

# Gun with Occasional Pony

By Squeak



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# Chapter 1

*In which the victim is identified*

This world is a funny old place. That's the first thought that came to my mind when I saw the body. Perhaps the whole thing was just a massive joke, some prank pulled by a God with a weird ass sense of humor. In anycase this poor colt ain't laughing anymore. He had his last laugh, about five hours ago judging by the rigor mortis. It was a gruesome scene, the mod who brought me here had left as fast as he'd come, weak stomach poor kid. I wish I'd had the same luxury, to go out and retch my guts into the sewer drain, but somepony had to do this job, and it certainly wasn't the newbie turning green in the hall. I looked over the body carefully. Trying to avoid getting blood on my hooves. He'd spilled his guts, quite literally. Somepony had harbored a terrible grudge against this guy, he was carved up finer than a thanksgiving turkey. It was so bad I almost didn't recognize him.

He was Ragingingsemi, I remembered him from the billboards in the FIM district on the outskirts of the /co/mpound. He was a fic writer, not unlike myself once upon a time, but he wrote fics of different nature, a dirty nature. Fapfics were a thriving business here, RagingSemi's house of Fapfics was one of the most popular places for the trade all along the /co/ast, encompassing the /co/mpound all they way down to the /b/ay. It's main place of operations was in the the FIM district, not too far from the motel, in an otherwise clean cut, easy going area. He'd made a lot of enemies, apparently some of them were going to be very happy now.

I'd had nothing against the guy, he was just trying to make a living in this place, same as the rest of us. Who could blame him if his methods were a bit....eccentric to put it mildly, he certainly didn't deserve to be here, in this dump of a motel, split open like a fortune cookie on new years.

"Squeak." called the mod from the hall. He lurched back into the room looking like a dead fish. "You got anything?"

"I've got a few things." I gazed around the room. It was your regular cheap motel on the east end of the /co/mpound. It smelled of cigars, mold and thanks to Semi, roadkill. He was on the floor, several feet from

anything in the room. The decor, what little there was, lay untouched. The tables and chairs lay undisturbed and the bed was perfectly made, right down to the mints on the pillows. It was strange, aside from the blood slowly pooling around the former author, the room was immaculate. "It looks like the body was moved, this room is far too neat to be the scene of the crime. No blood spatter on the walls, no sign of a struggle, this whole thing stinks to high heaven."

"You're telling me." said the mod, holding his nose. I didn't know his name, no one did. He was one of several who patrolled the /co/mpound, making sure everypony obeyed the rules. They weren't very good at their jobs. Most of them hated us, and encouraged trouble more than they helped. But a few of them were on our side. Still I didn't think I'd be getting much help on this case.

"Thanks for bringing me." I nodded to the kid. "It's just as bad as you said on the phone." I pointed to the bed. "The way I see it, they brought the body into this room to set up a false scene. But they must have been interrupted, if they were smart enough to move the body, there's no way they would have left without messing up the room a little." I walked over to the window, it was open, a gentle breeze rustled the curtains as it came in from the street. "They probably went over the fire escape and into the city. Whoever it was they're long gone now." I looked back at the poor sucker sprawled on the carpet. "But they won't be for long." I marched past the mod, mumbling my thanks again, and made my way to the street level. It was late, I was never quite sure of the time, ponies don't wear watches. But I was sure it was at least a little past midnight. Still the taxis drove through the streets like clockwork. I hailed one and quickly boarded.

As the cabbie started the car, I thought to myself again about this funny old world, The OC, the place I called home. They say everything, when it gets big enough, spawns a world like this. A world where ideas are power, where every thought of the fans takes shape, no matter how incipid or superfluous. The kind of place where you don't have to tell the cabbie where you want to go, because they never do that in the movies, inner monologues are done with a slight echo and a pony can drive a car even though they lack opposable thumbs. Everything around me was a thought, a construct of nonsense built upon an original foundation, My Little Pony: Friendship is magic.

It had surprised everyone when it'd come to popularity, it seemed harmless at first, but grew in a surprisingly short time, before we knew it, we were here. None of us more than seven months old, based on a cartoon. Everything was pony based, mixed in with the often warped, strange ideas of The Fandom. Even the cab in which I now rode was pink with large curly hair.

I myself was the idea, the facsimile, of a fan. A rather small idea, just an image here, a mention there. But an idea nonetheless. I don't know who from, none of us did, but almost every pony with a name has the same story. One day poof, you're here, in The OC, no warning, not a lick of sense, just the whim of some writer, artist or random person. But you learn quick, you have to. Apparently Semi hadn't learned enough. I had a few suspects in the case, a few leads I needed to check. But first I needed to head back to the office.

The building I was housed in was themed after Doctor Whoof, a large hourglass for a door and a spiky hairdo for a roof. I payed the cabbie. I didn't have pockets, but the money always just seemed to be there, in my hoof when I needed it, exact change. That's just how things worked.

Inside it was a bit run down, but it was home. My office was on the ground floor, behind the door with my name on it. "**Squeak**" it proclaimed in large boldface type, Arial by the looks of it. Below that the word "Writer" had been hastily crossed out, and replaced with Private Eye, spelled in Comic Sans. I hated Comic Sans. The words had simply popped up after the 'incident' and I had followed them. I wasn't a writer anymore. I thought as I walked past the door into my office. The only stories I needed now were real stories, stories from the streets.

As I sat in the chair behind my desk, everything turned black and white. I don't know why. It'd been happening ever since I'd first seen that hastily scrawled Private Eye on the door. Beside me, a cigar burned in my rubber duck shaped ash tray. I didn't smoke, but the cigar was always there, always burning. I'd tried to put it out several times, but it just ended up back in the tray, smoke slowly rising same as always. I'd long given up, and just let it sit there and look cool.

I mulled over this case that'd fallen in my lap. What'd happened to poor Mr.Semi? Where had it happened? Who had done it? All these questions burned in my head. I had some suspects lined up in my head,

but in the OC new ponies came and went like so much salad at a buffet. It would be a hard case to solve, but I had nothing but time. I needed someone to ask, a trampoline off which to bounce my theories. I needed to go see someone with connections. I needed Pacce, or maybe Madmax.

A knock at the door shook me from my thoughts.

"Mail" came a voice from the door. A voice I could never mistake, no one in the OC sounded quite like that.

"Come in, Derpy." I called. "It's open."

She stepped in, her blond mane wild as usual, her eyes staring of in opposite directions.

"Mail." she said again.

Derpy was an odd case. Here in the OC, the occasional background pony from The Cannon ended up popping into existence when the fan speculation on them became too much. They were often treated like minor celebrities. But Derpy was an odd case.

She had started out as an animation error, as far as I'd heard. Then the fandom ran away with her. Comics, pictures, stories, theories, all poured into one idea, the idea of Derpy, or Bright Eyes, as she sometimes liked to be called. All of this was just fine and dandy, and in fact how most BP's ended up in the OC, but she was something different. Her idea had gotten so big, it bled its way into The Cannon. The creators took a thought from the OC, and made it "Real". She popped up in episodes, and derped her way around the actual ponyville. Yet at the same time, she was a fan construct. Most of her personality was just the whims of fans and fic writers, subject to change and sway at the drop of a hat. So she was in between. Her eyes had been crossed before the shift, but now ponies said they seemed even more so. They said she had an eye for each world. One eye in The Cannon, one eye in the OC. It made her a bit funny in the head. Her voice was made of the theories of what she might sound like. So as a result it sounded like everything, from a sweet country girl, to chain smoking Spaniard, it was all there. The general effect was like putting a television in a blender.

"What have you got for me Derps?" I asked kindly. I liked the kid, she was a kind enough pony, despite her issues.

“Mail.” she said a third time.

“Okay, put it on the desk.” I cleared a space. I really did need to be neater if I ever got the time.

She reached her head into her saddlebags, and retrieved a small envelop. I’ll never quite figure out how she kept them all straight, the mail always looked tossed around at random in that bag to me. But she always pulled out the right one nonetheless. She sat it down.

“Who’s it from?” I asked. A lot of ponies never signed letters, you always had to ask the mailmare if you wanted to know. It didn’t make much sense, but it made exposition a lot easier.

“Slywit” she said. Then she turned and left.

# Chapter 2

## *In Which Old Friends Catch Up*

For the second time in the last few minutes I found myself in a taxi, this time pure-white with flowing violet curls.

I'd stared at the letter for some time before opening it. I hadn't heard from Sly in a while. He wasn't the kind that sent letters; he was more the kind of pony who would rather call or just drop by for a visit, but that wouldn't have been suspenseful enough I suppose.

Sly and I had been good friends since the start of the OC. Both of us had been fic writers back then. We used to bounce ideas of each other, read one another's work, that sort of thing. He was a good pony, a black and blue pegasus -most of the time-, with a jester hat as his cutie mark. He was the author of Paradise, a popular series that had gained a considerable following. I still read the updates when the Equestria Daily landed on my doorstep. I'm not quite sure why we hadn't talked in a while; perhaps after I stopped writing we simply hadn't run into each other, or maybe I was changing. I didn't like the second option.

In anycase, his letter had come as a surprise.

"Hiya, Bittersweet Squeaks," it had started in his normal Droid Serif. That was his nickname for me. Back when I was in the biz my niche was writing short, often sweet stories that more often than not were constructed to bring out a tear or two. Thus, the nickname was born one day, perhaps after not enough work and too much to drink. It brought back fond memories.

*"I heard about what happened to Semi," the letter continued. "Bad stuff, really, and I know who they call when bad stuff goes down. Hearing about it made me think, seeing as how I haven't seen you in a while, it'd be good to hear a friendly voice. Things have gotten bad lately and, to be honest, my reasons for calling on you aren't entirely for the sake of reminiscing. I have a feeling it's all connected, Squeaks. I could use your eyes on this."*



*See you soon.*

*Slywit.*

And so I'd hailed another cab and headed down to Sly's old haunt. He lived in a house near the center of the /co/mpound, close to the writer's guild building. It was a pretty nice place, shaped like Luna's crown.

We passed it as the cabbie looked for a space. The center of the /co/mpound was always busy. Anons milled about everywhere in this part of the OC, black pony silhouettes with little definite shape or features to call their own. They say most ponies start this way; in those dark faces laid all kinds of ponies, from the most vile of villains to the kindest of saints, you could never tell with an Anon. A few of them waved warmly as I got out of the cab, and quite a few more kept walking without a second glance. Such was the nature of the /co/mpound.

I trotted up the stairs and knocked on the door. Waiting patiently, I took in the scale of the place. The /co/mpound could be compared to a large city, complete with tall buildings, houses and hardly a tree in the place. It was where a lot of the fandom sprung from and was arguably ground zero for where the OC had started. Most ponies considered it to be the center of the OC, though there could be no actual center since nopony was quite sure how far the OC stretched in any given direction. Some had tried to find out, but those who went farthest never seemed to come back.

*Perhaps this world is flat, I mused. Maybe they fell off the edge.*

The sound of the door opening shook me from my thoughts.

"Bittersweet Squeaks!" Sly exclaimed warmly. "Good to see you! Still got that hat I see."

"Good to see you too, Sly." I replied. "Yep, haven't taken it off before and I'm not planning to start now." While the majority of ponies in the OC avoided human clothing outside of glasses I'd been dropped into the OC wearing a reporter's press hat. I hadn't bothered to take it off since.

I was starting to wonder if I even could.

“True, it suits you anyway.” Sly turned and headed into the house.”Come in.”

I followed him inside. The interior of the house wasn’t as well kept as the exterior and books were laid everywhere in various states of decomposition; Sly had never been the neatest of ponies.

“So, you got my letter?” he asked, walking into the kitchen.

“Yeah, Derpy delivered it a few minutes ago, ” I answered, taking a seat in the living room. “What’s up?”

I heard the sound of a refrigerator opening. “Check the paper on the table.”

The table in front of the couch was far from orderly, its surface hidden beneath papers, notes and unused story pages in what could generously be described as a heap.

“Which one?”

“Oh, one second, I’ll get it.” He walked back into the living room, two steaming cups of tea floating behind him.

The thing about Slywit was you could never be quite sure what he would be on any given day; last time I’d seen him he’d been a pegasus, but he was currently a unicorn. No one was sure why but the popular theory was that his “idea” had been jumbled. When he’d come in everyone was thinking of a different Sly and, as a result, he got the mixed blessing of three different bodies. Sometimes he’d stay in one form for weeks on end and other times he’d shift between states in a matter of minutes, often at rather inopportune times.

One of the cups landed in front of me, a bit of coffee spilling onto the floor. One of the setbacks of three bodies is he was rather unpracticed in their use; he could manage a few spells as a unicorn and a couple of tricks as a pegasus but he was a bit shaky as either. He got along pretty well as an earth pony, but that form seemed to pop up less.

He sifted through the pile of paper on the table, his horn glowing blue as they floated into lessor sub-piles on the floor.

“Here,” he offered, floating a bit of newspaper my way, “read the first article.”

The front page was a story about the newest background character to enter the OC, Bon-Bon, along with a few new fics mentioned on the side.

“What am I looking for, seems like a fluff piece to me.”

“That’s just it, that’s a copy of the Equestria Daily.”

“Yeah, I know, I get them everyday,” came my reply as I flipped through the inside of the paper.

“Think about it Squeaks; that paper is magic. It’ll update itself for the rest of the day, right?” he pressed.

“Right”

“Then why, if Semi was murdered, is there no mention of it anywhere inside?”

It dawned on me. He was right, the Equestria Daily always had the latest news, right down to the second it happened. It’d been a few hours since the Mods had found Semi, so why had there been no report?

“They’re keeping it under wraps,”

“Exactly.” Sly took a sip of coffee.

“You think the Cube is in on it?”

“I don’t know, but I think somepony is.” Sly looked back and forth conspiratorially. “That means this goes pretty damn deep, Squeaks.”

It was silent in the room for several minutes. The Equestria Daily newspaper was at the heart of the /co/mpound; it’s were everypony gets their news, where every event was planned, and where nearly every contributor could be found at one point or another. I’d had an office once, same as Sly, back when it was small. The Daily was run by Sethisto, one of the odder denizens of the OC due to him being one of the few beings that wasn’t a pony. He was a small cube that floated around collecting content and obsessing over “The Great and Powerful Trixie”. It was said he was themed after some video game, possibly an offshoot from another OC

somewhere. He'd been just as surprised as the rest of us when it took off the way it did. Now it was massive, hosting hundreds of fics, art, any content you could care to think of.

Any content, I realized, besides fapfics.

"Got an idea?" asked Slywit. "You've got that face that tells me you're about to do something you probably shouldn't"

"Am I that obvious?" I asked, trying to adopt an impassive look.

"You're no great poker player, Squeaks."

Fair enough, he'd taken enough bits from me in a game to know that well enough. "Well... we do have someone on the inside."

"Oh." Slywit paused. "You're going to see *her*."

"Can't think of a better lead at the moment." Several people took residence in the Equestria Daily building, mostly just background ponies who had made their way into the OC. But *she* was one of the top contributors and if anyone could tell me what was going on, it would be her.

"I haven't seen her in a while. You'll have to give her my regards."

"I will," I promised. Getting up, I added, "Thanks for the tea, Sly, it was good to see you again."

"No problem, Squeaks," he replied, magically lifting the cups. "Just don't get yourself killed alright?"

I gave him a thin smile. "The OC won't be rid of me that easily." I looked at the paper.

"Mind if I borrow this?"

"Sure, take it," he replied, waving a hoof dismissively.

"Thanks." I picked the paper up in my mouth; one of the drawbacks of being an earth pony is that you have to taste most of what you want to carry. Speaking around the paper, I managed to say "By the way, I'm sure Maxie's forgiven you for the April Foal's joke by now."

*Poing-smash*

I turned to see that the two cups were now in a thousand pieces on the floor. Slywit's horn was gone, now replaced by a pair of up-right wings.

Some fan theories applied to everyone.

Sly had turned into a pegasus, his changes were seldom in his favor. It made him rather fun to mess with sometimes.

"Don't you say a word, Squeak. Not. A. Single. Word."

I smiled "Wouldn't dream of it." I walked towards the door before deciding to mess with him a bit more. "I'll remember to give Madmax your regards."

*Poing*

In my defence though, I have to say that had been a *very* interesting April Fools for everyone.

# Chapter 3

## *In Which a Lead is Followed*

I hailed a cab. The Equestria Daily building wasn't far, but walking through the inner /co/mpound the early hours was often more trouble than it was worth. I realized that I hadn't slept in quite a while, and the sun was starting to peek over the horizon. Celestia's shift, I thought briefly. An odd trend in the OC was that the crime rate went in reverse. During Celestia's shift we got spammers , scammers , trolls and a general grab bag of all those wonderful things. During the night they slept, I suppose annoyances weren't nocturnal. The mods were supposed to get rid of them, but they hardly ever did anything quickly. You had to fend for yourself in the OC.

The Cab pulled up to the building. It was massive, it's exterior changed periodically, it was always hard to peg what it looked like when it wasn't dolled up as something or other. But basically it had the shape of a large wizard's hat most of the time. Today it was done up to be themed after the Gala, the last episode of the season was airing soon, and the theme had been created to celebrate. thousands of ponies would be here to watch it when it aired. There was a buzz around as always, ponies entered and exited through the multiple doors at the building's base. I walked up to the nearest one. There was a line, mostly fic writers, anxious to get their newest work out to the masses, a few drawponies mixed in, hoping to get their shot as well. A few were turned away by the guard. I waited for a bit before I came to the front, I got a good look at the guard and sighed.

"Squeakers!" He yelled

"Hello Sprinkles...."

"Ah man! You haven't been around here in forever, how's it going Rubber Duck?"

Sprinkles was a grey earth pony who often worked odd jobs around the OC. It seemed today he was playing guard dog. His full name was Sargent Sprinkles, there was a rumor he'd earned that title during the Ban Wars, but I doubted it. He wore an army hat and a clown nose at all times,

fitting as he was quite the jokester. We hadn't often seen one another, so I didn't know him all that well, but he had a thousand nicknames for me none the less.

"No, I haven't, funny how that works out." I replied.

"Yeah, small world ain't it Squeaky? So, what's brings you back to the EqD? Want your job back?"

"No, I'm here on a case Sprinkles, somepony's been murdered."

That made him pause. "No kiddin'?"

"No kidding at all. I'm here to follow up on a lead, so I haven't got time for pleasantries, sorry."

"Fine, fine, I get it, on duty and all that, finding clues, solving murders, regular Sherlock Hoof aren't you?"

"Nope, I don't have a Watson." I said wryly. "Now, come on I haven't got time for this."

Sprinkles looked a bit put out. "Alright, you know, if you rush everywhere you'll miss the small things, Squeakers." he said opening the door.

"Don't worry." I said. "I'll try to be very attentive. I strode past him into the building.

Being inside the Equestria Daily main office, is a bit like how I'd imagine being inside a beehive might feel. The second I walked through the doors the buzz of activity hit me like a shovel to the face. Ponies everywhere, rushing from point A to point Z and all 24 letters between those. The top fic writers had offices on this floor, all of them sat around writing like madponies trying to get the newest chapters out into the OC. I remembered the early days of the office, it wasn't nearly as busy back then. It had once been a nice, peaceful place to write in fact. Now I wondered how anyone got anything done in this noise. No wonder Slywit chose to work at home. But that's progress I suppose.

As I walked, comments scattered and ran across my hooves. Comments were the main driving force behind fics, they were created whenever some pony decided to review a story. They popped up above the

cubicles of the author who's story was being reviewed with a noise a bit like popcorn in a microwave. The small creatures were some low level form of life, and appeared as small post-it notes with tiny arms, legs and shoes. They were almost always fancy dress shoes for some reason I couldn't bring to fathom. No one was quite sure why they happened, but life went on.

I surmised that a new writer had to be in the office, because the comments were running amok. Leaping in and out of trash bins, swimming in the water coolers, and generally being little terrors. Bad comments always acted this way. When a story was reviewed poorly they popped up and started making trouble. Most writers had to deal with this at some point, and it was always their job to round up the unruly creatures. Judging from the chaos taking place in the corner of the office in which I was standing, someone had written something *really* terrible.

As I walked, trying to avoid the little monsters tugging at my legs something orange and blue came barreling into my side.

I gasped as the wind was knocked out of me, landing on the floor against the wall with a thud.

The pony that ran into me was on her feet first.

"Get them off! Get them off!" She yelled. Several comments had leapt up, pulling at her mane and tail. Everypony in the office ignored her screams, and went about their business, walking around her, their own destinations were far more important.

I got to me feet, shaking away pain I was sure I'd feel later. "You must be the new author." I said.

No pony ever helped out the newbie, it was a tradition. Bad comments slowed down the whole office. if you got them, you had to deal with them.

"Yes! Help me! Please!" she yelled, trying to shake the comments away.

Alas, I'm not made of stone. I didn't work here, their 'Traditions' didn't apply to me anyway.



“Hold still.” I walked over, reaching into her mane, I bit down on one of the comments and pulled it out, tossing it onto the floor. “Uhg.” I spat, the taste still lingering in my mouth. Bad comments tasted awful.

I grabbed a nearby bin and we soon had the lot of them rounded up. Crisis averted, I got a good look at the unicorn in front of me. She had an orange coat with a bright blue mane and tail. Her cutie mark was a slightly crooked writers quill turned at an angle on her flank. Due to her rather loud color scheme, I hazarded a guess that perhaps she was one of the Summerponies. Summerponies were a slang term for ponies that came from a growing community on farther edges of the OC. So far it didn’t have a proper name like the /co/mpound, or the /b/ay. It was an artsy place, filled with a lot of ponies at odds with the /co/mpound’s values. The kind that wore multicolored legwarmers, had fox ears, and other such things that were generally looked down upon here. In truth, I didn’t mind them as much as most as long as they didn’t bother anypony. But the OC is tough, there was little room for ponies like that.

Looking her up and down again, I noticed that besides the coloring she didn’t look that much different from any other pony you’d see on the street. Perhaps I’d been quick to judge, maybe she was just eccentric. She sagged slightly now that the work was over, and let out a sign.

“Thank you.” She said breathlessly. “I’m Starshine Maria Quill by the way.”

Never mind, she was a Summerpony most certainly.

“No problem.” I shrugged, as far as ponies can shrug in anycase. “I’m Squeak.”

She paused for a moment. “Oh, I’ve heard of you, you used to work here didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. I didn’t want to go into this topic. “A long time ago.”

“What happened?” she asked, using her magic to collect a few papers that had spilled in the chaos.

“Lots of things.” I said curtly. “It’s not important. Now, if I were you I’d get that bin of comments down to the furnace before they get out.” I nodded towards the shaking canister on her side. “And I’d get a few tips from the

other's while you're at it so this doesn't happen again." I managed a smile. "They don't bite. Much. Good luck!"

I trotted down the hall before she could reply. I didn't have time for those kinds of distractions. I'm too friendly sometimes. Slywit had warned me about it on a few occasions, along with others. It was fine every now and again, but someday I was pretty sure it would get me killed. For now though, I just needed to find Madmax's office.

Another thing about the Equestria Daily building, was that it was hard to find much of anything off of the first floor. Fics, and fic writers were easy to find, they were everywhere, with varying degrees of skill. They came and went so fast they often never got anything close to an office to themselves, except for the very good ones. So there was no point in moving them to the upper floors, or anywhere else. They simply shifted too quickly. Anything off of the first floor was different story. The building was under constant change and construction, moving, demolishing, rebuilding, everything was in constant motion. If you found a room one day, there was no guarantee it'd be there the next.

I slowed my trot as I came to the elevators. As I walked towards them I noticed the less unruly comments helping out around the office. Fetching water, holding pens, and generally being well behaved. I briefly wondered what had become of my comments. But that was neither here nor there.

The elevators were done up to look like giant books today. A Twilight theme I suspected. I'll never be quite sure how the elevators always managed to work, though the rest of the building never seemed to stay constant. I was thankful for it though. The doors opened with a ding and I stepped inside.

I wasn't quite sure which floor to go to. The buttons panel took up a third of the wall, stretching all the way to the top on to the back of the elevator. It always took me a while to find where I wanted to go. The higher ups always knew which button to press, somehow, but I didn't have that luxury.

So I pushed a button at random.

There's something I'll always hate about the Equestria Daily elevators. This is the fact that it is impossible to tell which direction they'll

take to get you to your destination. They hardly ever simply went 'Up', up was only one of many options.

I braced myself against the floor as the motors started up. All at once I was roughly thrown to the side as the car shot to the left. Though I'd been expecting it I hit the opposite wall with a thud. There was no preparing for these elevators. I lurched forwards as the car jerked to a stop, tossing me around like a super ball. My stomach took up temporary residence in my throat as it suddenly jerked downwards, falling rapidly to wherever it was going. I was quickly smooshed against the ceiling by the force of the decent.

I've often wondered if ponies have bones, or what I'm made of in particular, The OC doesn't exactly have a great department of medical science. So no one really knew the answer. I was beginning to doubt it though, because I surely should have broken a few by now.

I hit the floor as the elevator once again halted it's progress. Somehow my hat remained on my head through the whole ordeal. I really was starting to wonder it was even possible for it to come off.

The doors opened with a ding, sliding away to reveal an office. It was a large one, filled with shag carpeting and various statues, most of which, I noticed, were of Trixie. The entire far wall was nothing but a large window. I looked out and saw I was high above the /co/mpound. I briefly questioned the fact that I had gone down, but somehow ended up far above the city, but quickly abandoned the thought. As the popular saying went, 'It's magic I ain't gotta explain shit'.

There was a desk across from me. The chair behind it was turned away, judging from the Trixie statues and carpeting, I had some idea who's office I was in.

"Hello, Squeaks." said the chair.

"Hiya." I said. "How's business?"

The chair spun around. A large cube sat between the armrest, red and yellow with intricate carvings on all four of it's faces. "Business is a'boomin." Said Sethisto

# Chapter 4

## *In Which The Boss is Bothered and an Artist Gives Advice*

"How are you, Squeaks?" asked Sethisto.

I'm sure if he'd had fingers he would have steeped them.

I'd known Sethisto-'Seth' for short- since the start of the OC. I still wasn't quite sure how he managed to talk, lacking a mouth among other things, but if anything it was his talent. While in the early days it might have gotten him into trouble now and again, these days he had no such worries; being head of Equestria Daily had it's benefits. Almost every bit of information worth knowing went through him first. I doubted he'd talk, but accident or no this was a good opportunity to get some answers.

"I'm well," I lied. "nothing to complain about."

"Good, good. Come to get your job back?"

I smiled. "No such luck, I've actually come on a case."

"Still on that detective thing are you? Very well then, I'd just like you to know your old position always open."

"Good to know. I came here to talk to Madmax, but while I'm here do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

The chair spun slightly. "I don't see why not. I'm always here to answer questions for the press." He laughed at his own joke.

"Good, I'll make this short and sweet then." I sat down. "Ragingsemi."

"Hmmm?" he murmured. Something in his voice told me he'd heard me perfectly.

"Ragingsemi was murdered last night in a motel in the FiM-District," I said flatly. "Heard anything about it, Seth?"

His chair spun back and forth as he thought. Don't ask me how. "I'm very sorry to hear that Squeaks," He said in a plastic, practiced sort of way. "I had no idea. Simply ghastly, poor fellow."

I eyed the cube warily. Sethisto had eyes and ears in almost every corner of the OC and There was no way in hell I was going to believe he was in the dark on this. I had to press him further.

"Oh, too bad then," I said with mock disappointment. "Well then, at least I can be of some help to the paper. You know, Informing you of this terrible event and all that stuff. Now that you know, I'm sure you'll update the papers post haste?" I raised my eyebrow in a detective-y sort of way.

Sethisto was quiet for a moment.

"Well, these things take time, Squeaks, you must understand that running a paper is by no means easy. It could take days, even weeks, to get a headline like that out."

"Oh yes, I understand." I got up to leave.

"You do?" asked Seth, surprised. "Er...I mean of course you do. You're a sensible pony, as always."

I paused dramatically as I came to the elevator. "True, I am sensible." I peered back at him, looking about where I figured his eyes might be. "And my sensibilities are wondering something."

"What's that?"

"Well, the way I see it, the paper you're running is magic, correct?"

"...Yes." I could hear the unease in his voice.

"So, it updates itself within the day it's purchased, correct?"

"Well, yes... but the articles have to be written before it updates! That takes time, Squeak."

I nodded "Oh, of course. I understand completely." "One must go through all the procedures and all that. Nothing to be done about it..."

"Good, I'm glad you're being understanding about thi-

“...Which is why,” I cut him off, smilingly slightly, “I’d like my job back.”

I could almost see his non-existent face pull back in surprise “What?”

“My job. You said you need someone to write the article, make sure it’s on the up and up. So, give me my job back. I’ll do it.”

It was silent in the office for a while. I was hoping he wouldn’t call my bluff, but I could tell he was scared. Seth had a worse poker face than me, which is hard for a guy lacking such a feature. I stared him down some more, daring him to take me up on the offer.

He broke first “Okay fine! I can’t have that article get out Squeaks.”

“Oh, and why’s that Seth?” I asked, taking a step towards him. “Is it because you know something you don’t want the rest of us to know?” I took another step. “Because I’ve had a little theory since I came here.” I came still closer. “There’s been a lot of....questionable things on the blog over the years.” Step. “The Pony Panty Scandal.” Step. “The ‘Saucy’ pics in the Drawfriends articles.” I was almost nose to...whatever he had, with him by this point. “The sensual fiction bundles. All that was fine and dandy, I didn’t mind in the least. But you know what I think? I think you were planing to let fapfics in next, and Raging was your competition. Am I in the ballpark, Seth?” I leaned in so far I could smell the cheap leather of his seat. “I think you wanted to corner the market. Couldn’t have the old steady blocking your path, now could you? I was going to ask Madmax about it, but I’m sure now. Why else would you suppress this information? Why else would you be so unwilling to tell me what’s really going on, and why else would The Great and Powerful Trixie kissing Twilight be the heading for a story about socks?” I almost fell over the table I had leaned in so far.

“That has to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” said Seth curtly.

I deflated slightly. “Huh?”

“Squeaks, I’m going to level with you. I like you. You were a good employee here at the paper and I really did enjoy having you, but you were a much better writer than you are a detective.”

I levered myself back across the table. “Then why don’t you help me out and fill in some blanks, Seth?”

He sighed. "Fine, it's obvious, no matter how misguided your suspicions, you're not going to quit this."

I shook my head. "Nope."

"So I'm going to give you three pieces of advice: One, there are some very big players in this game, Squeaks, way bigger than me and a hell of a lot bigger than you. I'd turn around now, go back to your office and forget any of this ever happened. Two, because of reason one, I cannot tell you any more about than this. For your own good, of course; I would be honestly sorry to see you killed, and you *will* be. And my final advice is, if you're going to see Madmax, press the fifty-second button from the top, twenty third from the side, and tell her I said hi."

I stared at the cube for a while; he was telling the truth as far as I could tell, and that put me back to square one. It looked like from here on out I was going to have to roll the dice in the dark and hope I didn't loose.

"Thank you for your time, Seth," I said, turning to the elevator.

"Like I said," Seth's chair turned back to the window. "anything for the press."

The elevator doors opened with a ding, somepony walked out as I went inside. It was Derpy, a package in her mouth as usual. I tipped my hat to her. She noted me briefly then turned to Seth and said "Mail!" around the parcel.

"Oh are those my custom Trixie plushies!?" asked Seth eagerly. Then he seemed to remember I was still in the room and quickly said, "Um...for that article."

I couldn't help cracking a slight smile. Some things never changed.

I quickly located the button Seth had directed me to. Bracing my self against the floor I pressed it and waited for the ride to begin. It was quite a

surprise when the car rolled leisurely to the left and opened with a casual 'ding'.

Madmax's room was a large one, she was one of the Fandom's most recognized artist, and therefor a very big idea. I'd always suspected a small amount of my own idea's size was due to her. Artist were a peculiar lot in the OC, the more popular their work the more they could do. A good artist could bring someone into the OC with a few strokes of a pencil. Quite a few ponies owed the fact they were here at all to her.

She'd worked for the Equestria Daily since the beginning. I could remember the days when it was just her, myself Sly, Pacce, Nathan and a few others. The days of little corner offices, making jokes about the latest episode, and eating junk from Brewers, a local shop. Things had changed a lot since then, but we'd still remained friends. The walls and curtains were green, her favorite color and the chairs and couches were variations of this. Her desk sat over in the corner, slightly disorganized; It seemed everyone I knew could do with a maid. Above it were posters from certain episodes. I briefly noticed that *Party of One* was prominently displayed at the forefront.

“Maxie!?” I called. “You here?”

“Hmm?” I heard something from the kitchen. “Who is it?”

"It's Squeak! I need to ask you something."

I heard some shuffling for a moment before her head appeared in the doorway. Her twin ponytails swinging around the frames of her large green glasses.

“Sqqgeeeeeuuuuuuuaaaakkk!” She exclaimed.

“Maaaaaxxxxiiiiiiiiiiii!” I yelled back, smiling. It was a bit of a running joke between the two of us. We’d done it once at the office, back in the old days, and one of the new pony’s had remarked on how annoying it was. Since then it had become our customary greeting.

She trotted over smiling and gave me a quick hug. “So, what brings you here, lover?” her eyelids fluttered as she spoke.

I tried to say something cool. “Nothing but you, sweet thing.”



We held each other's gaze for several minutes, but I was the first to crack. I burst out laughing. She couldn't hold it long after that, and began to giggle. A while back there had been several fics and pictures put out 'Shipping' the two of us together. Along with various rumors and whispers. In reality we were only good friends, we often made a joke out of the whole thing. I remember last April Fools she'd sent me a picture of her looking at the camera with the customary "XOXOX" at the bottom. I still kept it sitting on my desk to freak people out.

"So," she said, wiping away a tear. "What really brings you here?"

"I'm on a case. Not having much luck though." I sighed. "My last suspect was a bust."

"Oh, you mean about Semi?"

"Ah, so you know about that?" I'd figured as much. "Well tell me what you know, maybe it'll fill in the gaps."

Maxie sat on the couch. She had a habit of sitting like Lyra, her favorite background pony. It was an odd, vaguely unnatural position for a pony on its own, sitting upright, let alone when using the armrest. I briefly noted that since we didn't technically have arms, it didn't make sense for almost every chair in this world to *have* armrest. But if I chalked up everything that didn't make sense in the OC, I'd have a modest paperback.

"Well, as you probably figured out from talking to Seth," Maxie began. "they're keeping this whole thing quiet. I haven't been able to figure much out, all I know is that when the news came in everypony was at their post to get the newest edition out. The article was almost ready for print when Seth sent Derpy down to the news room with a notice."

"A notice?" I was short on leads, I needed anything I could get my hooves on. "Have you got a copy?"

"Sure." Her horn glowed green, a small scrap of paper floated from her drawing desk and situated itself in front of my face.

## NOTICE

All News Regarding the Recent Death of one, Raging Semi are not to be printed by Order of the /Co/mpound Mods, pending an investigation. Please cease any work on the story, and resume your regular posts. There is currently a rumor about the Great and Powerful Trixie appearing in Season two, please focus on that instead.

I hope it's true!

-Seth

"What? That's not right...." I murmured.

"You noticed?" asked Maxie, raising an eyebrow.

"The Mods ordered no such thing." I grabbed the paper from the air, I noticed it tasted vaguely of flour. I sat it on the table and inspected it closely. "When was the last time the Mods gave two shits about what happened to us? It was only one of the few sympathetic ones that managed to let me in at all. They'd never put out any kind of press silence. Let alone make any actual effort to solve this case. Even if they were, since when would that matter to Seth? This notice is a complete lie, and a bad one at that."

"Exactly." said Maxie. "I'm pretty sure everyone on the floor knows it's manure, but they're not saying anything. This whole thing's got them scared Squeak."

"Scared?" I knew a murder was nothing to sneeze at, but some would say Semi had it coming. Why would other contributors be scared?

“Mmhhh,” she hummed as she nodded. “There haven’t been anymore murders as far as I know...but word on the street is some ponies are disappearing Squeak.”

Now I was getting somewhere. “Disappearing? Like who?”

“I haven’t heard many names yet, but from what I have heard it seems ship-writers are being targeted.”

“Ship-writers? There’s a billion of those, who would be picking them off? It’s not like you could make a dent.”

Maxie’s horn glowed again. A smokers pipe floated from somewhere, she placed it gently in her mouth and continued. “That’s what I don’t get.” a puff of rainbow colored smoke snaked up into the air, it smelled faintly of candy. “If this is true it’d be like trying to stop a river with a wine cork. Useless.”

“Exactly...is there anything in particular you’ve noticed about those rumored to be missing?”

Maxie chewed the end of her pipe as she thought. I remembered when she got that pipe, it was after a comic release celebrating two million Equestria Daily’s sold. I’d asked her what was in it several times, but she never told me.

“Well, the last I heard was a pony named...Coffeebean hadn’t been seen in a while.” She pondered. “Only name I can recall.” She took another drag of the pipe. “Hey, you want to go to Mc’Donalds? We could take The Van and think things over there.”

For some reason whenever she used that pipe it always made her want Mc’Donalds,

a fast food joint near the Writer’s Guild building. Maxie was one of the few ponies in the OC who actually owned a car; a really fruity number with a unicorn spray painted on the side. I’d taken her up on the offer once to find out to my dismay that The Van flew, Rainbow Dash style, through town. During that ride to Mc’Donalds I’d made peace with the fact I was probably going to die to the sound of the Erasure song ‘*Always*’. Maxie drove like a maniac when she was hungry, and for some reason the radio only picked up that one song.

“No thanks.” I said quickly. “I’ve got to follow this lead. Pacce might know something about this Coffee Bean guy. Thanks for the help Max.” I grabbed the notice between my teeth.

“Anytime Squeak.” Said Maxie. “But let me help you out, you look ridiculous holding things in your mouth all the time. You can borrow one of my saddlebags.”

And that’s how I found myself once again in the elevator, only this time wearing a bright green saddlebag with a flower on the side. Oh well, at least I wouldn’t have to carry things earth pony style anymore. Maxie had been kind enough to pack a few things as well. She’d given me a few request tabs, good for one Madmax drawing, they were some of the best currency in the OC. They might prove useful should I have to bribe anypony. Along with a pencil and some paper. I had no idea what she thought I might use them for. It’s not very often an earth pony learns to draw beyond basic writing. Have you ever tried to draw a Q with your mouth?

I looked at the many buttons on the elevator wall. Finally I knew which one to press. The lobby button, the very first one near the door. It would take me back to the Writer’s Room, and I could get out of this madhouse. I pressed the button and for the third time that day, braced myself against the elevator floor. The car jerked to life, and lurched to the right. I leaned hard to the left and managed to stay upright. I was getting good at this. The car then heaved forwards, throwing me into the back wall with a heavy thud.

Never mind.

I was suddenly pressed against the floor as it hurtled upwards. I could hardly breathe as my chest was compressed by the force of the ascent. As it rose faster The pressure on my ribs became almost unbearable. For the second time that day I silently wondered if I could break any bones.

The elevator slowed suddenly, launching me a short ways into the air. I hung weightless for a moment. This wasn’t normal. The elevator never slowed, it always stopped on a dime. I didn’t know much about science-as little as there was here anyway- but as far as I knew there was only one way I could be floating like this. The tingling in my stomach told me

something bad was about to happen. That feeling when you get to the top of a roller coaster, and there's a moment when you think 'Oh shit'. Except on this coaster I had the feeling there wouldn't be any tracks at the bottom.

My own scream interrupted my thoughts as the car fell into a spinning decent. I was in free fall. Somehow, whatever force that pulled the cars had gone haywire. It turned over and over as it fell. I was violently tossed to ceiling. I saw stars as my head impacted one of the lights. It shattered, sending glass whirling into air as I spun end over end back onto the floor. I could feel it cutting into my legs as I smashed into paneling. The buttons on the wall flashing wildly like street signs on steroids.

I stopped feeling things after a while, a blessing if you ask me. I felt like a rag doll in a tumble dryer. Finally my head hit one wall too many. Darkness approached at the corners of my eyes. Dizzy, and incredibly nauseous, I blacked out.

## Chapter 5

## *In Which the Plot Thickens*

I'm not sure how long I was unconscious. I hoped it was a long time, because this was the closest thing I'd gotten to sleep in a day and a half. I think my first thought upon opening my eyes was something along the lines of, 'Oh, I'm still alive. That's nice,' and then regretting the fact that I wasn't dead because of the pain. My *everything* hurt. I had pain on top of my pain, and that pain was renting houses to other pains who wanted to move up in the world.

It was dark inside what remained of the elevator; the doors were crumpled and ruined, letting a small amount of pale light in from whatever was on the other side. The floor panel was almost as mangled as I was. In places buttons hung out of their sockets at odd angles. It looked ghastly.

I tried to get to my hooves. The glass that littered the floor cut harshly into them, at least on the spots that weren't already cut up anyway. I made a mental note to track down whoever it was that first thought up the idea that ponies could bleed. He and I were going to have *words*.

I weakly checked to see if my hat was still on.

It was. Damn, that thing was stubborn.

Maxie's saddlebag was a bit beat up, although it had still fared better than me. That was the only bit of good news I could come up with; hey, I may be in the bottom of an elevator shaft half-torn to bits but thank Celestia I was *fashionable* about it.

Of course, at the moment I had bigger things to worry about. These elevators always worked, or at least they did in a round-about way. Still, they didn't just cut out. Someone had been trying to get me out of the picture, and it was a wonder they hadn't succeeded. But I suppose if my life is a detective story it would be a pretty bad one if I went and died in the first half. My funeral probably wouldn't make much of climax.

I was shaky, but I managed to stand. I limped my way over to the crushed doors and, with far too much effort, I levered one off it's hinges.

It fell with a heavy clunk to the floor, the sound echoing through wherever it was that I had landed. I didn't like the finality of that sound.

There were a few lights spaced here and there, but it was mostly dark. I could see a network of tubing running in crazy patterns across the ceiling and walls. I recognized it immediately, it was the old message system. Back when the office was small it'd used old-fashioned message tubes to relay information across the floor. Nowadays they simply got the more well-behaved comments to do it, but the system was still there. I was beneath the Writer's Room, below ground level. I limped into the darkness, if I was lucky I might be able to find a way out, or at least some way to call for help.

Walking was an immense effort, the cuts on my hooves screaming at my brain with every step. The rest of my body was getting in on the act, every part singing with pain like some demented opera, probably *Pony Maria*. Still, I forged ahead; I didn't plan on dying down here, not while there were so many questions that needed answers, like who'd killed Semi. It had to be someone with a lot of power in the OC, at least enough to keep Seth quiet about it.

If they managed to somehow bump them all off, where would he get his Trixie/Twilight fics? I thought wryly.

Still, someone had tried to kill me, which meant I was getting close, the bad guy only tries to kill you if they're worried. I was on the right track but I still needed more information, and I wasn't going to get it down here in the dark.

My thoughts were interrupted as my left forehoof didn't land on anything. It fell through the air tossing me off balance. A shiver shot up my leg before traveling through the rest of my body. It was the kind of cold that couldn't be fixed by a blanket and some hot chocolate.

The kind of cold that freezes the soul and chills the bones.

It snapped me out of my reverie in a hurry. I looked down at the floor to see a large black hole yawning open in front of me, impossibly dark and impossibly deep. There was a distant wail emanating from within, the kind of high pitched noise that makes your teeth itch, literally *itch*, as if they were trying to escape your skull. It was kind of noise that makes that little part of your brain that keeps you sane want to run and hide.

It was a plot hole.

Plot holes were a strange phenomena, even by The OC's standards. They tended to occur when a large number of writers collected in one place. They were made by gaps in logic, bad characterization and, worst of all, forgotten ideas. Anything that fell into a plot hole was erased in its entirety; If you fell into one of these there wouldn't even be a photo to remember you by, every memory of your existence wiped clean.

I wavered for a moment trying to get my balance. It'd taken me by surprise and I teetered dangerously over the edge. The hoof that had fallen in grew steadily colder, like I'd stuck it in ice water. My right hind leg wavered in the air in an attempt to lever myself back onto solid ground. I hung there for a moment, scared to do so much as wiggle my nose in case it sent me tumbling to oblivion.

Suddenly I felt something behind me. Something that felt all too much like a pony trying to shove me to my death. I let out an unflattering yelp and kicked out with a hoof. The kick struck hard and my assailant grunted in the dark, stumbling. I used the leverage I gained to tilt myself away from the hole. Back on all fours, I quickly lifted both hind legs from the ground and gave the mystery assassin a sharp buck. With another grunt he went down in a heap.

I turned around, trying to think of something snappy to say, but the words died in my throat. I recognized him.

"Sweet Celestia Squeaks, see if I ever help you again," groaned the heap.

It was my editor.

"Lights?" I asked, confused.

"Who do you think? I'm certainly not your mother." He grunted as he got up to his hooves. Three horseshoe-shaped bruises were turning a harsh purple against his shaggy white coat.

Lights was a large white unicorn and a card-carrying Grammar Nazi. He had been my editor for a couple of months while I was still in the fic writing business. Editors were an odd lot in the OC, their job consisting of fixing errors in stories and generally making sure they were up to printing



standards. Most were freelancers, editing as they pleased, but a couple latched on to particular writers in a sort of symbiotic relationship. I hadn't seen Lights since I'd stopped working for the Equestria Daily.

"Sorry, I didn't know it was you." I paused. "Wait, what are you doing down here anyway?"

"Saving your sorry flank. Here I am, trying to fix your mane-brained errors, and what do I get for it? A hoof to the gut, that's what! And what the bloody hell is it with you and commas!? They're everywhere! Celestia forbid you learn to use a semi-colon..." he muttered. "Oh, and another thing; descriptions, use them! What do you even look like? You haven't mentioned it once."

I eyed at Lights warily; editors were weird, but this was Ponitzer Prize stuff. "You can see me right?" I asked sarcastically. "Yellow earth pony, black mane with a brown hat? Bleeding from several places at the moment. You know! I look... um, Squeaky?"

"What about your cutie mark eh? We're five bleedin' chapters in and you've never told us what it is!" he yelled, stomping his hoof for emphasis.

I looked down at my flank, a rubber duck on a writing pad sat there as always. It never made sense to me why the rubber duck was there. I mean, the writing pad made sense, but my talents have never included water fowl, even of the rubber variety.

I raised an eyebrow. "Lights, your not making any sense."

"**YOU'RE!** It's 'you're'!" He sat down on his haunches and rubbed his temples. "You need an apostrophe in there!"

I sized up the unicorn in front of me "...Are you drunk?"

"Uhg, never mind! Look, we need to get this thing moving. I came to tell you that you're on the right track. Some of the other editors have noticed their clients have gone missing."

That caught my attention. "So... the rumors are true?"

“Yeah, they’re true all right.” Lights looked around warily. “It’s like they just vanished into thin air! One day they’re giving you stuff to edit for your daily bread and the next... Poof! It’s like they were never there.”

“Let me guess; it’s Shippers in particular?” I asked.

“So you’ve noticed as well?” He looked mildly surprised. “Well, yes, somepony’s doing something with them I’m sure. Which is why I can’t have you going around falling into plotheoles. I’m an editor, and if somepony starts taking out writers, soon I’ll have nothing to edit!”

His concern was heartwarming. “Well, thanks... I guess. Now, if you can show me a way out of here I’ll get right on that. I don’t suppose you’ve got a teleporter somewhere, do you?”

He rolled his eyes. “Always one for a quick jab, aren’t you Squeak?” He turned towards the remains of the elevator. “I can fix the car so it’ll take you back to the lobby. Stay put.”

“You can do that?” I asked, genuinely surprised. A thought occurred to me as I looked back at what was left of the elevator. “How’d you even get here anyway?”

“You have your secrets and I have mine. Now, don’t go falling back into that plot hole while I’m at it, okay? Oh, and think about your left forehoof for a minute.”

“What are you talking about Ligh-” I looked down to find that the hoof in question was nearly translucent. I put my it in front of my face in disbelief; I could see the opposite wall right through it!

“Don’t panic,” Lights said evenly, although his advice came more than a bit too late. “Just think about walking and it should come back. You’re lucky it wasn’t in there for long. Getting around on three legs is rather hard, I’d imagine.”

I was shocked; I’d heard about what plot holes could do, but I’d never seen one in action. My hoof had barely been in there for a few seconds and it was almost non-existent. Only the merest of outlines told me it was still there at all.

I did as Lights said and thought about my hoof; it wasn't hard, being that I was rather attached to it, after all. I thought about walking through the /co/mpound's streets, jumping, kicking, running, the works. If thinking about sporting activities could get you a medal, I'd have won gold for sure.

The ghost limb became solid again with a small 'pop'.

"There you go," Lights said, a smile on his face for the first time since he'd arrived. "Now, to get to work." He turned and walked towards the elevator, with a parting "Don't get killed."

I was left on my own once again. I stepped away from the edge of the plot hole, wanting to get as far away from that thing as possible; after what it'd done to my hoof I didn't want to get the full treatment.

It was no accident that I'd ended up in this room. First I'd plummeted several stories in an insane elevator and *then* I'd almost been erased from existence. I imagined what I might tell Maxie next time I saw her: She'd say 'How have you been, Squeaks?' and I'd have to think of a lie, because I certainly couldn't say good.

The hole took up the majority of the floor and, as far as I could tell, there was no way across. I looked back towards the elevator, where Lights was mumbling something about proper word tenses. If he hadn't of come to save my hide I'd be stuck down here, with the hole baring my way forwards and the broken elevator unable to take me back. I'd either have fallen into the hole, sat around in the dark till I starved to death or leapt into oblivion on my own accord.

Someone wasn't just trying to kill me, they were trying really, *really* hard. I wondered why they'd go through all the trouble since I didn't have very many leads yet. I was armed with only rumors from Max, warnings from Seth, and a couple of disappearances I had no way to track, not to mention Semi's murder. Which was common knowledge. In any case, a well placed knife would shut me up pretty quickly, regardless of whether it was worth it or not. Then again, whoever had it out for me certainly wouldn't be the only pony in the OC with a flair for the dramatic.

A voice shook me from my thoughts. It was a strange voice in that I didn't exactly hear it, its words seeming to bypass my ears and go directly into my brain.

"You have to help!" cried the voice.

I jerked backwards. "What! Who's there!?" I gazed into the darkness; across the hole I could make out the vague silhouette of a pony. The shadows were too complete for me to make out who it was and, although I couldn't see them, I felt its eyes staring at me intently.

"You have to help!" the voice repeated.

"Help with what?" I yelled. "Who are you!?"

"You have to stop it!"

"The disappearances?" My voice echoed oddly through the tunnel.

"That, and so much more... Go! Quickly!" The pony turned and raced off into the darkness. Out of instinct I tried to follow, only to realize again that if I took another step forward I'd fall into the plot hole again. I watched as it retreated, trying to make out anything that might help me to track it down. It was a useless gesture though, and in another moment the blackness had swallowed the figure entirely.

I stared for a while. That pony knew something and, more importantly, was on my side apparently. A very rare thing, considering my line of work. I'd have to find them... somehow.

Something fluttered over the plot hole and landed at my hooves; it was a scrap of paper, a strange symbol marking the front. My mysterious pony in the dark must have dropped it. In bright, hastily drawn letters, it said one thing:

***Go to Hell.***

Well, maybe they weren't on my side after all.

I quickly picked up the paper and put it into Maxie's saddlebag. The symbol was unfamiliar to me, but even if I didn't know what it was, somepony in this town would.

Lights called me over.

"It's fixed," he said, not without some pride. "...*but*, when you get back to the lobby, make sure to tell them to do some more thorough repairs before anypony uses it."

I looked cautiously at the elevator. The floor-selection panel was on again, although only the one lobby button glowed. The rest of the floor buttons remained dark. The glass on the floor was gone, but the car was still battered and dented in places and the one remaining door was still caved-in. The thing looked like it was held together by spit and prayers.

Lights noticed my apprehension and gave me a shove. "Go on, I don't have all day!"

"Fine," I conceded while casting another worried look at the contraption. "But do you think it'll hold both-" I turned to find Lights walking back towards the plot hole, this time grumbling about redundant word usage. "-of us..." I finished lamely.

Editors are weird.

Well, it was either try the elevator or take my chances with the plot hole. Staring at the state of the elevator, I was having considerable difficulty deciding which one was the better option.

Oh well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I mused. I could *certainly* die down here, or I could *perhaps* die in the elevator. So, I stepped inside, and pressed the one remaining button.

"Onwards and Upwards" I said under my breath.

I braced myself against the floor out of habit. There wasn't much of a point to it; I didn't think I could get much more torn up. The elevator slid slowly and jerkily to the left, the floor shaking like an earthquake, and then stopped. The doors didn't open. I looked around, a slight tinge of claustrophobia setting in. Was it stuck?

My question was answered as it shot up five feet, flattening me to the ground. It stopped just as quickly and I was fired up to the ceiling like so much confetti. The doors opened with a slightly warped 'Ding' as I fell back to the floor.

Everyone in the Writers Room stared at me as I limped out. The second I was clear smoke began to gush from the elevator. I went over to the reception desk, the receptionist looking at me as if I'd just crawled out of a horror movie.

"I was told to tell you that-" I was interrupted as the cables snapped, the elevator fell, loudly back down the shaft. There was an explosion this time, closely followed by the *whoosh* of wind rushing up, the hot air blowing paper everywhere. "...the elevator needs repairing," I finished. Then I turned and practically crawled back onto /co/mpound's streets.

I *hate* elevators.

One perk about living in a world based on a cartoon is that injuries, at least the ones that don't kill you or have plot significance, heal pretty quickly if you can get out of the 'scene' you got them in. A few short minutes after I walked out of the Equestria Daily building I was back to normal. Even the rips on Maxie's saddlebag were gone.

It was midday now; apparently I'd been down there for longer than I thought. I yearned for a bed and, at that moment, all I wanted to do was go home, curl up and sleep for a week. My body complained at me for being awake so long but I didn't have time to rest. Someone had tried to kill me, and I wanted to be on their tail before they tried to do it again. I didn't have time for sleep.

So I needed coffee.

I stepped through the doors of Brewers, the local coffee shop, although it also doubled as a restaurant and general junk food store. The bell above the entrance rang cheerfully as I entered. It was your average place, complete with wood floors and dark, earthy colors. The interior smelled of coffee and fresh vegetables, making for a pleasant contrast of sweet produce and bitter brew. Brewer sat behind the counter, a brown earth pony with a thick black mustache. He didn't talk much, but he was a good guy. Behind him Heatwave warmed the coffee. He was an odd addition to the /co/pound; he didn't exactly mesh with the straightforward 'no frills' attitude of the town, mostly due to his mane being made of fire.

Still, no one brought it up because he made a damn good cup of coffee using it.

I nodded to Brewer, who grunted in return as I walked to a seat. I could see several ponies I knew around the place. Dapples, a dark grey unicorn who was the newest addition to the staff, stumbled across the dining room as he took orders and tried hard to not drop anything. He was a bit clum-

*CRASH.* The previously grey unicorn was now a warm red thanks to the addition of tomato soup to his coat.

Okay, very clumsy, but he was one of the few unicorns willing to take the job. Earth ponies generally didn't make for very good waiters; no one wanted to eat a salad after it'd been carried in somepony's mouth. There were inventions to get around this but Brewer, being Brewer, was too cheap to buy any.

Dapples walked shakily to my table.

"I'll take a cup of coffee, strong as you can make it," I said.

"Okay, one cup, gotcha," he replied, his horn glowing as he magically wrote down my order. He walked off to fill it, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I needed someone who knew the ins and outs of The OC, someone who knew the seedy dark secrets of ship writers, someone with a magical mustache.

I needed Pacce.

# Chapter 6

*In Which a Conman is Consulted, a Watson is Wanted, and a Trip is Taken.*

The FiM District was certainly... something.

It was much like the /co/mpound, only less crowded. It had originally taken shape as a refuge during the ban wars, except back then it had been a massive, opulent city, built from rebellion and inhabited by the lost. However, since the end of the wars the population had slowly diminished, leaving many buildings empty and boarded up. Most large contributors had secondary offices in the better districts. The only others who cared to stay were the stubborn kind. The kind that said, if the mods didn't want them, screw that; they could make their own way. It was slow but, to a hoofull of ponies, it was home.

Unlike the /co/mpound there were few Anons running around, most every pony had a name and a story, but I only wanted to hear one of them.

The district bordered the /co/ast before pouring into the /b/ay and, eventually, the outer OC. It was a mostly respectable, if empty, area in all places but one; Fic Lane, which was itself located on a small street near Arttown. Through here nearly every fapfic, crack slash and lesbian-soaked piece of literature to ever be put to paper passed at one point or another. I tried to avoid it when I could these days. I'd had an office down here a long time ago, back when I was in the business and the business was good. Then again, I'd had offices in lots of places back then.

In this place, the secrete whispers that were once held in the shadows had turned into big business. It thrived and lit up the skyline. Even after the author's death I could still see **Raging semi's house of fapfics** in the distance. The tacky-green neon glowed like the lights in a terminal ward, as if to say 'Don't go here for, once you do, there's no going back.'

But let's hold up on that thought; if I keep this up, I might go and say something profound.



My hooves made an odd clicking noise as I walked down the street. A few ponies milling about turned their heads in my direction, but no one said hello. I could sense that something had changed here. They knew the old man wasn't coming back home and they knew something bad was going down. Hell, they probably knew more than I did.

I looked around trying to get my bearings. He had to be here somewhere, I just knew it, he hardly strayed far from this part of town. I walked through the streets, turning down various offers from unsavory-looking pegasi. I could see a couple respectable businesses had lasted since things turned. Their owners looked out at me hopefully and I would have loved nothing more than to stop and look around, but I couldn't for two reasons: One, I was on a mission and, Two, I didn't have any money.

I finally came across the blue earth pony standing in an alley. He was talking to green unicorn with a pink mane about something or other. Making a deal, I'm sure.

I walked over. "Hello, Pacce."

The unicorn took one look at me, and ran. I like to think it was because I looked threatening, but from the looks of him he would've run from damn near anything that wasn't his drug of choice.

Pacce quickly hid whatever he was doing and turned to me with a salespony-kind of smile. 'Squeakers!' he said plasticly. "Haven't seen you around these parts in a while. How's life treating you?"

Pacce was a strange one. He was perfectly normal by most standards, except he had a magical mustache taped to the end of his snout. If you looked away and looked back it would always be something different. At the moment he was sporting a handlebar.

Pacce had carved out a niche in the Fim District as the guy who could *get* things. If you wanted it, he had it. Magical items? Easy. Black market episodes? Child's play. Naughty fics? Hell, he got 10% off everything coming and going through this sector of town. He'd somehow managed to attain mod status in this part of the OC, which was no small feat. There were various rumors surrounding how he'd gained the position. Knowing him, there was no telling if they were true or not. Having such power made

him even better at *getting* things. It was rumored he'd had an editor's eyes on sale once. Some said that, with those, you could see the world in a whole new way.

But right now I liked my view fine. The thing I needed was information.

"I'm well, Pacce." I said. "But I must say I'm not here on vacation."

"Are you sure?" he asked raising an eyebrow. "The weather is lovely this time of year."

"No Pacce, I'm here on business."

That got his attention. "Oh, so you *need* something." His salespony's smile grew wider. "Well I thought I'd never see the day. What is it you want? I've got a sweet deal on socks. They're the hot thing right now, very hard to find in stoc-

"I need information, Pacce." I cut him off.

"Oh, well that changes things," he said with mock graveness. "With information, it depends."

"Depends on what?" I asked, though I knew full well what the answer was.

His smile returned in full force "What's in it for me?"

I clicked my tongue. "You see, that's the interesting part..." I said, taking a few strides past him into the alley. "...because I have it on good authority that telling me what I want to know could help you out."

"And how's that, Squeaks?"

"Well..." I said, looking back. His mustache was now a pair of mutton chops, hold the gravy. "...the evidence so far suggests that somepony in the OC is taking out fapfic authors and ship writers. I believe that puts you in danger, doesn't it?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, affronted. "I've never touched the stuff in my life!" A filly could have told me he was lying through his teeth.

“Oh, is that right?” I pressed, adjusting my hat a little. “Well, if I know my history –and I think I do– you were pretty active in the ship writer’s community a while back.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. The only fic I ever wrote was ‘Junior Speedsters Forever’. To critical acclaim, I might add,” he bragged while puffing out his chest.

“Oh, you think so, do you?” I asked, looking him dead in the eyes.

“I do.”

“Well, what about those Lyra and Bon-Bon fics?” I asked, pressing forwards.

“Oh, those weren’t all that bad.”

“Even the part with th-”

“A moment’s relapse!” He interrupted. “A one time thing.”

I raised an eyebrow and drew closer. “What about that one with Gilda and Dash?”

“A drunk pony’s musing, that’s all it is!”

I pressed my nose against his. “The ‘Equestrians in Undergarments’ scandal!?”

“T-that was hardly a ship fic.”

“You had Rainbow Dash stealing panties!” I yelled.

“Well...” His eyes darted around wildly. “It’s not like anyone read it!”

I pushed forwards a bit more, knocking him off his hooves. “It was during the friend-off,” I growled through clenched teeth. “It took them *days* to put out the fires from the riot.”

He started sweating at the memory. “Well...I can hardly be blamed for the actions of others!”

“You were selling torches in the street!!”

“Fine...” He sighed. “I admit it, some might consider me a writer of...less than appropriate literature if you look at it that way... But I’m a businesspony, Squeaks! I simply go where the money is!”

“Yeah,” I scoffed, “I suppose you do, don’t you?” I backed off. “But since you admit it, that puts you in the line of fire. Will you help me?”

“Squeaks, you’re twisting my arm here!” he whined. “I can’t part with this kind of valuable information for nothing!”

“I haven’t even told you what it is I wanted to ask about!”

“Well, yeah...” That smile snaked its way back onto his face. “...but apparently, you want the answer really badly. That, my friend, makes it valuable.”

I scowled at him. I’d thought as much. Ever the ‘Businesspony’, he couldn’t part with anything without compensation, even if his own neck was on the line. I didn’t want to do it, but I reached into Maxie’s Saddlebag, and pulled out a request tab. I’d hoped to save them for when I was in a pinch, but it looked like I didn’t have any other choice.

I set it on the ground, holding it down with a hoof. I wanted to make sure it stayed there ‘till I got the information I wanted.

Pacce’s eyes glittered in the darkness when he saw it. I could hear him drooling as he whispered, “Is that...”

“It is.” I finished. “Good for one drawing from Maxie. Imagine it Pacce; you could get anything you want... within limits of course. Perhaps a picture of Gilda? I know how much you like her...”

The blue pony licked his lips. He stared down at the tab under my hoof hungrily, I could see his brain already working on what he could get with it. “Well, Squeak, you drive a hard bargain,” he lied, “but I believe I can help you. What’dya need?”

Now I was on the right track. “I need you to look at this.” I took the letter out from the Saddlebag’s side pocket and held it up. “There’s a symbol at the bottom. I need to know where it’s from.” I said quietly.

He leaned in close, his mustache now a curllly-cue, and squinted at the paper. "Hmmm, I haven't seen this around these parts since the last ban war,"

"So you recognize it?" I asked.

He nodded. "Oh definitely, most definitely... What you have there is a piece of paper from across the water."

I considered this for a moment. "You mean towards the Outer OC?"

Pacce nodded again, stealing a glance at the request tab as he spoke. "Ponychan Plains, to be precisies. Not just anywhere either. This paper's from one place in particular."

This was looking promising. "And where's that?"

Pacce was practically trying to will the tab out from under my hoof with his mind at this point. He stared, fixated on it.

"Pacce!" I yelled. "Concentrate! You'll get this, as soon as you tell me where the paper is from." I tapped my hoof for emphasis.

He snapped out of it at that. "Okay, I'll tell you this, but you're lucky I don't charge you extra." That smile of his split his face, almost reaching his ears. The kind of smile that tells you the person behind it sees you as a very large wallet that needs emptying. "It's from the S.F building."

The name rung a bell. "The S.F Building?"

"If you don't know, then that information *will* cost you more. Now, I believe it's time you pay the piper, Squeaks."

I grunted. "Fine." I took my hoof off the tab. It was gone faster than my eyes could track. Pacce smiled wider than ever. "Thank you. Happy to do business as always."

I turned to leave. "I bet you are," I called over my shoulder. "Don't spend it all in one place."

At that, I walked out of the alley. I could hear Pacce's maniacal laughter fading away. There was no doubt in my mind that he was off to Maxie's office to cash in that tab. I smiled; despite his smarmy nature, the

two were actually good friends. It'd probably never crossed his mind that he probably didn't even need the tab. He could have just asked.

But then, that's not how a salespony thinks.

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I walked until, trying to find a cab to hail. They were a rarity on this side of the OC, but eventually I found one, a blue and rainbow-colored number. I handed the cabbie exact change, as always, and made my way back home.

So, Ponychan Plains. That's what Pacce had told me. That meant that this case was bigger than I'd realized. The Plains were a settlement near the Outer OC that had formed across from the /B/ay as a result of the ban wars being particularly heavy on that side. It was the opposite of the Fim District in that, after the wars had ended, the ponies stayed. It was one of the more populated areas of the OC, as well as one of the strangest. The /Co/mpound had formed from the ideas of the anonymous, who eventually came up with names or identities depending on what they did. Ponychan Plains had formed from those who'd been born with names, the kind of ponies who didn't often have trades or jobs and were instead there for the sake of being there. Depending on who you asked, it was either the most loving place in The OC, or a madhouse of insanity and hugging. As for me? The jury was still out on that one.

The cab came to a stop at the front of my building. I hadn't been back in so long it looked like a five star hotel to my tired eyes. I climbed wearily up the steps and trudged my way to my office. I needed to collect my thoughts.

I was surprised to find a pony with a beard and a brown robe waiting on the steps.

"Squek!" he yelled, rushing over. "I've been waiting on you for hours. Where have you been. What's the point in being a detective if you're not even going to keep to your own hours, huh!?"

I sighed; I didn't have time for this.

It was C.J., short for Commander Jesus. He was the local crazy pony. Every town has one I'm sure, that guy who gets drunk a lot and starts

shouting about how Gummy is a secret agent for Beelzebub. In anycase, this wasn't the first time this had happened and I'm sorry to say he was one of my best customers. Just last week he had hired me to find out who was plotting to steal his teeth. I'd told him it was one of the pigeons who hung out near the park. He'd stopped sleeping there, payed me, and moved on. Don't ask me where he got the money, but a pony's gotta eat.

"What is it C.J.?" I asked. All I really wanted to do was sleep at this point, but I decided to humor him, if only for a few minutes. I figured I might even get some money for my trouble.

"Squek!" he yelled again. C.J never got my name right. "There's something goin' down man. Some real bad shit. You feel me?"

"Yes, I feel you," I replied flatly. "What's going 'down'?"

"Somethin' big man, somethin' real big. I can feel it in my whiskers." He pointed to his matted beard, his eyes shifting wildly. "They're in on it, they're all in on it. They ain't got no choice, you see?!"

I rubbed a hoof against my face, trying to stifle a yawn. "Who, C.J., who's in on it?"

"They are!" he screamed. "They all are, every stinking one of them! I knew it! I just knew it! I knew they would betray us! I've heard the whispers... So many whispers!!!"

I needed him to get to the point. "What have the whispers been saying?"

"They hide in plain sight, Squek, they hide in plain sight! They take them, and they fall! We'll fall! We'll all fall!!!"

I took a step back, wary of his crazier-than-normal ravings. For him to seem crazy in relation to his regular crackpot-routine was no small feat. "Who are 'they'!?" I asked in growing exasperation and anxiety.

"The ones you never notice, the ones outside the spotlight. Notice, Squek! Notice!" He flailed around for a moment before rushing off down the stairs screaming about the 'The one who eats cake.'

I stared after him for a while, trying to work out what he'd meant. I'd heard his inane ramblings more times than I cared to admit, but this time

seemed different. He seemed more irate, more afraid. I had a strange feeling it was related to the case. Things seemed to be getting worse, and now the Plains were involved. I needed to get to the bottom of this.

I looked forlornly at my office door. There was a bed in there, and it was beckoning to me like a misspelled word to an editor. Hell, at the moment I'd have taken a couch, but I had a feeling in my gut, a feeling that I needed to get this case solved fast. There was no time to be sleeping on the job now.

It broke my heart to turn away from my office, head back down the stairs and call a cab. I knew where I needed to go, and I knew that if whatever was causing all this was to be found there, it would be dangerous.

I needed to take a trip to the Plains, and for that I'd need a ticket. But first, I needed someone to watch my back.

I headed back out on to the streets, and caught a cab to Sly's place.



## Chapter 7

### In Which Tea is Taken and a Train Makes an Early Stop

We stood in line waiting for tickets to the Plains. There was only one way to get there and that was the Pony Express, which was both a very lame pun and the only train across the water to the edge of the known OC. The tracks went for several miles from the /b/ay to the gates of Ponychan before making a return trip. There was no other way to get from one end of the OC to the other; going across the /b/ay by boat was never an option. Trolls flourished in the murky waters that lapped at the edges of the small coastal town, making it one of the more turbulent areas in the OC. Going fishing there was a death sentence, let alone trying to get across in any kind of craft. Who knew what monsters grew in the deepest waters miles from shore? I couldn't begin to imagine, and can imagine a *lot*.

Slywit stood next to me in line. He was currently a Pegasus, his wings fidgeting impatiently on his back. For some reason he'd donned a cowboy hat.

"Are you sure about this Squeak?" he asked. "Pacce isn't the most trustworthy source in The OC. This could be a wild goose chase."

I'd asked him to accompany on the investigation to the Plains since there was no way I was heading in there alone. The culture shock on its own would be enough to worry about, never mind the murder investigation that rested on my shoulders. Somepony had already tried to kill me once in the past few hours and I didn't fancy the idea of going in without someone I could trust to watch my tail.

"Well, I haven't got any better leads," I said, moving forwards. "the way I see it, it's this or bust. Besides, there's lots of ship writers on the other side of the pond so It'll be a prime target for whoever's doing this."

"Fair enough," he conceded. "but I still don't like it, we don't have the home field advantage anymore."

He was right; the Plains were a strange place, alien, while the /co/mpound was home, familiar. Here I knew who to trust, what to expect. I'd visited the Plains a few times back when it was just getting its legs, near the end of the ban wars. Since then it had gotten a lot bigger, steadily

encompassing more and more of the outer OC. Who knew who --or what-- we'd find there.

"All the more reason I need you."

We came to the front of the line, I noticed the pony in the booth looked familiar.

"Rubber Duck!"

Sly and I both sighed. "Hello, Sprinkles."

He smiled. "And look, it's Sly! What's up stallion?"

"You know, the usual," Slywit said flatly.

We didn't have time for this. "We'd like two tickets to the Plains, Sprinkles. Coach, nothing fancy."

He raised an eyebrow. "And why would you two be going to the plains? It doesn't have anything to do with that murder you was talking about earlier does it?"

"Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't," I said impatiently. "Either way, we need our tickets."

"Still in a hurry, as always. Geeze, you're gonna put yourself in an early grave working like that."

If I lived long enough for that to happen, I'd be more than happy.

Sly stepped in front of me, tipping his cowboy hat. "No rest for the wicked, Sprinkles. Now, get our tickets please."

"Fine, fine, fine," he said grumpily. "I tell you, this used to be a people business. Back in my day, ponies were friendly to their ticket...giver...guy..."

"Sprinkles, only started this job a few hours ago."

The clown-themed pony pulled back in shock. "How do you know that!?"

"Your application is on your desk." Sly eyed him questioningly. "It hasn't even been signed yet... wait, are you even supposed to be worki--"

“Two tickets to the Plains! Coach! Here you go!” Sprinkles shoved the tickets through the window. “Now, off with you! Don’t you see I have more customers? Geeze, a pony tries to make a living in this town....”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as we made our way to the train. “Nice eye, Sly.”

“Why, thank you. They don’t call me ‘Slywit’ for nothing, you know.” He adjusted his hat. “Besides, if I’m going to play detective with you, I have to act the part.”

I nodded. “True, but remember; the murderer isn’t ‘Playing’.” I paused. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

I looked him up and down. “What’s with the Cowboy hat? Are you trying to look like Calamity or something?”

“Shhh!” His eyes shifted back and forth. “Don’t call attention to it.”

“I think it does a fine job of that all on it’s own, Sly.” I raised an eyebrow. “...What’s up with you?”

“Well it’s just...” He looked around, making sure no one was listening. “...Not everyone takes kindly to a guy who’s an earth pony one minute, and a unicorn the next. It freaks some ponies out. Heck, it borders on summerpony territory and I get enough crap about it in the /co/mpound. I don’t know how things work over in the Plains, so who knows what’ll happen.”

I sighed. “There’s three things wrong with that theory, Sly. One...” I pointed to his back. “...that thing does nothing to hide your wings. Two...” I gestured to an alicorn boarding ahead of us. Her mane was glowing like a neon sign, changing colors every few seconds. She turned and winked at me. “...you’re hardly the strangest pony on this train, and three, you look like a Appleoosa reject. You’re drawing more attention than you’re turning away.”

“Nice Calamity outfit!” yelled somepony in the crowd.

Sly slapped his face with a hoof. "I haven't even read that fic!" He sighed. "Fine, maybe I'll stay a pegasus for a while anyway." He removed the hat and put it into his saddlebag.

"Good, now let's get this show on the road; the quicker we're back in the /co/mpound, the better."

We walked towards the large locomotive. It was bright blue, with every nail and railing painted in bright rainbow while thick, multicolored smoke poured out of the many stacks at the top. The engines begin to hiss and spit as ponies rushed to ready it for departure.

The conductor, a pony named Promotory, took our tickets and ushered us inside. The train was crowded as ponies of all kinds milled about, packing luggage into their cabins and chatting animatedly. I spotted quite a few summerponies and alicorns on this trip, obviously part of The Plains crowd returning home.

As the lands expanded outwards, The Plains filled with all kinds of ponies in colors and shapes of every possible imagining. Occasionally they got bold and came to the /co/mpound in an effort to be more worldly. While there were those who seemed happy, I saw many more sitting dejectedly, crying to themselves. The /co/mpound was not a kind place for such ponies. They found it was hard and cold, not at all like they'd pictured. It was a harsh realization, but they were the lucky ones.

At least they'd made it back to the train.

Sly and I found our seats; much to our surprise, Sprinkles had somehow given us a cabin. Whether or not it was on purposal didn't know but, if you'll excuse the pun, I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

We hadn't brought much with us. Sly had a few supplies in his saddlebag, while I still carried Maxie's. It may not have been the most fitting, but hell if it wasn't useful.

The speakers that lined the cars played old music from back when the OC had started, the classic tunes. It made me nostalgic listening to Eurobeat Brony's signature beats as they echoed throughout the train. It reminded me of my short stint as a music pony, back when times had been good oh so long ago. I wondered if they played my stuff and, if they did, if anypony listened.

As I settled into my bed I heard the engines start up, and a quick look out of the window confirmed we were under way. As we pulled forwards I could see the /co/mpound slowly shrinking behind us. The EqD Building, with its ever changing rooms, and the various apartment buildings, filled with eccentric individuals, faded into the horizon. I thought of my office, the unknown Anons that ruled the city, Maxie, Seth, Derpy... Hell, I thought about CJ and Pacce. This case was taking me a lot farther away from home than I'd thought and things were only getting more mysterious as I got deeper. I'd come in with one question and come out with a basketful. This was the only lead I had, given to me by a conpony in back alley, but it was better than nothing.

I looked at the disappearing city, the city I hoped to Celestia I'd see it again. I was in deep waters and I'd better start swimming pretty damn fast.

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There isn't much to view between the /co/mpound and the Plains. I'd looked down at the water below, but had to stop when I felt pretty sure something was looking back. There was nothing on either side of us but the /b/ay, its watery expanse stretching out as far as the eye could see. The rickety tracks were the only thing keeping us from tumbling into the troll-infested waters far below. I'd heard stories about the ponies that built this bridge after they'd been banned from their homes, that the trolls had driven them mad... Or turned them. I wasn't sure which was worse.

It was pretty boring in the cabin. Sly had brought his work with him and was scribbling away on the next chapter of Paradise while I opted to get out and stretch my legs; sitting in a cabin doing nothing made for pretty boring prose, after all.

I left Sly to his writing, opened the cabin door and walked out into the hallway. A few ponies had the same idea and were admiring the train. Unfortunately, I'm not a train enthusiast. Instead, my stomach suggested we go in search of the dinning car.

From what I was seeing of the other passengers we were the only /co/mpoud residents on board. It was purely the vacation crowd, and from one end of the train car to the other I saw no pony I even remotely recognized and quite a few more I was pretty sure I didn't want to. I avoided looking at anypony too closely; though the Plains were a bit more

'Love and Tolerance' than the /co/mpound, it wasn't unusual for a pony to board the train on one end and never get off on the other. I didn't want to make any more enemies, All I wanted was to get this case over with as fast as possible.

The train was larger than it looked. I knew the Dining car would either be in the front or the back of the locomotive, but I didn't know which. I decided to ask.

"Excuse me." I tapped a black unicorn with a rainbow-colored mane and tail. "Would you happen to know the way to the dining car?"

The unicorn, who was revealed to be a stallion, turned. He looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place his face.

"It's that way." He pointed to the front of the train. "Just keep walking, you can't miss it." The unicorn paused for a heartbeat. "Do I know you?"

Damn, I knew why he looked familiar; he was Roy BG, a newspony who'd done a stint on the Bronyshow, a local radio broadcast. They went around the OC highlighting ponies of particular interest and had done a feature on one of my stories back when their office was in the EqD basement. They'd moved up in the world since then, but it seemed like I hadn't been forgotten.

I didn't want to talk about those days. "No, I'm sorry, I must just have one of those familiar faces." I smiled awkwardly. "I'd best be going to the dining car now. I have friends waiting," I lied, skirting past him towards the front of the car.

If he said anything after that, I didn't hear it. Breaking into a trot, I made it the rest of the way without incident, other than dodging past the occasional slower pony or small filly who'd decided the floor was their play area.

Finally, I reached my destination. I grabbed the door handle in my mouth and swung it open. I probably didn't have to, but I held my hat out of habit. The wind rushed by as I quickly hurried through the space between cars, the cold biting into my coat, it was vicious, but it had nothing on the smell. I shall spare you the details of what the /b/ay smells like. If you do care to imagine it, remember the worst thing you've ever smelled, then forget it. There's no comparison.

I managed not to gag as I stumbled into the dining car. There'd once been a pathway separating the cars from the open air, a kind of magic glass that kept the air out. A few stops at the /co/mpound station had taken care of them. Due to the nature of its clientele the train was often vandalized, to the point where there was a whole crew of ponies tasked with restoring it. Eventually they'd given up and decided the spells that kept the glass working just weren't worth the effort.

Despite the smell I saw a few ponies eating at the colorful tables in the car. I decided to sit at a booth towards the back and wait for my appetite to return. I hadn't put anything in my stomach that wasn't coffee for a day and a half, so I was sure it wouldn't be far behind.

I surveyed my surroundings in the meantime. The dining car was themed after Pinkie Pie: There were balloons everywhere, tied to chairs, along the wall, on the plates and table cloths, even on the ceiling. It gave of the impression that a filly's birthday party had exploded.

A fancy waiter in a pair of Groucho glasses came up and offered me a menu.

"Would you like anything to drink?"

I didn't trust myself to open my mouth without spewing my guts, although it might have made the carpet look better. I just shook my head instead.

"Very well, let me know when you're ready to order, sir." He walked off, his large clown shoes squeaking as he went.

I sat back in my chair, listening to the clicking of the rails as the trains sped towards our destination. I concentrated on the case in an effort to forget the smell which still permeated my nose. I thought back to the EqD basement: Somepony had given me that piece of paper that had led us to this train. It was my biggest lead, and I had no idea who had given it to me, or even whether they were on my side. The only thing I *did* know was that they knew more about what was going on than I did. If Maxie was right and more writers were disappearing, I had to get this thing solved fast, no matter where it took me.

My thoughts were interrupted as the car door swung open again. A mare stumbled in, wearing a checkered bandanna around her mouth. She

was a unicorn with a green coat and a lighter green mane. I couldn't see her cutiemark. She also looked familiar, but I couldn't put my hoof on as to why once again.

She shook herself off then sat in the booth across from mine. The waiter came up and asked for her order. She mumbled something to him, he jotted it down, nodded and left.

The mare laid back in her chair, looking positively worn out. What little I could see of her eyes over the cloth were ringed by dark circles. Her horn glowed, and she removed the bandanna.

I couldn't help but pull back in surprise.

It was Lyra.

She looked like she'd met the bad end of one of those brushie-brushie memes, but it was definitely her. She was one of the BG's who had made it into the OC, like Derpy. It was a shock to see any of them so far away from the EqD Building, let alone on a train to the Plains. I was surprised she'd made it to the platform. Somepony of her status should have been mobbed the second they set hoof on the street.

She noticed my staring and, with a gasp, quickly put the bandanna back on. I had a feeling she wasn't just wearing it to block out the smell of the /b/ay.

She'd already noticed that I'd recognized her. In for a pinch of oats, in for a pound.

"I know it's you, so you might as well take that thing off."

She sighed as she untied the knot holding it on. "Please don't tell anyone." Her voice had a thick Irish accent.

I got up and walked over to her table. "I won't," I promised, dropping myself in the seat across from hers, "if you tell me what it is you're doing on this train."

She cast a hard glare in my direction. "What's it to you?"

"Call it a fan's curiosity. It's not often I meet celebrities."



She scoffed. "I'm no celebrity."

"I know a lot of ponies who'd beg to differ." I inspected her; she *really* didn't look good. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing you can help me with." she turned to look out the window.

I leaned in closer. "Try me."

"Why should I tell you what's going on in my life? It's none of your goddamn business."

Looks like I was going to have to play hardball. "Well, I'd hate for it to get out that you're heading to the Plains. I used to work for the EqD you know. What if I let it slip that one of their most beloved background ponies was leaving the /co/mpound? It's unheard of you know. Very big story."

I could tell by the look on her face I had her.

She sighed. "Fine," she conceded while looking around the car warily, "but not here. We can talk in my cabin. I'll have them bring some tea."

"Excellent." I got to my hooves. "I'll just grab my companion and we'll head off."

"Companion?" she asked. "Look, you know too much already, I don't want to tell more ponies."

"Don't worry, he's really good at keeping secrets." I headed towards the door. "Besides, meeting a strange BP on a train to the Plains in the middle of the night? I've seen the movies Lyra, so you'll have to excuse me if I bring some backup."

I pulled the door open and let the rushing wind whip my mane again. I tried to make a cool exit, but I think the gagging sounds ruined the effect.

---

I went back to our cabin and found Sly. By the time we got to Lyra's room she was already sitting down, levitating a cup of tea in front of her nose.

Sly's cowboy hat was back on, he said it was for ascetics this time. He thought it made him look a bit more intimidating. I didn't have the heart to tell him otherwise.

She leered at us as we sat down. "Ask your questions so I can get this over with, Presscap."

"My thoughts exactly." I looked at the tea cups in front of us. They weren't made for earth ponies. I wondered if she had done that on purpose. Still, I needed the caffeine, so I bent over the table to take a sip. Sly did the same. "So, let's cut to the chase. Why are you here?"

Her tired eyes looked at me for a moment. "I need to get away."

"Get away from what?"

"From everything!" she gestured around the cabin with her hooves. "You have no idea what it's like..."

"Being adored?" I mused. "You're right, I have no idea what that's like."

She scoffed. "Adored? Try *stalked*. I can't walk down the /co/mpound's streets without being mobbed, I can't get a soda and pay for it myself, I can't go home without getting through the crowd of ponies who want autographs it's too much!." Her voice grew quieter. "It wears a pony down..."

"So, a simple celebrity vacation?" I had thought this might've been related to the case, but that was looking unlikely now. I'd always wondered what it was like for the BPs in the OC. Being Canon immigrants, some of them had massive followings, but I could also see where the novelty would wear thin.

"So, you think things'll be better in the Plains?" I asked. "Sorry to tell you, it'll probably be worse for you there. If the stories are correct, /co/mpound fans have nothing on *Ponychan Plains* fans. You ever heard of Nyx?"

She shuddered at the mention of that name. "Yes, I'm well aware of the nature of the Plains. But I've been told there's a pony there who can

help me in the /merch/ant square. I plan to change my coat, my mane, my tail, the whole thing. Then maybe I can finally get some peace.”

The room was silent for a few minutes. The sound of the rails echoing through the cabin. Sly was the first to break it.

“But if you’re not seen around the OC, then you could be....you know...”

“Forgotten?” Lyra turned to him. “I know the risks. I don’t need you to warn be about them.” She got up and walked towards the window. “Does that answer all your questions?”

I nodded. While I’d hoped she might have something to do with the case, I’d gotten the answers I’d wanted. I couldn’t ask for much more.

She turned and glared at us. “And you won’t tell anypony?”

I stared back at her. I’d always liked Lyra. She was one of the most popular BP’s in the whole OC, but it looked the popularity had taken its toll -with a hell of a lot of intrest.

“We won’t tell anypony,” I agreed. “Right, Sly?”

Sly nodded. “Right.”

At that she turned and walked towards the cabin door. “Good.”

As we got up to follow her out, I suddenly sensed a shift in her demeanor.

“Did you enjoy the tea?” she asked.

Her voice sounded far away. Suddenly I felt tired, well, I always feel tired, but I mean *really* tired. My eyes were heavy. I opened my mouth to reply, but I couldn’t get the words out. My vision swam as I shifted from hoof to hoof.

Damn.

“I’m sorry, I really am.” She walked out the door. I heard the lock click behind her.

I looked back at Sly, he was already on floor, weakly struggling to get up. We'd been set up. I thought back to the dining car. How could I have been so stupid? She hadn't exactly done a great job of hiding who she was. She sat down right across from me and removed her only means of disguising herself. She'd *wanted* me to know who she was. She'd wanted me to ask questions. She wanted me here.

My hooves gave out on me and I went sprawling to the floor. I tried to fight it, but the darkness was already creeping around the edge of my vision. How long had it been since I'd last slept? A day? Two? I was tired, so unbelievably tired.

I couldn't fight it anymore, I laid my head down, and let the darkness take me.

Damn.

---

*Welcome to Ponychan Plains. Please be on your best behaviour. We will not tolerate belligerence or smut of any kind. Bans will be levied to those who break the rules. Be polite, enjoy your stay and remember: Love and Tolerance is the answer....*

I could hear a robotic voice echoing at the back of my head. It sounded far away, like it was coming from the inside of a long tunnel.

*/Co/mpound translation: Don't be an asshole....*

My head hurt. *Really* hurt. I had the feeling that something was wrong, but I couldn't quite remember what it was. I opened my eyes, then immediately shut them. It was far too bright, I'd been out cold all night, it appeared to be early morning. I squinted, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

*Notice from Conductor Promotory: Oh Celestia help us, the tracks are blown! The train is going to crash!*

Wait... *what?*

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I waited for my brain to catch up to the rest of me. Slowly I remembered what had happened last night.

Lyra had drugged me... I opened my eyes fully and saw Sly lying on his side next to me, snoring loudly. I still felt like I was missing something.

*Warning: The train or the tracks has suffered a major malfunction. Please evacuate the train immediately. If you are not a pegasus, please find one to assist you. If you cannot, then enjoy your stay in the /b/ay, and remember to recommend the Pony Express to your friends and family! Have a pleasant day.*

I was on my hooves in seconds. The speakers along the train were broadcasting a warning. The monotone voice of the welcoming service echoed through the mostly empty cabin.

I raced over to the window and flung it open. The wind whipped passed my head, threatening to pull me out of the train. What I saw shocked me so much I didn't even notice the smell.

Ahead of us the tracks were mangled and broken. I could see the Plains just beyond the break. There were several pegasi and alicorns helping earth ponies across the gap to the platform on the other side, jutting out of the cliff face. I called out in hopes of getting their attention, but they were already too far away. It didn't look like they were going to make a return trip either. I quickly dashed back in and closed the window. Sly was still out cold on the floor, his cowboy hat lying nearby.

"Sly! Sly wake up!" I shook him with a hoof.

"Mhmm...He's a keyboard wizard....but there's a twist..." he mumbled.

"Sly! Get up **now**. We're in real deep shit at the moment!"

He just mumbled some more and turned over in his sleep.

I gave him a sharp kick to the ribs.

"Sly!"

He woke with a start. "Huh!? What?! What's going on?"

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"That!" I helped him to his hooves. "The tracks are blown up ahead, but we didn't know until now because Lyra drugged us. I think she planned this." Once I had him standing, I raced over to the door. I tried it a few times but it wouldn't budge. "She's locked us in!" I remembered.

"B-but that's insane!" Sly yelled, looking around the room in a panic. "Why would she want us dead!?"

"We can figure that out when we're on solid ground!" I looked Sly over. He lacked a horn, or even wings. His condition had really bad timing; this was one of the few times he was an earth pony. There'd be no help from him this time.

"Is there anypony else onboard who can help us!?" he asked.

I searched through Lyra's drawers at random, looking for something, *anything* that could get save us. "No! They're all on the other side. They probably didn't even know we were in here." Finding nothing, I gazed out the window again. The break in the tracks was coming up fast. If we didn't find a way out of this soon, the only help we'd need is somepony to fish our bodies out of the /b/ay, assuming we didn't turn into trolls first.

I heard a loud thud behind me, shortly followed by another. I turned around to see Sly bucking at the door in an effort to break out of the cabin. "Help me!" he yelled.

I didn't need to be told twice. I got next to him, and we both hammered at the door with our hooves. The wood began to crack and splinter as we worked.

"Stand back!" Sly pushed me aside, and with one more sharp buck the door was torn from its hinges.

"I hope we don't get a bill for that," I remarked as we ran out into the hallway. Sly was already heading towards the lead car.

"If we get off this train," Sly panted as we ran, "they can charge me anything they want."

The tracks began to get distorted and bumpy as the train progressed and I strained to keep my balance as we were almost thrown to the floor. Things bounced and flew through the air as the train got close to the edge.

"Have you got a plan!?" I asked Sly.

"Not even a little one," he replied before dodging a mane brush as it whizzed past his head, "but damn it all if I'm going to sit around and die!"

We reached the break between the cabins and the conductors booth. Sly threw the door open, and I leapt through. I caught another glimpse of the tracks. The damaged section was far too close for comfort.

I landed in the booth with a thud, struggling to keep my balance as the shaking of the train got worse. Sly wasn't far behind. I looked at the controls in utter confusion.

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"I wish that thing would shut up!" Sly began pulling leavers and pushing buttons at random. "There's gotta be a brake or something in here!"

For lack of a better idea I did the same, but all the dials, buttons, pulleys and levers may as well have been the deck of Star Trot's *Enterprise* for all I knew.

The train began to rock and roll as we sped down the tracks. I started clutching the controls to stay upright more than anything.

"I don't think this is working!" I yelled. The train rolled and shook. "We're gonna crash!"

Sly looked around the booth, looking for something to tell us what to do. Finding nothing, he leveled his stare at me. "I don't think there's a way out of this, Squeaks..." he said slowly.

I clung to the controls for dear life as the trains started to buck and jump. The break was less than hundred yards away and getting closer with sickening speed.

"Looks that way, Sly." I glanced at him. "So... this is it, huh?"

He laughed bitterly. "Yep, I'd say so. Looks like I won't be finishing Paradise. My readers are going to kill me."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that. Hell, if I was going to die, I might as well do it smiling. "Shame, I was looking forwards to the last chapter."

The train jerked again. We were almost to the edge now.

"I don't think Maxie'll be getting her saddlebag back either." I remarked.

Sly smiled. "Oh well, it looks better on you anyway." He paused. "Oh, and Squeaks?"

"Yeah?"

"Next time you ask me to go with you somewhere, remind me to say no."

I smiled back. "Sure thing, Sly."

He patted me on the back. "Guess I'll see you when I see you."

The trains jerked a final time. We'd reach the break. The lead car caught on a bump in the tracks and Sly and I went sailing towards the windshield, the train breaking apart around us.

They say that when the somepony is in danger, their brain slows the passage of time, in order to take stock of how truly screwed it is. I can attest to the fact that this is true, as at this point my brain decided it was in fact *very* screwed. The speaker system uttered its repetitive welcome one last time, although it sounded warped and distorted in my ears.



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I hit the windshield first. My body went barreling through it like tissue paper. The shards of glass cut into my skin as I was tossed out into empty space. In my present frame of mind I could see the crystalline shards whirl through the air, glittering like so many diamonds in the sun, as I fell. If I'd had time to focus on anything other than the odd sound ringing in my ears (it sounded mysteriously like my own screaming), I would have thought about how pretty they looked.

Sly wasn't far behind. He fell end-over-end out of the train, going a fair bit faster than I was without the windshield to slow him down. He sped past me like a bullet out of a gun, flipping like a mad ballerina.

I could see the ponies standing on the other side of the tracks on the Ponychan Platform. They looked up and pointed at us in horror. Their concern was a little late, but still appreciated.

Below me I could see the murky waters of the /b/ay coming up to greet me. Things swam back and forth eagerly. Trolls, I was sure. I couldn't make out what they looked like, only able to catch sight of the occasional tail here or tentacle there, but I was sure that if hitting the water didn't finish me off, they certainly would.

This was it. I was going to die, and there was nothing I could do. The case would remain unsolved, the writers would keep disappearing, and I'd just be another line in the EqD obituaries.

I wondered, who would get to write it? I'd always figured that if I ever died on the job Sly would be the one to do it, but seeing as he was currently tumbling to a very similar fate that wouldn't be happening. I wondered if Pacce would do it? But if he did...then they'd probably have to pay him.

I was really close to the water now. I closed my eyes, and prepared to die.

I waited. Then I waited some more.

Shouldn't this dying thing have happened a lot faster?

I opened my eyes to find myself floating away from the water.

"Oh." I whispered. I must have already died, my soul was on the way to pony-heaven. Rising up past the clouds. The whole affair was a lot less dramatic than I'd thought.

The fact I was heading to pony heaven raised a host of other questions.

"The look on your face right now is priceless," said a familiar voice.

I looked up to see an alicorn flying above me. I noticed a faint blue glow surrounding my body. He lifted me to eye level.

"...Sly?" I asked dumbly.

"Yep." He grinned.

"Am I dead?" I asked while checking to see if all my limbs were still present.

"I don't think so."

I felt very confused. "...Why am I not dead?"

"I'm a bit confused about that myself. I was falling through the air, pretty sure I was about to kick the bucket, then I got that familiar feeling I get when I'm about to change, and bam! Alicorn."

I paused for a moment. "So this has never happened to you before?"

"Nope."

"So... your condition that switches your body between the three pony types, which I might mention has *never* helped you before this point, waits until we're in imminent peril to mix the three and save our lives?"

Sly nodded.

"I knew it was a good idea to bring you. I've never been so happy to see a Deus Ex Machina in my life." I nodded towards the platform on the other side of the tracks. "Can you put me down now?"

“Sure.” He flew off towards the Plains, leaving the wreckage of the train behind us. “You think Lyra’s in the crowd?” he asked, gesturing towards the assemblage of ponies who’d escaped from the train. “I have more than a few questions for her.”

“You and me both, but if she’s got any sense she’s well into the Plains by now. It’ll take a while to track her down.”

“Yeah, you’re probably rig-” he paused. “Uh-oh.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “What do you mean, ‘Uh-oh?..’

He started flapping his wings harder. “I’ve got that feeling again, like I’m about to change.”

“What!? Now!?” We were still a little ways from the platform.

“Yes...now...” Sly replied through clenched teeth. “I’m going to try to aim towards the tracks.”

“Aim!?” I didn’t like where this was going.

Sly’s wings began to beat erratically, he grunted and strained as he pushed me forwards. The magical glow around me flickered worryingly.

“Sly?...” I could feel the magic fading, I was going to fall soon. I flapped my forehooves in an effort to somehow clear the distance faster. I slowly began to sink. “Sly!”

With a grunt, he tossed me the rest of the way. I landed with a thud on the iron tracks. It was painful, but at least it wasn’t moving.

I was on my hooves in seconds. Sly was still struggling behind me, I could see on his face that he didn’t have much time left.

“Fly!” I yelled. “Come on!”

Sly gave a final push, flapping hard. He was less than a foot from the tracks, when, with a loud pop, he was an earth pony again.

He hung in the air for a moment. Curse cartoon psychics.

“Crap.” he said flatly.

Sly tumbled out of the sky.

I didn't have to think about it, which is good, because if I did then I probably would have thought better. I hooked a hind leg around a break in the tracks and launched myself out into the air. Sly was falling fast but, lacking any other options, I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck with my teeth. I tasted blood.

Gravity will forever be on my list of enemies. We stopped with a sickening lurch as my hoof clung tightly to the railing. It hurt like hell. There was a cracking sound I really didn't want to think about, but what mattered was that I had Sly, his body hanging limply in my grasp.

I really need to work out more, Sly was a lot heavier than he looked. Pretty sure that my leg was broken, I used the other one to lever us back to safety.

I laid there panting for a while. I was bleeding a lot, and I was more black and blue than yellow at this point, although I was still alive. I looked at the wreckage on the tracks. The caboose had come off of the train and sat awkwardly on the tracks. From the looks of it there was a fire somewhere inside. What remained of the rest sat jutting out of the /b/ay, puffs of rainbow colored smoke still billowing from it's smokestacks as the engine sputtered and died. I could see I wouldn't be getting back to the /co/mpound anytime soon. Behind us I heard the ponies from the platform racing up the tracks to get us. I hoped they had food. I'd never gotten the chance to eat anything on the train.

Sly eventually opened his eyes.

"Am I dead?" he asked.

I smiled. "No, you should see the look on your face right now."

He chuckled weakly. "Huh, I guess that makes us even."

I nodded. It was a bad idea, my neck hurt terribly. "For now."

We sat there waiting for the ponies to catch up. This had been the second attempt on my

life in the last two days. I thought back to my theory, the one about how the bad guys only tried to kill you when you were getting close to the answer. I looked again at the mangled wreck of the train.

I must be pretty goddamn close.