

My Little Metro

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Prologue

My name is Lockbox.

It's a strange name to be sure. But my father... my adoptive father... always told me it was appropriate. It is my cutie mark, after all, simple and boring though it is. I have always had a good sense of where to hide things to keep them safe and sound. I collect things. Always have, and perhaps always will. Usually I find pictures, or books, or toys. Whatever it is that keeps memory alive. Anything that was probably important to somepony, somewhere, in the time before. Like everything else, memories must be preserved and carefully hidden away so they aren't corrupted.

I'm not sure why I collect things the way I do, except to satisfy my strange, romantic notions of keeping old dreams alive. I think it's because I know that somepony would appreciate it. If not the owners of the items that crowd my room and adorn my wall, then somepony who will come later, wondering what it is we have lost. What we can one day hope to regain.

It's hard, trying to believe that the world will ever go back to the way it was. For many years... twenty for me... the metro tunnels beneath Stalliongrad have been our fortress. Our prison. Our home. Crowded beneath the ruins of a once great city we scabble to survive. There is no Sun to look up to and hope in, no Moon to put our dreams and wishes on. The sky has been burned black, and clouds mock us with rain so cold it burns. The very ground of our city is blanketed by radioactive poison from the destructive power of enemies whom nopony can seem to remember or care about anymore. We have many choices in which to die, but few that lead to a real life.

I think the worst is the Rot. The inevitable wasting away of bodies that cannot fight against a hostile environment that never lets up. For no air here is pure. Not really. The poisonous magic released by the bombs seeped into every crevice, and the fumes are always there in some form or other. After years of breathing corrupted air and twisted magic, many of our elders die slow deaths as their lungs are destroyed from the inside out. That is, if they live that long, what with the monsters and bandits having full

reign over every stretch of tunnel that isn't monitored. Sometimes even the civilized ponies of another station cause the trouble.

We work hard here in the Metro. We live fast and die young more often than not. If there is an Equestria, or even a habitable world beyond these closed spaces and the sky that never opens, we do not know of it. Radio signals, if they are still being transmitted from somewhere, do not find us. The land is poisonous tundra of snow and ice and twisted trees as far as the eye can see, and nopony has reached us from beyond the city limits, if they are there to make the trip at all. The blasts that leveled our town have hurtled us back to scavenging and improvising our technology. Nopony can reach us to give us new supplies.

Stalliongrad was an old city, slow to embrace change and reluctant to bend knee to Canterlot, and we have paid dearly for our isolation. There are no Elements of Harmony here. No hope of help coming to us. I like to think there are other ponies out there, stubbornly clinging to life, and certainly there must be some pockets of the world that survived the holocaust.

Still, for all my idle dreams I had always thought our lot in life was certain. In these metro tunnels we will live, and in them we will die.

But the day Hunter returned... the day fate came to me... nothing would ever be the same again.

Chapter 1

“Is there a hero somewhere, someone who appears and saves the day? Someone who holds out a hoof and turns back time?”

I started the day as I usually did. I woke up and did my morning chores, moved crates around and talked to the traders who came through. I asked if they had anything new in the way of very particular junk nopony else wanted or needed. They had little, since Exiperia was a fairly self-sufficient station and sold more than they bought. I said hello to Sunny Side, my old friend, and shared a drink with him. Sunny Side was my closest companion, though as a pegasi he had it worse than most of the others. Even I, as a simple earth pony, was better suited for a life underground. The pegasi are born with a need to fly, but how can they do that when the air above will destroy them in seconds? It was always depressing, hearing a pony who was happy for everypony else share with me his constant, grating anxiety, the need to spread his wings in open air when there was none left. I gave him my usual condolences and shoulder to cry on. What else could I do?

Like clockwork we parted again as he went to his weekly target practice with the station militia. I then retired to my tiny room to try and organize what I had acquired during the day. I dropped onto my couch that doubled as the bed, enjoying the way the soft cushions accommodated my usual sprawling position. I had lived in this same room for a good ten years now, and looked forward to greeting that same musty run down couch every day until I died. Though it was cramped, and every available space was taken up by junk or my personal belongings or my own body, I felt that made it more snug. My room was like a good blanket, and at least I did not have to share. Chalk that up to being the adopted son of a pony of influence in the station. Trying to ignore the sounds of somepony shouting and music quietly filtering through the thin doors, I lost myself in my day dreams. It was time to stare at the Wall.

I let my eyes run over the thick jungle of pictures and postcards that completely obscured one wall of my room, still images of a beautiful world frozen in its prime. The gleaming spires of Canterlot rose up over all

Equestria, the forests of the Whitetail Wood grew happily, tended by pony caretakers. The wonderful buildings of Manehattan, with its architectural triumphs, stood tall and proud. Ponies lived, worked, and smiled. And all I could do was sit and stare at the moments stuck forever on little pieces of paper. I burned each and every scene into my brain, locking it safely away in the recesses of my mind. In there, these ponies and their happiness would live as long as I carried the memory. For a little while at least, I and the old world would connect across time. Ponies long dead would come back to life and frolic in my mind's eye.

I could do this for hours, imagining what it must have been like to walk on streets that were paved and clean. To breathe air that was always crisp and filled with the smells of a busy day. I liked the pictures that had ponies in them most, especially when they were at a café or a diner, eating and drinking. I liked the fond jealousy of watching them partake of a bounty they knew with blissful conviction would never end. Ponies had had such wealth before, and I liked to think some day we could have it again.

What did their food smell like in those days, I wondered? What did the grass and the trees and the flowers do to one's nose? How bright were the colors compared to the faded majesty of my modest collection? How did the Sun feel in the day, how did the Moon comfort them at night? What were the Princesses really like, and would they return to heal our world? Such questions kept me up at night, something my father... my adoptive father... would reprimand me for more than once. He didn't mind that I enjoyed the thoughts of a better world, just that I would lose sleep over it, or worse, get inspired enough to go and do something dangerous for the sake of it.

I dreamed of flowers. Flowers, I thought, probably smelled a bit like a cooked mushroom, or like the strange gasoline smell the bioluminescent pods in the deeper tunnels had. Just cleaner and less acrid, I was sure. Perhaps the bread would have that crisp warm scent of a good blanket that had just been washed? I knew that our bread couldn't compare to the golden-brown wonders I saw in my pictures. Just thinking about how crunchy they looked made my mouth water, even though I would never know exactly how they tasted. Anything from the time before had to be better than this, though.

I eventually picked up a guitar and gently strummed it with the corner of my hoof. That guitar was one of my most prized possessions. Something that I could create beauty with, and entertain the young ones. The colts and fillies were my favorites, with their bright and hopeful eyes. I adored the way they scurried through the horrors of our world without much care or thought to how terrible things really were. How they had no knowledge of what they were going to face when they were grown. I envied them, and saw a glimpse of an innocent Equestria in those eyes.

I had played for an audience once or twice around the story fires, when the elders would relate to us the stories told to them by their forefathers of the time before the scorched earth. I or another pony more skilled with instruments would sit in a corner and just strum the night away, listening to the quiet drone of old voices regaling us with stories of things we would never see. There came tales of shimmering wonderlands of snow that didn't freeze your ears off, and great celebrations that would clear the way for spring. Stories of ponies working in harmony and fellowship. Summer days so hot, you would sweat like a pig and love it, staying cool with iced drinks and air conditioning that didn't break down all the time. Cool autumn nights spent curled up with a lover under a blanket of stars. The world bowed down to us and gave up its provisions happily, and we cared for it in turn. I am not ashamed to admit I cried at more than one of those meetings. We would sit in silence, letting the images fill our heads, comforting us, taunting us. They stayed with me more, though. My memory could hold it.

It was getting to be evening when my father... my adoptive father... knocked on my door, smiling that knowing, grim smile of his. He always knew when I was getting lost in the Wall.

"Hey, Lockbox," he said in his gentle, slightly nasal tone. "Come on, get up now. There are some ponies I want you to talk to."

My father... my adoptive father... was always trying to get me to become more active in helping run the station. I think he hoped I would inherit the position of mayor from him. It was not something I looked forward to. Experia Station was plagued with problems, not the least of which were being a frontier station on the fringe of the main circle. It kept us away from conflicts between other, more powerful stations, but it also made us vulnerable to attack from other, darker sources. We had been

suffering for a long time from a threat my father tried to keep in the inner circle of leadership to keep me and the others from panicking.

“Is it about the alliance with Draft Station?” I asked.

My father shook his head. “No. Right now I think it best if I show you some things that have been kept quiet until now.”

“The attacks?” I asked. I remembered the talk around Exiperia, kept it locked away in the safe of my mind. My father sighed.

“Perceptive as ever, my son,” he said, and gestured with his hoof outside again. “Come on.”

I got up and put on my saddlebags, followed him into the cramped hall, shaking my flanks to get my saddlebags to sit easier on my back. It was amazing that we could stand these conditions, really. A pony could barely turn around without bumping flanks with someone’s door, or other flank. You got used to it, or you went insane. Some of the poor pegasi who couldn’t handle living here have done that, and went stir crazy from the lack of flying and open spaces. Disregarding everything they fought their way into the poisonous air outside, going as far and as fast as they could before they fell. Dying a quick death as their flesh burned and their lungs dissolved, at least they got to spread their wings one last time. The doctors called it “going feather-brained.” It made me very, very glad I was an earth pony.

I followed the graying mane of my father past Sour Grape’s place, where he stood outside the door and gave me and my father a curt nod.

“Lockbox,” he said gruffly, and I returned the nod. Inside Grape’s room I could hear his poor wife griping again about his behavior. Sour Grapes was not the most affectionate of ponies, and his wife complained quite often about his lack of a work ethic.

I was pretty sure she was having an affair with Balderdash, whose place we passed without a word. The stallion was calmly listening to some old world music inside. He loved hearing music and often organized what few parties we could afford, not that we had much occasion for them.

We passed old Granny Turnip's room, swung around the kitchens where Nuts was gossiping with Bolts over the cooking pots, and began heading upstairs. I recognized Clockwork and Yuletide, two ponies who worked with the livestock, playing cards in the hall. My father gave them a vague reprimand which they barely acknowledged, as he did almost every time they passed. My father was a dour pony, but he didn't like to bring an iron hoof down on anypony. The station was happy enough with him and Primare Donna in charge. Between them and the others Exiperia was peaceful enough, until this new threat had come.

And then there was Starry Gaze. The unicorn filly appeared out of nowhere as usual. I wasn't quite sure what she did around Exiperia, since she was always either daydreaming or doing a different odd job every time I looked.

"H- hey there, Lockbox, mister Cinder Block," she said, fixing me with her sparkling eyes as she fell into step behind us. There was barely any room to walk alongside, but she pushed to get as close as possible anyway. I felt a little crowded as my haunch kept brushing her shoulder, which she no doubt intended. Many a young colt had lost themselves in Starry Gaze's eyes, though she was always too shy and timid to really make use of it. She was a little like me, always sending her gaze off somewhere else, lost in her thoughts. I suppose she took that similarity to be a sign of compatibility, as she had been pushing hard to find time alone with me. I gave her the same nod I had Sour Grapes.

"Um... I made this for you!" Her horn glowed and levitated out a little circle of string, decorated with shiny bits and pieces of who knew what. In the center was an old bit from when money was worth something, with Celestia's face on one side and Luna's on the other. It was pretty enough.

"Thank you," I said, and after a moment she realized I wasn't slowing down to take it. I allowed her to float it into my saddlebag.

"So... where are you two headed?" she asked, and I was acutely aware she was just making small talk while she stared at my flanks.

"The clinic," my father said. "There is business that needs taking care of. Lockbox is coming along to learn a few things."

“O-oh,” said Starry Gaze, her bright eyes dimming a little. She knew just as I did he was talking about the attacks, and it was enough to blunt even her optimism. “I... I hope you figure something out, then. I know you will.” She stared at me as she said it.

“Don’t worry,” my father said with a comforting, paternal grin. “The Rangers themselves are coming here. Between them and our station we’ll put an end to this trouble.”

“That’s good, sir,” she said, still waiting for me to say something. I did not.

“I’ll... I’ll see you later,” she murmured, eyes downcast as she turned away.

“Take care,” I said, and with one last hopeful look over her shoulder she was lost to the corridors.

“You shouldn’t be so short with her son,” my father sighed as we came up to the main level. “She is a nice mare, and is only trying to be friendly.”

“I know, father,” I said. I knew I was being something of a foal. Shying away from females seemed to come naturally to me, but where Starry Gaze was concerned I knew it was for the best. She wasn’t my type, and I felt she was pushing for a relationship because I fit the criteria that made me a good choice, not because there was anything between us. That and I knew Sunny Side had had his eye on her for a long time now. The poor pegasus had a crush something awful on the unicorn, and getting caught in a love triangle was the last thing I needed.

Still, just to be nice to her I’d show that I’d kept her homemade trinket next time we met.

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The main level of Exiperia always bustled with activity. Here the docks resided, and where all of our livestock were kept and our farms were grown. There was also the small collection of shacks and stalls we called a market was housed. As we pushed through the crowd, I saw several militia

ponies rushing back and forth. I noticed Sunny Side, but he couldn't spare a glance as he fluttered over our heads towards the guard posts. *They* certainly knew something was up, but everypony else was acting like it was business as usual. I narrowed my eyes and looked at my father.

"... It happened just recently. Word is spreading now," he told me.

"Why didn't you announce it to the station?"

"And have everypony believe our leadership is going to squawk our panic at the air like crows?" he answered with a glare. "No, we need them to think this is just another mutant attack for now. Though, the way the bodies always end up, that will change very soon..."

It was morbid to admit, but my curiosity was piqued. I said nothing more to my father as we pushed through the market towards the hospital, ducking into a side hall to avoid the worst of the crowd. I saw several worried glances and hushed conversations going on, and as we neared the clinic I felt a sinking feeling develop in my stomach.

"Cinder Block!" the head doctor, Pokey, greeted my father as we came to the door. A worried crowd of ponies waited nearby, held back by the militia. I heard several of them calling out for news of loved ones.

"My poor Blue Jay is in there! My husband! Please, just let me know he's all right!"

"Damn it, my son was on duty during the last attack! Where is he? Let me see him!"

"Greymane, you know my wife! Is she okay?"

"I'm sorry Timber. Rules are rules. I can't say anything. Everypony, move back! Make way for the mayor!"

I felt their eyes on me and my father, accusing and hopeful. They wanted answers. My father just trotted up to the head doctor like it was an ordinary day. I knew he was trying to put on a brave face, but it just came off as indifferent to me.

“Pokey,” he said calmly. “What is it now?”

“Another one of *those*,” the doctor grumbled, shaking his silver mane. “They came out of nowhere, as usual. Every single bloody guard on the post was wiped out! We should speak of this inside. The trader can tell you more, he’s the only one who got out unscathed.”

“Very well. Take us inside.”

I pushed against my father as we crowded inside the door, eager to be away from all those angry ponies outside. Their glares made me blush, and my ears burned at the clamor they made. The sight was no better inside. The clinic was crowded almost to capacity, and many areas were cordoned off with bedsheets. I saw the warm glow of unicorn horns behind them as they worked their best magic to stave off the inevitable... but there was a whole corner stuffed with covered bodies already. My stomach twisted.

“They attacked like they always do, coming out of nowhere and hitting us like lightning!” Pokey snapped, leading us through the bleak scene. I saw a pony lying on a bed through a gap in the sheets, his eyes wide and pupils dilated. He stared straight at the ceiling, hugging his pillow while a couple unicorns tried to coax him into drinking a healing potion. He just lay there, staring and breathing like he was already dead but didn’t know it yet. On his flank was a blue jay. I turned away, feeling sick. Pokey kept talking.

“Just like before, they didn’t kill with any weapon we know of. The best we can figure is it’s some kind of magic, or perhaps a poison we can’t detect! There’s nothing *physically* wrong with their victims... most of them. They just come in looking like... well, like *that*.”

He raised a hoof and pointed at one of their most recent cases. A big, strong pony who looked like he could buck a tree in two and a cutie mark of two crossed pistols sat up straight, his head lolling back and forth. On occasion, his hoof reached up into thin air.

“Mmmuh,” he groaned. “G... gotta reach it... get the gun... captain’s orders... gotta fire! Mmmuh! Can’t see...”

Cinder Block stood directly in front of the dizzy stallion, looking him in the eyes.

“Trigger Hoof,” he said calmly. “Trigger. It’s Cinder Block. Can you hear me? You remember me, Trigger?”

He waved a hoof in front of the stallion’s eyes, which were filled to the brim with dilated pupils just like Blue Jay. Trigger glanced at the waving hoof, and for a few hopeful moments it looked like he was becoming lucid again.

“C-captain’s orders,” he muttered. “Open fire. Don’t stop shooting. Gotta reach my gun. Gotta reach.” He lifted his hoof and tapped it against Cinder’s. The gesture was disturbingly child-like.

“Tell me what happened,” my father demanded in a slow, commanding voice.

“Not normal. Not normal,” Trigger whispered, transfixed by my father’s hoof. “Shadows. Out of shadows. The noise. It’s breaking everything. Oh, Goddesses, the *noise*. In my head. In my eyes. Bursting. Can’t move. Gotta reach but I can’t move. Mmmuh. Wings... horns! Horns! Wings! Reaching! They’re gonna get me! AAAH!”

He backpedaled into the wall, shrieking incoherently. A couple of militia ponies nearby tried to hold him down as he thrashed against an attacker we couldn’t see.

“WINGS! BLACK! DON’T TOUCH ME! GET AWAY!”

“Sedatives, now!” Pokey ordered, and a nurse rushed forward, using her teeth to jab a needle of glowing purple... stuff into Trigger’s neck. The big stallion’s cries were quickly reduced to whimpers and insane mumbling again. None of the other patients seemed affected by the outburst, and the clinic was eerily quiet once more. I heard the mumbling of another lunatic nearby, behind his curtain.

I stood still through the whole ordeal, frozen to the bone with terror. Mutants were one thing, but afflictions of the mind couldn’t be solved with bullets... most of them, anyway. My father recovered quickly as usual.

"Is there *nothing* you can do for them?" he asked Pokey, who hung his head. I noticed the doctor's eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't slept in a while. How long had these poor ponies been back here, hiding all this horror from the rest of the station?

"All we can really do is make them comfortable," he murmured. "Eventually, they all... pass. One way or another." He nickered and tossed his mane towards the covered bodies in the corner. I couldn't bear to look for more than a moment.

"Sometimes they develop hemorrhages in the brain due to tumors that come from nowhere. This leads to a stroke, and the blood vessels just... fall to pieces. Loss of brain function comes swiftly. Sometimes they just... just *shut down*, like a lightbulb. It's like nothing I've ever seen. Their brains have suffered some kind of horrible trauma or stress, and they just... can't handle it. It's lethal no matter the species, pegasi, earth... unicorns die especially quick, though. Sometimes right there on the scene after an attack."

"Bastards," my father hissed. "They don't even have the decency to kill us like regular mutants. They slay us with *fear*."

"That is... one way of putting it," Pokey assented. "All of the victims have suffered some kind of severe trauma. They all arrive in a state of deep shock that we can't snap them out of. There is... talk... going around the clinic. That this isn't just magic... it's a psychic phenomenon *related* to magic. Even non-unicorns can feel the presence of powerful magic in the site of an attack, but it's not the *direct* cause."

"You're saying these freaks are telepathic?" my father rumbled. "That's just *great*. Celestia *damn* it, psychic monsters are just what we need..."

"What about the trader you mentioned?" I asked. "You said he was the only survivor?"

Pokey shook his head. "You can still see him if you want, but he was in bad shape... an errant bullet took him in the leg, and he only caught a glimpse of whatever attacked them... but it still scarred him deeply. He

hasn't showed any signs of degenerating... yet. We think he just took a glancing blow from... whatever it is they were hit with."

"Take us to him," my father demanded. I wasn't sure if I wanted to follow, but I wasn't going to be weak in the presence of my father. I followed them into the back of the clinic, to a private room. A dull orange earth pony with an equally dull mane sat on a bed, leg wrapped tightly with healing bandages. The intricate spells required to create those medical wonders were not able to be worked by just any old unicorn. As such they were very rare, only applied in the case of grievous injuries. He had a treasure chest cutie mark, and the rest of him was covered in cuts and bruises as if he'd been tossed around by a wind storm.

"My name is Sixpence," he mumbled as we came in. "I saw them. I do not know what I saw. I want to go home. I want to leave."

"Your injuries are still too severe Sixpence," Pokey assuaged him. "You'll be on the very next cart out of here back to Bucklyn when you're better."

"Sixpence, my name is Cinder Block," my father rumbled. "I need you to tell me everything you saw during the attack."

"My death," Sixpence groaned in a hoarse voice. "Our death. They didn't even need to touch your militia. They just... *looked* at us. Staring... those eyes..." He covered his eyes with his hooves. "I see them in the dark. Glowing red and orange like hellfire! They just *looked* at them, and... and the *noises*! Oh, dear Luna, the noises! It was like a hoof scraping on a chalkboard in my *head*. I thought my brain was going to explode! And then they...they all just started screaming and falling... firing at nothing... I hid. I hid. It was so awful. I couldn't do anything."

"Sixpence," my father asked quietly. "What did they *look* like?"

I felt a chill in the air.

"Wings," he said quietly. "Black wings, like a pegasus. And legs. So long. Reaching for us... their horns glowed... with such *power*... lightning and wind everywhere..."

“Horned, winged creatures with long legs?” I asked. That sinking feeling in my stomach was growing worse.

Sixpence looked up at us with dull, haunted eyes.

“The Princesses. They looked like the Princesses. Celestia help me, they looked just like her...”

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“We should do something, father,” I said, standing in his office after the visit to the clinic. Cinder Block paced back and forth in front of me. Primare Donna and the leader of the militia, Captain Ironhoof, stood nearby.

“We can do nothing for now,” Cinder Block replied. “These creatures kill us without even touching us. Their magic overwhelmed some of our best unicorn guardponies! We must do our best to hunker down until help arrives.”

The others didn’t see it, but I could tell that he was more than disturbed by what he’d seen. He was just trying not to be concerned too much for my sake.

“Cinder,” Ironhoof said, “we have lost a whole tenth of our guard force to these attacks alone! They’re going to bleed us dry, and then swoop in when we’re defenseless. We have to go out there and destroy them!”

“We don’t even know *where* or *what* they are,” Primare Donna said with a flick of her bright aqua mane that made me feel rather weak in the knees. Her beauty was her greatest asset, but she knew not to work her charms on my father or Ironhoof. I, however, was not so acclimatized to the earth mare’s... unique body language.

“What we need to do is call for help. I agree with Cinder. Other ponies who have been to deeper and darker parts of the tunnel system are coming here soon. They will be able to help us.”

“So what are we going to do?!” Ironhoof growled. “Wait until the whole Metro mobilizes? Until Ponyopolis gets off their collective asses and

sends an army? We know that will never happen, and the Rangers are sketchy at best!"

I said nothing about the Rangers. I had to admit I admired the brave ponies who wandered the dark tunnels of the Metro, slaying evil-doers and helping wherever they could. They kept the tunnels clear of mutants and fought back the crazier ponies of the Metro, such as the mysterious Great Cult of the Wyrn, and helped contain the insane little wars between the Celestian Monarchy and the New Lunar Republic. Whenever a pony was lost or hurt in the Metro, their only hope was a Ranger that would stop and help. They'd never leave a pony in need. They were the fiercest warriors, unflinching in their dedication to making the Metro safe. But their excursions took them places normal ponies weren't meant to go, and there were stories of how it affected their minds... quite negatively, in fact. My father didn't appreciate my love for them, even if he appreciated what they did.

"I know them," he said quietly. "Especially Hunter. He is coming here personally." My ears perked. I and my father knew Hunter ourselves. He was friends with Cinder Block, and often taught me how to shoot whenever he came by. He was also one of the bravest and strongest of the Rangers, and an extremely talented unicorn. If he was coming to investigate, then I knew we had at least a chance of finding out what's going on.

"Whatever we do, it has to be soon!" Ironhoof said, stamping his hoof. "We aren't going to last much longer. How long until these... these Dark Ones sweep us aside and invade the whole Metro?"

"I know, Ironhoof!" my father barked. "We must do our best to secure our borders. I want the watches doubled... no, tripled. Anything and everything out of place out there must be reported. All northbound tunnels are to be sealed off, every place we do not have a regular rail car route must be watched carefully. No pony goes anywhere, *anywhere* outside Exiperia alone. They will all be armed and escorted. Do I make myself clear?"

He stormed past as the other two ponies nodded. I followed him out, ears folded back. I still caught Ironhoof's ominous prophecy as we left the office.

“I hope you know what you’re doing. The Dark Ones will kill us all, Cinder Block! You hear me? This isn’t a normal war! This is our survival on the line!

“The Dark Ones will leave nopony alive!”

Chapter 2

“Just the usual tunnel trash...”

What’s strange about Stalliongrad is that most of the tunnels were not built with surviving a war in mind. Equestria knew peace for thousands of years under the benevolent rule of our Princesses. Whatever conflict there was stayed between individual ponies and almost never escalated into violence. War was a cautionary tale, a fable in storybooks that only happened in the lands of the griffons and the dragons. We had never believed it would reach us. So, the Stalliongrad Metro was created mostly to service ponies who elected not to walk the crowded streets above. Only when the war loomed were some of the tunnels haphazardly converted into shelters. By the mercy of Celestia and Luna, wherever they are, many of the tunnels have not collapsed after so many years of wear and tear. When construction began they were built in a sprawling, almost flippant manner. The enthusiasm of ponies unbridled and willing to work I supposed. It worked to nopony’s advantage, since it meant that everything was rather scattered, if roomier than it was normally supposed to be. At least they put work into whatever they built. We simply had to trust that the magic woven into the soil to keep it safe for the tunnels didn’t fade. Magic could be become tainted though, just like everything else. If the power of the bombs could destroy the land, then the residual effects of their magical enhancements would doubtlessly corrupt and twist the original spells laid down by our forefathers.

Did they know the war to end all wars was coming, I wondered? Did they know they were building the future homes of the shattered remnants of their people? That those few metro stations that were built in just such a way would be converted into factories, farms, and armories? Some of the stations were certainly built with preservation of the species in mind... large, fortress-like constructions deeper than most of the regular Metro.

These were occupied by the stronger factions, such as Ponyopolis or Hoofsa. I didn't know how or why those were created; many of the records of the time before were destroyed. The buildings above held few archives worth salvaging, and the stalkers who prowl the ruins come back more with salvaged goods than historical artifacts. No books or great fortresses, however, could prepare us or shelter us from the monsters that crawled out of the wreckage of our civilization.

I didn't know what the Dark Ones were, why they were here, or where they had come from. It was clear they were a grave threat, if the terrible scene in the hospital had been any indication, but if that was the case... why had my father tried so hard to keep the truth from us? Had he been so preoccupied with the status quo? I couldn't fathom it. My father was always one for keeping the peace and keeping the labor forces going, but to try to pass off a new and terrible danger to Exiperia as nothing more than simple mutants... it disturbed me greatly, and the conversation we had had about it didn't bode well for our relationship.

"That was awful, father," I said as we returned to my room from the meeting in his office. The walk had only served to let my father's thoughts gather and his temper boil. He wasn't easy to aggravate, but when he did get angry, he was less like a cinder block and more like a flaming gas leak.

"I know, Lockbox!" he hissed, shaking his head and looking everywhere but at me. "These creatures... these monsters, they are not like anything I have seen before. I have no idea how to deal with this, and it frustrates me."

"The station should know the truth," I said quietly. "If they don't know what is killing their families, they'll eventually storm your office and demand answers."

"They already do! If I could do something I would. But I won't let these creatures destroy our station from the inside out. I will put on a strong face for them. We have nowhere to go if we must evacuate. Give in to Hoofsa's demands and become one of their satellites? Goddesses forbid it! We must see if there is another option. When Hunter returns, we'll be in a better position to know what is going on."

I was still surprised to hear my father put trust in the Rangers, but then, he had only mentioned Hunter. Friends of the family were the only ponies he could stand when it came to real trust.

"There must be somepony who can get out there and *do* something, though?" I asked. I wasn't volunteering for anything, but I knew that against creatures who weren't afraid of guns or fire and could kill with their brains, we couldn't just sit back and wait for them to come to us. If we were all destroyed, then nopony in the future would be able to remember the past. And if that happened, then everything was lost.

"Do what?!" my father snapped, making my ears fold back. "There is nothing that *can* be done, not tonight at least. And not tomorrow. Especially not for you!"

My eyes widened as he pointed a formidable hoof right at my nose. "Father, I'm not saying that I would do something foalish," I attempted to mollify him, "but without somepony to go out and find out what's happening, what the rest of the Metro might think of this threat..."

"I won't hear another word of it!" he almost yelled and stormed out of my room, clearly convinced that I was ready to get out and get myself killed. It disturbed me to see him so angry, and for a few moments I was so confused I just stared at the air in front of me. I couldn't figure out why he was getting so upset, or why he seemed to be focused on me in particular. At the time, I chalked it up to stress, but that just made the argument seem silly. The next day, when I was sitting at the open eating area near the loading docks, I even found myself growing indignant. I looked down into my meager meal of mushroom and barley soup like it was at fault.

What right had my father to snap at me so? To try and tell me, a pony who might one day help run this station, that I'd have to sit down and keep quiet while better ponies did their jobs around me? I wasn't a child anymore. I was a full-grown stallion whether he liked it or not, and no matter how he had found me I was going to have to start taking a more active role in securing our future. He couldn't just believe that I was going to do something harmful because that was what his overprotective instincts told him. How dare he just *tell* me that my desire to find help was a foal's notion and not fit for consideration! I was no stranger to the dangers of the Metro. I had taken an active part in its defense more than once, clearing

out tunnels of straggling mutants. I had even once helped to hold off a wave of thumpers that ambushed a guard post I was inspecting with my father. My shooting lessons with Hunter had come in very handy that day. That moment of glory had been unintentional, however, and I'm fairly certain I had wet myself when one of the beasts got too close.

Even so, I had done it, and would do it again. It was very apparent to myself and others that I would do what's necessary to defend the station, and if that meant doing something about the threat of the Dark Ones, then that was clear too.

Would I, though, if I had the opportunity? This wasn't just picking up a gun and popping a few mutants in the head, or stepping on some rats. The question ran through my head over and over as I stared at my cooling soup, not even taking a bite. The mushrooms were rubbery and the barley was tasteless, but normally I would devour it as quickly as anypony else. Today, however, I was stuck for answers and full of questions.

The other ponies around me knew I was there, but did their best to ignore me. They were preoccupied with news of another guard post being destroyed by a terrible, unknown force, the news my father should have reported yesterday when it happened. Even if it was just a simple mutant attack as my father had tried to explain, no mutant utterly destroyed squad after squad of combat ponies and didn't even leave a scratch on their bodies. I felt their stares as they looked my way, knowing that I knew something, but they weren't brave enough to ask. I liked to think they respected me enough to not pry into my private business, but at the same time I felt alienated. I was stuck between duty to my father and love for my station.

I wanted to shout what was going on right there in the square, but what good would that do? At least they'd know. I had my Wall, didn't I? Touting my love of truth, finding the reasons behind every dark deed? Shame began to weigh my head down. I did my best to stay interested in my idle thoughts and my soup, which was growing lukewarm and wasn't steaming anymore. I didn't care. I wrestled with too many feelings. I didn't even notice Sunny Side drop down next to me, and suddenly I found his gasmask stuck in my face.

“Boo!” he barked. I fell backwards with a shout that echoed across the eating area, drawing a few amused glances from passers-by.

“Hi, Lockbox,” said Starry Gaze, looking down at me with a wary smile. Her pretty white fur and bright eyes enveloped my vision. I felt her deep red mane tickle my cheek as it cascaded over her head.

“Hello,” I replied as curt as ever, and rolled away to sit up again. Sunny Side laughed as he removed his mask. He must have just got done with a shift, as his deep yellow coat and orange mane were damp with sweat.

“That was very rude,” I grumbled. Starry Gaze tried to calm me with more smiling.

“We thought you looked lonely,” she said quietly, and reached across the table to touch my hoof with hers. I did my best to look disinterested, since I caught Sunny Side’s quick glance at the affectionate display. “Were you thinking about something?”

“Many things,” I said, taking my hoof away and rubbing it with my other one.

They waited in silence until Sunny Side raised his hooves. “Well? Many things like *what?*”

“*Private* things,” I said, angry at them for prying, angry at myself for not appreciating their concern and giving voice to my worries.

“Lockbox, you could pass for a Ranger, the way you never talk clearly,” Sunny Side exclaimed, brushing off my temper. “In any case, the whole station is in a tizzy. The business with the attacks and all, you see.”

“Aren’t you told anything?” Starry Gaze asked him. “You’re in the militia!”

“That’s what gets me,” my friend grumbled, waving a waiter over to get himself a soggyweed sandwich. I don’t know where he got his love of the stuff, since I despised its texture. It reminded me of crunchy worms. “We’re putting our lives on the line out there. These attacks hit us first, and

apparently we can't do anything to stop it... but we aren't even told what could be coming for our post next? It's pretty crappy, if you ask me."

"Um... Lockbox?" Starry Gaze asked, giving me her most winning smile. "Has... has your papa told you anything?"

I finally dug my snout into my soup and slurped it up grumpily, taking time to chew the rubbery mushrooms.

"I think he's been told more than he wanted to know," Sunny Side murmured, fixing me with a suspicious stare. "You know what's going on, am I right?"

"If I could tell you, I would," I said at length, my snout dripping with white broth. "But even I don't know the whole story. It's some new threat that's terrifying and dangerous. That's all I know."

Even if it was the truth it didn't satisfy Sunny Side, who huffed and stared straight ahead, tapping his hooves together. When his sandwich came, he ripped into it like he had just been through a famine. A strand of soggyweed dangled comically out of the corner of his mouth. An uncomfortable silence fell over the table and I found myself resenting my father for the gulf his secrecy put between me and the rest of the station. Starry Gaze only looked uncomfortable and put her hoof on mine again. I was too distracted to brush her off, even though I saw Sunny Side glancing at us out of the corner of his eyes.

It wasn't that I didn't appreciate my father and what he did. I owed him my life, and I loved him as I would my birth father. But this was going too far. Lives were at stake, and he was trying to put a lid on it like it was just another broken water valve or farm maintenance spell that needed attention. And now my closest friend was in danger of dying a horrible death, and I couldn't even tell him what was going on.

"I'm sorry, Sunny Side," I mumbled at length. The pegasus fluffed his wings, making his barding rustle. He rapped the table with his hooves, full of nervous energy, and then burst into a huge smile. I could still see bits of soggyweed stuck between his teeth.

“Ah, don’t worry, Lock,” he said, patting me on the back. “You all have me on the job, remember? If any of those... whatever they are... comes around, *they’ll* be the ones six feet under when I’m through with them!”

He nibbled his lower lip, starting to grow anxious. Sometimes pegasi just did that. They got a burst of restlessness and need to start using their wings. If they weren’t able to they would grow depressed and temperamental for the rest of the day. Stations usually had a large room set aside just for pegasi to work off all that energy, a “flight room.” Even if ours could barely be called a “stand up and walk around” room for how cramped it was, it was something. I pitied my friend for his afflictions, because they weren’t his fault and would be completely natural if Equestria wasn’t a poisonous wasteland. When it happened I just let him take care of it without pointing it out, as it was a terrible reminder that one day he too could go feather-brained and make a suicide run for the deadly clouds above. He once had made me swear to shoot him if he ever went that crazy, not wanting to be remembered as just another lunatic. Another pail settled over the table.

“Um... I gotta go,” he said apologetically. “I gotta go... use the flight room before my next shift. Exercise, you know. I’ll see you guys around.”

I let him go with a small smile shared between us. Starry Gaze smiled too, which made Sunny Side even sunnier. “Be *careful* out there,” Starry Gaze told him.

Then it was just the two of us. I looked up at her, and our eyes met. Awkward silence reigned. I forced myself not to notice how pretty her eyes were, how they pleaded for me to open up. To trust her with things I kept close to me. Her hoof was still on mine. She must have taken the silence to mean her companionship was wanted, and improving my mood. Even I had to admit it was good to have somepony stand beside you in a time of loneliness like this.

“You’re a good pony, Lockbox,” she said quietly. “I can see it.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, as I didn’t know what else to say. With a final rub of my hoof from hers, she got up and left with a sad smile dominating her expression.

I was alone again for a long time. It wasn't until my father came to fetch me that I remembered I hadn't shown Starry Gaze her trinket like I had meant to.

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"No word yet from the other stations?" I asked my father as we stalked down the hall to the City Gate. It was our largest self-made construction, a bristling array of magical wards and automated turrets manned by our most dedicated guards. The Gate itself was a huge steel door, crafted many years ago to serve as a barricade against the horrors that lurked in the city above. Stalliongrad was home to many dangers, and the largest and most powerful beasts roamed the streets. Magical enchantments hid the already hard to find entrance above, confusing the minds of simpletons and mutant freaks. If they got through that, the enchantments would activate alarms and guardponies would rush to secure the door as more traps stood ready to burn, maim, and destroy anything that wasn't a pony. If they got to the door, they'd likely never pry it open. If they got past *that*, a whole army stood ready to wipe them out.

Hunter knew the secrets to getting past our security measures, but we would open it for him anyway as a common courtesy. Each station had different methods of security, and only a chosen few that were allowed out the main gates knew how to get back in. The surface was just too dangerous to open and close the doors for any old pony. The Rangers were one of those few we trusted not to take advantage of our knowledge.

"No word yet," my father said quietly as we stood before the gate, surrounded by stiff-necked guards weighed down by flak jackets and full body barding. Many of the beasts that wandered the aboveground could shred that armor like it was paper, but it was better than nothing. And we had not yet met the creature that was invulnerable to bullets and knives and strong hooves.

"The other stations are as in the dark as we are. They haven't encountered the Dark Ones, but they have received odd reports from the stalkers of new beasts combing the ruins, in much the way that Librarians roam their haunts. But we will receive no help from them. Not even Draft Station is willing to send military aid apart from spare guns and bullets.

They don't want ponies' lives wasted on what they think are panicky rumors."

"Troubling," I said.

"Very ," my father said. I worried that his taciturn nature rubbed off more on me than I knew.

"We have a pony coming in!" A guard at a terminal reported, watching a small green line oscillate up and down. "Magical readings normal. He's alone."

"That will be Hunter, yeah? Open the gates. Unicorns, send the signal to disable the traps until he's gone past!"

I watched the great Gate, shifting my weight from hoof to hoof. To meet with Hunter again was an exciting prospect, after all. We hadn't seen each other for several months, and it wasn't like Rangers just dropped in for routine visits.

"Guard ponies, tack up and lower weapons!" I heard the loud, ominous clicks and clanks of guns being put into their ready positions.

A gun is a hard thing for many ponies to handle. With the shortage of proper battle harnesses and gun platforms, we've had to improvise our own methods. There are several tried and true ways for a pony to handle a gun: the least favorite but most common is to simply grab it in your teeth and pull the trigger with your tongue. But that was unwieldy at best, and many ponies can't properly brace themselves against the recoil or aim properly in a fight. So many folk craftsponies devised a special mechanism called the "war rein" that allowed a gun to be fitted into a cradle on the sides of their heads. It was designed to be interchangeable with most weapons, so that any gun smaller than an assault rifle could simply be slotted in. Most weapons nowadays were built with being slotted into the reins in mind. A small lever acted as the trigger. All a pony had to do was flip the lever down and bite it to fire the gun, and the powerful neck muscles all ponies possessed did the hard work. Many variants existed, allowing a pony to do everything from switch which side of his mouth he fired from to raising the weapon over his head to fire over cover. All of them had the ability to be

popped right off in an emergency. All one had to do was be careful to remember which lever did what.

Even so, building the war rein was time consuming and complicated, and it could be unwieldy in close quarters. It was typically issued only to ponies expected to be in consistent, hard combat in relatively open or straight areas. However, larger weapons were simply too big to just slap onto a pony's head. Specialized hydraulic barding and specially made saddles gave a pony a steady platform from which to fire large weapons. Without one, you just had to trust yourself.

Of course, if you were a powerful unicorn all of that was rendered moot. This made unicorns exceptionally lethal, valuable, and feared combatants... and the most visible and sought after targets on the battlefield. Hunter, however, was far too skilled to be worried about such things.

The Gate gave a loud squeal as the hydraulics hauled the two great interlocked slabs apart. The doors ground back on the tracks built into the floor. They only came apart about a foot or so. Blinding glare from the surface flooded the dim room, and I raised my hoof to cover my eyes. A tall, imposing shadow stood defiantly with the light at his back, showing no fear at all the guns aimed directly at the small opening he occupied. One could never be too careful in Stalliongrad.

"Well," a voice, deep and commanding said, "this is a fine meeting for a pony who's gone to hell and back!"

"Welcome back to Exiperia, Hunter!" my father exclaimed. "We've been waiting for you. Guards, close the gate!"

The gate squealed shut again, the great locks coming together once more as magical conduits connected and did their work. Hunter's horn glowed as he levitated his bag of supplies and walked it in. He was dressed in the full body barding of the Rangers, covered in saddlebags and ammo packs, with heavy armor protecting almost every inch of his body. His head was covered by a large helmet with a built-in gas mask and filtration system, customized to provide a metal spike over his horn, allowing it to double as a last-ditch weapon. Through the faceplate stared dark green eyes, regarding every detail of his surroundings with critical scrutiny. He

seemed to radiate an aura of authority, knowledge, and command. Every guardpony nearby visibly shrank back as if in deference to his mere passing.

I'd never seen a pony more prepared for the dangers of the outside world, nor did I think I ever would again. He stood tall and powerful, a rock for every danger of Stalliongrad to break upon. Every step he took was measured and confident, like he knew every action he was going to take before he did it.

"Guards! Holster weapons!" There was a chorus of clicks and clanks as the war reins were switched back to their upright, inactive positions. Several of the guards turned away to head back to their other duties now that the excitement was over. The others who stayed watched with rapt attention, eager to hear what wisdom they could gain from the Ranger.

"Come, Hunter. Let's sit next to the fire," my father offered. Hunter pulled off his helmet, revealing his dark green fur coat. His short-trimmed silvery grey mane spilled out around his neck.

"It's good to see you both," he said, his deep voice reverberating in my chest. He fixed me with that hawkish gaze, riveting me to the spot.

"Lockbox. I found something for the Wall," he said with the tiniest hint of a smile, and floated out a small piece of paper from his saddlebag. It was an old, faded picture of the royal palace at Canterlot. We had no idea what it looked like nowadays. All we knew was that radio transmissions from that direction had ceased many years ago, and that it had been at the epicenter of a massive bombardment. The best we could figure it was nothing but a giant crater carved into the mountainside.

"Thank you," I murmured, and took it in my mouth to place it in my saddlebag. I felt a short spike of guilt when I noticed Starry Gaze's trinket again.

"So, Hunter. I assume you know why you have been summoned here," my father began.

"Yes... the new threat beyond your borders. I didn't find anything but the usual tunnel trash on the way here. But I did sense several areas that

were... tainted, in some way or another. Large vortices of magical disturbances that I couldn't pin down, like somepony had unleashed hell on the place and then vanished without a trace."

"The poor souls who could speak after the attacks did mention horns, and something akin to magical power being thrown around by the creatures," my father agreed. "Our unicorns are the first to fall."

"Well, damn! Guess I'm the wrong Ranger for the job," Hunter said with a Nightmare-may-care grin. "Maybe we should send little Lockbox instead? He's a dead-eye shot with his pistol, that one."

I cleared my throat as my father shifted uncomfortably. "I would... rather Lockbox remain out of this conflict," he said sternly. "He is here to learn, and nothing more."

"The boy has all the makings of a good pony, it's true," Hunter said quietly. "You may need his help in time, Cinder, especially if these creatures are as powerful as I've heard."

"I will say no more." And he did not. Hunter cast me a pitying, understanding gaze and telekinetically stoked the fire.

"In any case, there is a new development. The Celestial Monarchy is beginning a new push. Hoofsa has decided to allow them into their station. It's not looking pretty. The New Lunar Republic is stepping up efforts to combat their influence by spreading propaganda and violence. There are rumors they have taken Diamond Dogs to bolster their ranks. One of Hoofsa's satellite stations was wiped out by them."

"That gives the Monarchy control of the great armory *and* most of the central trade routes," my father said worriedly. "I'm almost glad we're out here on the periphery."

"Whatever this other mystery is facing you, I will do my best to solve it," Hunter assuaged him. "These Dark Ones will learn what it is to try and kick a pony when he's down... the Ranger Order is well aware of what's been going on, even if we cannot yet understand its nature. We will destroy these creatures soon enough."

It was at that moment there was a burst of yellow feathers, and my friend Sunny Side hurtled into the room.

“The southern guard station!” he shouted, his eyes wide with fear. “It’s been attacked! Everypony’s dead!”

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It was a terrible sight at the southern entrance to Exiperia. Pony bodies were flung about as if they had been rag dolls. Weapons and bullet casings were scattered all over the floor. The rail car stationed at the post as a static defense had been completely upended, and its mounted weapon torn clean off by some terrific force. There wasn’t much blood, but somehow that made the scene even more terrifying. All the barricades that blocked off the unused tunnels had been torn to pieces, as if a tornado had swept right through the wooden and stone blockades and tossed the debris like confetti. I saw that one unfortunate pony had been stabbed through the neck by a flying chunk of wood. I fought to keep down the soup I had eaten earlier in the day. I then noticed something even more terrifying than the lack of blood.

There wasn’t a single Dark One body to be found.

The others rushed forward, trying to find what ponies they could help... though none of them were breathing this time. I was riveted to the spot by shock and awe. Around me echoed the cries of frightened ponies.

“Damn it, damn it!” my father exclaimed, flipping over a body and recoiling from the victim’s look of surprise and terror on his face. “Why weren’t we warned? Where the hell was the alarm?!”

“They never made it,” Hunter murmured, pointing a hoof at an earth pony mare who looked like she had keeled over just before reaching the alarm. “I’m willing to bet the Dark Ones were strong enough to disable the magic wards and enchantments in the outer tunnels, too... these poor souls got no warning and no chance to call for help.”

“Dark Ones?!” the guardponies gasped. “Is that what they’re called?”

I winced. They definitely weren't going to be encouraged hearing an ominous name like that out loud. My father only pointed his hoof at Sunny Side, who was rubbing his temples with worry. "Explain what happened here!" he barked. The pegasus snapped to attention.

"Me and my patrol were standing just inside the door," Sunny Side explained, pointing at the entrance. "And then there was this... this *noise!* I can't even explain it. It did something to us. We were all frozen... we couldn't even move. Then there was the sound of shooting, shouting... it didn't even last a whole minute. Then it all went quiet again, and... we couldn't move for at least a couple minutes afterwards."

"The Dark Ones swept in and wiped them out, paralyzing any chance of reinforcements!" Hunter growled, stamping his hoof. "They've already faded into the Metro..." His eyes narrowed, and his expression grew slightly more thoughtful. His horn suddenly glowed a fearsome blue. "I think I can sense them... or whatever traces they left behind. No, they are gone now. Vanished."

"Celestia knows what's happening here," my father snarled. "We need to-!"

"Wait!" Hunter snapped. His horn began to pulse. "I'm feeling life signs... lots of them. They're definitely not ponies!"

"Oh Luna!" another guard wailed. "The Dark Ones are coming back! Shit, shit! We're all gonna die!"

"Quiet, coward!" my father snapped. "Hunter, what is it?"

"Not Dark Ones... Mutants," he hissed. I gulped. Sunny Side checked his mounted guns to ensure they were loaded.

"Battle stations!" my father shouted. "Tack up and lower arms! Lockbox, grab a gun!"

"Everypony form a line!" Hunter barked. "Use the wreckage as cover! Watch each other's backs, gentleponies! Pegasi, mind the ceilings!"

The unused tunnels were always kept blocked off with copious amounts of mortar and wood, and whatever else we could use to discourage travel through them. If they were available, we simply sealed them with a large gate. Mutants and bandits had full reign over those tunnels, and now that the Dark Ones had obliterated the barricades...

"They set this up," I heard Hunter mutter to my father. "Destroyed the guards and blew out the barricades. Set the mutants on us now that we're alert... wouldn't be surprised if they strike from another direction while we're busy with this."

I swept up a submachine gun cradle attached to a helmet, latching it firmly around my head as I took up position with the others. I felt the creeping, gnawing fear in my gut. It chewed my insides like a hungry deep ant.

Then came the sounds. Many of the mutants of the Metro were thankfully not subtle creatures. They were loud, cantankerous beasts and gave away their presence with their shrieks and howls. And oh, how they howled. Loud, wailing screams and short, staccato barks pierced the air.

"Cerberus is coming. Make sure your triggers are faster than their feet, ponies! Open up the moment you see the bastards' faces!" Hunter said with a grin, levitating two assault rifles to his sides. It seemed he was actually happy to face such beasts. The cerberus was a horribly mutated creature descended from the dogs that used to run and play with ponies in better times. Now they were ugly, horrid monsters that sported anywhere from one to three heads. Rarely were the extra heads useful, mostly being lifeless deformities, but they left a terrible impression on those who were attacked by them. Worse, they traveled in packs.

I felt my muscles tense. Guards stood their ground, I narrowed my eyes and clutched the trigger between my teeth. Claws scrabbled and raked on stone and metal as the pack drew nearer. It seemed they were charging headlong towards us. Sunny Side took up position directly overhead, covering me. He was singing something, just loud enough to be heard.

"When I was a little filly and the sun was going down..."

His voice was drowned out by the roar of gunfire that tore into the first wave of cerberus to round the corner. Blood and brains and chunks of mutant went flying all over the tunnel. I jumped at the explosion of noise, my mouth clamped on the trigger, a burst of bullets went wide. The dogs leaped and sprang on their unnaturally strong legs, zipping back and forth. Saliva dripped from their malformed jaws. Judging by the amount of pustules and ulcerous sores that riddled their mangy hides, shooting them would be a mercy. It took a steady jaw and steadier nerves to face one down and line up a shot.

Knowing Sunny Side had my back, I remembered the lessons drilled into my head from the day of my birth. Not everypony was militia, but they all had to learn how to defend themselves.

You are an earth pony. Feel the land. Take strength. Stay steady. Aim true. You are as firm as the earth.

I spread my hooves and watched as one of the creatures broke free of the pack and went wide, springing onto a wall, about to use it as leverage to pounce right at another guard pony...

My gun chattered. Crimson geysers burst all along the cerberus' back as it fell limp to the ground. Turn. Aim. Fire. Don't hold the trigger too long. Trust the others to pick up your slack. Fire! Another rattle, another deafening report. Another cerberus went down, sporting a brand new set of holes. From there, it was almost automatic. Turn. Shoot. Turn, shoot. I flinched as one of them came close, but Sunny Side's mounted guns blew two of its three heads into chunks before it could raise a claw. Somehow, all I could think was how disgusting the sight of destroyed innards was. I was out of bullets. I punched the magazine out, grabbed another off the ground, slammed it home.

Turn. Shoot. Stay steady. You are as firm as the earth.

It was over as suddenly as it began. The cerberus crowded the tunnel with their bodies. I stood in the midst of the carnage with the other ponies, panting heavily. The trigger felt warm and foreign in my mouth.

"That's it!" Hunter called, his horn no longer pulsing. "Holster weapons!"

As one, we pushed the war reins back up. Some of us turned to give each other nervous smiles. See? We could still do this. We could still defend ourselves. The site of the massacre was now the site of a victory.

“Lockbox!” my father and Sunny Side said at the same time. I let the trigger, slimy with my spit, pop out of my mouth, tossed helmet and reins to the ground. I felt queasy, but I could also feel the exhilaration of a battle won in the air. It helped me keep my lunch down.

“Are you all right?” my father asked as Sunny Side landed beside me.

“Of course! He’s a great shot, like I said,” Hunter exclaimed, fitting his helmet back on. He was already trotting towards the tunnel the beasts had come from. “You might want to clean up this mess before another monster is attracted by the blood.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked, and it felt strange to talk. My mouth was still buzzing from the vibrations of the gun.

“This was no accident,” Hunter said, his voice grim and dour through the filter on his helmet. “This was an *attack*. The Dark Ones annihilated an entire guard post without even touching it and then sicced the monsters of the Metro on you. We won very little here today.”

The realization slammed into us like a ton of bricks. The glory of victory went sour in our mouths. Sunny Side grimaced as my father scowled. The rest of the guards lowered their heads and set to work clearing the bodies.

“Luna knows what’s going on out there. These Dark Ones are clearly seeking destruction and violence... so I will go to my order and tell them to answer in kind. I must finish my investigation and then go straight to Ponyopolis. We will destroy these Dark Ones before they can destroy us.”

He turned to the pile of cerberus corpses. One of the creatures stirred and let out a pitiful moan. Hunter stood over it, staring through his helmet. I could *feel* his scowl from that distance.

“We Rangers have a motto, you see. If it’s hostile...”

He reared up on his hind legs and brought his armored hooves down on the cerberus' main head. It caved in with a disgusting squelch. Sunny Side grimaced again. I and my father watched it all. We didn't even flinch as the blood sprouted up and splashed onto Hunter's barding. The Ranger looked back at us.

"You kill it."

My father sighed and turned to go back inside, apparently full of violence for today. Sunny Side began to help clean up.

"Lockbox, if I could speak with you," I heard Hunter say, staring down the tunnel the cerberus had come from. I trotted up to him, eyes widening as respect and admiration bloomed in my chest. This pony had just looked at the scene of a massacre and faced down a horde of mutants, and he was already preparing to hurl himself into danger again.

"Your station will not survive this," he said. The good feelings were considerably squashed.

"I know," I whispered.

"There is no more time to waste. Action must be taken. Ponyopolis is the only station with the strength and will to help us fight these creatures. They must be warned."

He levitated a small talisman out of his barding. It was a necklace, and on it was a pony skull crossed by two daggers behind it. He floated it in front of us to hide it from the others.

"I want you to keep this safe," he said quietly. My eyes bulged.

"Hunter..."

"Do this for me, Lockbox. I trust you. It is vital that this talisman is kept secret. Should I not return by morning?"

"Hunter, we need you-"

“- then take this to my fellows. There is a Ranger base near Bucklyn station. They will carry my message the rest of the way to Ponyopolis. Just show this to them, and they will know what to do. Bucklyn isn't far. I know you will make it if I fall against these Dark Ones.”

I felt a tightness in my throat. All at once, I was struck by the realization that Hunter was giving me what could be his last words. I was being given a *mission*. I wasn't sure what I was feeling. Excitement? Terror? Betrayal? Anger? Or all at once. My mind reeled, and I almost took a step back. But the way Hunter looked at me made me stop. Something in his eyes spoke of a deep trust and understanding that he knew what I was feeling, and was giving me this responsibility because he knew I would see it through. I was touched and intimidated all at once. I didn't feel worthy or ready of such trust, especially not from a hero like Hunter.

And yet...

Bucklyn wasn't far, like he said, and this mission could prove vital. I had seen the devastation the Dark Ones could wreak. Hunter was right. Ponyopolis had to be warned. Here at last was my chance to do what I always want: help to save my station. To help the Rangers. To help my friends, my father, all the ponies I cared about. And anyway, this was Hunter standing there! Of course he would come back and simply take the talisman and do what he needed to save Exiperia. Perhaps the responsibility wouldn't fall on me directly, and if holding onto this little thing was so important, couldn't I do that much at least to defend my home? Did I really have a choice when my family's survival was on the line?

Did I really *want* there to be a way out?

I gave an imperceptible nod without really meaning to. I just felt it was right. I knew I would've been ashamed of myself if I refused to at least hold on to it. The hard, heavy feelings in Hunter's eyes receded just slightly.

“Thank you, Lockbox. I cannot impress on you how important this is, and how grateful this makes me.” He floated the talisman into my saddlebag. It felt unusually heavy. My body subconsciously sagged to one side as the weight of duty fell upon me. Hunter floated his weapons to him, attached them to his body, and without another look back, stalked into the shadows.

“This is about our survival, Lockbox,” he said, and though he spoke quietly his voice echoed so I could hear it as he left me there, forlorn and frightened at the mouth of the tunnel. His voice rang in my ears long after the sight of him was lost to the Metro. “Never forget that. We are all that remains of ponykind, and we are on the brink. We cannot hesitate. We cannot waver. The war has not stopped. It is victory, or extinction.

“This threat must be destroyed. *In its entirety.*”

Chapter 3

“It’s now or never!”

The next morning found me staring at my Wall again. I waited for news of Hunter’s return, praying to the heavens that he would come back safely. I figured even just hoping against hope would somehow affect the Ranger’s journey positively. I didn’t know if heaven or hell or even the supernatural in general existed anymore. It had become clear very soon after the bombs fell that Celestia and Luna weren’t going to swoop down and fix everything. No pony knew where they were, or even if they were alive now. The few thousand ponies who huddled in the Metro after the attack had to deal with their entire world being shattered, then having the guts ripped out of their very faith. I wondered how they’d survived. How they hadn’t just torn each other to pieces in a panic. But that was the nature of faith, I supposed. Its incredible resilience in the face of impossible odds ensured its survival. Belief in the Princesses and in the virtues that made us good ponies was still strong in some parts of the Metro. I too had faith that Equestria might someday become green again. It wouldn’t be faith if there was always a clear cut reason to believe, would it?

But today, it seemed my faith was failing. I didn’t believe enough, or Hunter wasn’t strong enough, because he did not return. My father had tried to speak to me after Hunter had given me his talisman, but I would hear none of it. I only caught some vaguely consoling words about the nature of the Metro and how we all needed to trust each other. I just retreated to my room and flumped onto my couch, my thoughts swirling. I stayed there all night, tossing and turning in bed and chewing on my store of snack foods. Sunny Side came to visit once or twice, checking in on me, but I didn’t even look up to see him. I locked myself away in my little box, curled up with all my pretty pictures, and tried to believe that the threat of the Dark Ones was still manageable. Every second that came closer to morning without news of Hunter eroded that belief. I made a special point to glare at Starry Gaze when she came by and shut the door in her face. I shared a few curt words with my father when he came by in the morning to tell me that Hunter hadn’t arrived yet.

I knew I was being temperamental and angry. But in my mind, I had good reason. They couldn't possibly understand what was going on. Hunter was out there, fighting for his life or already dead. If the strongest of us couldn't face the Dark Ones, what hope was there? My friend, my mentor was in danger. He'd looked me in the eye and I had seen *doubt*. Doubt in his own abilities to face this threat, and certainty that Exiperia would be wiped off the map. Hunter had always been the pony that believed in me and what I could do. My father sheltered me, but Hunter gave me focus. He told me about the dangers of the Metro in detail, offered the lessons that saved my life and the lives of other ponies. His lifestyle was clear-cut and without any room for hesitation or dreaming.

If it's hostile, you kill it. The phrase had a simple, brutal kind of power to it. It was attractive, even through my natural aversion to scenes of blood and gore. It gave me impetus, and I appreciated that much if not the thoughtlessly violent principle behind the words. I wanted to understand, but the Metro gave a pony so little opportunity to delve into its secrets. The dangers of the Metro were too great for understanding. There's only the space between your tongue and your trigger that determined how quickly you died. And if something like that could overwhelm even Hunter... Did Hunter believe another Apocalypse was coming? Was I going to be the first herald of our ultimate doom? That little talisman in my bag wasn't a message of hope. It was Hunter's epitaph.

The weight of such a thought kept me in bed well until lunchtime, when Sunny Side barged in and demanded that I get up and get something to eat. When I refused, he kicked me in the side and dragged me by my tail until I relented. We said little to each other on the way to the eating area. My head drooped low, while Sunny's was high and mighty. He looked angry. I wondered if it was with me or the situation in general. I admitted to myself that Hunter's appearance had been less than cursory, and realizing that he wasn't coming back didn't help matters at all. We sat down at a table, and there was a small shuffling of hooves as ponies moved away from us. From me. It stung, but I knew they had their reasons. Their families were dying, and I was stuck with orders from my father not to say anything. The name of the Dark Ones had inevitably spread from the militia to the rest of the Metro. It had the effect I'd anticipated. Everypony was afraid of the outside and paranoid of leaving the station. I heard a group of colts and fillies at play discussing how the Dark Ones ate your brains and turned you into one of them. That was probably not far from the truth.

“So...” Sunny Side began, sipping at his mushroom soup. “It looks like we have a heck of a situation on our hooves.”

“Mmnh,” I grunted. I was somewhat distracted by hearing Primare Donna and Ironhoof speaking to a crowd nearby. They talked about the threat facing the station, reminding us to be encouraged by the new alliance with Draft Station.

“It would’ve helped if we knew about it sooner... at least, that’s what the other guards say,” Sunny continued. “Me, I’m willing to admit that there are some things you just can’t do anything about. I mean, if they can just zap us with their minds and not even unicorns can fight? What’s the point? Who cares if they’re called Dark Ones or ‘those mutants’ or whatever. We’ll still be just as dead.”

“Your optimism is a light in these dark tunnels, Sunny,” I grumbled. He smiled and patted me on the back.

“Don’t worry, Lockbox. I’m scared as anypony. But... well, I don’t blame you, all right? There’s no point in that.”

He let up when he saw I wasn’t getting any more cheerful. My mind was still on Hunter. I knew him. If he said he was going to come back by morning, then he was coming back, no exceptions. But he hadn’t come back at all, and I still had his talisman stuck in my saddlebag. I wondered if I should give it an extra day or two. Perhaps Hunter had just been delayed somehow? Maybe he’d been injured and was traveling slow. I refused to entertain the notion that he was dead. It just wasn’t possible that somepony so strong and brave had just ended up like all the others.

Death was no stranger to me. Its specter followed us everywhere. My own parents had been killed when I was just a colt, and there was hardly a pony in the station who hadn’t lost somepony close to them. But there were a select few ponies who I believed would never perish. Hunter was one of them. He had to be alive somewhere. Even so, he’d charged me with the mission of carrying his message to the Bucklyn Rangers. Somehow I had to find my way there. Though it was a line or two over from Exiperia and not much farther than Draft, it wouldn’t be easy finding an excuse to leave. My father wouldn’t let me go outside the gates more often than not, and never

alone. He'd be keeping a close eye on me until this business with the Dark Ones was resolved. If I told that a Ranger, even if it was Hunter, had trusted me with a dangerous mission, I'd never hear the end of it. No, it was better to keep quiet and keep my head down until an opportunity presented itself. Until then, the talisman weighed heavily in my bag.

"Uh, Lockbox?"

I blinked and started, looking to Sunny Side who was waving his hoof in my face.

"Metro to Lockbox! You're zoning out worse than a guardpony gone a whole shift without a drink..."

"I'm thinking," I said quietly.

"You're always thinking! Stop thinking and start talking one of these days, Lockbox. Sometimes it's truly tiring having to talk for the both of us. You know I never really know what's going on in your head."

I liked it that way, but I didn't say it out loud. I appreciated that Sunny Side had stuck with me all these years in spite of my anti-social disposition, though I hadn't said so much. The understanding was just... there. I quietly ate my food while he talked about how the morning shift had gone. No more attacks by Dark Ones or mutants, but there was always an undercurrent of nervousness.

"We all know something's going to happen eventually," he said. "But we just don't know when. It's like we're all strings ready to snap..." He trailed off, and I knew he was thinking about all the other pegasi who had snapped and gone feather-brained. I grimaced, giving him a gentle pat on the shoulder. Even if I didn't know what to say, I figured that being there for him was the best I could do.

"Well, it's bad at any rate," Sunny Side finished and began eating his soup again.

"Maybe... if we just get out of the station for a few days," I said out of the blue, shrugging. Sunny Side sputtered and shook his head, trying to clear his ears of whatever lunacy he had just heard.

“What, you mean... just go do something else? While all this is going on?”

“If the Dark Ones haven’t swooped in and annihilated us by now, I doubt they will the moment *our* backs are turned,” I continued. “Besides, we still need to keep our station running. Father can’t just shut down all the railcars.”

I looked up and just happened to see a familiar pony walking by. It was Sixpence, the trader who had survived a Dark One attack with his mind still intact. I noticed that his leg was now wrapped securely in regular bandages, but he seemed to be walking fine on his own. He’d mentioned his home was in or around Bucklyn Station. Perhaps...

“Sir?” I asked, waving him over with my hoof. Sunny Side watched me curiously.

“I know you,” he said. “I saw you with Cinder Block in the infirmary.”

“Yes. Forgive me for prying, but are you healed enough to go back home?”

“That I am,” Sixpence said, and looked extremely relieved. “I’m going back to Bucklyn with the very next caravan due out. I’ve already signed on.”

“I’m with that caravan,” Sunny Side spoke up, grinning. “I was assigned as a guard to it just this morning. Heh, old Ironhoof was never in a blacker mood. He practically threw my orders at my face!”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

“I didn’t want to give you any funny ideas!” Sunny Side shrugged haplessly. “We can shoot mutants well enough Lockbox, but your father would have my head if I just let you run around willy-nilly. You remember what happened the last time we went out alone!”

I touched my side warily, remembering the day. We were silly children wandering in an unused tunnel, and I had dared try and go to the surface on a rickety, rusty ladder. I’d fallen of course, and hurt myself so

bad I cried. Sunny Side flew me all back to the station. I'd practically owed him my life that day.

"We were children, Sunny Side," I grunted. "We made a stupid decision, but nothing bad really came of it."

"Tell that to your father!"

I resisted the urge to scowl, instead turning back to Sixpence.

"Well, I wish you luck, sir. Perhaps I'll see you on the caravan."

"Thank you," he said. "If you don't mind my saying so, I wouldn't mind if you *were* there. I heard you acquitted yourself well in the battle at the southern gate."

"You... heard about that?"

"It was hard to miss all the shooting! I heard a Ranger also came by?"

He suddenly leaned forward, quite interested in what I had to say. Rangers were everypony's folk heroes, but I didn't feel like talking about it, remembering my promise to Hunter. I looked at Sunny Side instead for support.

"Well, he did," the pegasus answered for me. "But he also left almost immediately after that attack. He's investigating the Dark Ones you see."

I elbowed Sunny in the ribs.

"Come on, Lockbox!" he groaned. "It's not like the station hasn't figured out what you call them already."

"And this Ranger... Did he say anything at all about what might be done about this?" Sixpence asked. Chalk it up to a trader to be worried about what could affect commerce through the tunnels.

"If it's a big enough danger, he'll find the other Rangers, and they will contact Ponyopolis. And then they will fight the Dark Ones," I said tersely, just to get him off my back.

This seemed to satisfy him for the moment. He stood back, nodding slowly to himself.

“Oh, good. That’s good. Ponyopolis? I was there, once, you know. On another caravan. Amazing place. Can’t really get through to them much anymore... guess we’d *need* a Ranger to get any messages to them now, what with the Monarchy and the Republic spreading all over the Metro. Between them and the mutants and bandits, we practically need a tank just to get anywhere.”

I raised an eyebrow. This conversation was supposed to have been over a while ago. “Yes. Well. See you on the caravan, perhaps.”

“Yes. Yes, see you later. Take care. Hope we aren’t late.” He waved and walked away. I noticed a slight wobble in his step, as if he wasn’t quite sure of his footing. Perhaps he wasn’t as fully healed as he’d claimed... a magical bandage could only do so much to knit together flesh. It sped up the process, but it was vulnerable to all the same dangers if some foolish pony started clopping around on an injured limb. Either that or the attack from the Dark Ones had left some mental scars that weren’t immediately apparent.

“Poor guy,” Sunny Side said, seeming to agree with my thoughts. “He must be stressed something awful. Almost getting killed and then getting stuck in a strange station.”

“Yes. Stress,” I murmured, waiting until Sixpence had disappeared into the crowds before going back to my food.

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“And you wanted to join this caravan why?”

“I think it would be a good experience for me, father. I’m fully grown now, and I’ve never been outside the station. Not on official business at any rate. Since Ironhoof needs most of the militia to remain behind here, he’s understaffed. He’s been asking for a few volunteers.”

My father watched me with his usual stern scrutiny. He tapped his hooves together on his desk, and for a moment I was afraid he would refuse me outright. But then his expression softened just slightly, the lines around his eyes receding back into his pelt.

“Son,” he said quietly. “You know that whatever I do, it’s for the good of the station, right?”

I gave him a single, firm nod. I knew my father well enough to say that he always had the best intentions in mind, whatever he might say or do. Of course, that sometimes led to bad decisions in themselves. I wondered for a moment if my noble intentions were going to get me anything but a quick death.

“I know these attacks have everypony worried. These Dark Ones are beyond anything we have seen before. But I do not want to stifle you. I have been short with you, even unfairly angry the last couple of days. And for that, I apologize. I know that you want to help the station. You have a good heart, Lockbox. This trip to Bucklyn should be a good thing for all of us. The caravan will strengthen ties with Draft Station by providing some goods and services, and then they will move on to Bucklyn for our merchants to collect some of the latest trade goods. Everypony likes to see commerce flowing.”

He continued to tap his hooves together, staring at the table. I was somewhat mollified by his apology, but he still had not given me permission to go with them.

“And I understand your friend Sunny Side will be a part of the caravan?”

I nodded.

“Yes, he’s a good stallion, that one. You two have always worked well together. You always keep an eye on each other, that’s good.”

I understood what my father was doing. He was trying to convince himself that letting me go might actually be safer than keeping me here. If I was traveling all the way to Bucklyn then I wouldn’t be in the way of any more Dark One attacks. It made me want to roll my eyes, but I still felt

flattered. My father, overprotective though he may be, only wanted me to stay safe in the end.

“Well, all right,” he said. “The caravan leaves first thing tomorrow morning. Report to Ironhoof once you’ve collected your things... I know you’ll be a valuable asset to them.”

He looked at me with a tired smile, which I returned. But as I turned to go, I was halted at the door by his voice.

“Lockbox.”

I looked over my shoulder, ears perked.

“I know you respect the Rangers. And I know you admire Hunter as well. I’m sorry we’ve received no news from him yet. But, son... the Rangers are not like normal ponies. They’re... dangerous. In more ways than one.”

Did he suspect this had something to do with Hunter? Worse, did he know? I kept my expression placid as he continued.

“Please, just... remember that Exiperia will always be your home, all right? Do what needs to be done, and come back safely.”

I stared at him for a length of time, puzzling over what he had said. There seemed to be only one appropriate response. I turned back and went to his desk, moved around it to his side, and gave him a one-legged hug around the neck. He returned it after some hesitation. The moment stretched on, and over his shoulder I noticed a picture on his desk that was normally on one of his top shelves. It was a small photograph of me as a bright-eyed young colt, standing next to my father who wore a small, barely happy smile. In contrast, I was grinning so wide it looked like my face was about to split apart. It had been one of my first pictures, and in my little colt’s rationale I’d wanted it to look good for posterity’s sake. New pictures were so rare nowadays, requiring the arts of a very focused and talented unicorn. So few resources could be spared to make them, pictures were often prized by those who had them, like me. Knowing he’d been looking at it send a tiny needle of guilt into my heart. I was keeping a secret from him. I didn’t trust him to trust me with the full weight of the truth. But this wasn’t

that bad, was it? I'd just knock on the door of the Ranger base, pass on the message, and come back home. I'd be able to do something to help, and Ponyopolis would get Hunter's message one way or another. Everypony would be happy.

As I pulled away from my father and finally left his office, I felt my stomach twist. How deeply was I going to underestimate my own problems to make them bearable? I wanted to believe that this would be a simple task, and that when it was done our problems could be solved by ponies stronger and wiser than I. Was I being selfish, just wanting to fulfill my own dreams of being useful to the station? I hadn't even begun my journey, and already my doubts were piling up.

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I looked Starry Gaze in the eyes, an unwise thing for a stallion to do at the best of times. But she didn't usually give me a choice if she could help it. I think it's because she's a firm believer in eyes being the window to the soul. So in her mind, the longer she stared at me, the better I'd be understood. The only thing I was getting a better understanding of was why I kept trying to brush her off. She kept searching for a part of me that wasn't there.

"So... Sunny Side told me about the caravan," she said. I nodded, and plucked the strings on my guitar. My turn to play around the story fire had come. Tonight the elders would share stories again. Some were scary, others wistful, all of them sad. Some of us didn't even remember exactly how long ago the war had been, or what precisely it had been about. None of us came from families that held positions in the government or prominent places in the military of the old Equestria. Then again, most ponies, even the oldest, didn't really *care* why the war had been fought. All we wanted was for things to go back to normal.

"You're going with them? To Bucklyn?"

"It's not that far. We'll be all right," I said, to remind her and myself. It's not that far, Lockbox. You'll be fine. The station will be fine. Hunter is alive, and this is just a little favor. The Dark Ones will be defeated quickly. And everything will go back to normal... or as normal as it got in the Metro. Starry Gaze tapped her hooves together and broke her gaze. I looked back

down at the guitar. I always had to look to play properly. Hooves and strings didn't go well together, but unicorns usually focused their talents on more useful things.

"Still, um... Take care, of course," she said nervously. "I know you'll be fine. Especially with Sunny Side with you."

"He's a good pony," I said, a none-too-subtle hint towards his eligibility.

"Yes... yes, he is," she said, perhaps remembering she had told me the same thing. It probably didn't help that I had remembered to show that I hadn't forgotten her trinket at last, and had it looped around the end of my guitar. It had delighted her, of course, but only after I brought it out did I realize it had the exact opposite effect I'd intended. I raised my gaze again, noticing the way she looked at the fire. She seemed lost, even confused. Poor filly. As a unicorn she'd be called on to do a great many things for the station. Encouraging our meager supply of plants to grow, creating healing supplies to counter radiation and injuries, forging the magical enchantments that would ensure our survival. She needed companionship I wasn't able to give. Eventually, Sunny Side did join us, and with a smile he settled in on Starry Gaze's opposite side as the story began.

"Canterlot was a fine place," the storyteller started as I strummed a slow, melancholy tune on the guitar. "But everypony always talks about Canterlot. No, what I've heard... is about the Whitetail Wood. We all know it's not standing anymore. But I know. I know what it used to be like. The smells and sights and sensations. It was once a very peaceful forest. Grown and tended to by our very own Ponyville ponies. The sap was harvested there... ah, tree sap. There's something I'm sure we all miss. We've all seen the trees that grow in the streets, and the tunnels. The twisted, gnarled things that sway and groan? But these trees... oh, these trees! They reached into the sky, they did. Growing straight and tall, waving bark as brown as... as chocolate. Ah, chocolate. I remember when we still had some chocolate stores... sweet chocolate that melted in your mouth and gave you such a buzz you'd swear lightning danced on your tongue! Dark chocolate bitter as our coffee, but twice as rich and so much tastier. And the leaves on those trees? Ah, they spread out on branches like an umbrella, big and green. So, so green it'd leave you dazzled. No pony remembers the sound of rustling leaves anymore, not the kind you'd hear in

Whitetail... not even I can relate it to you tonight... or the sight of a good old sun raining light down through them...”

We all listened, well into the night. The storyteller, an old blue-grey mare, told what she knew. She spoke of the trees that reached as tall as buildings, healthy and bountiful under the watchful eye of pony caretakers. She told of the sweet sap and juicy fruit that would fall from their branches, and the grass beneath them that was so soft it tickled your hooves to walk on it. We had copies and pictures and words of such things, but no way to truly *feel* what those memories were like. No way to see, to listen or touch. No way to really *know*. Such a thought never failed to make me sad, and yet at the same time it filled me with hope that one day we might see a world like that again. Hope for something as beautiful and pure as Equestria before the bombs was something I wouldn't let go of. Not ever. I poured my feelings into the guitar's song long after the mare fell silent, closing my eyes and losing myself to the music as my hoof danced back and forth over the strings. I didn't even notice when the stories, which had been trotted out one by one, stopped. I didn't notice when ponies began to file away to go to bed or their duties, leaving only those few who talked quietly with each other and listened to my music. I just... played.

It was only when another player tapped my shoulder that I woke up from my reverie. It must have been a good two or three hours later, because the crowds had thinned considerably. It was nearing bedtime. I looked to my right and saw Sunny Side staring into the dying fire. Starry Gaze had fallen asleep against his shoulder, her pretty red mane scattered over his back. Her chest rose and fell with gentle regularity, and the look on her face was one of heart-breaking peace. Apparently Sunny Side's shoulder was very, very comfortable. Even if it had been coincidence and not choice on Starry Gaze's part, both I and my friend were pleased with the result. Sunny Side hadn't budged an inch since he'd sat down, and his smile was at once goofy and content. I reached into my saddlebag as I got up and walked around them, and with a flick of my head tossed Starry Gaze's trinket onto Sunny Side's ear. He raised an eyebrow and turned to stare at me as I left. He seemed confused, even as I smiled at him. Starry Gaze would hurt for a while, but this was for the best. For the strangest reason, I knew that it'd be better this way. Something in my gut told me I didn't want to be close to anypony this night, or many others to come.

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The next morning was a rush of activity. Sunny Side woke me up quickly, telling me to hurry and collect my equipment.

“Ha! Lockbox! Gonna become a regular old soldier now, are we?” asked Arsenal, our pony in charge of the local armory. His appearance fit his name: he was a big, heavy, copper furred unicorn with a bunker cutie mark. He was invaluable to the community, being an expert in the maintenance of firearms. We couldn’t afford to make much more than the most basic weapons, which amounted to the simple, improvised small arms guns. Submachine guns, basic pistols, and single and double shot shotguns were common outside of *the* Armory, which had the manufacturing capability to produce high quality weapons at exorbitant prices.

“Only for a day or two,” I answered, and I was issued all the standard gear. The Mule, a mish-mash of different parts into a serviceable if stubbornly hard to manage automatic carbine, was standard issue. I also made sure to pick up my trusty standby, a magazine loaded pistol. The last few weapons were a bit more ominous.

“This is your hoof knife.” Arsenal pulled out a long, serrated blade. “It fits onto this holster on the side of your leg like so, see how the flat of the blade goes against your leg? Any sideswipe from this will rip open even the toughest mutant hides! And you can hold it in your mouth, too, if you like to fight that way.”

I didn’t relish the thought of sinking cold steel into anything, even mutants, but I accepted the weapon regardless. Apart from that, I had to be tacked up properly: militia uniforms had to have anything and everything attached to them for use in any situation. Arsenal gave me a quick run-down of what my barding was like. There was little in the way of protective armor since that’d just slow me down, but there were plenty of spare bags, pockets, and slots. The gasmask, by far one of my most essential tools, was hung around my neck so I could just slip it over my face in an emergency. Several spare filters were stuffed into my saddlebags. All filters had magical enchantments to absorb the foul spells that lingered in the air on top of the poisonous air.

“These should last about twenty minutes each. But if more than four hours, get a doctor,” Arsenal said with a wink. I didn’t get it.

“And don’t forget this.” Using his magic he slapped a harness onto my head, fitting it over my helmet. There was a light attached with a wire running down to a small apparatus he fastened to my chest. “That’ll be your charger. It’s designed to work with almost anything electrical, and if you slap a gemstone into this slot here, it’ll give you a magical charge. That gem will do everything from act as a secondary light to let you give a minor enchantment to any item of your choosing.” He tapped his horn. “You got my special talents to thank for that addition.”

Being loaded down with everything apart from the kitchen sink was a new experience; I usually didn’t need to carry anything more than a single saddlebag. Still, I thanked Arsenal and trotted to the main loading docks, where the caravan was being outfitted. Sunny Side greeted me there with a smile.

“Hey hey hey, my little militia pony!” he said, slapping me on the back. “Glad you could join us. You look silly, by the way.”

I felt silly too, covered in barding, gear, bags, and munitions. If anything, all the equipment piled onto me would provide as much protection as body armor. Nothing but a small flak jacket protected my chest and ribs from harm. My helmet was a size too big and tightening the harness made it cover my eyes, but it had to be tight to provide a good platform for my war rein.

“Well, anyway, let’s get going, huh? We’re gonna be late.”

“All caravaneers report to the main loading docks immediately!” Ironhoof bellowed at the end of the platform. “Get your gear together, foals! Tack up and move it out! Cart pullers, to your stations!”

Sunny Side let out a loud whistle as he fluttered into place on the rear cart. All of them could be propelled by pumping the lever that turned the wheels, but since we weren’t expecting to keep a fast pace, we were going to be towed by the guardponies. The pullers got hitched up while I did a final check of my gear.

“Hey fellas!” I looked up at a familiar voice. Sixpence had arrived at last and dropped into the cart next to me. I froze, staring at him, remembering the odd conversation we had had the other day.

“Mind if I join you?” He seemed to be asking me. I didn’t answer. Sunny Side gave him an easy smile as he pulled on his battle harness. The carbines attached to his shoulders and pistol armed war rein made him look inordinately dangerous.

“Not at all,” he said. “Don’t worry; we won’t make you pull on that leg!”

“Ha! I hope not. Don’t want us crashing and burning or anything.”

I gave him a short stare, and then leaned forward to speak to Sunny Side.

“How’s Starry Gaze?” I asked him. He suddenly got a very pensive look and flapped his wings.

“Not too good,” he said, and I must have looked guilty, because he tried to soften the blow. “I mean, I was there to talk to her, you know? But seeing that you’d given me her little gift... that wasn’t a nice thing to do, Lockbox. She had a lot of feelings wrapped up in that trinket.”

“Of course it wasn’t nice,” I said, my mood suddenly going south. “Rejection isn’t nice. But I’ve never been good at... discussing that kind of thing with fillies. We’re not going to be an item, and that’s final. She’ll get over it, I’m sure.”

“Maybe,” Sunny Side said. “In any case, she let me keep it. Just in case you wanted it back.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I have too many other things on my mind.”

Sunny Side gave me a stare, raising an eyebrow. “... You’re not a colt-cuddler, are you?”

I blinked. Sunny Side started to grin and I knew he was messing with me.

“Because, if you are, that’s totally fine with me...”

“What!” I squawked a little too loudly. I glared at my friend and gave him a quick punch in the shoulder. “Of course not. Don’t be silly, Sunny Side. I just... I just...” I grunted and looked away. “Look, I’ll apologize when I get back, all right? Perhaps it wasn’t the best thing to do. But I have other things on my mind.”

Sunny Side gave me a sad, almost pitying stare that I felt angry about for some reason.

“You always have things on your mind, Lockbox. But you never really share them. It worries me, sometimes.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, fiddling with my helmet. The talisman weighed heavy in my bag. It’ll be fine, Lockbox. This secret can afford to be kept. I kept telling myself that as the caravan began to pull away from the docks and into the darkness of the Metro. In there, my thoughts could hide away in the cold, damp spaces.

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“So, why are *you* going to Bucklyn?”

I turned around and gave Sixpence a stare. I’d been looking back, covering the rear of the caravan as we started our journey. My headlight kept flickering, but continuously pumping the charger gave me something to do. Sunny Side fluttered overhead, unable to sit still for long.

“Pardon?” I asked.

“Well, it’s just... You aren’t part of the militia, and you aren’t a trader from what I can see. Bucklyn’s a bit of a trip, isn’t it?”

My thoughts went to Hunter’s talisman. “I’m just excited for the chance to get out for a while,” I said, trying to sound natural. “These attacks have made me restless, you see.” Sixpence continued to stare at me with a strange, wobbly smile.

“I see,” he said at length, barely audible over the clacking and squeaking of the cart wheels. “It’s a good thing, I suppose, for young ones to get out and about. Especially since we’re confined to these tunnels.”

“Not that young,” I reminded him. I didn’t look back again, though I could feel his eyes on the back of my head.

Later on, we came to a checkpoint. It was a small area where, out of courtesy, other travelers along the line dropped off supplies like bullets and pure water. There was a special load in every regular cart run that was used to resupply checkpoints, and we made a quick stop to rest and change out our pullers and get a little break from the constant rocking of the carts. Even in times like these, we of the northern stations didn’t like to think we had left a stranded caravan without any hope of survival.

I decided to get out and stretch my legs while the others made sure that all the goods were well and truly tied down. My helmet was stifling my vision, so I decided to loosen the strap just a little bit. I found myself staring down a side tunnel, one that led far, far away. Eventually it would pass through some dangerous areas and hit Marestra Station, a far off and strange station that also resided on the edge of pony territory. The tunnel itself was dark and forbidding, much like the path that lay ahead of me. I’d given my word to Hunter that the message would be delivered in person and the talisman would remain a secret. But until then...

Until then I was interrupted by a loud scream and a clatter of hooves. Sixpence came tearing around the corner, his eyes wide with fright. His injured leg slowed him only slightly as he bolted towards us. I was incredulous. How had he gotten so far from the caravan? Why had he...

“Mutants!” he screeched at the top of his voice. “Mutants everywhere! They came out of the ceiling! Run! Run!”

I could hear the loud snuffling and angry growls of whatever it was chasing him, punctuated by loud, thudding stomps. They were as loud as my heart as it hammered against my ribs. My blood ran cold as I hoofed it back to the caravan, the pullers scrambling to get themselves hitched. I recognized that sound, from a time not so long ago when I fought by my father’s side against a wave of monstrosities.

The thumpers had come out to play.

“Get the lead out, ponies!” the caravan commander shouted. “Pegasi keep us covered! Everypony tack up and ready arms!”

I leaped onto the rear cart, Sixpence dropping in beside me as Sunny Side took up station above. The loud thuds and stomps grew louder and louder as ear-rending screeches and whistles echoed through the tunnel. The pullers at last got their hooves under them and began the slow crawl up to speed. We accelerated painfully slowly, and I could see the long ears and gruesome fangs of the first thumper round the corner as we at last started to gain ground.

“Oh, *shit!*” Sixpence whined. Sunny Side’s guns roared alongside another pegasus in our company. The beast’s head was split open like a melon struck by an axe, bursting apart with a spray of gore. We rounded the corner, and though the rests of the creatures were lost to sight, their horrid sounds still came after us.

“What the hell are they doing *here*? This tunnel is supposed to be secure!” I heard Sunny Side shout as the mossy walls turned to blurs around us. The pullers were spurred on by terror and adrenaline, but thumpers could keep pace with even the best of earth pony runners. Our advantage lay in our endurance. A thumper could only keep up top speed for so long. But that single burst of speed was often enough to overtake their prey.

“Probably our old friends the Dark Ones!” the puller of our cart shouted over his shoulder. His hooves pounded the track as his burly muscles strained themselves to the limit. It was all on him, now. I looked to the rear and immediately wished I had stayed home.

At least a dozen thumpers were hot on our trail, their long hind legs giving them bursts of power and speed no pony could hope to match. I could see the pink insides of large, pointed ears turned towards us, attracted by the clatter of hooves and the huffs of terrified panting. Our fear must have been music to their senses. It was hard to believe the pony-sized horrors were once sweet and timid little rabbits. The destructive power of the bombs had warped and tainted even the most innocent of Equestria’s creatures.

“Don’t just stand there!” Sunny Side shouted, spinning in mid-air and popping off a double-shot that cracked a thumper’s leg clean in two. “Shoot them, Lockbox! *Shoot them!*”

I felt a jolt as I slammed my war rein into place, the Mule in the cradle already loaded and ready to fire. I bit down on the trigger. My teeth rattled. My head ached. My ears hurt from the eruption of noise. I kept my jaws clenched regardless, spraying bullets into the oncoming horde. Another guard deftly leaped from the front cart and added his bullets to mine. I had burned almost halfway through my ammunition when I realize I was firing in a blind panic. Noises crowded my senses: the sound of galloping hooves, the screeches of the thumpers, my own wheezing breaths. My nose was full of the caustic stink of burning gunpowder. Adrenaline sharpened my senses to a keen knife’s edge. Everything was too loud, too colorful, too frightening.

Stay steady!

The chase was on as the pullers got to their top speed, and the fittest of thumpers continued to bound after us with wild abandon. Their constantly moving bodies, however large, were hard to get a bead on. My mane, picked up by the wild wind of our flight, flapped against the side of my neck. I took whatever shots I could manage, squinting through my gun’s shockingly bright muzzle flashes. No matter how many monsters we downed, another was ready to take its place.

“Conserve the ammo,” the guard next to me said. His voice was hoarse and muffled around his trigger. *Crack crack crack!* went his gun, not helping my headache at all. “Conserve the ammo, Lockbox!”

I was about to say something back when the thumpers fell upon us at last. Sunny Side and his companion spun and shot two clean off the walls they had been clambering upon but three more swarmed our cart, pouncing over the bodies of their fallen. Sixpence screamed ineffectually. Then came a flash of mangy fur, an impact on my shoulder, and I toppled onto my back. The helmet, one size too big, came loose and flopped off.

My vision was full of ugly monster snout. Bestial eyes wild with hunger stared me down seconds before a paw the size of my hoof

slammed into the side of my head. Everything went dark and blurry. A high pitched whine inside my head rang against my eardrums. My world went dark for a precious few seconds as instinct kicked in. My hooves kicked wildly at the great, shaggy weight on my chest, my hind legs bucked and clawed for purchase. The knife on my leg caught on the thing's fur, slicing its chest. I gritted my teeth and sawed into the flesh, nauseated by the ugly feeling of metal sliding over bone. The beast wrestled with me on the floor of the cart, punching my chest armor before grabbing my foreleg in its horrid teeth. I felt the limb almost tear clean out of its socket as the creature jerked its head back and forth.

The whine inside my head grew louder. I could see red on the edges of my vision.

"No!" I screamed, and brought my hind legs under the creature's chest. With all my panicky strength, I *bucked* as hard as I could. It was like kicking a brick wall, but the creature reared back all the same, wheezing for breath. Its head came apart a moment later, showering me with brains and guts. For a split second, I saw every gory detail of the inside of a thumper's brain cavity, and then its body slumped to the side of the cart.

"Lockbox!" I heard someone shout, probably Sunny Side. That was another I owed him. I felt something drop onto my chest. My war rein. Put it on! I slid the helmet back into place, squashing my mane uncomfortably as I jerked on the straps to tighten it up. A quick glance over my shoulder showed the other pegasus kicking a dead thumper off the cart. The earth pony was out cold or dead, several long gashes scored on his throat.

"Spinner!" Sunny Side shouted, dropping to his side. "Spinner, are you okay?!"

"Look out!"

Our puller's warning came almost too late as the cart shook from another impact. I twisted violently, seeing a thumper's jaws snap shut just in front of my nose. A burst from my Mule took care of that, but it was just one of many. The creatures had gained on us again. The thumpers were all around us now, and every gun that could opened fire. The chaos lasted just a few seconds, but those seconds would remain burned in my memory forever. There was nothing in my world but the deafening roar of guns, the

screaming of ponies in pain and terror, and above all the rumbling clatter of the wheels on the tracks.

Sunny Side and the pegasus dodged back and forth above, struggling to stay alive and aloft as much as they were trying to protect their fellows. Claws and teeth were everywhere. My jaw ached something fierce. I'd been biting down so hard on the trigger I felt it or my teeth would crack. My mind was gone. My body was all action. Spin, fire, reload, too slow, get the pistol and jam it in your teeth, fire again. There, punch, kick it right in the face. I felt blood in my mane, on my face, in my eyes. Mine, theirs? Doesn't matter, shoot again!

A scream to my left! Sixpence struggled with one of the beasts as it attempted to pull him right off the cart. Time seemed to slow as I saw one of his hooves leave the floor of the cart. In another instant he'd be pulled to his doom.

No time to think. Jump! I jumped, not sure of what I was doing, only knowing that I wasn't about to abandon a pony to a fate as horrible as that. I landed right on the creature's square head, driving my front hooves into its skull. I pressed my pistol against the back of its neck. With two jerks of my tongue, my final two rounds slammed into its spine and burst out the other side, spraying the back of the cart with blood. I turned back to Sixpence as the creature collapsed to the tracks and rolled with a series of heavy, meaty thumps.

My eyes met the trader's. He seemed strange, as always. Shocked. Grateful. And then his eyes hardened. Narrowed. At *me*. Before I could register what was happening, I felt his hooves grab my shoulders. His hind legs push into my stomach.

"I know what you're trying to do!" he growled. "And it *won't work!*"

He kicked. My hooves left the floor of the cart.

I was in open air. Falling. Spinning. The ground zoomed up to meet me. I felt it embrace me with all the subtlety and power of a falling boulder. I felt a terrible jarring impact, realizing that was my body colliding with the mercilessly unyielding tracks. There was an explosion of white behind my eyes. The world spun around me. I tossed and turned, hooves flailing. The

whining in my ears returned full force, blotting out my senses. The last thing I heard was a loud thud as my body rolled to a halt, and then the sound of cart wheels and gunfire receding into the distance.

Chapter 4

“Do you want to see tomorrow? Then you better earn it.”

In the darkness of the Metro, being alone is at once a blessing and a curse. One can find themselves a strange sense of peace in the tunnels where only monsters and ghosts roam. Without having to constantly worry about another, a pony can focus exclusively on their own well-being. If you trust yourself and your abilities, traveling alone can be a potent method of ensuring your survival while removing the burden of other lives dependent on yours. Traveling alone in the shadows and silence severely scales back one's chances of being found, and any and all salvage is yours to carry if you find it. We of the Metro usually skulk and scavenge to make a living, so moving alone and quietly is a skill many pick up early in life. The tight confines and small spaces mean large groups are very quickly and very easily discovered if they aren't careful. However chance, fate, and the inscrutable nature of the Metro itself can turn your advantages into terrible twists of luck. A single cut can turn into a horrible infection unless you find a pony skilled in medicine. A single broken bone can leave you easy prey for the mutants and bandits. One little slip-up is all it takes for the Metro to swoop down and prey on your weakness.

I'd never felt more weak than I did lying in that forsaken tunnel, surrounded by the bodies of mutants and their pungent stink. I had no one small injury. I was bruised, battered, and bloody all over. Thick, crimson fluid dribbled out of my nose, clogging my airways and making every breath a wet and frustrating experience. One of my eyelids was black and blue with blood, swelled to obscene size so I couldn't see out of it. Even though I'd had my helmet on, my head ached something fierce, and I could feel the warm, disgusting dribble of my own blood down my cheek. The entire lower half of my body felt numb and useless, and for a moment I thought I'd been severed in half somehow. Even stranger, I felt so tired I couldn't muster up the will to care, even if I was on the verge of death. Several gashes had been scored in my sides, and I only just now realized that the thumper's teeth had done a terrible number on my foreleg. The uniform was shredded and soaked through with blood, and I keenly felt every rip and tear in my flesh from the thumper's awful teeth. I felt grateful I couldn't see the full extent of the damage. My shoulder and elbow throbbed with a continuous,

sharp ache that felt like somepony was driving a spike into my joints. Every second that passed allowed me to regain my senses and feel every cut and bruise more sharply. Clang, clang, clang went the hammer that drove the pain in deeper with every beat of my heart, made it ever more acute to my senses.

I took a deep, ragged breath, sucking in the air through the oozing blood that covered my snout. Pain exploded all along my sides. I probably had a broken rib, or three. Earth ponies were remarkably durable, a blessing from the Princesses that had lasted through the Apocalypse. Unfortunately that meant my body itself had to break the fall and take the hits while keeping me alive. It was a miracle I wasn't dead or unconscious, and certainly a blessing that I hadn't been set upon by the thumpers trailing behind the rail cart. I didn't think much of it, though, as my mind was too full of reeling, blazing agony.

Just breathe, Lockbox!

I slowed my breathing, acclimatizing myself to the fresh tide of pain that accompanied every single puff of my lungs. A wave of dizziness swept over me and my vision blacked out for a few moments. I fretted this was the end and I was about to die, but after a few minutes of lying still and battling against the pain I recovered again. I wondered if it would be better if I was unconscious. Anything was an improvement to lying here in devastating pain, debilitated beyond all help. The leg that had been in the mouth of the thumper resisted every attempt to even twitch. My mind conjured grave images of me sitting in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, bandaged and broken while other ponies looked on in pity and horror. I felt a strange mixture of shocked resignation and terrified denial. I knew I was gravely injured, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. I had to get up, or I would die. Somehow, I needed to get moving and find help. I wouldn't let my body give in. I wouldn't let *myself* be snuffed out like the candle at my bedside. My dreams of seeing a better world couldn't be so meaningless. My entire life couldn't just be one giant prelude to this. So many ponies were depending on me to survive. I still owed Sunny Side a lifetime of friendship for his loyalty. My father waited impatiently for my safe return. And Hunter was still out there, willingly giving his life for the Metro.

I tried to remember Hunter's lessons. Many years ago he'd begun instilling within me a sense of pride in who and what I was. Even if he was

a unicorn and I'd never be able to match his raw power and resourcefulness, he never let me compare myself to him. I had to be able to trust my own body and the experiences I went through to guide me. Otherwise, I'd be doomed the moment I set hoof outside.

You're an earth pony, Lockbox. You and yours are the heart and soul of ponykind. Without you, we'd never have an anchor to keep the pegasi's heads out of the clouds and the unicorns' minds in reality and out of their arcane rituals. Your bodies are strong and your minds stubborn. I've never seen an earthy pony worth their salt give up on a task he's decided on. And you will not be the first.

It was true. I had far too important a task to simply lie down and die. My shoulders were strong enough to bear the burden. I was an earth pony, and I could take whatever weight was settled on them. I'd given my word, set my heart on something. I wouldn't give in.

I turned my head as much as I could, trying to reach my bags and pockets. Every little twitch sent an explosion of pain ripping through my body, expanding outwards like forks of lightning. Gritting my teeth I craned my neck and strained to my emergency medical supplies. The mysterious potions within would do little more than dull the pain for a short time and provide relief from minor injuries. I was in need of a hospital, casts, and bandages. No one spell could fit everypony and mend their bodies with a flick of the wrist, as everypony's body was different. Magic was a volatile and extremely precise art, and one small discrepancy in a unicorn's spell could do more harm than healing. Even the most powerful unicorns could do little more than speed along the healing process. Some injuries were just too grave for anything but a long stay in a hospital bed. But for now, the potions would have to be enough.

My body cried out in protest as my nose bumped my ribs a little harder than I'd meant it to. In an instant my resolution melted away to a sniveling cowardice. My head flopped back down and I wept like a newborn foal as the pain flared up, stabbing deep into my chest. Blood mixed with snot bubbled around my nostrils. I struggled to keep my sobs in check, fearful of attracting more monsters, and because every hitch of my breath caused more pain.

No matter. Try again. Once it was bearable again, I lifted my head and turned my snout back, and this time managed to get my split lips around the bag's flap. As gingerly as I could, I rooted around until I got a grip on the small box that contained my salvation. Ignoring the sharp twinge in my neck, I nudged open the small container and found my prize: the shockers. They looked like nothing more than little needles, but they could be a lifesaver. Though small, they contained a mixture of spells and potions. Magic wasn't confined by space, after all. The needle would inject the cocktail of magical potions, and magical enchantments within would be completed by the push of the plunger, like connecting two circuits together. That provided a shock of energy and pain relief, as well as stimulating the body to speed up the healing process.

I got a syringe between my teeth and grinned with triumph. I lifted my uninjured hoof and pressed the bottom of the shocker against my arm. I felt the needle slide in, and the plunger cracked apart the arcane wards within the tube. I felt a small jolt of energy pass all through my body, followed quickly by spreading warmth. At once I could feel relief from most of my lesser injuries. The flow of blood from my head and nose began to slow. Those ailments would be taken care of quickly. As for everything else, I had to move with caution or risk making it worse.

I tried to stand. Everything spun. I collapsed again, pain clawing at my mind, forcing me to stay awake and pay attention. My breathing, no longer bubbly and ragged, was labored nonetheless. Every rise and fall of my chest was accompanied by that sharp, stabbing pain. I attempted to test all four limbs. My knife leg was still inoperable, and the throbbing ache remained in spite of the shocker's best efforts. My ribs still felt broken. My last attempt to move had made me break into a cold sweat. Tears streaked through the dirt and grime on my face, falling in rivulets.

You're an earth pony. As strong as the earth. Try again!

I tried again and was met with failure once more. Something deep within me was broken, or several somethings. Somehow I couldn't pull it together enough, my body wouldn't let me push any farther. No. I had to get up again. I had to move!

At last I found it within me to slide forward, dragging myself on my uninjured foreleg. I could feel every tiny pebble that pushed into my

clothing, nudging my broken ribs. Each tiny jolt was like a sledgehammer crashing into my chest, making me gasp for breath. My back legs remained numb and dragged behind me. Gritting my teeth, I pushed and pulled and cursed, hauling my dead weight as far as I could.

Darkness came and went in those few, desperate minutes, where I hoped against hope that help would find me. That everything would be all right with the world. I felt very little but pain, carving my body like a mutant's claws, knew nothing but the struggle against exhaustion. I gritted teeth until they were close to cracking. The despair and agony battered on the walls of my mind, slowly tearing down my defenses. Though the magic helped to shore up my willpower, eventually I cracked, and the pain came rushing through. When I collapsed to the ground again, a fresh wave of dizziness and nausea welled up within me, smashing through the protective cloud cover of my shocker's healing spells. I dry heaved and blacked out once again from the sheer sensory overload.

"Damn it!" I gasped as I came to in a rush of consciousness, coughing up fresh blood. The cramps, the beating of drums on my head, the piercing pain in my chest... It was too much. I rested my head on the ground and just *breathed*, waiting for it all to stop and go away. It didn't. It seemed only to get worse. I heard the strange whining in my ears again. It grew louder and louder until it was all I could hear. The shrieking pain sprouted from every cut and bruise in my body and blossomed into ugly life. All I could do was close my eyes and whimper, trying to hide in the dark recesses of my mind from the despair that oozed over me like a thick sludge. It weighed me down until I could do nothing but remain on the ground, utterly defeated. I thought of my Wall and my father, the comforts of home. The thoughts only made me grow sadder.

And then, there was a light. It was around the corner, growing closer. It pierced my eyelids, grabbed my attention, and forced me to look up. A short spring of hope bubbled up inside me. Was it the caravan, come back to fetch me? It had to be something good. Why, that light looked so beautiful and warm, it seemed to be a unicorn's horn, glowing with tender loving care. So soft, it was like a blanket of illumination, washing over me.

It wasn't until the light had completely overtaken me that I realized it was coming from inside my head, and I was beginning to faint.

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Darkness surrounded me. Stars wheeled overhead. Every beat of my heart was like a jackhammer, thundering down into the earth.

Save... Life...

I was floating. I didn't have a body. I could still feel the pain, but it was like a distant memory, an echo down a long hallway.

Stop... Death...

I swam forward through the mist of my own mind, tumbling and spinning. There were no walls. There was no floor. Just me.

Dream... See...

The light returned to me. I went towards it, and I saw my Wall suddenly appear before me. Every picture was there, but it was... different. They were all perfectly clear. The colors were sharp and crisp. I stepped closer. Within each tiny memento, I saw movement. I saw *life*. I saw ponies living, playing, working. I saw Canterlot's spires reach into the sky, the waterfalls cascading down with water as clear and clean as newly refined glass. I saw the trees of Whitetail Wood swaying gently in a summer breeze. I saw a happy pink mare skate across a frozen lake, completely unperturbed by the cold because she knew eventually the winter would end.

With tears in my eyes I let myself fall forward into the dreams and memories. This was Equestria as I dreamed. This was what I wanted for us all.

I slammed into the hard earth and the pain returned. I was myself again, smashed to pieces on a dirt path. I looked up with my good eye, and found myself surrounded by *trees*. Tall, green, healthy trees, short saplings and fat bushes at their bases. Trees of all shapes and sizes I had no names for yet knew were wonderful all the same. All around me they grew, reaching up into the air and shaking their leaves in the breeze as if to say "Yes, yes, I am alive and I love it!" The dirt beneath my cheek was no longer bitter and slimy. It was fresh and earthy, such a rich brown shade I

cried just looking at it. The majestic scenery extended into a horizon of happily rolling hills covered in green, luscious grass that made my mouth water just *seeing* it. Overhead I could feel a terrific, buttery yellow light, accompanied by a gentle heat as soft as a child's touch. Was that the sun? Was it Celestia's wings I felt on my cheek? I couldn't lift my head to see. But this was Equestria as my pictures remembered, as we all wished it to be. It made my head swim with exultant joy. My breath caught in my throat as I struggled to understand this sudden miracle.

Was this some new Equestria I had stumbled across? Was I a spirit and in the embrace of the Princesses in the next life? Whatever it was, I didn't want it to end. I was still alone and broken as far as I knew, dying. But at least I would die with this beautiful vision in my eyes...

Another pony appeared, rounding a bend in the road. I recognized her as a pegasus, though she kept her rather small wings tucked closely at her sides like they were precious packages. She possessed a long, noble, pink mane that bounced merrily with each prancing step she took. I'd never seen a pony move with such simplistic, elegant movements. She looked happy, without a care in the world. There was a small, satisfied smile on her prim little snout, as if she was absolutely confident that today and all other days after were good ones. Her fur coat glowed like the Sun above, glistening as she bounced along. Everything about her was graceful and peaceful, utterly and totally devoid of threat or malice. She seemed to embody the soft quiet things one enjoys in those times when life slows down. When they are ensconced in a cozy blanket with a good book, listening to the sounds of life outside your door, or quietly sharing a warm drink with a good friend in companionable silence. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life.

"La la la la," she sang tunelessly in a voice soft as silk, until she came across my limp body. "Oh!" she squeaked, jumping back, wings flaring. Strong cyan eyes that sparkled with liveliness took in my battered state. My mouth went dry as, for a few precious moments, our eyes met.

"Oh, my," she whispered delicately, taking a few steps forward. "Oh, you poor thing. You've been hurt, haven't you?"

Apparently, she had a talent for understatement. I pried open my suddenly parched lips, trying to speak, but she shushed me with such

tenderness I didn't feel the need to talk. I felt a sharp ache in my chest as her face drew close to mine, and I felt cool breath on my forehead. She was so pure it hurt to look at her.

"Don't worry, it doesn't look so bad. I'll bring you back home and patch you right up. Here..."

She bent down and plucked up the small, snow-white rabbit next to my head. Though it squeaked and shivered, she placed it delicately into her saddlebag, where its little head poked out. The pegasus cooed at it gently, and gave it one of the most caring smiles a pony could have on their lips. And then, she turned and began to walk away. Leaving me alone. Leaving me broken, like my world. Turning away from the destruction and loss I represented. My heart shattered in my chest. Everything abruptly felt so distant, so cold and lifeless. I was not in Equestria. I was intruding on something I had no place in. I was no longer welcome in the old world... I never had been welcome.

Save... Life...

The light grew brighter. Everything began to stretch, distort, fading into the distance. My perfect world was dissolving before my eyes, returning to faint memory and half-remembered dreams.

"Wait..." I croaked. "Please... don't go..."

Remember... Lost...

"Please... don't leave..."

Lockbox.

"Come back... come back...!"

Lockbox!

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I opened my eyes and was greeted by the worn, dull surface of the Metro tunnels and the rusting pipes overhead. Welcome home, Lockbox,

the dead rock said. Welcome back to your cold, glum reality. My head swam. I felt delirious from pain and blood loss.

Out of my one good eye I saw large eyes staring back at me, yellow, glowing in the dark. My light had been smashed in the fall, and the only illumination came from some bioluminescent mushrooms growing out of cracks in the floor. I was too dazed to even make sense of what I was looking at: a big, hulking shadow, the sound of deep, snorting breaths. *This is it*, I thought. *Any moment now I will feel fangs sinking into my neck, and it will be over*. I fervently prayed it was another dream.

“Pony should be more careful,” the shadow said in a deep, rasping voice. Its voice echoed and warped in my ears. My own labored breathing was louder than this strange voice. “Pony shouldn’t lie down in the tunnels. Not safe.”

I was vaguely aware of something lifting me up in big, heavy claws. It was surprisingly gentle. The movement alone made my world spin, and darkness claimed me once more.

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I was in a different tunnel than before, smaller, with pipes lining almost every inch of the walls. It took a moment to realize that the cracked, dull walls were moving, sliding past my vision. No... *I* was moving. I was lying on wood instead of dirt. My eye rolled forward, and saw a pony’s flanks swaying, walking. No more great shadow. The pony was hitched to lines that led back to me. And then I realized: I was on another cart. It was a flat, primitive thing with no walls, more like a flatbed wagon than anything else. But it wasn’t the ground. It wasn’t the maw of a thumper.

I took another look at my rescuer, and saw a cutie mark of a sun peeking through some clouds. I recognized it at once.

“Sunny?” I whispered. My voice sounded cracked and foreign.

“Don’t talk,” my friend said. “Rest, Lockbox. I’ve got this.”

His steps were heavy and wooden, and his head hung low. I looked closer and saw one of his wings hanging limp at his side, twisted unnaturally.

“Sunny...” I moaned. “Your wing...”

“I know. Hush now, Lockbox. We’re not safe.”

“Sunny... I saw! I saw... I saw...”

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When next I woke, I felt safe at last. I was lying in the warm orange glow of a sprite-light, one of the magically charged lanterns that kept many pony inhabited parts of the Metro lit. There wasn’t a real parasprite in there, thank the Princesses, but for the sake of aesthetics a magically synthesized ball fluttered around in the lantern’s confines. Sunny Side had dropped me off in a small side tunnel, with raised platforms on either side for railcar crews to disembark. It must have been a spare for when traffic was too heavy in the main docks. I saw a large metal door set into the wall above the platform next to me, presumably leading to wherever Sunny had gone. There were no thumpers or other mutants gnawing on me, so I believed I could call myself free of that particular danger.

I did a quick check of my own body. I was still wounded heavily, but most of my injuries had been dressed, cleaned, and stabilized. I could feel the warm, comfortable embrace of healing bandages around my foreleg and rib cage. Somepony had gone through a lot of trouble to get me patched up. My barding had been removed and placed to the side, where the rest of my gear and guns were. It was strange to see just how much I’d actually been wearing. I’d probably looked more like I was going to war than just making a routine run to another Station.

I attempted to move, and was stopped once again by pain. It was starting to feel like a good acquaintance at this point. Thankfully, I was distracted by the door opening. Sunny Side came through, swathed in bandages like me, along with a stern, grey-maned earth stallion. He wore a doctor’s saddle, laden with healing supplies. Without a word to me, he trotted over and pulled out a small box that looked like my charger, although it had two prongs on top. Using his teeth, he chewed on a small

lever on its side as he waved it over my bandages, and I felt a strange tingling sensation. Each pull of the lever was accompanied by the tell-tale shimmering hum of magic. Magical energy jumped and sparked from the prongs to my body, and the bandages gave off a faint glow. The pain began to recede again, and I found I could breathe a little more freely. All too soon, the doctor drew back and replaced his box.

“There. That’s all the charge I can spare,” he said, and turned to Sunny Side. “Are you going to pay up or what?”

Sunny Side shifted uncomfortably on his hooves. “Uh... well, there is a slight, erm, problem, doctor. I seem to have already given you all of my cartridges...”

The doctor’s eyes narrowed. “Are you telling me that I’ve been wasting good medical supplies on a pony from another station, who I don’t even know, and you haven’t even paid *half* of what’s owed? Do you have any *idea* how expensive it is to create and maintain these bandages? I can’t just *walk up* to the Guild of Magic and have them replace all the gemstones I need to power my chargers, craft the healing potions! Even if I *was* a unicorn, there’s taxes, bills, time wasted to consider!”

“He’s my friend!” Sunny shot back. “He is *not* a waste of time!”

“If neither of you can pay up, then that’s all you are to me,” the earth stallion hissed. “If my patients found out I was giving free care to foreign ponies, my head would roll!”

“My father,” I broke in, “is a pony of influence in Exiperia. He can hoof the bill when I get back there.”

“He better, assuming you aren’t lying,” the doctor grumbled, rounding on me with a glare that made me blush. “Or the first place you’re *both* going after your recovery is debtor’s prison!”

He stormed back through the door and kicked it shut with a resounding bang. Sunny Side shook his head and spat on the ground the doctor had stood on.

“Asshole,” he said, and turned back to me. He gave me a wary smile, which I returned.

“I’m starting to think you’re a guardian angel, Sunny,” I said. “You saved my life. Again.”

“It’s what friends are for,” the pegasus answered, waving it off. “That’s what the old stories say, right? Friendship is the magic that gets us through times like these.”

“Indeed they do,” I murmured reflectively. I remembered my fever dream with sharp clarity. “Where are we?”

“Right outside Draft Station. I know it’s not as far as I’d like to be, but it’s as far as I could manage. Isn’t this just like Draft? Guards let me in for being Exiperia militia and won’t lift a hoof to help heal us.” He showed off his bandaged wing, giving it a sad, proud smile. “Thumpers almost tore me open when I went back for you. I dunno how, I was sure you were busted up something awful, but you managed to drag yourself onto a spare wagon down one of the side tunnels. It was hell dragging that thing all the way here...”

“No mutants?” I asked in wonderment. What about what I’d seen?

“No mutants!” Sunny confirmed. “I dunno why, but the tunnel was completely clear all the way to Draft. The thumpers had cleared out. I guess the caravan pulled them out of the woodwork, and they scattered when we turned out not to be easy prey.”

I stared into space. Had the talking shadow just been a fever dream? The eyes in the dark had seemed so real. I hadn’t crawled onto a wagon, or at least I thought not. But Sunny didn’t mention a thing about another pony being in the tunnels. I decided, for now, it wasn’t important as long as I was alive.

“Where’s the rest of the caravan?”

“Gone on to Bucklyn Station. I figured we could wait until they make the return trip for them to pick us up. What’s weird, though, Sixpence? He

disappeared before we even got to Draft. Rat bastard stole a gun and some ammo on the way, too.”

My eyes shot open and I rolled onto my stomach, ignoring the pain in my sides. “Sixpence! He was the one who pushed me off!”

Sunny’s ears drooped. “Wait... what? Pushed you?”

“Yes,” I said, anger beginning to boil inside my stomach. “He kicked me off the cart. He was trying to murder me.” Even after I’d saved his life! The indignity of it all made me want to stomp my hooves.

“But... but why? He’s just a trader, he has no idea who you are. It doesn’t make sense!”

I settled down and thought about it. All of the strange events that had led me here so far *did* have a few things in common: Bucklyn Station and the Rangers there. Sixpence had asked about Hunter and what he was planning to do. I’d brushed it off at the time, but now it seemed to fall into place. He knew I was going to Bucklyn, he’d shown an inordinate interest in why I was going, *and* he’d been determined to stop me from getting there. Somehow he must have known that I was carrying something important, something to do with the Rangers... and for whatever reason, he’d wanted to interfere.

I know what you’re trying to do. And it won’t work!

My mind came back to the Dark Ones. Sixpence had been touched by them, I remembered that too. Had he gone mad, and believed he had to help the Dark Ones kill us all? It was so little to go on, but it was the only thing that led to a rational explanation of why he’d tried to kill me.

“It may not make sense,” I told Sunny. “But there *is* a reason behind it...” I looked my friend in the eyes. “I have to keep going, Sunny. I have to get to Bucklyn.”

Sunny’s face contorted, incredulity written all over his expression. “Whoa, hold on, Lockbox. This is getting a bit over my head. You’re not even well yet. You’ve just accused somepony of trying to murder you. And now you’re talking about how we *have* to go to Bucklyn?”

"I know what I saw, Sunny! I know what he said!" I exclaimed with a ferociousness that shocked me. "He didn't try to kill anypony else on that caravan but me. I'm willing to bet he even lured the mutants our way. Think, Sunny. Why would he disappear with guns and ammunition so soon after I mysteriously fell off a moving railcar into the waiting jaws of mutants that weren't supposed to know we were there?"

My friend puzzled over this for just a few seconds more before nodding in agreement. "All right, Lockbox. I trust you. But this just makes things even more dangerous. We have to wait here and tell your father about this, and then go back home where it's safe."

"*Nowhere* is safe anymore, Sunny!" I thundered, slamming my uninjured hoof on the wooden floor of the wagon. It shuddered under the blow. "Have you forgotten what the Dark Ones are doing already? They're murdering us by the dozen and we can't even fight back. If we stay here, if we let word get out that I'm alive, Sixpence could come back and finish the job. And even if *he* doesn't get me, the Dark Ones will unless we go get help!"

"Then tell me why Bucklyn is so important!" Sunny snapped. "I saved your life, Lockbox. I risked my *wings*! Don't shut yourself away about this!"

I glared at him for several long moments until my thoughts caught up with me. My gaze softened. He was right. But Hunter had told me that the talisman was to be kept a secret. If Sunny knew about it, then what if he was put into even greater danger by my willingness to drag him into this?

"Rangers are there," I decided to tell him, looking away. "Hunter told me to seek them out if he didn't return. Without their help we will not be able to convince any others to fight the Dark Ones."

Sunny Side dropped onto his haunches and stared at me in silence. I didn't like the look on his face, and it cut me deeply. I worried he would try to talk me out of continuing my journey, which was out of the question. Not only did we face the Dark Ones, there was a pony, maybe several, who was trying to stop us from defeating them. My dream was still fresh in my mind. If I was ever going to have a hope of keeping our world safe, and on

the path back to reconstruction, then I had to deliver Hunter's message. I had to get to the Rangers.

"Lockbox," Sunny said quietly. "If we have to get to Bucklyn... and the Rangers really will help Exiperia... then we have no choice."

"No," I answered. "Not really."

Sunny hung his head. "Then... we need to get to Bucklyn. Get passage on the next railcar out of here."

"Assuming that doctor isn't keeping watch on us," I added. "That, and I..." I attempted to stand once more. The bandages were doing their work, but I couldn't push myself too much. I was still wobbly and tired, and when the thought entered my head that I hadn't eaten or drank much recently I found myself parched and starving.

"Then we're stuck here, for the time being," Sunny said. "And the longer we stay, the more likely it is the doctor will call the guard and clap us in irons until we can pay up. You have no idea how long it took to convince him to even look at you... if I'd known Draft Station was so full of thieves and beggars, I'd never have supported an alliance! He forced me to keep you out here, or lodging and a bed would have been extra."

"Heh... pony's got to make a living," I murmured. "I think, for now, I could do with some food. And I'd like to see what's on the other side of that door... I don't fancy sitting around out here all day."

"Are you sure you can even move?"

"I'll be fine, Sunny. It's not like I'm running a marathon."

I struggled to stand, letting the freshly charged spells work their magic and do most of the heavy lifting.

"How do we know Sixpence isn't wandering around waiting for you?" asked Sunny.

"We don't... but I doubt he'd actually imagine that I came out of that mess alive," I replied. "If he ran off with guns and ammo, he's either scared

stiff his plan didn't work, or he's preparing himself to do something else now that I'm 'dead.' Either way, I want some food, and if I'm going to sit anywhere it's going to be *inside* a station. Just... nowhere too public."

Sunny helped me clamber up onto the platform, assuring me it was safe to leave my things here, as only he and the doctor had come to this part of the station. I knew that I was taking a big risk just by moving when I was in such a state, but I needed to feel a little closer to civilization after my brush with death. There was no way I was getting on my barding or my saddlebags with my ribs still injured, so I let Sunny carry my personal possessions, along with what few cartridges I usually had on me. Just in case, I tossed my jacket over my hindquarters to hide my cutie mark. Ponies could look astonishingly alike sometimes, and cutie marks were our most distinguishing feature.

The bullets were our most valuable possessions and would pay for our meals. It seemed strange to me, and still does, that ponies based their economy around weapons of destruction. However, these bullets were from the time before the bombs, when factories and other workshops worked at peak efficiency. The armories that made them had utilized top-tier machines and spells for the war effort. Unicorns nowadays could still taste the spells that were woven into their casings to make them especially deadly and energy efficient, spells to let them carve through the air and never lose speed, even spells to protect against rust and common wear and tear. The kind of spells we couldn't hope to duplicate now without proper arcane matrices and magic fonts. This gave old world bullets a sense of permanency and value, something we could clearly look at and think 'ah ha, this is worth such and such an amount.' As they'd been mass-produced in the millions, they were also easy to find and gather together. Add to all that the fact that they doubled as last-ditch, deadly munitions that could pierce the hide of all but the toughest mutants, and it made a strange kind of sense that they became our main sources of income. Certainly many stations bartered with more common trade goods, exchanging a pot for a chair or a hat for a box of cigarettes, but the bullets were the standard with which we measured real value.

When Sunny pushed open the door we were greeted by a wide hallway with a high ceiling occupied by a few abandoned hovels constructed from now rotting wood. The area was lit by a few lonesome sprite-lights, and I could see empty fuse boxes and generator cases long

since ripped open and scavenged for parts. It seemed to me to be an old maintenance tunnel, forgotten and rarely used even in the time before the war. Not far in, we encountered an old stallion who looked up at us with a forlorn, unfocused gaze. He had a healing bandage wrapped around his head that had burned out months ago, and he looked like he hadn't shaved or bathed in weeks. He wore rags for clothes to protect against the damp chill of the Metro, and on his dark blue flank was a pickaxe cutie mark. Such a pitiful creature I'd never seen in my home of Exiperia, and for a moment I wasn't sure what to do, or even think.

"Spare a bullet?" he mumbled brokenly.

I felt a strange solidarity with the old stallion, perhaps because of my own collection of injuries. And I also remembered, sharply, the pain of abandonment as the pretty mare of my dreams ignored me entirely, opting for a little bunny rabbit. No, I couldn't be that heartless to anypony. I motioned for Sunny to give him one of my bullets. It seemed only right.

"Thank you, sirs."

Not much farther along we came to another tunnel that crossed ours like the top of a T, lined with more shacks and homes made of old wood and rusty metal. They were piled on top of each other, sometimes three high, connected by small planks and platforms of wood, creating their own little jungle gyms. This looked like an old cargo transport tunnel, since there was a large ditch that ran along the bottom where small wagons could pass back and forth. It too had been retrofitted into this ramshackle living area, with sleeping ponies and a couple of young fillies taking most of the available space. I could hear voices and sounds of activity echoing down the hall, and I nudged Sunny Side towards them.

"What's over there?" I asked, pointing left where most of the noise was coming from.

"The main market and commercial district," Sunny said. "Draft is a small station like ours, and they don't have much to work with besides trade. But they do have several smaller tunnels that lead to the surface, so apparently they get a lot of traffic with stalkers."

Stalkers. The very name sent a chill up a pony's spine. No pony knew just how organized they were, but they were the ones who came back with all the stories and all the treasures of the old world apart from the Rangers. Prowling the city above, they braved mutants and radiation to bring back still functioning machinery and little luxuries we couldn't make for ourselves, all in the name of a quick bullet. They were just as daring and perhaps even more foolhardy as the Rangers, and not nearly as organized. They were treasure hunters and bandits, folk heroes and vicious mercenaries. Most of them proudly wore the old city flag of Stalliongrad to identify themselves. Others just let their hooves or their guns do the talking. I didn't relish the thought of meeting one, since they were so unpredictable. That and we didn't have nearly enough cartridges to buy the services of one, no matter how useful they might be.

As we continued limping down the long residential hallway, I met several other ponies in the same state as our first beggar, sitting quietly with themselves or talking with each other. It was not a happy station, and I recalled my father hadn't spoken highly of Draft Station when he mentioned our alliance. He'd told me Draft Station had strict work quotas and a rather cutthroat economy based on how much business one could bring to the station. Since they were more of a checkpoint between stations than a self-sufficient place, they had little to spare on amenities. Those who could make the cut lived rather comfortably; the rest worked as hard laborers. I suspected that if I was too generous here, my bullets would run dry very quickly... and my stomach turned over with guilt that I could so easily forget generosity in the face of such overwhelming hardship. But what could one pony do? I had my own mission to consider, one that could determine the future of the Metro.

We passed into the market area, which was even smaller than Exiperia's. It was crowded with what few ponies who actually had things to sell, hawking their wares among their poorer compatriots. Not even their stalls were pretty: they were improvised constructions made of pieces of shaft elevators, sheet metal, and scrap. Their customers looked like they were a step away from poverty or banditry, dressed in a mish-mash of old clothes. There were many transients here, coming and going, an eclectic mix of personalities who attempted to keep their noses above the commoners around them. In one corner a unicorn technician furiously worked at a large steam generator, his horn glowing brightly as he fiddled with its interior. In another a group of stalkers walked through like they

owned the place, completely indifferent to the regular ponies and their troubles. Tinny, slow dance music issued from scratchy loudspeakers on the ceiling, only enhancing the melancholy, bland atmosphere. Newcomers though we were, we were hardly spared a glance. Things in Exiperia weren't quite as bad as this, but if the Dark One attacks continued, I believed that we would soon be in the same situation.

There was a small eatery near the docks, with a single pegasus mare flitting between tables as she cooked and served the food at the same time. We sat down and I rested my aching ribs and throbbing foreleg. There was nothing on the menu but some kind of stew made of who knew what, and tea fresh from Exiperia's mushroom farms, but I devoured it hungrily. The only frustrating thing was how slowly I was forced to eat. Every swallow was murder, but I pushed through the pain to get some nutrition. I could see a crowd on the main platform, full of ponies from other stations. They were pressing against a large gate that had been set up in front of the platform, showing passports and other papers before they were let through. I recognized the colors of Appleton and Ponyevska, and a couple others that seemed familiar. A few of them were arguing with the guards over so-called "trade tariffs" that Draft used to supplement its income of selling stalker junk. Add to that the troubles that came from requiring passports to prove one was a valued trade partner with Draft, and it became obvious the small station was abusing its position as a chokepoint on many trade routes between inner and outer stations. It only got worse when a couple of unicorns dressed in olive green uniforms bearing the insignia of the Guild of Magic simply walked through the gates, which drew the ire of a couple Appleton earth ponies.

"Hey!" one of them shouted, standing tall and bright green with a brown mane. He stalked up to the unicorns before being halted by a guard. "Those Guild suck-ups get through without even showing papers? We've been standing here for hours!"

"The Guild does good work for our station," the guard sneered, putting a hoof on the earth pony's chest and shoving him back. "You're just a waste of space, *farmer*."

I turned away as the two of them got into a colorful shouting match.

"It sounds like the Guild are the ponies to ask for a free ride," I said to Sunny, who raised an eyebrow.

"The Guild of Magic?" he asked. "They rip off anypony that isn't loyal to them."

"We aren't going to be loyal to them any longer than it takes to get to Bucklyn," I murmured.

"That's dangerous talk, Lockbox. Couldn't we just wait for *our* caravan to come back? I'm sure they'll be happy to take us."

"The Dark Ones are more dangerous, even if nopony but us is ready to believe in them. And the caravan might linger at Bucklyn. For all they know we're both dead and they're figuring out what to tell my father. It should stay that way for now. We can't wait around here with that doctor threatening to lock us up and Sixpence probably ready to shoot me on sight if he finds me again."

I watched the Guild unicorns go over to one of the market stalls and purchase a few things without any trouble. The Guild of Magic was not an organization that my father spoke highly of, and with good reason. They were little more than unicorns who held magic in higher regard than ponies' lives, and through concentrating their power and resources they were the greatest source of magical equipment in the Metro. Generators, water purifiers, air filters, all of them were only considered top-quality if they came from the Guild. They used that influence to overcharge for all their services, and get to places normal ponies couldn't, and were allied with many unscrupulous stations in the name of turning a profit. They weren't nice, but they were invaluable. An extremely dangerous combination. And right now, I was planning to ask them if they could just give us free passage to the next station over.

I found myself questioning the wisdom of my quest, but the threat of the Dark Ones overshadowed everything in my mind. The tunnels from Draft to Bucklyn weren't exactly safe, especially nowadays, and there wasn't much to keep me from believing our own caravan would be destroyed along the way by something. We had to leave, and fast. This was our only available option.

“Let’s give it a try,” I said, and slurped down the rest of my food, hobbling over to the Guild unicorns who were laughing with one of the stall merchants. Sunny followed with an apprehensive expression.

“... and he actually tried to pay us in common tools! And food! Imagine,” said one of the unicorns, a tall and handsome fellow with a well-groomed blonde mane. I wondered how many ponies he had impoverished to get the supplies to make himself look that nice.

“Excuse me,” I said, though apparently I wasn’t loud enough, since the trio kept chuckling to themselves. Sunny Side gave me a sidelong look that said he didn’t think highly of this plan, but unless we wanted to bankrupt ourselves and get thrown into a cell until my father bailed us out, this had to be attempted.

I waited until the unicorns deigned to turn our way.

“Oh, hello, what’s this? We’re not in the mood for hoof-outs...”

“We’re looking to make something of a business proposition,” I said, deciding to get straight to the point. I was never one for small talk with other ponies. “We require passports to get out of here and into Bucklyn without any trouble. We’re willing to perform a service to the Guild of Magic in exchange for them.”

The unicorn looked at his companion, then back at me. Then both of them burst into loud, mocking laughter. I would be the first to admit that bandaged and without our barding we didn’t cut very imposing figures, but I still struggled not to roll my eyes. The two of them carried on well past the point of credibility, and it was clear they were trying to literally laugh us off. I didn’t budge, and they became somber when they realized I wasn’t leaving that quickly.

“You actually believe that you and your companion have something to offer the Guild?” the blonde-maned one asked. “You... *do* know who we are, right?” He turned and showed off his uniform. I saw his symbol of office thrown into sharp relief: the head of an alicorn with wings curved high above its head, embracing a six-pointed star surrounded by five smaller ones. The historians say it was the cutie mark of Twilight Sparkle, the greatest and most powerful wizard who ever lived. I could only imagine

what she might think of her symbol being used purely for power and monetary gain.

“We’re well aware of that,” I said. “But we’re still offering. Surely passports are not that valuable to the Guild? We’re asking for a one way trip, in exchange for a small service.”

The blonde unicorn was about to brush us off when his smaller, grey-furred companion raised a hoof.

“Hold on, now,” he said. “We’re in this area on business, right? We could use the help, surely...”

The other stallion glanced at him and the two turned away to confer in low voices before turning back to us.

“Be back here in an hour,” they said. “We will tell you our decision then.”

Sunny Side and I turned to head back to our little hideaway in the side tunnel, avoiding the others. Being seen talking to the Guild could be dangerous for some ponies. I settled back down to rest my weary bones while Sunny pondered our strategy.

“I hate this idea.”

“It’s the best shot we have of getting to Bucklyn quickly.”

“What if we’re sent on some stupid errand way over in Marestra?”

“We told them we want to get to Bucklyn. They’ll send us on a job to or near it.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then I hope you don’t mind sharing cells in debtor prison. And I’m not sleeping on the floor.”

Sunny sighed and followed me back to the docks when an hour had passed. The old beggar was still there, but he had the dignity not to ask for

money a second or third time. That didn't stop me from guiltily trying to avoid his sad, despondent gaze. My barding still gave me trouble; after several failed attempts to attach it properly I just hanged it loosely around my shoulders. I could do nothing but hope eventually I'd be able to grin and bear the pain of having it constrict my already aching ribs. Though I had no doubt that the doctor's magic was doing its job, I wished dearly to be back into prime fighting condition for the trip to Bucklyn.

Fortunately, my doubts were somewhat baseless, as the unicorns greeted us cordially with a job that wouldn't be too troublesome.

"We just need you to deliver payment to a stalker who managed to collect an interesting artifact for us," the one with the blonde mane explained. "He lives not far from here, but we've some business to take care of ourselves in Draft."

"You'd give us passports simply to give a pony his payment?" I asked. "What's to stop us from running away with it?"

"We have our ways," the grey unicorn said with a sly smile. "We aren't *the* only remaining ponies with significant magical power in all of Equestria and perhaps the *world* for nothing. Rest assured, if you don't complete the job, not only will you not get any goods you'd abscond with, but we will know, and by extension, the Guild will know. And that, my young friend, would be a very, very bad thing for you."

"Doubtless," I murmured.

"It's still an awful lot of trust you're giving us," Sunny grumped, but the blonde stallion only chuckled.

"Would you rather we said no and left you sitting around here with nothing to show for your injuries? We can clearly see you're capable of handling yourselves, or at the very least getting out of trouble alive. That barding, the ammunition... you wouldn't have those things if you couldn't at least take two steps outside without dying. Here, as a show of good faith, take this."

He levitated out a large bottle and held it up to us.

“Extra strength healing potion,” he explained. “Concentrated spells guaranteed to interface properly with healing bandages and shockers alike and provide that extra boost any injured pony needs. Take it, free of charge. It’s hardly worth anything to me right now.”

I had to admit I was growing apprehensive. But to turn down something like that in my state would be senseless. I supposed it was too much to ask for them to hoof my medical bills as well, and didn’t ask. They were already providing two expensive services for a relatively inconsequential job. I could see the blonde unicorn’s easy-going smile, and knew that this was how they buttered up future customers, spread good feelings among the masses. If I took the healing potion and agreed that I trusted them and was willing to take from their stockpiles, then that meant I too would owe them. Next thing you knew, you were knee-deep in debt, your station depended on the Guild to survive, and your leaders were thinking of conquering the Metro with all their shiny magical equipment. It was a dangerous game the Guild played, and one they had mastered. It wasn’t any wonder there were rumors they had close ties with the Celestian Monarchy.

In spite of knowing such things, I had to get to Bucklyn. The Dark Ones loomed large in my mind, their shadowy wings covering my doubts with fear. The lives in my home station, the entire Metro, took precedence right now. I nodded and took the potion in my front hooves, guzzling down a large gulp before giving it to Sunny. He too took a long draught and hid the rest under his wing.

“You should both be ready to travel at least, in a couple hours’ time,” the unicorn said with a winning smile. “The Guild helps those who help it. So, then, do we have a deal?”

“We... do,” I said in a voice barely audible above the milling ponies around us. The unicorn gladly floated two passports and the payment package into my saddlebag, along with directions to the stalker base located not far away. It was in a remote section of the Metro, in the blank spaces between Draft and the Eastern Stations. It wasn’t too dangerous to get to, but one could never be too careful in the Metro. And with that our path was laid out. We waited until the healing potion had taken effect, and to my surprise it did indeed work wonders. I could *feel* my black eye starting to recede; it was an incredibly alien sensation. With the magic at

work on full power, I could slip on my barding once more. I'd just had a taste of what the Guild gave to those stations that enslaved their interests to the Guild's. Many of those without Guild services had to make do with hand-me-downs and chemical supplements to take care of injuries.

The doctor hadn't come back to harass us again, but I had to kick myself for not thinking he'd literally have an eye on us. A guard began following us as we left the market area and went into the eastern section of Draft, which housed a small bar and workshop area. There were many doorways that led to pointless side tunnels and warrens where ponies crowded into whatever private spaces they could find; this was one of the few blessings that the over-enthusiastic construction of the Metro gave us. I noticed the guard easily; he was making no effort to hide himself, hoping to intimidate us by his mere presence. I kept walking. Sunny stayed dutifully beside me. The workers didn't look up from their benches, the bartender didn't even give us a glance. I wondered if they thought we were stalkers, tramping through their station laden down with weapons and armor. I felt the guard's eyes on the back of my neck. We were heading towards the small side gate of Draft on its eastern border, which was a small but reinforced door that led to a catwalk down into a tunnel used by nothing but stalkers and mutants. The guard was getting closer with every step we took towards the door.

Eventually we came to the darker, less-used area of the station where the gate was located. We had taken a couple of turns out of sight of the others into the cramped maze of side rooms and storehouses; the guard could stab us both in the back for trying to escape our debt and nopony would be the wiser.

"Stop!" I heard the guard shout. I broke into a sweat and felt Sunny tense up beside me. The guard was just around a corner behind us, and it was clear he meant to keep us from leaving. Fortunately he wasn't smart enough to go back and get more help, but that meant we had to lose him. We turned another corner and hurried our pace into a long straight hall, dodging into a store room just as the guard shined his light down the corridor.

"Stop!" he said again, fruitlessly. "You are ordered to come back with me to the main market area!"

Sunny and I took cover behind a large stand of empty crates, waiting for him to pass by. Though it would doubtlessly be easier to simply knock him over the head, I didn't want to resort to that. I was already cheating a doctor who had saved my life (albeit reluctantly) and leaving my family and friends to think I was dead for the time being; I wasn't quite ready to add assault to the list if I could help it. Sunny seemed tense and quivered like a leaf. His injured wing must already have been torture for the poor pegasus, and this further excitement just added to his stress. I pressed up against him and gave him a look that helped to silence his shivers for the moment. We could only hope that his wing would be useable again soon. Hiding in that dark corner, it suddenly struck me that he had risked not just his life, but his mental well-being to save me. I had to be more deserving of that kind of trust. I'd get him out of this safely myself if I had to.

"Come out!" the guard demanded. He was just outside our door. "Damn it, you're just making things worse for yourself! I'll come back here and bring down the whole militia if I have to!"

His shouting might attract attention, and as the seconds ticked on I felt myself start to grow a little more focused, a little more tense. If he went ahead to alert the gate guards, we'd never get through. I'd fail the mission. The Rangers would never be warned. The Dark Ones would sweep in and destroy my home before any help could even be mustered.

"I'm giving you five seconds to *come out!*"

Could I do it? Could I hurt a fellow pony now to save more in the future? I didn't have the guts to kill him, I knew that. But I had to do *something*.

"Five!"

I needed to be strong, for Sunny, for my father.

"Four!"

His hoof scuffed on the ground as he started to move. I'd lose my chance if I didn't act *now*.

"Hell with this... time's up!"

Don't think! Act! *Now!*

I burst out of my hiding place, grabbed the door handle, and flung open the door in blur of movement. As I spun in place, I saw the guard turn in slow-motion, eyes narrowing, jaw dropping as he began to jump, startled. My hind legs shot out, and I felt the sharp impact of my hooves smashing into his helmet. He staggered into the far wall, blinked owlshly. He didn't react quick enough to stop me from flinging off his helmet, nor to stop me from smashing my front hoof into his temple. He slumped, dazed, eyes rolling in their sockets. My ribs were aching in protest, my heart hammered in my chest. Every breath felt forced, weighty. I could hear blood rushing in my ears. Sunny stood wide-eyed behind me, jaw slack. I found it hard to believe myself. Had I really just *done* that?

"Uhh..." the guard groaned. I stared at him, almost in shock. I'd just seriously hurt a pony for the first time in my life.

"Lock..." I heard Sunny gasp, snapping me out of my reverie. "Holy crap, you *decked* that guy."

"Um... uh... yes, I... guess I did," I murmured, licking dry lips with a cardboard tongue. There was *definitely* no turning back now. The guard was still twitching on the floor, but he'd be up and about again soon.

"Hurry!" I hissed, and we were on our way once again. I hoped the gate guards hadn't heard the confusion.

That proved to be a baseless worry, as the gate was lightly guarded. The only things standing between Draft and the outside world were the gate itself, a console to control magical traps and alarms, and a single sleeping unicorn guardpony. He was slouched on a bench, but wasn't sitting like a normal pony. He had perched himself upright, hind legs hanging over the edge, front hooves crossed over his belly, chin resting against his chest. He was snoring up a storm, and his paunch was exaggerated by his odd position. It would've been comical if my mind wasn't still racing over the fact that I'd just viciously bucked a pony in the face. *Twice.*

Unicorns didn't normally need to be present to open up an enchanted doorway. Passports made it easy for a pony to simply show up, identify themselves, and then walk on through, protected by said passports. If a pony had one it was usually enough to skip most of the background checks and cargo sweeps that were often made when one station's ponies entered another. We, of course, were planning to skip the identifying part. Passports were usually crafted to work only once or twice before needing a unicorn's attention again, and were created to work with specific doorways or station entrances. It should be easy.

Now if I could just figure out how to work it. I tiptoed up to the console and tapped a key to activate it. The magical radar inside beeped quietly, but the slumbering unicorn only grumbled and flopped onto his side. There was a small slot next to the console, which I presumed was for the passports. I pressed mine into it, and the console gave off a loud buzz before I pressed Sunny's into it as well.

The unicorn began to stir from his sleep, snorting as his hooves pedaled through the air.

"Ah! Who's... who's...?" he asked, and found Sunny's smiling face greeting him. He had his passport in his mouth.

"No need to worry, sir!" he said. "We've got passports. From the Guild, see?"

"Uh... huh?" asked the unicorn, and passed over it with his magic. He seemed satisfied, since he gave Sunny a curt nod. "Yeah, that checks out. Fine. Just don't scare me like that again, by Celestia!"

"Sorry about that," Sunny apologized as I pushed open the door. "We won't trouble you any longer."

The unicorn was distracted by incoherent shouting somewhere farther back. The guard must have finally come to his senses. It kept him busy long enough for me and Sunny to slip through the door and slam it shut again, charging down a stairwell that hugged the wall. The door came out to a wide tunnel that used to be one of Draft's main cargo tunnels until trade from the east tapered off; it'd been shut to all but vagrants and stalkers for some time now.

We thundered down the rickety stairway, the metal clanging under our hooves as we charged away from Draft station. Though my ribs flared up again and my injured leg complained awfully, I fought through the pain, determined not to be slowed down. I didn't look back, even as Sunny charged by, eyes wide. I heard the door clang open, and the tunnel reverberated with a gunshot. A breath of air brushed my mane, and the wall next to me burst into shrapnel that bounced off my barding. Before another shot could be taken, we'd turned the corner and disappeared into the shadows of the Metro.

Chapter 5

"Is it always so... dark?"

The tunnel we found ourselves in hadn't been looked at or maintained in years. We slogged through ankle deep sludge, formed by mud seeping through the floor. The smell of decay clogged our noses. On the walls sat bioluminescent glowplants that opened their leaves as we passed, revealing the highly reactive glowing stems inside that sucked up what little carbon dioxide we gave off and added to the meager light from our headlamps. I'd found a small spare in my saddlebags that all militia were issued. It cast little more than a small circle of light which needed constant replenishment from my charger, much to my chagrin. Ponyopolis' scientists told us our eyes had adapted better to the dim conditions of the Metro, but one always needed *some* light to be able to see. And I knew we were still easy prey for a mutant on the hunt no matter how good our eyes got. Sunny Side didn't adjust quite so easily. I heard the nervousness in his voice as he spoke.

"Well, we're definitely not going back there. Ever."

"I know, Sunny Side."

"I mean I was expecting mutants and other things like that. But now we're practically fugitives! From *other ponies!*"

"Sunny Side, take a deep breath."

"I mean did you see that? They shot at us! They were gonna kill us over a few bullets! First thing I'm telling Cinder when I get back, give those bastards a flick of his mane and tell them to shove off. No alliance is worth this."

"Sunny, please, we need to be quieter now."

"... Sorry... I wish I could fly again..."

"I know, Sunny Side. Soon, I hope."

As we tramped through the mud and collected dirty water I found myself extremely thankful that our barding included shoes for our hooves. If I touched the tepid water with my injured leg I'd get an infection alarmingly quick, and it took specialized care and magical spells to deal with advanced cases.

As we walked, I noticed the mostly intact bundles of pipes that snaked overhead. They were empty of course, hollow and useless. But they still carried sounds quite easily, as I noticed when a low, metallic groan came echoing down the length of one bundle, before it rose suddenly in pitch to a drawn out squeal. It made my fur stand on end.

"Talking pipes," Sunny Side whispered. "You get those sometimes... standing on guard in the outer checkpoints... always, *always* when everything else is quiet, you hear the damn things. Anything can cause it, really... wind, random vibrations... mutants crawling along the walls."

A loud shriek and a distant splash boomed through the tight spaces. One of the pipes farther down the line must have come loose and fallen. It startled me, but Sunny jumped, vainly flapping his uninjured wing and looking the worse for wear when he couldn't get into the air. I heard him curse and pick up the pace. The sooner we got this job done, the sooner we could get to Bucklyn and, hopefully, a bit of safety and shelter.

Another loud groan came booming down the tunnel. We paused, thinking it to be a mutant. But nothing came to attack us, and we kept walking.

"There're ghost stories about-" Sunny began. I silenced him with a sharp look over my shoulder.

"*Really* not the time for that sort of thing," I said, and he agreed because he clamped his jaws shut.

"So why do you think the Guild was so willing to help us?" Sunny asked after a few more minutes had passed, purely for the conversation.

“They probably hope we’re stupid,” I replied. “They want to gain our loyalty with gifts and golden promises and then we become their two-bit lackeys. I didn’t like them. But at least we have passports now.”

“Yeah, assuming they don’t turn them off or something when they find out we’re debt dodgers,” Sunny mumbled, and then brightened all of a sudden, prancing to catch up with me. “It’s kind of exciting, actually! I’d been hoping to find a way to stick it to those greedy bastards in Draft. Ugh, to think we have to actually be allies with those ponies...”

“There were many unfortunates living there...” I mumbled thoughtfully. How many ponies still suffered under petty, greedy stations like Draft or the Lunar Republic? How many more would remain in suffering even if we did defeat the Dark Ones? All I’d be doing by killing them was ensuring our survival. I had to believe that was worth it.

“Yeah...” Sunny agreed, his mood dampening again. “How’re your ribs?”

“Not well. But I could be worse,” I said. So far I’d been gritting my teeth against the constant aches and pains my body gave me. But no matter how bad I got, Sunny had me beat. When was the last time he’d really flown? I elected to keep talking to keep his mind off it.

“We’ll hit an old rail system soon,” I said, tugging out my map. It’d been magically enchanted to be waterproof, so I had no qualms with setting it down on a small patch of damp earth. “A main line. Where real trains used to go.”

“I wonder what it was like,” Sunny murmured, looking over my shoulder. “To have those luxuries.”

“I have a few pictures of trains,” I recalled. “Beautiful things they were... shining silver snakes over the land. Big caterpillars in the tunnels. Some of them didn’t even need ponies to be pulled... the engines were enough. Magic propelled most of them.”

“Wow,” Sunny gasped, wondering. “Not like what you see down here, then,” he added in a wry tone. We’d just rounded a corner and come across the utter ruin of an old subway train. By its make it had run by the power of

ponies pulling it, helped along with a few spells to lessen the inertia. No sense in making up fancy engines to yank a train a few hundred yards at most. This train still stood upright; it must have been shut down shortly before or after the bombs fell. The ponies inside were forced to march into the tunnels that would be home for the rest of their lives. The cars remained on the rails, rusting away to nothing. Open doors gaped like maws waiting to receive ponies that would never ride again. Still it sat, dutifully occupying the tunnels it hoped would be filled with the clatter of travelers.

“Sad,” I whispered as we passed it by. “To see such a mechanical wonder in ruins.”

“Mood’s kinda ruined by all the bodies...” Sunny murmured. The corpse of a yellow earth pony hung gruesomely before me. I froze, but soon realized that if mutants were about they’d be upon us already. I approached the body with quickly evaporating caution. This pony had been dead for a while. The blood had dried to a crispy black color, and there was a nauseating stench issuing from the gory wounds on his neck. Peeking through the door I saw another body collapsed over a row of seats. A cerberus, mangled from gunfire and smelling foul. My stomach clenched.

“Poor things... killed each other and nothing to show for it.” I looked over the pony’s corpse and found nothing; his body had been stripped of everything short of his ragged underclothes. Even his gun had been dismantled for useful parts. Nothing went to waste in the Metro.

“At least it hasn’t attracted scavengers,” Sunny said as he hopped up into the train car with me. Together we moved down the line, hopping between cars. I hoped to find something useful, even if it was just a few spare parts somepony had left behind in case we needed it. As we walked, I wondered at the empty seats and the manner in which they’d have been used in happier times. Stalliongrad had been a large, crowded city, and even these short, small metro trains were built with comfort and aesthetics in mind. I could still see the faded, decorative paint, the elegant wood embellishments. Magical charms had protected most of the trains from wear and tear even years after they stopped working. Well carved loops and swirls scored the molding, giving the train an air of sophistication and old world charm. Even in the midst of modern technology, ponies enjoyed a rustic feel in their creations. I tried to imagine ponies sitting, talking, reading

newspapers on their way to work. Never knowing or thinking that a routine train ride would one day take them into a world of horror and despair. They must have taken so many things for granted... or perhaps we simply thought they did.

This silent testament to the old world left me in a melancholy and haunted mood. Like the earth pony who died at the claws of the cerberus, the train was a masterwork that took years to build and moments to destroy. That we ponies were even capable of such a feat still surprised me. Alas, there was nothing else inside except another cerberus in the final car, which had been killed in a very peculiar fashion.

"Metal arrows?" I wondered. The body had been struck by what appeared to be sharpened rods of metal, shaped to be aerodynamic and flight worthy. Two of them remained in the diseased, mottled flesh, buried in the sturdy rib cage. There were other marks on the cerberus' body where three more had struck home and then been removed for later use.

"Fired from a Wonderbolt, I'd bet," Sunny Side postulated. "Those things are deadly in close quarters, you know."

"The Wonderbolt... greatest killing weapon of thieves and murderers in Equestria," I mused, hopping over the cerberus and out the back of the train. I knew little of the real life Wonderbolts, who carried on the tradition of grand aerial acrobatics before their abrupt end in the war. But like Twilight Sparkle, their name was now used to describe a much more ominous item. The Wonderbolt was a made from scratch pneumatic weapon that was a favorite of stalkers and bandits for its silence and relative ease of construction. It had a reputation as a weapon of assassins and skulking, dark-minded ponies because of its primitive design and the cruel looking barbed bolts it used for ammunition. Just to be on the safe side, I tacked up and lowered the rein of my trusty Mule. Signs of other, dangerous ponies couldn't be ignored. Sunny followed suit, and for a time we could believe that were capable of defending ourselves. I doubted that in our current state we'd be able to fight off anything more than an absent-minded foal. My injured leg was beginning to ache and burn something awful despite how much I avoided putting weight on it. My ribs too complained endlessly, and I found that I had to take several tense stops to catch my breath. Sunny Side's injuries didn't debilitate him so much, simply because he

didn't need to use his wings, and because he'd only received a good scratching from thumper claws.

Injuries or no we continued down the tunnel, passing under the metal river of pipes that flowed over our heads. Our headlights stood between us and total darkness, and we battled to keep them charged. Fortunately for a good hour or so we encountered little more than rats, the garbage they chewed on, and strange, unearthly noises from the depths of the Metro. Long, deep grinds and groans accompanied by sharp squeals and metallic shrieks. Those noises haunted me for quite some time, and I imagined them to be everything from giant demon mutants that wanted to eat our souls to horrifying distortions of reality that would gobble up our sanity. For Sunny Side's sake, I didn't give voice to those irrational fears. The Metro had a strange mythology that had built around it in the years we'd inhabited it, as if it'd become a world unto itself, apart from Equestria and outside the reach of both magic and scientific study. It was a black place to be sure, but I wasn't quite ready to begin ascribing ghostly, horrible elements to it. The real world, with its twisted magic anomalies and once caring ponies who now murdered each other over scraps of clothing was horrible enough.

"Are we going the right way?" Sunny asked. I reached for my saddlebag and pulled out the map, noting that since this tunnel had next to no adjoining ones, there was no doubt that we were going the right direction.

"Just one left turn up ahead, at the door with a red light above it on the south wall," I explained. "Then it's into some smaller side tunnels that lead to the old E line that used to link Bucklyn and the Appleton plantations. After that a bridge, and... that's where the stalker usually met Guild reps."

"Ugh, damn it..." Sunny Side groaned. "Just what I need. More small spaces."

There was more to it than that. We'd only just reached the door with the light over it when we paused to look over another scene of death. Several mutants, their bodies charred beyond recognition, lay in front of the door. They hadn't been killed by conventional weaponry, but I could see marks in the walls where magical glyphs had been triggered, unleashing magical energy that destroyed the creatures that apparently had tried to

claw open the door. It was cracked open just a smidge, probably opened soon after the beasts had been killed.

“Well that’s strange,” Sunny remarked. “It looks like they weren’t killed too long ago.”

“They turned off the security for us,” I responded, and boldly stepped over the corpses. They were still warm. But we had a job to do, and I intended to see it done. There were no bandits here we’d been warned of. The stalkers used these tunnels more than them, and they had no love of bandits. Of course, stalkers themselves could turn bandit just as easily.

We found ourselves in the tangle of side tunnels between main Metro lines that connected maintenance rooms and other small, out of the way areas. Many rooms and passages in these places were old and useless, serving little to no purpose other than to confuse and disorient a pony. That and hide the skeletons of those who had died and been devoured by scavengers down here. Dying alone in the Metro meant no funerals and no chance of an excursion sent to look for your body. The dangers were simply too great. The mutants would consume it, or the body itself would be lost to the tunnels. The only reason one had to pay attention to a corpse was the potentially useful salvage they could claim off it.

These tunnels, however, looked like they were rarely if ever tread by ponies or mutants. Radioactive moss grew from the walls, feeding off the cold, moist atmosphere, and the tight passages were choked in some areas by cobwebs (and sometimes still used spider webs). The exposed pipes were rusted and could break open with a swift kick of the hoof, revealing nothing but empty pipe inside. Nothing lived here. Nothing moved here. It was the perfect hiding spot for a lonesome stalker who preferred his own company.

The loud growl that echoed behind us soon disproved that. It was a low, rolling sound, the kind a mutant gave in warning to trespassers to stay away... or as a signal to its fellows that it had found prey.

“Damn! Where the hell are they all coming from here?” Sunny whispered. We picked up the pace and darted through the tight halls in as straight a line as we could. Moving quietly was pointless; the dogs could track us by scent. I followed the old, faded signs that pointed the way to the

E Line through the twisting tunnels, going past rooms full of empty, rotting crates and rusty barrels. I hadn't the time or the desire to figure out what they'd been used for in better times now. A skeleton occupied one room, providing nutrition for a colony of glowing lichens that had attached themselves to the bones. The pony's femur was being gnawed on by a drake, a small, mutated lizard. They were scavengers, and it paid us no heed as we passed by. The grisly sight barely gave me pause. I had no time to ponder the fate of other ponies when our lives were in danger. Our geiger counters clicked constantly in this area, and the growls of mutants were close by. I cursed my injuries with every breath. Here and there other mutant bodies, still cerberus corpses, lay dead, but these were fresher than the ones we'd encountered on the train. I could see they'd been killed in much the same way as before: large puncture wounds where metal bolts had been ripped back out of the flesh.

We then came to a long, straight tunnel leading up to a large doorway, and all over the walls were the marks of combat. Bullet holes and magical scoring alongside metal bolts buried in the concrete went all the way up to the doorway like a storybook of destruction. Spent casings littered the floor. The control panel for the door had been blown up by some very determined and angry pony, leaving it permanently open. Thank Celestia for small blessings.

We came out into a scene of quiet devastation. The room was several train cars long, and had once had catwalks stretching across the length of the ceiling. These had crashed to the ground long ago, and the crane that used to lift up rail cars joined them. The great machine was nothing more than twisted wreckage that had rusted away long ago. But what disheartened me most was seeing most of the ceiling had collapsed along with the whole mess, and many tons of rock and earth. The depot had been cut in half by the wreckage. There was no choice but to backtrack to the rear entrance of the pit stop. That offered no clear path either; the destruction extended into the main tunnel. A massive quake or bomb had sent the ceiling crashing down and the earth flooded in. E Line was blocked off.

"Shit," said Sunny, and I was inclined to agree. We had no time to follow E line back northeast and find an alternate route, and that was even if cerberus weren't on our tails. There had to be a way...

“There!” I said, pointing at the mountain of earth and concrete. The rear of a train jutted out of the wreckage. It had been shoved into the wall by the landslide. I hobbled forward to investigate, clicking my charger several times to increase the output from my meager headlight. With a little help from Sunny I hopped up on my hind legs to peer through the back door. What luck! The inside of the train was only partially filled with dirt, and I could see it stretch beyond the debris pile to the rest of the E Line. This tiny passage choked with junk would be our way through... we just had to pry open the door, do a little digging, and-

“They’re here!”

I whirled around and saw a three headed cerberus round the corner out of the pit stop. Pale yellow eyes rolled in their sockets and stopped on us. Its central head dipped low as scabbed lips peeled back to reveal a growl full of misshapen teeth. The other two heads wobbled aimlessly, twitching and spasming. The beast gave out two sharp, short barks before Sunny’s war rein roared in reply, splitting its brain case open. It was too short a distance to effectively use his saddle-mounted long barrels, which I prayed wouldn’t give us trouble in the train car.

“Damn.” I grabbed the door handle as best as I could and pulled. My leg cramped in response, and I could feel the teeth of the thumper tearing into me once again. The door wobbled, but didn’t budge. I braced myself as best I could and shoved one side with my uninjured hoof, feeling it gave way just slightly with a loud squeal of metal on metal. I heard Sunny’s gun chatter again as more dogs spilled out of the pit stop, barking and growling, uncertain of the great gun that pummeled their numbers. They stayed back, unwilling to go forward but strangely unable to retreat. Another shove and another squeak forced the door open just barely. I reared back, shoved again, got another inch.

“Hurry, Lockbox!” Sunny shouted, fumbling as he reloaded. I heard a loud, warbling snarl as all the noise began to attract the attention of something else. Something big. The dogs whimpered. I focused all my attention on the door, and at last was able to squeeze my way in just enough to brace myself against both sides. My back against one and my hind legs on the other, I reached deep down and summoned my considerable earth pony might. The doors creaked like an old pony that refused to wake.

“Lockbox!” Sunny shouted, fearful. “Something’s coming!” I looked back and saw strange lights flashing farther down the tunnel, casting the shadows of some four-legged beast on the walls. The guttural snarl came again. The dogs howled.

“Come on... now, damn it!” I growled at the doors, which gave way at last with a sudden jerk that made me flop to the ground, banging my head on the side of a pole. It was supposed to help ponies keep their balance when they couldn’t find a seat, and now punished me for falling. How oddly appropriate. Sunny scrambled in after me, almost making me break my ribs all over again as he crawled over my limp form. I heard his saddle guns scraping the sides of the train car. It was tilted at an awkward angle, forcing us to constantly re-adjust the way we stood.

“Get up!” he snapped. I felt his teeth latch onto my barding and jerk me to my hooves. Growls and snarls were behind me. I instinctively bucked backwards and felt my hooves connect with something, flesh and bone giving way. There was a whimper and a yelp, and then a loud, piercing growl as the lights got closer. I could hear the hum of electricity. The cerberus were in a panic, barking and baying. We weren’t even halfway through the car. Sunny scrambled over a pile of loose earth that had flooded in through one of the windows, struggling with his heavy guns. I jumped forward, ramming my head into his flanks and shoved him through. He rolled down to the ground with an indignant “oof!”

“Dig! Dig if you have to, damn it, just go!” I shouted, and looked over my shoulder.

The dogs were shying away from one of the strangest beings I’d ever seen in my life. A gaunt, four-legged cat-like creature came around the corner. This thing was responsible for the lights I saw. The light seemed to emanate from the creature’s body, rising and falling in intensity as regular intervals like some strange radio signal. I could see the silhouettes of organs and bones within the thing. It had no eyes that I could see. Instead, its face was covered in thick bushes of whiskers, many of which seemed to be fleshy tendrils that waggled of their own accord as the creature swept its wide, boxy jaws across the ground. Sparks of electrical energy jumped between the fleshy whiskers and the ground, and I could see the cerberus dancing on their paws with each loud spark. From the creature’s thin

shoulders sprouted two long tentacles that waved about like grotesque tree trunks, and at their ends were glowing pods that crackled with energy. As I watched, one of the tentacles lashed out and struck a whimpering cerberus dead between the shoulders. There was a ghastly noise like an explosion and a bright flash of light. The cerberus fell dead without so much as a twitch.

That was all I needed to see before I turned tail and followed Sunny through the train car. It was painfully slow going, as we were forced to navigate an obstacle course of turned over seats and discarded furniture. Sunny blazed a trail through the wreck, kicking aside errant boxes and the body of a dead drake. I could see light begin to fill up the enclosed space from behind. There was a tingling feeling on my haunches, like the buzz of electricity. I spun without thinking, taking hold of the Mule's trigger and letting loose a burst of gunfire into a maelstrom of streaming tentacles and blazing magical energy.

The creature had been looking inside and met the full fury of my bullets. It flared like a new sun and *roared*, tendrils flailing as it recoiled from my attack. My eyes were almost blinded by the intensity of pure light that assaulted my senses. Dazed, I staggered backwards. I couldn't see. I couldn't see. Run. Run run run run! There was another flash, but of pain. One, two, three times I rammed my face into a wall or piece of furniture as I stumbled through the confined space tripping over mounds of dirt, until I felt Sunny's leg wrap around my neck and pull me forward. The train cars shuddered as the thing's powerful tentacles flailed inside the small spaces, rending metal asunder and tearing the cars' innards apart. Showers of dirt fell as windows burst. The hill of debris was about to come crashing down. Sunny and I booked it over the uneven floor, hooves scrabbling for purchase as our insides curdled with fear. Either that or we were being constantly electrocuted by the thing's arcane abilities.

Somehow we kept out of reach of those horrible appendages. Somehow we stayed just far enough ahead to stay alive. Our ears rang with the monster's enraged shrieks as we tumbled out of a side door, rolling onto the tunnel platform into the wall with a thud. I cried like a colt as one of Sunny's guns dug into my sore ribs. I staggered upright and winced at our condition. All of our hooves were burned and our manes puffed out in every direction, frazzled beyond description. No time to laugh, the creature was clawing its way inside the train cars too, grasping with grotesque talons.

And then the train cars gave way. There was a huge rush of noise like a flood heard from a distance. The cars toppled over, driven by a moving mountain of dirt, the big windows staring at us like a looming monster eager to crush us. In a moment of clarity I snatched Sunny and rolled *towards* the train, ignoring his feeble protests. It was drowned out by noise, anyway. We tumbled off the platform and heard a uniform *crash* as the tops of the train cars tilted and struck the wall, creating a new small tunnel between the platform and the wheels, with the side of the train acting as the roof. It was an incredibly tight fit. At last, Sunny detached one of his saddle guns and dragged it alongside him as we crawled and wriggled for our lives. Dirt continued to shift and pile up around us, and I feared we'd be buried alive. Thankfully I could see the end up ahead. More loose earth draped itself over the exit in a grim curtain, mocking that small hope. Flopping towards it like a dying fish I literally punched the developing pile out of the way, forcing a path out. To survive what I had so far only to be killed by a pile of dirt was too unfair to contemplate. I squirmed through the small space and dropped onto my stomach as Sunny pulled himself alongside me. He'd grabbed my tail on the way out and tagged along for the ride. We watched as the train cars filled up with more dirt, sealing the passage for good this time. The creature's evil lights were nowhere to be found, and I couldn't tell if the loud groans I heard were the tunnels or the beast mourning a lost meal.

Sunny and I looked at each other. We were caked with dirt and our still healing injuries throbbed with agonizing pain. My eyes were moist with tears, and I only just now thought about how I'd never been so utterly terrified in my life. Several times now I'd almost died, and I wasn't even halfway done with my task. Soon there was only the sound of our labored breathing as we lay shocked (no pun intended) by our close escape. Neither of us had been in quite such a situation before, and getting out alive was a feat in itself.

I'd heard many stories of ponies who survived such terrible things laughing, or hugging, or crying. Not so for us. We simply lay back, stared at the ceiling and breathed together. Every breath we took reassured us that we'd just faced one of the Metro's unknown horrors and made it out intact.

When my heart stopped jackhammering my ribs I turned over and stood up, wobbling on unsteady hooves that sizzled with pain. Sunny and I

jabbed ourselves with a shocker each and took the last draughts of the healing potion. It wasn't much, but it soothed our pain enough to stand. I plodded onward, keeping my gaze on the immediate space in front of me. Just one step in front of the other. We still had a job to complete.

The tunnel soon widened, and we found ourselves in a huge, cavernous area that held a thin bridge choked with overturned train cars and fallen concrete. It stretched precariously over brackish, lambent water that bubbled and steamed, casting an eerie glow over the walls. I could hear my Geiger counter clicking wildly.

"That can't be healthy to drink," Sunny remarked. I agreed. We began to make our way across the bridge, moving at a leisurely pace. We didn't feel like running for our lives until we had to, and our hooves still tingled. I looked across the cavern and saw our bridge ran parallel to another. Thin, rusted catwalks still bridged a gap that only pegasi could fly or unicorns could teleport across. Many of them looked ready to fall just from being looked at, and anyway we had to stay on the E line.

I heard a mournful roar echo through the wide cavern. My shoulders sagged when the sound of slithering reached my ears. Nothing was ever easy, was it? Sunny and I readied our guns and waited in the center of the bridge for the next inevitable attack.

A flash of light caught my attention. For a moment I wondered if the tentacle monstrosity had tracked us down again, when suddenly a unicorn in full barding and levitating three weapons at once stepped out from behind a pile of rubble on the other bridge. Their face was covered by a gas mask, but I could see a strikingly aquamarine mane and tail streaked with blue. Two assault rifles and what I recognized as a volt driver hovered near their head, trained at us.

"Are you friends?" they asked, their voice magically enhanced to boom across the distance. It was definitely a mare's voice. "I doubt it. Are you from the Guild of Magic?"

Sunny and I looked at each other. Another roar rose from under our bridge.

"Now!" demanded the strange mare.

“... What if we are?” I chanced.

Before she could answer, the unicorn jumped back as a metal bolt zipped down from somewhere in the ceiling and struck the ground at her hooves.

“Lucyyyy!” a new, male voice crowed. “I’m hooome!”

“Damn it!” the mare shouted back as she dodged into cover. “I want what’s mine! You’re *all* gonna die here!” Her horn glowed brightly, flashing like an out of control lightbulb. It made my head spin until I raised a hoof to block the strange sight. What power could *that* be?

Sunny Side looked at me. I looked at Sunny Side. We both ran for it. The roar came back a third time, and up from under the bridge spilled an army of nightmares.

“Dropbears!” Sunny Side shouted, rearing up.

“What? Are you kidding?!” I shouted back. Dropbears used to be a myth in old Equestria. Even among hydras and cockatrices, nopony really believed in giant bears that literally dropped out of trees. Unfortunately for us, the horrors of magical radiation made that threat all too real. I couldn’t believe how bad our luck was. Of *course* our route would take us right over one of their hideous nests.

The ursine, pony sized creatures swarmed up over the edge of the bridge, locking on to us with foul, glowing eyes. Short, powerful limbs clawed their way towards us. There must have been a dozen or more. No time to think or even breathe. We just opened up with our guns and *ran*, fueled by fear to ignore our various aches and pains. Carving a path through the horde, we dodged through a hole in their numbers that was quickly filled by more. We passed another train car, and I looked up just in time to see a dropbear fall down from the ceiling of the cavernous tunnel, landing heavily on the car’s roof. It dented under the thing’s weight, and I ducked down low to avoid a paw the size of my head that swooped down. Its claws scraped over my helmet. Fortunately, the creatures weren’t particularly fast on their feet. They were ambush predators and could manage only a clumsy lope at top speed. But we were injured and

staggered and stumbled more than we ran. The ground behind us erupted as the tunnels rang with the sound of gunfire, and the electric eruptions from the volt driver. It fired metal pellets at incredible speeds using the power of electro-magnets. Hunter had brought home such a weapon several times, and I'd fawned over how "cool" it was as a colt. Now I was wishing fervently whoever invented it got stuck in a hole and died.

"You're all gonna die!" the mare screamed again. She couldn't get a good bead on us, as bolts kept raining down around her head from somewhere up above. Some she dodged, others she somehow deflected at the last moment with a telekinetic thrust. "I want what was promised to me!"

A dropbear hot on our heels was downed by a bolt from the ceiling. It dove in just under the shoulder and presumably hit something important because the dropbear dropped like a rock. Whoever was up there was a good shot.

Then somewhere above us the ceiling exploded, and the mare cackled manically. Her horn was wrapped up entirely in a blanket of magical energy. The rain of bolts stopped.

"How do you like that, you selfish bastard?!" she shouted, and resumed shooting at us. We weaved through the gap between two cars and stayed under cover on the other side. It was pelted by bullets and metal pellets the volt driver used as ammunition. Another dropbear tumbled down from the ceiling a few feet ahead of us. It recovered from its fall with terrifying swiftness, rearing up to claw at us before the mare's guns tore through its body and sent it crashing to the poisonous water below. We barely slowed down.

Until we came to a hole in the bridge, that is. It was far too wide for me to jump.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Sunny Side exclaimed, dancing on his hooves. I turned back and found three dropbears lumbering towards us. I held down the trigger on my Mule and my world was enveloped by noise and fire. I kept shooting until the Mule steamed and clicked, overheated and out of ammo. The three bears sprawled dead as I ripped the Mule from its holster and replaced it with my pistol. The creatures behind us were gone, but I

knew they lurked just under the surface of the bridge and on the ceiling above. I could hear their claws scraping and gouging the concrete.

Down below on the other side the catwalks and solid platforms were still intact. They jutted out just far enough to make an escape feasible...

"Sunny! Go!" I tore the bandages free from the pegasus' wing with a yank of my teeth.

"What?! What about you?"

"No time! Hurry! Use your wings; it's your only chance!"

I didn't give him another moment to argue and shoved him forward. He screamed indignantly as he pushed off the ledge, falling far too fast for my liking. He cursed all the way down. His wings fluttered, desperately trying to stabilize his landing at such a short distance. He wasn't going to make it. I'd killed my best friend. He wasn't going to...

He collapsed against the sharp edges of the lower platform with an audible gasp. His front hooves grabbed the ground in front of him as he tightened up, still flapping his wings to keep himself from falling backwards. I watched helplessly as he struggled to claw his way onto the ledge.

A dropbear swung down in front of him and reared up to deliver a killing blow. I could see Sunny Side's eyes from here. His pupils shrank from utter terror.

I don't know how I reacted quite as quickly as I did. But it happened. I could see the creature rising up, every twitch and flex of muscle. Saw every flap of Sunny's wings. Everything registered with me as it happened. I *knew* exactly what was going on, found all the circumstances as they changed and adjusted accordingly. I was in no rush. Like a machine the barrel of my pistol lowered, found the right target; I straightened and clenched my neck muscles. Three quick squeezes of the trigger later and the dropbear stumbled backwards, twitching in pain on the ground.

Sunny Side, with the assistance of his wings, scrambled onto the platform and turned back to me, his face a mask of fright mixed with

determination. His twin saddle guns thundered, and I could tell he was shooting at the dropbears coming at me from below.

In fact, one of them landed right next to me. It grunted as if annoyed I was there and whacked me with its broad shoulder. It only moved a few inches to the side. I went flying. My thin flak jacket did little to protect me from a hard impact with the side of a train car. My head should have been cracked in two, but my sturdy helmet made me feel only a sharp, jarring pain as opposed to a lethal, brain splitting one. Thank Celestia for small blessings.

“Ow.”

I craned my neck and sent my last three rounds into the dropbear's chest as it fell upon me. The beast grunted again and flopped onto its stomach, confused by its slow, painful death. And yet more began clawing their way up over the edge.

Another flash next to me, and the unicorn mare was suddenly right in front of me. Her horn flashed wildly and the same wave of nausea and dizziness as before overtook me.

“Give me. My. *Money*. You greedy Guild *bastard!*” she screeched in my face. Through the gasmask I saw vivid red eyes glaring at me, full of hate and entirely too much stress. I didn't answer her; I *couldn't*. The flashing light from her horn transfixed me even as I grew more desperate to look away. My mouth went dry. Time seemed to slow down, warping around me into a confused muddle. I felt my senses distorting, wavering, and my thoughts become more pliable. Give her all my money? Sure... sure, that seemed like a good idea. At the edge of my senses I heard Sunny Side shout something. The mare staggered as two bullets impacted with her side.

“-crazy bitch!” I heard Sunny Side finish as the brain-clogging dizziness suddenly passed. I fell back into the present, shivering as my body regained control of itself. I dragged my hooves over the ground as I went back to the edge of the gap, looking desperately for a way out. Sunny Side had regained the high ground and was preparing another shot until I heard a loud whooshing noise behind me. Sunny Side fell over backwards, his guns somehow just... *separating* from their harnesses.

Damn unicorns.

“Money *now!*” the mare yelled.

I reached for my saddlebags.

“Okay, okay!” I shouted back. “Your money’s here!” I struggled to open the latch. Even nosing open the flap was hard work. Her horn was flashing again, and I could see even the dropbears intimidated... or controlled... by the almost seizure-inducing light. They hung back at a safe distance, predatory gazes unfocused and without a target.

I nudged around until I felt the Guild’s package of bullets and tossed them out, one at a time. Two packs of three full magazines tied together, covered with magical runes which I presumed to be the Guild’s anti-theft system. It was a hefty sum. The mare recognized them too, as her eyes widened beyond their already ridiculous size.

“Finally!” she said, and the magazines were wrapped in the glow of unicorn magic. She floated them just in front of her face, turning them around and around to verify their authenticity. For a moment I wondered how she was still standing after having two rifle bullets lodged in her gut. She either had very good armor or her lunacy went deeper than I thought. Either way it was hard to think with her damned horn still sending me into mini-fits. I couldn’t even blink.

“I knew they’d see reason. You were probably bringing this to me, weren’t you? Not Sid. He doesn’t deserve it. Sorry I shot at you. Lost my temper, that’s all. Just gotta... get these open...”

What happened next, I had no idea. One moment the mare was magically fiddling with the Guild seals on the magazines. The next moment everything was flashing lights and noise and screaming. Lightning bolts of energy erupted from the bullets straight into the unicorn’s horn and lashed the ground near me. The dropbears wailed and ran. I curled up into as tight a ball as I could as thunder rolled and crashed into my ears, still hearing the terrible screaming at the edge of my senses. It was only after a few seconds that I realized the screaming was coming from both me and the mare. I was still morbidly hypnotized by the sight before me, unable to

close my eyes as much as I wanted to stop looking. The mare reared up on her hind legs, spasms and twitches wracking her body as she continued to scream and scream in unison with me. Magical energy continued to crash straight into her horn. Her entire body was enveloped with a piercing, burning light in what appeared to be some kind of magical overload. Random equipment went flying off her barding in bursts of lightning as her gasmask cracked, then burst open in a shower of plastic shards. I could see blood running out of her ruby-red eyes like tears, down the pale silver fur of her cheek. And she kept on screaming, no, *shrieking*.

And then with a bright flash of light and a clap of thunder, she was gone. Not exploded. More like vaporized. Just *gone*. It took me a few seconds to calm down enough to stop screaming at thin air, my voice trailing off into a strangled whimper when nothing insane and violent continued to happen. At last I felt free to blink, wetting my stinging, dry eyes. I blinked several times to make sure I wasn't seeing things. And I saw... nothing.

The place where the mare had once stood was nothing but a patch of blackened, charred concrete. There were two little circles where her hooves had been, but that was all the evidence she'd ever even existed. The dropbears were scuttling back to their hiding places, terrified by the sudden loss of that hypnotizing light and the freakshow that followed.

"... Is she dead?" I heard Sunny Side shout across the gap.

"One can only hope," said another voice next to me. "She always did have a habit of coming back like a bad dream."

"*Augh!*" I answered, almost collapsing off the edge as I stumbled backwards. I jammed a new magazine into my pistol, but the other male just stood there.

The earth pony that stood at my side was the wildest I'd ever seen. He was a thin-limbed dirty scoundrel, dressed in heavy, faded clothes. A wrinkled and dirty black vest covered in pockets was over his chest, worn over a thick jacket similarly endowed with harnesses and pockets. On his shoulders was emblazoned the old flag of Stalliongrad: he identified himself as a stalker openly. His saddlebags were thick with supplies. Over his back was slung a long barreled sniper rifle, and his war rein was occupied by the

very Wonderbolt that'd been raining down silent metal death on the dropbears and cerberus. The stallion's fur was the color of rust, and his mane was jet black and streaked with grime and dirt. Eyes like the grey skies of the surface looked me over lazily. He idly worked the pump on the Wonderbolt, bringing its air pressure back up to killing power.

"That was a sneaky plan with the exploding bullets and all," he said. His voice was a dull and quiet buzz in my ears. It sounded like a voice that was very easy to dismiss and forget.

"... Plan?" I ventured hesitantly. The stallion raised an eyebrow.

"I see," he whispered. "Come on, then. Let's get outta here. Dropbears always come back to the same nests."

"But... the bridge is destroyed."

The stallion grinned. It didn't reach his eyes, which were still lazy and disinterested.

"I'm very sneaky, my little pony."

He turned away and hurried to the edge. Before I could stop him he swung himself over and down. I hurried over to see him shimmying down a thin pipe with all the grace of a spider, landing on a small bundle of pipes that led over the water to the wall, where they joined other pipes that wandered up and down the walls. I watched in amazement as he scampered along the precarious, uneven surfaces like they were solid ground. He looked at me across the distance and gave another not-quite grin.

"Ponies, ponies, ponies. Always thinking you gotta be ponies," he said in his low buzzing voice. "Why not be a spider or a fly for a little bit? It'll help you get across here."

He slid down one of the pipe bundles and deftly leaped off, landing neatly but loudly on the catwalk under Sunny Side's part of the bridge. The pegasus eyed him with suspicion, but the other stallion just took out a rope from his pack which he tossed over to me.

“Hurry and tie that to the end of that train car. You can tie a knot, right?”

He turned to Sunny Side.

“Naughty knots ought to be top notch,” he said. Sunny Side only blinked. I shrugged it off and tied the rope as instructed (no easy feat with just my earth pony hooves) while the strange stallion secured the other end. After that it was a quick shimmy over the gap, with Sunny Side pulling me up as I reached the other end.

“Coulda done that in ten seconds flat,” the stallion said, and to my amazement he pulled the rope free with nothing but a clean jerk of his head.

“So, ponies, ponies, ponies...” he muttered as he looked us over with an unchanging bored expression, stuffing the rope back into his saddlebags. “You’re in no condition to travel, you got the look of station squatters about you, and you couldn’t even handle Sweet Dreams on your own. And yet you carry whole bushels of money that... explode.”

“We were... we were on our way to make a delivery,” Sunny Side said for me. I was still wrapping my head around what had happened.

“From the Guild?” he asked. “That money was supposed to go to me, I’d bet. Figures. They’ve been trying to get me for weeks now.” Another creepy grin. “Congratulations, fellas. You’re now hired assassins.”

Sunny Side and I shared an anxious expression. The stallion, however, waved it off. “Don’t worry about it. Bombs, berries, bears and bitches will never take down this pony. Way I figure it, I was supposed to use my old Guild token to try and open up the seals, prompting the magical backlash you saw that got Sweet Dreams back there. The Guild didn’t factor in how much she hated me... and apparently was unaware that we’ve spent the last couple days trying to kill each other.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. The implications were beginning to sink in. I’d just killed a pony. Not just killed them, I made them *explode*. I’d just blown up a fellow pony while unknowingly being an agent of execution

for the Guild. I'd been manipulated and been an accomplice to murder just so the Guild could get whatever petty revenge they wanted on this stallion.

I sat down heavily on my haunches as Sunny Side worried his lip, looking pensive. The stallion seemed perfectly unperturbed.

"Ahh... first pony kill, huh? Well, don't worry about it. Sweet Dreams was one crazy pony... and it's not like she didn't have it coming. She'd already taken out Purple Prose and was moving on to me until you came along."

So I was a murderer of murderers. The Guild had meant to wipe out me, my friend, and this stallion. I'd nearly led us to our deaths, and another pony was accidentally sacrificed so we could live.

I said nothing as I stood back up, beginning to move further along the bridge.

"My name is Sidewinder. You can call me Sid," the strange stallion said, watching me lead Sunny Side in a meandering, slow path towards the exit.

I heard the click of a gun safety. We whipped around and saw nothing.

"And lucky for you..." We spun around again and found Sidewinder standing at our sides.

"I owe you for taking out a thorn in my side," he said with another not-quite grin. "So, I'll take you kiddos where you're going for half-price."

"You'd shoot us in the back," I spat, surprising Sunny Side. My black mood at being suddenly turned into a common killer gave my voice more snap than usual. "If the Guild makes murderers out of common ponies so easily and you stalkers are all nuts, then we shouldn't trust you. We shouldn't trust anypony."

"Nope. But just because you can't trust me doesn't mean I'm going to kill you. That'd be wholly unprofessional of me. I wouldn't get anything off you I couldn't get off some poor sucker's corpse."

"Then why are you still pointing your gun at us?" Sunny asked.

"Why are you pointing yours at me?"

He had a point. I turned to Sunny Side, who seemed worried... but if this 'Sid' wanted us dead, wouldn't he have filled us with bolts before he even showed himself? He'd shot dropbears instead of us. And just because the Guild had tricked us... would this pony be able to help? He was offering, and we needed to get to Bucklyn. An enemy of the Guild that was ready to throw our lives away might just come in handy. I felt like I needed to be very reserved around this particular pony, even if he genuinely wanted to help. No pony except Sunny Side even knew of our mission, and I trusted him enough to keep it that way.

I slowly reached up to my reins. Sunny and Sid followed suit. In unison, we gently raised our guns back to ready position.

"There now. We're all good ponies here," Sidewinder said. "So. Where are you headed?"

"Bucklyn," I said, and that was all.

Murdered, my mind told me. You just murdered a pony to get there.

She was going to kill me.

Was she? Or were you all just in the wrong place at the right time?

"Is that all?" Sidewinder replied with an easy smile. "Just a hop, skip and a jump from here, really. Right. Here's the deal. We stalkers love deals. More than ponies. So it's a good idea to make deals with us. I get you to Bucklyn in one piece, and you don't report back to the Guild that I'm alive, and we all don't kill each other... though I don't know why you'd do that anyway, seeing as they were ready to sacrifice you both, too."

He turned his back on us and started walking, obviously expecting us to follow. We did, and he led us back into the shadows of the E line. As we left the strange glow of the bridge behind us, he seemed to melt away into

the darkness. The only way we could be sure of where he was was with our lights and the sound of his voice.

“If Sweet Dreams hadn’t taken that bomb when she did, the Guild was depending on me being stupid and greedy enough to take the money myself. Or, it had a timer and was going to go off at some point or other. Either way, I don’t think they much cared what would happen to you two.”

I wasn’t listening much. Sunny Side was busy flexing his now apparently functioning wing, testing the limits of its capability. That he’d managed to take a flying leap like that was proof he was on the mend, which no doubt would improve his mood significantly. I wouldn’t blame him if he spent all day in Bucklyn’s flight room. As for me, I could barely walk in a straight line. The horrible screams from Sweet Dreams’ throat still echoed in my head. The sight of another pony riveted with agony and fear... all because I’d accepted a job at face value for the sake of my mission. It could’ve been her, us, or this Sidewinder. Either way the deaths would’ve been on my head. It was one thing to be surrounded by death, and another entirely to be the direct cause of it.

I tried telling myself it was worth the trouble; that my duty to my home and family superseded whatever duty I had to ponies as a whole out here. Sweet Dreams’ greed and mindless folly had inadvertently given me the chance to keep going, to stay alive and save my loved ones. Her fault. The mission took precedence. It would be the same for any pony that tried to stop me. I found myself repeating that many, many times to drown out the small, niggling doubt in the back of my mind.

Chapter 6

*When we choose a path, fate does not follow.
It comes to meet us.*

My leg bothered me soon after continuing along the E line. Even that short sprint from the dropbears had put unnecessary strain upon it. I could feel that the flesh hadn't quite mended yet; stitches had been applied and the healing potion still worked furiously to keep up with the exertion of survival. Even then I knew it'd be a long while before I could feel like my limb wasn't coming detached with every step I took. At least now we'd been walking at a sedate pace for the last two hours and I hadn't put much weight onto it since our mad dash over the bridge. The E line stood mostly abandoned until it swung back around southeast and met up with Section 12, the line that would take us straight into Bucklyn. Until then, who knew what would be in our way? The tunnels of the Metro always had a way of surprising ponies, whether from freak cave-ins, new tunnels dug by mutants, the movement of bandits and creatures. No two trips into the Metro's depths turned out the same way.

Fortunately, things seemed predictably horrible and lifeless so far. E line didn't fail to be uncomfortably damp and cool, though that and the pains in my body kept my mind away from darker places. We passed only a few side passages which Sidewinder ignored, and once were disturbed by a lone drake that saw us coming and growled before running. Our meager headlights were the only thing standing between us and total darkness, not that there was much to see on the constant blank walls. The river of pipes above and around us continued unabated. The only other features were us and those less fortunate than us. Many other stalkers used this tunnel, but didn't clean it of their refuse... or their corpses. I watched Sidewinder brusquely check the torn body of what seemed to be a young mare stalker, the flesh stripped away almost down to the bone around her ribs. Some mutant (or particularly starving pony) had even cracked open her skull case and devoured the fatty richness of her brain. With her body tangled amongst a few stalagmites surrounded by glowplants, I imagined her final moments desperately trying to use the rocks as a meager shelter before falling prey to some horrid beast.

While the sight turned my stomach and even made Sunny Side sigh with disappointed disgust, Sidewinder just gave the whole scene a once over and moved on when he found nothing to scavenge. It occurred to me with a flash of grim insight that I'd perhaps be expected to do the same if we found ourselves on our own. Living in a station gave us a modicum of shelter and protection, even as the world outside grew darker and more hideous by the day. While daily tribulations and fear surrounded me from the day of my birth, I'd never had to literally poke through a dead pony's pockets to find essentials. I wondered how it was our society fell so far. Weren't we once the paragons of friendliness and goodwill in the world? According to our histories, even the Great War barely touched our shores until the end, when the bombs and megaspells rained from the skies. Now, we weren't even sure if we were the only intelligent beings left in Equestria, perhaps all the world, yet still we slipped further away from our old ideals. In times like this, I felt all the more blessed to have a friend like Sunny Side and a father like Cinder Block. Only bright spots like those kept hope alive that we could reclaim our heritage, even in the face of utter extinction. At the very least, we lived with the hope that no matter how terrible we ourselves became, we'd always value our friends.

Our new friend Sidewinder, however, gave me some doubts. He proved to be rather talkative, though only to himself. He hugged the walls and attempted to stay blended with the shadows as if he didn't have two inexperienced ponies tromping alongside him, and he muttered almost constantly in that deep, droning buzz of a voice. It sounded like a religious invocation, or a unicorn worrying over a complicated spell. I heard many interesting and disturbing things from him, and was content to just listen to what he had to say. At the very least he seemed more interested in babbling than trying to kill us, which I was fairly sure he'd attempt to do at some point. Sunny Side, however, was unnerved by Sidewinder's peculiarities and at last blurted out his discomfort.

"You're just... a crazy pony, aren't you?"

I almost laughed. There were better things to exclaim after two hours walking in the cold and dark with a clearly unhinged pony. Sidewinder *did* laugh, though it was more of a disturbing low-pitched chuckle.

“When you live alone in the Metro, being crazy is one of the few ways to entertain yourself,” he said, snickering. He then fixed Sunny Side with a very serious stare, eyes going wide enough to ruffle the pegasus’ feathers.

“I also touch myself sometimes.”

I shared a very confused look with Sunny Side.

“That’s... good?” my friend replied with a nervous smile.

“No, it’s boring!” Sid replied. “I’ve learned all my own tricks by now.”

Sunny Side fell back into uncomfortable silence.

“Oatmeal...” Sidewinder murmured as he scurried back into the dark.

I chuckled, glad for the levity Sidewinder provided even if I still fretted about being shot in the back. So far he’d kept his word, but would his mind soon turn on us like Sunny Side’s might? I made sure to hang back behind the strange stallion, using my little light to make sure he was always ahead of us. I noticed him pick up something once or twice, but I wasn’t sure what. It could’ve been anything from a stray bullet to a piece of lint. At odd intervals he’d stop dead in his tracks, reach into a specific pocket, and toss out a small metal screw on a length of string. I wondered if perhaps he was fishing for invisible creatures, but the operation became monotonous and uneventful after every throw resulted in him simply drawing the line back and continuing on.

While he was engaged in this activity once, a howl from behind echoed through the tunnel. We raise our ears and straining our senses. Nothing came, but we all knew sooner or later something would.

“Cerberus is hungry,” Sidewinder muttered. “His many heads are always hunting.”

We let the implications sink in. Always, *a/ways* you walked a fine line between hunter and hunted in the Metro. In a way, I’d released Sweet Dreams from the eternal game of cat and mouse we played with the new monsters that ruled our world. Were the Dark Ones a sign, I wondered, that the gods had truly abandoned us? Were they the next generation of beast

that would at last extinguish the vestiges of ponykind and rule this new, frozen world? I wondered about those dark wings and long horns casting shadows over our once great cities, spreading over the seas to the other lands. I saw their terrible, brooding shapes lording over a planet that'd once been the home of dragons and griffons, zebra and deer and so many others for thousands of years. The old stories spoke of so many distant lands, ruled by so many different races apart from ponies. Worlds within worlds. All of them ended in an instant when the world stared into the face of terror and blinked, and the war to end all wars began. All of it burned to ash, replaced by wild uncaring magic and bloodthirsty monsters. An entire world of wonder and life doomed to an existence as an irradiated ice ball, tyrannized by mutants and Dark Ones. Such an ignominious fate was too terrible to contemplate, and only strengthened my resolve and soured my temper the more I thought about it. I imagined Sunny Side noticed the way my brow was furrowed, as he snapped me from my reverie.

"Are you all right, Lockbox?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I noticed you getting all thoughtful back there again. It's about that mare, isn't it?"

His voice dropped to a whisper, and I followed suit.

"I still can't believe it," I admitted, my gaze going to the ground. "To think I almost led us both into a deathtrap just because..." I paused, making sure Sidewinder wasn't listening. I couldn't take that chance. "Just because I wanted to get to Bucklyn without delay. I'm the one who had us deal with the Guild and accept their proposal, and now... somepony is dead. It could've been any one of us, and it all would come back to me regardless."

Silence draped between us like a curtain. For a long time there was nothing the clomp of our hooves on the ground, the muttering of Sidewinder up ahead, the sound of his scurrying back and forth, checking every nook and cranny.

"I think what bothers me most is how little it bothers me," I said at length. "What we are doing... it's so important. Sweet Dreams didn't *have* to die. She just *did* because she was greedy and we happened to cross

paths. I cannot help but wonder how many other ponies will try to stop us. How many we'll have to go through."

I shook my head.

"Every pony that dies is one less to make our world the way it used to be. I'm no stranger to the Metro, but that was the first time I've really seen what it can make us do to each other. The first time I've seen *us* as enemies, and not just the world around us. Everything's changed in such a short time. And I still walk forward, trying to do what I must. Shouldn't I be breaking down, Sunny Side? Shouldn't I be consumed with guilt? Shouldn't I be doing what our ancestors would do and find a way to fix it?"

My friend couldn't answer, except to say, "You're a *good* pony, Lockbox. You're stronger than me in many ways. I think... I think if your father were here, he'd do the same as you. Just... what he has to."

It would've made me feel better, except he stared straight ahead as he said it and seemed disturbed by our talk. Perhaps I wasn't wise to seem uncertain. I certainly didn't feel like it. The way Sweet Dreams died would haunt me for a long time, I knew. The way blood streamed from her eyes, the look of sheer animal terror that comes when a pony simply can't understand why they're suffering so terribly. And yet I just put one hoof in front of the other, distancing myself from the memory like it wasn't such a big deal. I felt torn between two minds. One cried out for forgiveness, for a way to bring back the life I'd inadvertently taken, no matter how "deserving" she might have been of death. The other gruffly pushed onward, justifying that it was her own fault; I was alive, she died, nothing more could be said about the affair, and in the end more important lives than hers were at stake. Since I wasn't a blubbing wreck, I feared the latter stood victorious. Though my journey had barely begun I knew I'd already sacrificed a small part of my dream of a better world to save the last remnants of mine. I was willing to sacrifice other ponies. Worse, it felt strangely normal.

In my mind's eye, an aching beautiful pegasus turned away from me and went back to paradise, leaving me alone and cold in the dark.

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We passed a crossroads where E Line split off, curving east-southeast. The other tunnel had been walled off in some distant year with rusty metal sheets and rebar. It seemed to me more of a cage than a wall, and I noticed a strange decoration at the top: a circle of twisted metal with a single sprite-light in the center. It glowed with an unearthly pale blue light.

“A charm!” I said with a spark of realization, surprising my companions. Sidewinder hissed at me to be quiet.

“Yes, a charm! A charm against the boogey-monsters that don’t care about bullets. Shut your trap and keep moving!”

We’d reached a darker, less civilized part of the Metro, where mutants were thick and dangers were high. No more errant sprite-lights lit our way and the tunnel was choked with collapsed sections of wall and veritable fields of glowplants. Strange sounds echoed from the blocked off tunnel, distant as a memory and just as haunting. Chagrined by Sidewinder’s reprimand I forced myself to look away from the strangely beautiful charm and followed my companions.

“We should be quieter here. These tunnels aren’t very nice, and I’ve seen evidence of bandits moving around,” Sidewinder whispered as we passed by another grove of glowplants growing right out of a pony’s skeleton. Just to be safe, I checked my stores of ammo. There were only four clips left for the Mule, not counting the two magazines of military grade bullets that made up most of my life savings. Twenty-two shots for my pistol and a hoofful of shotgun shells rounded off the collection. Sunny Side had considerably more, but I wondered if soon we’d be reduced to scavenging off corpses like Sidewinder.

The tunnel grew ever more claustrophobic as we continued on. The sickly green glow of the plants cast monstrous shadows from broken pipes and fallen debris, and the light echo of drafts through the tunnels lent an eerie atmosphere to them. I almost jumped when a drake scuttled out of a smaller hole dug into the wall by lurkers, once harmless rats mutated into hairless pink abominations that could kill a pony in sufficient numbers.

“Still a bit jumpy, are you? Don’t worry,” Sidewinder said, grinning over his shoulder. “It’s when the drakes *aren’t* around that you have to be really careful.”

Soon we came to another crossroads, with the fiercest obstacle we'd faced yet: a complete cave-in that choked the entire width and height of the E line. Our lights shone on the wreckage of a train that'd been caught in the disaster, but there was no chance of tunneling through it like Sunny and I had in our escape from the electric cat-beast. It too was clogged full of earth. The only other way was to our right, through a side tunnel that bypassed the main E line and went off south.

"Shit," Sidewinder grumbled, scuffing the dirt wall with his hoof. "Now we have to go straight through fucking bandit territory... assuming something worse hasn't eaten them all."

He turned back and regarded us morosely.

"I don't suppose you two are very good at staying quiet, are you? Rumor has it this whole stretch of tunnel has some pretty weird stuff going on."

"Well, you're supposed to be the expert," Sunny Side answered, smirking. "Bandits and ghost tunnels getting you down? If you don't have a plan we can always just go back the way we came."

"Ha! As if. Don't worry your little head." Sidewinder leaped forward, bonking Sunny Side several times between the eyes with his hoof. "Your uncle Sid has it all figured out!"

Sunny Side watched Sidewinder disappear into the shadows of the side tunnel, somehow even darker and more foreboding than the E line itself.

"If he's my uncle, then a thumper's my sister," he grumbled, and followed him inside. I took one look at the darkness within, and only went forward after a judicious recharge of my small headlight.

The side tunnel looked more like a cave than a proper pony construction. Dirt covered most of the concrete platforms. The walls were held back by little more than rotting timber. In one section, the wall had been penetrated by the winding roots of the mutant trees that choked the Stalliongrad. I wondered many times what the surface was like now, less a

city and more a bizarre wildlife sanctuary. The stalkers and Rangers often brought back reports of wildly growing flora creating veritable jungles between the rotting skyscrapers, occasionally torn up by blizzards of unpredictable ferocity and magical anomalies. Anomalies came and went with unnerving irregularity, and were unstoppable when they appeared. Worse, some of them roamed the deeper tunnels of the Metro as if they possessed minds of their own. I hoped never to encounter one, though I wondered if my fever dream counted.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of trickling water up ahead. Sidewinder held up a hoof and stopped us from going further while he investigated. He didn't seem to mind our lights as we shined them on his back, trying to look ahead. Either the danger was not reactive to light, or it'd already seen us. Once more he pulled out the screw on the length of string and tossed it forward every so often, testing invisible waters.

I saw Sidewinder pause at the very limit of our lights and flick his tail forward, egging us onward. We went, and as we crawled I felt something very strange in my head. A buzzing noise like there was a bee trapped in my skull began to pester me as I did my best to stay low and quiet. It only got worse the further I went, until it became a phantom vibration running through my skull. The lights didn't reveal anything I or the rest of us could see, but the closer I came the worse the feeling grew. The sound of trickling water grew louder.

I gently scrubbed my forehead, trying to calm myself. It must've been leftover effects of my injuries, perhaps the numerous blows I'd suffered to my head. Celestia above, the last thing I needed was a concussion! The air of the tunnel felt thicker than normal and my breaths started to come in deep, sucking gulps. Sunny Side gave me a worried glance but said nothing.

"Ah ha," Sidewinder said at last, pointing down another side passage that led to what appeared to be a checkpoint on a sewage line. Water dribbled down from the ceiling into slurry that stood stagnant and foul in a shallow canal. In some distant age it might've been used by technicians checking on Stalliongrad's sewer system. Now it was a dirty little place for thirsty animals to have a drink. "Just a little fracture in the wall. Must be a storm going on up top, water's leaking in through these pipes in the ceiling... funny, I could've sworn something else would be here."

I wasn't paying attention to the stallion, instead gripped in the depths of what felt like a premonition. My stomach felt queasy as my vision began to swim. I breathed hard and quick, eyes darting around the passage. There was another door across from the aqueduct, and I began staggering towards it.

"Lockbox?" Sunny Side asked, fluttering to my side.

"Something's... something's coming. Something's close," I whispered, feeling queasier as time went on. "We need to get out of here. We need to move."

"Lockbox? What's going on? I don't... I don't understand," Sunny Side said, leaning against my side as I headed for the door with uneven, ungainly steps. Sidewinder gave me an odd look and turned towards the tunnel, then reached into one of his pockets. I watched him intently, wondering if he felt the same way I did. I saw the little string and screw come out again. The buzzing and nausea reached a fever pitch as he took a few tentative steps forward. I didn't know where the sense of danger came from, where the ominous, sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach originated. I just knew that simply by being here we made a grave mistake.

"No... No, don't!" I gasped, but it was too late. Sidewinder tossed out the little screw. It twirled through the air.

It stopped in the air.

Sunny Side and I watched with bated breath as the tunnel just in front of Sidewinder began to glow with an unearthly light. The screw was yanked out of Sidewinder's grasp and twirled in midair, then abruptly glowed red hot and melted away.

The buzz in my head was a terrible noise, drowning out everything else. I saw Sidewinder mouth a curse and felt Sunny Side drag me along into the side tunnel, kicking down the door as he went. Where there should have been a clang of metal there was only that damnable, droning buzz. It shook me to the core, shivering my bones and making my skin crawl. I felt as though I was in front of an incredibly loud music speaker putting out a mindless bass drum beat, yet still I was aware of my hooves propelling me

forward into the cramped passage beyond the door. Sunny Side didn't need to lean against me, and neither of us needed encouragement to run for our lives from the horrible whatever-it-was that came screaming down the tunnel.

I dared to look back and only saw Sidewinder silhouetted by a terrible bright light beyond the doorway, shouting something incoherently as he ran. The ground shook as if echoing our fright. Some... *thing* was at the doorway. I almost felt as though we were being watched, and the light was some baleful eye peering inside the cramped passage, amused by our terror. The rumbling buzz filled my ears, vibrating down in the core of my being, consuming all thought except to *run*. All sound, the *world* seemed reduced to that small tunnel that offered us such meager protection from the angry force of nature behind us. Somehow it seemed the faster we ran the less ground we covered, and I kicked my fight-or-flight reaction into overdrive, seeking to put as much distance between us and this terrible phenomenon as possible.

Just run, I thought. Run and run and run until there's nowhere left to go, then turn and shoot the damn thing with all you've got.

I looked behind again, over Sidewinder's broad shoulders, past his face that showed more professional concern than outright terror. The light at the end of the tunnel was softer now. Red, violet... pink, almost. It was in that more mellow, less-like-the-white-hot-rage-of-a-sun light I noticed something very peculiar. Our shadows were leaning *towards* the light. Like it was drawing us in.

Somehow it was that sight alone that seized me with more terror than anything else, and I put my body to running once again. The passage we charged through seemed interminably long and monotonous. We turned a corner, slammed a door shut, and still the light followed us. Were we actually going anywhere? Were we being sucked back in?

The light pulsed, sweeping down the corridor and overtaking us. We staggered under a sudden sweep of dizziness. The ground gave way and my hooves felt nothing but air. I fell, gritting my teeth against the ugly feeling of my stomach crowding my throat. I saw bits of wood raining down next to me, Sunny Side flapping ineffectually. For an instant I saw the

ground, murky and wet, the face of another dead pony, his skull bared in an eternal grin, rushing up to meet me-

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I sat quietly at my desk, listening to the radio. There was nothing but blackness outside my door, but I didn't care. What was playing was more important. It took some finagling, but I'd managed to acquire a recording of the final radio transmission our city ever received from the outside world. It was an infamous message. In earlier times, expeditions to surface outposts tried to answer it every so often, but it appeared the message was fully automated. I remembered this. I'd replayed this broadcast Celestia knows how many times in private. A message of utter despair and hopelessness, looping over and over for three whole months before finally cutting out. The last indication that there'd been anything living beyond the borders of Stalliongrad, and it couldn't even talk back. One by one the fires of life had winked out on our lonely world, until we stood alone.

This is a high priority distress signal from Her Majesty's Ship Quickstep, pride of the Equestrian Navy, broadcasting on all frequencies.

I stood as a young colt in the middle of a battlefield under a stormy sky, surrounded by twisted, mangled corpses of every species. Ponies, dragons, griffons, deer and zebra, buffalo and dog, all lay still in death. Cinder Block stood next to me.

"Father," I asked him with a child's ignorance, "what caused the War?"

My father looked down at me, his hard eyes narrowing down to slits.

"Greed, my son. Greed and fear took over the world. Greed for power and fear of it, too."

We are adrift in the Hollow Sea and running low on supplies. We are unable to run aground. We've found no land free of the Blight.

I felt a stirring in the dark. She stood next to me, the yellow pegasus of my dreams. I reached up to touch her cheek. My hoof was drenched in blood. Before I could reach her, she spread her wings and flew far, far

away, into the stars where Celestia and Luna dwelled, beautiful and free forever.

“Follow me,” she beckoned in a voice infinite in its kindness. Enchanted, I followed.

We've received no transmissions at land or sea, magical or otherwise. Unable to locate allied forces at any rendezvous points. No signs of life at any observed coastline. Negative results on all scry orbs and divinations.

“Lockbox!”

I skidded to a halt and looked over my shoulder. I saw Hunter standing behind me, powerful and defiant. He stood before a great light, and I rested in his shadow. Beyond him, the Dark Ones swarmed.

“Here! Get up! Stand with me and fight!”

For a few glorious seconds I stood next to my hero, braving all the horrors of the world at once. Creatures and mutants assailed me, Dark Ones swooped from the sky, but I didn't care. I stood firm, blanketing the new world with death and bullets and blood. After all, if it's hostile, you kill it.

Our current coordinates will be sent in burst transmissions at regular intervals. If anypony is out there, please respond. This message is set to repeat. Please...

I felt a feather light touch on my shoulder. I turned and saw a Dark One towering above me, wings stretched out, horn straight and sharp and proud. My mind melted and my bowels loosened with terror.

Stop... Death...

It stepped towards me like a living nightmare. I stumbled backwards.

You... Hear... You... See...

I reached up and slashed at the beast with my hoof knife. It ignored me and vanished, replaced by monsters. Mutants descended on me, and I fought for my life against impossible odds, falling to the ground. Sweet Dreams appeared and grabbed my hooves, pinning them to the cold concrete. She straddled me, holding me down and grinning manically through a broken gasmask. Blood streamed from her eyes. It dribbled down into my nose and mouth, making me sputter and choke. She laughed at my pain.

You... Hear... Must... Listen...

The shadows closed in, choking the life from me, swallowing me up. The last thing I saw was a glimmer of pink and yellow as the fair pegasus flew above the carnage, looking down at me with pity.

Is there anyone out there? Anyone at all? This is a high priority distress signal...

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I woke up with a bitter taste in my mouth and a sting in my eye. I raised my head and felt incredibly wet. My geiger counter clicked quietly, alerting me of faint levels of background radiation but nothing that'd shave years off my life. First thing, establish where I was and if everything was intact.

It pained me to do so, but I scrambled up on all four hooves, splashing water all around and kicking the skull I'd seen on the way down. Apparently some other poor soul had found his final resting place here. This was starting to become a disturbing trend. My injured leg throbbed, but still held together. My still healing ribs gave me even more trouble. I took a short breath and gasped as pain shot through me, nearly paralyzing me with a cold rush of agony. That was all that was wrong, wasn't it? It seemed so.

I looked around and found myself in a large, square room, the purpose of which I couldn't really determine. It seemed to be nothing more than a place where things were dumped, such as the brackish, foul water that pooled beneath me. Underneath that was a soft, squishy material that seemed to be a mixture of soil and... other foul things. It seemed landing

on this mess saved my life. The entire area reeked horribly, and it suddenly dawned on me that I'd landed in this muck. And my mouth had been open. That gunk. Full of dead things. Had been in my mouth.

I retched and spat, not caring how much it made my ribs flare up.

The others. I had to find them. My spare headlight still worked, and with its meager light and that of the glowplants that anchored themselves to the walls I found both Sunny Side and Sidewinder near where I'd fallen. They were both breathing, but seemed to be out cold no matter how much I tried to rouse them. With a bit of effort I dragged them out of the smelly water and deposited them haphazardly in a dry corner on a small raised mound of... well, I didn't know what it was, but at least it was dry. I pondered how we ended up here. I remembered the strange, surreal chase we'd just endured from the bright, mysterious light, and it dawned on me that that was probably my first encounter with an anomaly. After all, if that wasn't considered anomalous, what was? I'd have much more appreciated a strange light show or perhaps a weird sound instead of a horrifying apparition. Whatever its nature it hadn't followed us down here, so I decided not to think about it too much.

I looked up the way we'd come, and saw that we'd fallen through a circular opening presumably covered by a grate at some point in time. Instead it'd been removed and wood planks covered it instead, which broke under our combined weight and sent us down here. I quickly checked myself for splinters; they'd been a bit of a phobia of mine ever since I was a colt. There was no way to get back up, so I searched around the walls of the room until I came across a gate, rusted shut.

Then I heard the growl.

"Oh, Princesses, no," I whispered. "Just one moment. Just one moment to get it together..."

But I knew the creatures would give us no respite. I moved fast and ran to the gate, kicking at the rusty lock. The growls grew closer, louder. The gate clanged as I whaled on it, then finally turned and shot it open. My ears rang as the gate fell backwards. No time to worry about blocking it. I grabbed Sunny Side first, dragging him through and depositing him in the

next hallway, then turned back for Sidewinder. I bent down and grabbed his vest collar in my mouth, lifted my head.

I met the eyes of a lurker, standing in the passage opposite mine. The emaciated hairless monster stared at me with hungry apprehension, and I heard the beginnings of a growl starting in its throat.

The creature was half my size but twice as ferocious, and I knew it had friends on the way. With no time to chase it away, I just kept dragging Sidewinder back through the collapsed gate. I made it halfway through before more lurkers appeared around the bend, and then from the hole in the ceiling.

I'd just put Sidewinder down when they pounced. I still only had my pistol in my bridle, and its normally startling *bang* seemed more like an ineffectual pop as the lurker mob surged towards me. Three shots, three lurkers stumbled to the ground, the others scattering. They bayed at me with their odd, high-pitched squeals and snarls, gathering the courage to make another attack. They had no way to surround me. Still, I couldn't just stand here and shoot forever. Either they or another monster would find us eventually.

I fired again; the lurkers jumped and shrieked. With the moment of respite I grabbed the fallen gate door in my teeth and heaved it up before me. In that same second the lurkers attacked. A sea of pink, foal-sized horrors swarmed into the passage, a whirling mass of claws and teeth. I pushed back with all my might, using my flimsy barrier as a battering ram. The tide surged up and almost over my little shield. Grasping talons reached through the gaps in the ironwork, scratching and pulling at my clothes and barding. I opened my eyes, found my vision filled with gaping, hungry maws and dumb animalistic gazes. I could see the hunger. They wanted my flesh.

"Fuck you!" I screamed in reply, and sent my last two shots into the horde. I hit *something*, but that wasn't enough, and I felt my back hooves slide over the concrete. Below, above, to the gaps in the sides, they all pushed and squirmed, driven by that terrible, basic urge to feed. I kicked one square in the nose as it tried to squeeze past me, felt claws pulling at my mane. In a few short seconds they'd be all over me, pushing me to the ground as they went to feast on my comrades.

As if. I'm an earth pony. We feel the earth around us. We draw strength from it. That is our magic. I needed that now more than ever. I looked the squirming, roiling mass of death right in the face and bared my teeth in defiance. My ribs, my leg, it all was so unimportant when I had two helpless ponies right behind me. Even now, in the midst of the Apocalypse, some truths about ponykind could never be extinguished. I was an earth pony, and the *earth was my strength*.

I set my hooves against the ground, planting them firm in that faith. And I felt the magic coursing through my limbs.

"I... am... *THE EARTH!*" I screamed, and *pushed*.

The lurkers gave ground. A millimeter. An inch. They screeched in worry and confusion. I felt claws scrape on my hooves, ripping open my suit around my legs. Ignore it. Let it all fade away. The earth doesn't care for the little legs that run to and fro upon it. It just is. It just *moves*.

And I moved.

The lurkers weren't even pushing back now. They were too bunched up to gain leverage, and could only topple over one another as I kept up my slow, steady offensive. One lurker slipped beneath the gate, dazed. I stomped on its head as I passed by without breaking stride. I couldn't be stopped. Wouldn't be stopped. I felt invincible. The lurkers were just a bunch of featherweights now, tumbling over each other, squawking and squealing indignantly, back through the gateway and down into the muck. I propped the gate back up against its original moorings, watching the lurkers scamper back and forth in anger and confusion.

But they weren't running. I could've stood there and held the gate all day with my renewed strength and faith in Equestria's magic, but I didn't need to. The extra incentive came when Sunny Side stood next to me and lit the room up with a burst from his guns, and the lurker horde went running at last.

The magic slid back out of my veins, replaced with cold, hard reality and the dull agony of old hurts. I collapsed against the gate, broke into a cold sweat from my recent adrenaline rush. My injured leg ached

something fierce, my ribs stabbed into my sides, and my head pounded like a drum. But we were alive. I'd done it. I'd saved my friends with a little good old pony magic. I looked up at Sunny Side, and he looked at me. Sidewinder had come to as well. I knew they'd both seen it. They knew what had happened. Gently, Sunny Side knelt down and nudged me to my hooves, offering himself as support. I leaned on him, gratefully, and we all started walking again.

Nothing needed to be said.

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"So how was your first taste of earth magic?" Sidewinder asked as we poked our heads into the maze of back rooms. We'd found a flight of stairs that we hoped led us back up to a place level with E line, and scoured the small backways and passages to try and get back to the main line.

"Better than sex, am I right?" Sidewinder prodded me again. I rolled my eyes and didn't answer. I was in too much pain to really think. "It's how I can stay so steady when I pretend to be a spider, or a bat. The earth listens to us still, you know. I can give you advice on that. Just gotta ask mama Nature and she'll do things that'll blow your mind. She won't get rid of anomalies, though."

"Whatever that light was," Sunny Side said with a shiver, "it was strange. And I'm glad Lockbox was able to get up so quickly after it... did whatever it did."

I didn't tell them about the strange dream I had, pondering it deep within my own mind. The others hadn't mentioned visions either, so I figured I was the only one who'd seen such things. I didn't know how I'd recovered so quickly from the light's... attack? Touch? But it'd saved our lives.

"I'm more interested in how Lockbox here was able to feel it coming," Sidewinder said with a sly grin. I still stared ahead, unable and unwilling to figure out how that particular miracle happened. I hadn't exactly gotten us out in the nick of time, but it was still a talent that I didn't think was very common.

"I think little Lockbox here has a lot of things locked away," Sidewinder continued, still grinning as he passed me by to scout out the next set of rooms. "You're a mystery, my friend... and that's good. Mysteries are the only things that survive down here."

"Don't worry about him," Sunny Side told me. "I'm just glad we got out of there alive... but I am worried about what that thing was."

"An anomaly," Sidewinder replied over his shoulder. "You know, one of those weird things that we can't explain but are invariably deadly and unstoppable?"

"Ah..." Sunny Side said, his expression falling. We'd all heard stories about anomalies, but to see one up close was an experience unto itself. We'd just looked one of the mysteries of the Metro in its face and we'd been utterly unable to understand it. We'd just run and hoped it didn't kill us. That was the world we lived in now. Strange, incomprehensible, and dangerous. Laws of nature had been broken during the War, and the world wasn't working properly anymore. It wasn't something that I enjoyed thinking about. But I'd felt it, deep down, the sheer *wrongness* that bled off that thing. Somehow, it'd sparked something deep inside me, letting me know that something terrible was nearby. Whatever it was, it wasn't supposed to exist. It was a gaping, wandering wound in the spirit of our planet, appearing and disappearing at will. Whether it was a new entity or just a wandering vortex of wild magic, I had no idea. I just knew I didn't want to see it again.

Was I somehow more sensitive to the destruction of the world than others? I started to wonder. Neither Sunny Side nor Sidewinder felt it the same way I did. It was the anomaly that'd sparked my strange reaction; that went without saying. But why? And how? What was it about the world that affected me so?

What was it about *me* that felt the changes in the world that much more keenly?

Sidewinder came to an abrupt stop ahead, holding out a lanky limb to keep us from moving forward. We found ourselves at a door with cans hanging from the ceiling.

“Alarm system,” Sidewinder whispered. “Keep quiet now, we’re close to a hideout it seems. If we have to sneak don’t look at the bandits. Look at where you’re going. Just one hoof in front of the other, and keep them in sight in the corners of your eyes. We all know how to stay quiet, so we should be good.”

We slid along the wall to avoid setting off the “alarms.” Sunny Side was hard pressed to keep his guns out of the way in the close quarters, and we resorted to carrying one on my back. We continued creeping through the next small hallway, turning off our lights to keep ourselves hidden. I could hear voices up ahead. Sidewinder said nothing, and we were all smart enough to keep our mouths shut.

We found ourselves in a small, dark room, beyond which was a large auxiliary tunnel that undoubtedly contained both a railcar and the bandits we’d been hearing so much about. The faint glow of a campfire peeked through the crack of the partially open door. I could even hear their voices if I listened hard enough.

“So I told her, ‘Fuck Hoofsa! We can’t survive eating the scraps other stations drop off the table. We need to put them on our lists or we’ll start starving too!’”

“You said ‘fuck’ to Auntie Buttercup?” said another. “You know she’s practically boss of the whole northeast section, right?”

“Well, I didn’t say it... but I was thinking it! We can’t touch the Monarchy, the Republic massacres anyone who goes south, and Hoofsa’s out to get us! If we’re going to survive we gotta show we aren’t gonna be pushed around. Now that Ruby Red’s here, this whole gang is gonna have to shape up.”

“What a bitch that Ruby Red is,” muttered another bandit. “Just cause she’s a unicorn she has Candy Cane by the balls. It fucking keeps me up at night! And what do the rest of us get? Overpriced hookers in Connemara.”

“It’s that Guild, and the Monarchy!” complained the first voice. “Fucking unicorn elitism is spreading everywhere, even among us salt-of-the-earth types.”

I turned away and looked around the room, finding little besides useless boxes and crates and bits of scrap metal. It was the cage that really got my attention though. It rested in the corner, and had a very large, very imposing occupant. We froze as we saw the large, yellow eyes open and turn towards us, finding us easily even in the dark. The pointed ears rose up, the sound of big lungs taking a sharp breath.

We came face to face with a Diamond Dog. He wasn't big as far as Dogs went, but that still put him at our size, if not bigger. He'd been curled up with his formidable forearms hiding his face, which was scarred and pitted. A severe underbite made him look rather goofy along with that wide-eyed look he gave us. He didn't say anything. We didn't say anything back. He slowly crawled up to the rusty bars, peering at us. I'd never met a Diamond Dog before, but by all accounts there were little better than mutants... Hunter had sometimes told me about them, saying they kept to themselves and were extremely paranoid, preferring to hide and run from mutants and ponies alike. The ones that inhabited the Metro didn't speak to ponies, though that was mostly because the only contact one might have with them was in the slave pits of the New Lunar Republic. Wild Dogs were extremely rare... their mutated cousins, cerberus and other vermin, kept them at bay and kept our perspective of them skewed.

In effect, I was ready to move on and just leave the creature to his fate. He wasn't a pony, and likely would have clawed us open given half a chance. But then something extraordinary happened.

"Ponies... help... me?"

We froze. I locked eyes with the creature. Truth be told, I hadn't given much thought to Diamond Dogs, considering them just another vaguely unsettling creature of the Metro. Their powers of speech didn't necessarily lend them intelligence, or the worth that ponies had. When all you heard about a creature was that they were either hostile or stupid slaves of an evil government, your opinion of them didn't exactly flourish. But I'd never had one up close, nor had they asked for help.

"Leave him," Sidewinder whispered. "There might be magical locks on his cage. If we let him out the whole damn camp will know."

“Ponies... help... me?” the Dog repeated. I wondered if he was genuinely asking for help or parroting speech he’d learned. I looked at Sunny Side, who seemed torn, unable to come to a decision.

“We... he’s in a cage,” he murmured. “If we leave him...”

“He’ll go to the Republic and we’re going to get to Bucklyn,” Sidewinder hissed. “If we’re getting out of here we do it *now*. I’m a Stalker, not a Ranger.”

I hesitated. Could we really just leave a defenseless creature to die? I was struck for a moment by the clear intelligence behind the Dog’s eyes; he clearly knew what was going on and what we were saying. Wouldn’t I want help if I’d been stuck in a cage and left to rot?

Follow me, a butter-yellow pegasus whispered in my ear.

“We have to go now!” Sidewinder hissed. I didn’t move. But I didn’t move to help either. The Dog sensed our indecision. He locked gazes with me, and didn’t like what he saw. His eyes narrowed, and he stood up, grabbing the bars of his cage. He rattled them loudly and began to huff and puff.

“Hey!” shouted one of the bandits. “Shut up in there!”

The Dog continued making a racket. My heart hammered in my chest. The Diamond Dog was spiteful enough to get us all killed just because we weren’t going to jump to his assistance!

“Shit!” Sidewinder said. “I’ll put this Dog down now...”

“Stupid Dog, I’m coming in there!”

Sidewinder paused, and then kicked me and Sunny Side away from the door, motioning for us to hide. We scrambled behind some unused boxes while Sidewinder took a post at the door.

The bandit who came inside looked surprisingly normal. Just a cobalt colored earth pony with a dark green mane, dressed in dirty clothing. I could see any number of the less well-off members in Exiperia in his place,

just with much more grime and a nasty scowl. He didn't look like a murderer or a monster. Just a pony with an attitude problem. He shined a light on the Diamond Dog, who growled and continued to rattle his cage.

"Shut up!" the bandit snapped, and stepped into the room.

Sidewinder was on him in a moment. The bandit didn't even gasp as a heavy blow from Sidewinder's hooves took him down. Sidewinder grabbed the falling body and laid it gently down, and then abruptly jabbed a hoof knife into the back of the bandit's neck. The body jerked, twitched, went still. My mouth went dry. Sidewinder looked up at the Diamond Dog, who threatened to rattle his cage again. The bandits would know their friend was missing any second now. My stomach twisted as the reality of the situation struck home. Thanks to this Dog, we'd have to fight our way out.

The Diamond Dog pointed at the body.

"Keys!" he hissed.

"Bastard!" Sidewinder spat. "I wish we'd never run into you."

"Hey, Blue Bird! What's taking you?" one of the bandit's friends asked. "You're not talking to that thing, are ya?"

"Keys now!" the Diamond Dog growled. "I help!"

"I should leave you in there!" Sidewinder started.

No time. We had to make a decision. My head pounded, my ribs ached. Everything felt rushed and slippery, every moment slipping by bringing us closer to disaster. Arguing later, acting now. I leaped forward. "Sidewinder," I whispered. "Wait." I turned to the Diamond Dog. "You. You'll help us?"

"I help!" the Dog said eagerly. "I kill them! I am strong!"

"Blue Bird?" asked one of the bandits.

"He must be taking a dump," said another.

“Good,” I said to the Dog, tacking up and showing the Dog my Mule. “If you run, I’ll shoot you myself.”

Saying it sent me into a cold sweat. I didn’t know where that came from, and deep down I didn’t believe I’d be able to do a thing if the Dog abandoned us. But we were all in it deep now, and there wasn’t any other choice. I rifled through the bandit’s pockets as Sunny Side checked his guns without complaint, as if getting into a gunfight was a minor inconvenience. Loyal Sunny Side who, I realized, was following *me* into battle. Nausea and exhilaration wormed through my stomach.

We’re really doing this, I thought as I snatched up a small iron key. I’d never thought of myself as a warrior, much less a killer. But in the space of a few days, everything about me and my world had changed.

“Ho ho ho,” Sidewinder chuckled, his grin twisted and angry as he went to the door. “No spiders and flies on the wall today. Shall we be a hydra, a mantichore?” He reached into one of his many pockets, tugging out a small, cylindrical object with a length of wire sticking out the top.

“Blue Bird, fucking answer me!” shouted one of the bandits. “Shit, I’m going back there...”

Sidewinder cackled as he pulled out a lighter and sparked the wire, which I realized was a fuse.

“Or maybe... a fiery phoenix!” he said, lobbing the grenade out the door and bracing it shut with his own body.

I heard nothing but a chorus of panicked shouts and screams as I jammed the key into the cage’s lock and yanked it open. A resounding *BANG* struck my ears through the door, jarring my eardrums. My blood froze, startled in my veins. The Diamond Dog leaped over me, following Sidewinder as he charged through the door, whooping and hollering as he tossed another prepared grenade.

“Come on, Lockbox!” Sunny Side shouted, taking flight and zooming through the passage.

Just a moment, I prayed. A moment to get it together.

No moment came. Time marched on, forcing me to act. I sprang to my hooves and stormed through the door.

I am the earth.

Once through, I could see a large half-cylinder shaped tunnel littered with crates and assorted goods, along with the scattered belongings of the bandits who huddled under cover farther back. A railcar sat on a small track that dominated most of the tunnel.

BOOM!

I felt my mane flutter in the shockwave of Sidewinder's next grenade before I was bowled over by Sunny Side shoving me behind a large pillar. The pegasus took to the air, zipping back and forth in random directions as he kept the bandits pinned down with quick shots from his battle saddle's rifles.

"Cover me!" Sidewinder shouted as he charged up the side of the chamber. I knew what that meant at least, and leaned out of cover, sending a barrage at the nearest cowering form. My bullets ripped through the thin wood the bandit had been using as cover. I didn't see a pony die. Just a target drop.

If it's hostile, you kill it.

The Diamond Dog bayed loudly as he charged into the midst of the bandits, pouncing on one who'd been stunned by Sidewinder's grenades. Through the muzzle flash of my Mule I saw the Dog's large, powerful claws come down on the earth pony's head, pummeling him to death. Keep shooting. More movement, and I tagged it with a burst of gunfire. The pillar next to me exploded, hisses and snaps snarling right in my ears as bullets whizzed overhead. Shrapnel cut into my face as I ducked into cover, ears throbbing, head pounding. The tunnel was *ringing* with explosions, every gunshot in the confined space like its own little bomb going off.

Keep moving, I heard Hunter's voice in my head. Shooting is like hide and seek. Cheat and hide again after they find out where you are.

More of my cover was blown away. Another of Sidewinder's grenades exploded, and for a moment the gunfire slackened. Go, now! I sprang out of cover and rushed behind the railcar, poked my head out and fired again in tandem with Sunny Side. The pegasus fired off another two shots before he collapsed near the door, his still healing wing unable to take so much strain. Then I got shot.

I felt the impact, but was pretty sure it was stray shotgun pellets that did me in. I felt an explosion of pain over my front and I fell to the ground, gasping for breath. It was like a giant sledgehammer needle had been pounded into my chest. The impact spread through my body as I collapsed onto the hard rails.

I heard more shooting, more screaming. Then it stopped. The tunnel crawled with the eerie silence and the distant crackle of a campfire.

Then Sidewinder was in my face. "Get up!" he shouted. "Onto the railcar, go, go!"

"I've been shot," I said dully. I'd never been shot before. It was a very strange experience. I thought it'd hurt a little more.

"You're not bleeding, must've hit your jacket. Get up, go! More are gonna investigate!"

I was hauled roughly to my hooves and tossed onto the railcar. The Diamond Dog ran for the gate and pulled a lever, prompting the door to swing outward with a huge noise of screeching metal. Sidewinder locked the only other door that led inside as Sunny Side dropped down next to me.

"Shit," he breathed.

"Quite," I agreed, trying not to look at the dead bodies scattered around the room. I couldn't count how many there'd been, but I knew we'd only survived because we'd held the element of surprise, and Sidewinder had been quite liberal in his application of explosives. Don't look, Lockbox... they were hostile, and you killed them. I squeezed my eyes shut, wanting to drown myself in justifications, when Sunny Side shoved me up.

“Hurry, let’s get this thing started!”

The moment I grabbed the lever that started the engine, setting it putting to life, Sidewinder leaped away from the door as it flew off its hinges.

A blood red unicorn mare with a burgundy mane stepped through the door, kitted out like a professional and with a scowl to match.

“What the *fuck* is going on in here?!” she demanded, just in time to dodge away from a barrage from me and Sunny Side’s guns. Sidewinder leaped aboard the cart as it sputtered and wobbled down the tracks. Sunny Side shook the engine cage and shouted “faster, faster!” as if that’d make it actually make it go faster, and the Diamond Dog just sprinted through the large door and vanished down the track. I turned back and fitted my pistol to my war rein, shattering a bottle right near the mare’s head as she tried to get a good look at us. I saw an assault rifle levitate above her cover.

“Down!” I shouted, and we all ducked as she blind-fired at us all the way down the tunnel as we picked up speed. I could hear her shouting as the bandit outpost receded into the distance.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are and I don’t care!” she shouted, magically amplifying her voice. “If I ever find you again, I’m going to *kill you! Do you hear me?!?*”

“Must be that time of month,” Sidewinder said with a grin as the cart picked up speed. The Diamond Dog was seen at the edge of our cart’s lights, but then he vanished into a smaller tunnel dug into the earthen wall, gone into the shadows of the Metro without a word. I almost felt as though I should be angry he hadn’t even thanked us after he risked our lives, but then I realized how utterly tired I felt. The place I’d been shot was still paining me through the adrenaline rush, which was starting to come down.

Until I noticed we were already slowing down.

“Uh oh,” Sunny Side said, looking back at the engine that abruptly started pouring smoke. A little alarm chirped and magical wards in the tunnel walls zapped the engine case, frying the primitive electronics and

annihilating the magical circuits. We gave each other glum, incredulous looks as the rail cart slowly but surely chugged to a halt. The shouting behind us quickly increased in volume. In perhaps the quickest railcart dismount I'd ever done, we were already charging down the tunnel. Yet somehow it felt less terrifying and more bracing, a shock to the system to get me going instead of frightening me to a halt. I'd never thought of myself as a warrior before. I'd never believed I could actually do all that I'd done today. And I still hadn't gotten to the end alive.

"Don't worry boys!" Sidewinder shouted. "Fate's on our side! Bucklyn is just down the road from here!"

"All we have to do is get there intact," Sunny Side said. It was only then I noticed he was bleeding from under his barding.

"Sunny!" I gasped. He gave me a grin in response.

"Don't worry, it's a ricochet... found a gap in my armor right at the neck... ah, fuck, makes running hell..."

He began to flap his wings instead, and I remembered my own injuries. I needed rest. Healing potions. Whatever help Bucklyn could give us. Bit by bit the tunnels were wearing us down, reducing our effectiveness with every successive calamity. I was so glad our journey was nearly done, I almost forgot that we were running (or rather limping and hobbling) for our lives.

"I know you can hear me!" shouted a magically amplified voice as we charged back onto the E Line and bolted for the final stretch. **"The name is Ruby Red! It's the last name you'll ever learn! We're comin' for ya!"**

"Nice girl," Sidewinder remarked, tossing his mane like we were having a nice little trot in some light wind and sunshine. "Maybe we should invite her to dinner!"

We skidded to a halt before the great airlock door that sealed off E Line from Bucklyn Station. It was kept firmly shut to keep out refuse like us. That didn't stop us from bucking it as hard as possible and yelling at the tops of our lungs for the guards beyond the door to hear us. I hurriedly

glanced at the walls and smashed one of the wards set into the stone. Even if it'd already noticed us, we needed to act like there was a larger threat directly assaulting the door. As my hoof cracked the gem, it gave me a powerful shock that sent me sprawling, but I knew a big alarm like that would be what drew the guards to us. We heard the bandits soon enough, charging down the tunnel with blood on their minds, shouting all the obscene things they planned to do to us.

"You were saying about fate being on our side?!" Sunny exclaimed, readying his guns.

"Now now, that doesn't mean it's gonna jump in and save the day," Sidewinder said, his face painted with a shaky grin. "Sometimes fate is more in the role of moral support, you know?"

"How comforting," I murmured, struggling to believe we'd make it out of this alive while simultaneously preparing for my last stand. I bit down hard on my trigger, feeling its foreign taste and strange texture fill my mouth. I wasn't going to die here. Not so close to my goal. And it seemed fate agreed, because at that moment the airlock behind us screeched and squealed, great locks churning and hydraulics hissing as it swung inwards. Light spilled into the tunnel as if Celestia herself was standing right behind us. And still, I didn't look back.

I could see by the look on Ruby Red's face as she turned the corner that it was to our benefit. I wasn't the first to fire, but fire I did, and she only escaped by telekinetically hurling another poor soul in the path of our bullets, and as he fell she was already gone, retreating with the rest of her ilk.

"Ruby Red, you bastards!" she screamed behind her. **"You better watch yourselves! I'll be waiting!"**

I felt no peace. Just a strange sense of detachment. Friendly voices welcomed us into Bucklyn Station, but as I turned to our saviors, I felt no real sense of accomplishment. In the space of three days I'd become a killer and a not-so-savior. I'd been an assassination tool and a debt dodger, a fighter willing to leave a poor Diamond Dog to die. I alone had faced down an anomaly and resisted its effects long enough to save lives I felt mattered. I felt battered and broken inside, and as Bucklyn opened its

gates to us, I just staggered in, wobbling past the guardponies and their big weaponized railcar. I nodded curtly to their captain, brushed aside any attempt at questioning. I wanted a bed. I wanted a hospital. I wanted the Rangers to be there so I could tell myself that my short, albeit terrifying journey was now done, and I could go back to tending my silly little Wall. I could go to sleep and wake up in the same room every day for the rest of my life.

Then I looked up and noticed every gun in the room was trained on me.

Chapter 7

I had given my word.

The last thing I expected to hear upon entrance to Bucklyn Station was that I'd been placed under arrest. I'd expected, perhaps a little vainly, a veritable army of friendly ponies who'd shower us with congratulations and praise for surviving such a long and harrowing trip on hoof. I thought we'd be shown to a resting area where we'd be treated for our injuries and I'd be able to show Hunter's medallion to the Rangers nearby, and that'd be the end of it. They'd know what to do and my station would be safe and sound. It seemed that was too much to ask for the nightmare that my life was turning into.

In retrospect, turning up half-dead, armed to the teeth and with a crowd of bandits right behind us hadn't been our brightest idea either.

"Weapons down, now!" their captain, a tall tan unicorn with a powerful glow around his horn snapped at us. He was levitating three assault rifles at once. We did as he said and unholstered our guns, dropping them to the floor.

"Mind telling us why we're suddenly the bad guys?" Sidewinder asked with his laconic grin. "Or do you just enjoy putting ponies in hoofcuffs?"

"Shut up!" the captain barked, though his subordinates did indeed bring forward cuffs and secured them around our limbs. "You!" he said, pointing at me and wagging one of his rifles in my face. "Explain why you turned up here like this. What were the circumstances involving your arrival?"

"We were running for our lives," I said, and revealed nothing more. I didn't want anypony to know about Hunter's mission for me. The captain didn't look satisfied and snorted, motioning for the guards to take us away.

"It's true!" Sunny Side protested. I didn't know how he was talking and struggling with a bullet lodged in his chest. Adrenaline, probably, or the shockers. "We have passports. Just check our bags! That's why your

magical defenses didn't fry us. It's why we had to break one of the wards and alert you! We couldn't have just snuck in past them on our own."

"I could have," Sidewinder said, but the captain ignored him.

"You think passports are worth a damn anymore, boy?" the captain sneered at Sunny Side. "I don't care if you're Princess Celestia herself. All new arrivals are to be detained and questioned."

"About *what*?"

"About the deaths of the Rangers and the sabotage of the eastern plantations."

A cold chill ran through my veins. 'Ranger' and 'death' just didn't go together in the same sentence. Rangers didn't die, they prevented death. They didn't just keel over and accept the end for no reason. This wasn't possible. They were making it up to try and press imaginary charges. My mind raced, trying to imagine all the problems this station might be having that they suddenly arrested new arrivals. Bucklyn was always a tense place, being a large, five-hundred strong station and one of the few places along the radial that didn't accept Hoofsa's strong pressure to join their federation. They were responsible for the defense of several of the eastern plantations ever since rumors of bandits organizing into powerful mobs came up, but they'd always been friendly to the other independent stations of the north. I couldn't understand this fearsome resistance.

I railed against strong hooves that grabbed my limbs and attempted to drag me away. "What do you mean? How could we be responsible? We've only just arrived!"

"You think those bandits were the only ones out there?" the captain snarled, pushing through the crowd to put his face close to mine. "You motherfuckers, dragging an army along behind you and smashing a protection ward. You're lucky we didn't shoot you on sight! You could be spies, bandit deserters, saboteurs! So what if you have passports?"

"From the Guild," I gasped, hoping against hope that invoking that mysterious name would give us some leverage. For a moment I thought it might work, since the captain's eyes narrowed thoughtfully and then his

horn was magically ripping open my saddlebags. I twisted in fright, hoping Hunter's pendant wouldn't be seen... but somehow all that came out was some spare ammo, my meager supply of dried foodstuffs, and the Guild passport. The captain levitated it and looked it over, probing it with his magic. Then I remembered what happened to Sweet Dreams and my mouth went dry. I waited for the captain to explode, but he didn't, and then he sneered at me again.

"So what?" he snapped, and crushed the passport under his hoof. "You might have stolen this. Either way, we don't answer the questions. You do. Now off with you and don't say another word."

"Wait. My friend, he's hurt!" I pleaded, but they didn't listen. Instead I got a blow to my face for my trouble, and Sunny Side only gasped while Sidewinder looked on.

It didn't matter how much I struggled, they strung us along anyway, into a side passage away from the main entrance. I could see, beyond the checkpoint crowded with guns and guardponies, the lights of a station, the sounds of life and hardworking ponies... I'd come so close only to be torn away from my goal right at the finish line. The sounds and sights of hope fell away as the door clanged shut behind us and we were forced into a makeshift prison. It was a little hallway with several doorways set into the walls, each secured by doors converted into cell gates. We were all tossed into one, furnished with nothing but a harsh red emergency light above our heads, sans our weapons and armor but with our bags and equipment still attached. I hoped that meant we weren't expected to be held long... unless they planned on keeping us locked up so long we'd need to provide our own food from our supply.

I didn't mind the getting locked up part, no, what bothered me was that I could no longer complete my mission due to it. I felt stuck in a cold, nasty chill that prevented me from thinking straight. A huge barrier had erected itself in my mind, made from fear and panic, and my thoughts ached to be voiced, banging on the walls while I sat and pondered and withered with depression. Sidewinder seemed more disappointed and annoyed than anything else, as he curled up into a corner and laid his head against the wall. And poor Sunny Side at last seemed to be cracking under his façade of loyal bravery. The small space was barely enough for all of us to lie down abreast of each other, and spreading his wings was impossible

without brushing the tips on the walls or floor. That above all else, I knew, was an unbearable feeling for a pegasus to have.

“Um. Wait. Wait!” he said, rearing up and putting his front hooves on the door as it was slammed in our faces. “Could I just... get a bigger room? Please?”

“Shut up!” the guards outside shouted back.

“Wait, but, it’s getting close to my flying time! I can’t miss it!” he said, a note of desperation entering his voice, but then he slumped back down and pressed a hoof to the injury in his neck. “Damn it... damn it!” he said, sounding like he was about to start sobbing, and I hurried to his side, taking out a shocker that hadn’t been confiscated. I jabbed it into his skin and he shuddered as the magical energy provided a short boost.

“Fuck, it’ll heal up right over the bullet... I’ll have the damn thing stuck in me forever... like a splinter.”

I did my best not to wince. Splinters were just... disgusting to think about. “Don’t worry,” I said, trying to soothe him. “We’re going to get out of here.”

“Doubtful,” Sidewinder muttered from his corner of the cell. “I should’ve seen it coming. Bandits *that* close to the main doors always means a blockade. And they had a Diamond Dog too, so these guys knew what they were doing. They knew how to capture dangerous animals, set up checkpoints... We probably ran right into a military lockdown here.”

“Weren’t you supposed to know?” Sunny Side gasped sharply, slumping against the door and closing his eyes. “All powerful Sidewinder taken by surprise!”

“I’d heard Bucklyn was having troubles, but I didn’t know they’d gotten this bad. I’d been more focused on not getting murdered by the Guild or by Sweet Dreams,” Sidewinder said, not sounding apologetic in the slightest. I realized that in his mind, the job was done. He’d gotten us to Bucklyn alive and in one piece, and now he hadn’t the slightest amount of loyalty to us anymore. He was just sorry that he’d gotten caught up in this mess like us. I saw his normally frazzled mane even looked more low-key,

imitating his laid back slump. He didn't even care what happened to us, now. We were baggage and now we'd been dropped. "They'll have us against a wall in a few hours if we can't prove we're honest travelers."

"You have the patch of the Stalkers," I pointed out. Sidewinder laughed hoarsely.

"Yes, I'm sure the captain noticed it, but that doesn't mean he'll let us go. Stalkers can come from anywhere and work for anypony. We have no official allegiances, so unless we arrive at a station that knows us or we're carting a bunch of supplies, we're just one more mouth to feed."

He looked at me with a pointed, vexing stare that hovered between amusement and incredulousness. I saw that he mocked my inexperience and while this time terrified me, it wasn't anything more than a minor inconvenience. His sheer indifference to how this affected me and Sunny Side, not to mention my home station, lit a fire of anger under my heart. Still, I chose to keep my mouth shut.

"You're a kid, Lockbox. A little colt, and your friend there isn't much better. You've fought bandits and monsters, but you don't really know the kind of darkness that exists out there in the Metro. I have stories, you know, of all kinds of horrible things that happen to distant stations, and you... you have no idea what it's really like. You've only just got a taste, you see? You've never even seen the surface, have you? I have. I've seen what kinds of horrible things lurk up there. I've seen the sun break through the clouds and blind ponies that it used to comfort. The Sun is a monster all its own. I've seen the twisted woods and tangled vines overgrowing our fair city... turning it into a forest of death. I've seen monsters that I don't even know how to describe... I've followed rules like 'don't look at the Victory Spire' and 'never go into that north facing house' without even knowing why, because anypony who broke them disappeared without a trace. What's worse, I've seen what ponies do to each other down here."

He crawled forward, his chains clinking together, his grin spreading over his face like a mold. I grew distinctly uncomfortable and wished very much to no longer share a cell with him, now that his debt was repaid and he didn't appear to have any compunction about murdering us. But no, he was strange, but he was too smart for something like that, wasn't he? I hoped so.

“Have you ever watched a mother trying to sell herself at the dockside? Or sell her *children*? Have you ever seen the Monarchy bear down on a Republic station, showing no mercy and using commando units to slaughter innocent ponies whose only crime was living under the wrong government? Ever been through tunnels so dark and so wretched you’d rather you were walking on corpses, just so you’d know you weren’t the only pony in the place? I have. I’ve done all that and I can tell you, you’re not cut out for this.” His grin turned into a leer, as if by trying to make myself realize how stupid I’d been to come here meant some kind of victory. If anything it just made me mad.

“So what?” I asked, plucking up unexpected courage. “I didn’t know what I’d be facing out here when I left home. So what? Does anypony? All I know is I’m still alive and I have a job to do, and if I wasn’t going to finish it I’d be dead already. Since I’m not I’m going to keep trying.” The anger at my unfair situation, and the fact that I still hadn’t gotten proper and fair medical treatment to my wounds that aggravated me without end, drove me to greater heights of eloquence. It was strange how easy it was to stare down my problems when I was too frustrated to care about how big they were, and Sidewinder was the only pony around I could easily vent at. “So you’ve seen horrible monsters and been through horrible things. Am I supposed to feel sorry for you? Impressed? I’m supposed to curl up into a ball and cry? I’ve seen some pretty terrible things myself, and I don’t think I need you to remind me how terrible they were!”

Sidewinder didn’t answer. I supposed I’d made my point, since he just snorted at me and fell back into laconic, unfriendly silence. I hadn’t felt very brotherly towards him at all, even after what we’d been through, and this just drove the point home that he was still a very strange and unfamiliar pony who I wanted very little to do with when push came to shove. And when the argument passed, the anger abated with every heartbeat, bleeding out of me like sand between my hooves. Whatever I said, Sidewinder was right, and all I’d been doing through my outburst was try to put on a brave face. I knew exactly how unprepared I was for all the things that could go wrong, and I was still haunted by the face of Sweet Dreams, and the blurred, vague silhouettes of those bandits I’d put down without a second thought. All to meet Rangers who apparently had died before I even got here.

Merciful Celestia, I'd *killed* them. Just killed them all. The realization, the reality of what I'd done and its awful permanence dropped onto my back. I sagged under the weight and collapsed onto the ground, staring straight ahead. Killed them. I, Lockbox, had killed at least three ponies in as many days, just by traveling from one station to another. My head bowed under the weight of the shock. I didn't know why I dwelled on it so much. It was like gum that I refused to swallow, and kept chewing on it. I hadn't quite accepted the fact yet, and now I tortured myself as memories replayed through my head, over and over. The sight of blood dribbling down from Sweet Dreams' eyes, the indistinct shadows that collapsed lifelessly as my gun pointed and flashed at them. Like a colt's game, really. Point, flash, and they fall over. Then they never get back up again.

I felt very grateful I hadn't seen their faces and that my mind had been clouded by the terror and anxiety of the moment, the blinding flush of combat dulling my conscience until later. I didn't think I could handle even more faces to add to my nightmares. My mind began to go blank as time stretched on and on, and my thoughts droned in my head. I killed them. I didn't want to. I had to. I was angry at myself and snarled my old justifications. They were evil, they were obstacles, they were hostile. What would Hunter have done? How had he managed to cope with his first dead ponies, and knowing that his own kind was definitely out to kill him if he got in their way? Was I any better, since I'd mercilessly cut through them and then run, not even affording them the slightest dignity?

No... no, in the end, I supposed I wasn't any different. I'd held some small dreams of being a hero like my idols Hunter and the rest of the Rangers. But now I knew what that cost. What Rangers and Stalkers and all those other heroic ponies faced when they went into the dark unknown wasn't just monsters. It was their own souls, being warped and twisted by the terrors they endured. And I'd been infected by the same taint.

If it's hostile, you kill it.

This was all too much for me. I wanted these heavy thoughts to stop weighing in on my head, but they wouldn't go away. I felt rather sick, now that I really had time to dwell on what I'd done. All I heard was the gentle, labored breathing of Sunny Side next to me, and the clinking shuffle of chains along the floor as we shifted our weight.

“Damn it,” Sunny Side whispered, and I knew he was clenching his eyes tightly shut, aching just as I had for a little bit of rest and freedom, trying to imagine he wasn’t in a cold, crowded, cramped cell and he wasn’t bleeding. Just the chance to spread his wings. My heart went out to the poor pegasus, but there was nothing any of us could do. Or at least nothing I could do. I was pretty sure Sidewinder had fallen asleep and didn’t really care.

“It’s... it’s like an itch,” Sunny Side whined. His wings shivered, twitching in random directions. They yearned to move and be free. “I can’t scratch it. It’s worming around under my skin... it won’t stop until I can fly freely... make it stop, Lockbox! I can feel it. I can feel it getting worse. I can feel how... how small the room is. I can’t breathe...!”

“Yes you can,” I said firmly, unable to dredge up the patience to deal with a panic episode. He’d have to keep it together, because getting worse would bring the guards, and the guards would bring batons and hooves... “You *can* breathe, Sunny Side. Just keep doing it. Deep and slow, now.”

I settled in next to him, but gave him space. He curled up against himself, huffing and puffing.

“You know,” he said, “I never thought this’d be how our trip turned out. Heh... when will I ever learn to stop listening to your crazy plans, Lockbox?” Abruptly the door swung open and the captain stepped inside, pointing a hoof at Sunny. The pegasus sprang up, looking almost hopeful, if a little vacant and tired, and without a word two guards came to escort him out.

“Sunny Side!” I said, and he gave me a glance over his shoulder. In a single moment we said all that friends needed to say when they were worried for each other. Then they closed the door and their hoofsteps faded away.

So long Sunny Side.

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One of the things I liked about being in prison was that it gave me a lot of time to think. Thinking helped me pass the time. It was either that or

twiddle my hooves and roll around on my back over and over, which was what Sidewinder was doing while muttering to himself inanely. He said something about “fabulosity” but I wasn’t listening. I took some amusement from watching him act like a brain-dead colt until the sight suddenly grew disturbing and awkward as it dragged on and on, and I leaned against the wall to try and get some relief from the cool concrete for my headache. I wondered, dully, if I was starting to come down with something. Getting sick in the Metro was a terrifying experience; lack of valuable antibiotics and proper nourishment meant even simple illnesses could turn deadly. That and no station was going to risk a breakout. Cramped quarters meant sickness spread like wildfire, and had to be quickly and ruthlessly stamped out before it got too bad. If I did get sick, it meant a quick trip to quarantine... and then slowly dying there, or being shot out of mercy and burned in the tunnels. I’d seen it happen to several good ponies... usually the elders, or the children. The children were the worst. One day they were running and laughing, and the next they were struck down, unable to even see their parents too often for fear that they would spread it to the rest of the station. Exiperia, being relatively small, was almost draconic when it came to preventing epidemics. I’d seen the Rot and common colds destroy families before I ever saw my bullets tear apart another creature. Mercifully my father had never forced me to stand quarantine guard during a suspected breakout.

My ribs ached, and my leg throbbed.

Such things didn’t help my already black mood. I turned my thoughts back to home and the mission I’d undertaken to protect it. Somehow I’d ended up just short of my goal, due to Sidewinder not keeping up on current events and me being too stupid to try and collect some news or gossip, either from Sidewinder himself or from Draft station before we’d fled. The Rangers were dead. I didn’t want to accept it. I couldn’t until I got real hard evidence, until I saw the bodies for myself and investigated their little safe house. So that wasn’t up for debate either.

Ah... the Dark Ones. They loomed large in my mind now that I was here, stuck in the surreal red glare of the overhead light. What were they, I wondered? I didn’t know anything about them except that they were violent and unstoppable, which basically put them into the category of ‘every monster ever encountered in the Metro. Sixpence, who I recalled with a twinge of anger and regret, had said they looked like the Princesses, which

led my thoughts to them. I'd never seen the Princesses except in old, faded photographs or little charms, and those were generally stylized and without the vigor and detail that only a living creature could possess. The photographs, I knew, did them absolutely no justice. They were the apex of pony perfection, living representations of the ultimate pony form. As mares, they were more than beautiful, they were *perfect*. So heart-stoppingly wonderful and elegant you wanted to turn away and grovel in the other direction, because they didn't deserve your meager affection and devotion.

At least, that's what the stories said. As ponies in general, they were wise beyond comprehension, drawing on thousands of years of wise and benevolent rule to provide a guiding hoof to every crisis. But if they were so perfect, I had to wonder, why had the world gone so awry? I didn't know much about the history of the War itself, and it often surprised me no pony did. I knew most of the War's roots lay in the sudden, inexplicable disappearance of Princess Celestia from the public eye. It was her absence during the War that led to many ponies assuming that she was alive and well somewhere, or perhaps watching us still from the afterlife alongside her sister, Luna. Luna had led Equestria alone through the dark days of the War, but without her elder sibling's experience (or at least that's what I supposed the reason was), she'd been unable to contain the situation. Bit by bit the world slipped out of her grasp. According to what history we knew, there was nothing but chaos in the final days, with fell magic being hurled at will, dragons scorching the landscape and flying on unprecedented rampages, armies roaming almost at random. Our world had gone mad, as my father said, with greed and lust for power. And now it was dying.

Whatever the reasons, both Princesses were clearly no longer present.

"Sidewinder," I said out of the blue.

"Huh?" he replied.

"What do you know about the times before the War?"

"Not much to tell the truth. But it's a sad tale for those who know it."

"Tell me. We don't have much else to do."

“Celestia died, the world went to war, Luna couldn’t hack it and died when Canterlot went up in flames.”

Ah, but that was the version everypony heard. It was like finding a song sheet from long ago consisting of only a single verse. I wasn’t satisfied. Besides, there were varying accounts of Celestia’s absence during the War, and death was the least popular rumor.

“That’s it? And how do you mean, Celestia died? She’s a-”

“Deity? Heh, unlikely. No pony really knows why she left. Some say she went to fight a great evil, others say she foresaw the War and abandoned this world to make a new one. Others still say she just up and left because she’s a goddess, and well, what reason does the Sun have to care about a world that scorches itself? But if she was alive, don’t you think she would’ve come back to help us? Or her own sister?”

I couldn’t argue with that.

“So, what exactly caused all the strangeness? I can understand the wasteland, the radiation... but have you ever seen anything like that anomaly that chased us?”

“Eh, I’ve heard about it, seen one passing by... but it was much less impressive. It was a ball of living lightning that attacked anything too noisy. I saw it chase down a pack of thumpers and zap them all, Celestia’s honest truth. I don’t know what causes them, but I’ve heard they’re something like mad magic. The energy of the world lashing out now that order is gone or some shit. Basically, we’ve been naughty children, and this is the world giving us a nice long spanking.”

He paused, staring up at the ceiling.

“I knew a mare who liked spanking, some pony of influence in Felabelskaya. Not *being* spanked. No, she’d give it to *you*. She had this paddle-”

“The anomalies, Sidewinder. What about them?”

“Told ya, I don’t know nothin’ about them. But I can tell you some other strange things. Stories are what keep things alive here in the Metro, even if they aren’t accurate. Stories about the old world... stories you can go to bed with. And then... well, there’s the other kind.”

He turned towards me with a strange, almost scary grin.

“Almost all my stories are the other kind.”

“Tell me,” I said. If I was going to try keeping history alive, I might as well delve a little deeper into the mythology our own Metro created.

“I once helped a caravan run a tunnel blockade down south, near Ponyopolis. It’s a strange place, between Felabelskaya and Connemara. Those Monarchist bastards were withholding vital medical supplies, trying to force Connemara to submit to their authority. Hoofsa helped us; this was before they jumped in bed with King Pleiades... Gave us maps to an alternate route... through the secondary line between Felabelskaya and Grazeld, and then we’d swing south again to get to Connemara. We had to escort a pony-drawn cart, couldn’t go too fast since we didn’t know what exactly would be there. We got about halfway through, no problems, when suddenly the lights start fizzling, and our only unicorn with us, he starts going crazy. His horn lights up like the dickens, and the rest of us aren’t doing so well either. I felt something in the air around us. Some kind of static, like from a radio, except it was in your head. It wasn’t a good feeling at all... heavy, almost, but intangible. The unicorn is going nuts, crying about how he can hear it, and how ‘they’ are so sad. It’s really freaking us the hell out, so we just try to book it in the cart, ‘cept by now the lights are almost completely out except for the unicorn’s horn. Our gems and lights were just going out, like they were being drained... or the light was just going somewhere else... The static, it was getting terrible, to the point where I couldn’t hear anything, and I had to shake up the others to keep ‘em moving. And I’m hearing voices, too, except they aren’t coming from the other ponies. Just whispers at the edge of my senses. They said things that I didn’t understand and felt I didn’t want to know about. It was knowledge that tantalized and taunted... but I knew was deadly. Then our cart-puller trips and hurts his leg, nearly sent us all onto the ground, so we have to try and untangle the stupid idiot while things just go straight to hell. Another guard snaps and starts shooting down the tunnel at nothing, then

the unicorn flies off the handle. He's sobbing by now, his hooves are out... reaching for something or kicking it I don't know..."

I noticed him trail off, lost in the memory, his eyes glazing just a bit. It took a small prod from me before he kept going.

"It was like... like he was trying to keep something from coming near him... or... trying to keep it from going away. Something only he knew... then he jumps off the cart and takes off towards Grazeld, screaming about something. I dunno, the static was too loud to hear. So he leaves, and then our only light's gone. Me, I'm thinking this is it, we're dead, a few more seconds and some ghost will come and choke the life out of us. Then there's this bright flash, and it's over. Just like that, everypony's back to normal. We're scared as hell, but we're alive, just without our unicorn. We get to Grazeld and everything's fine. Except, when we asked about the unicorn, the one who jumped off the cart... the guards at Grazeld didn't see anything. Not even the ones at the five hundred meter mark, furthest out. We were close enough that unicorn should've come tearing right down that tunnel minutes after he left us. There are no side passages in that tunnel. No holes. Nowhere he could've gone. He just vanished. I never saw him again. Just like the ponies who look at Victory Spire on the surface. Or the ones who go into that north facing house... needless to say, after hearing our tale and how shaken up we were, Grazeld blew the shit out of that tunnel and sealed it up but good."

A pall settled over our small, poorly-lit cell, and I found myself wishing I hadn't asked about it. Would that anomaly we encountered have swept us up too? Sucked the life from us, obliterated us from existence like that poor unicorn, and who knew how many others who disappeared without a trace in the Metro? It was a long while before I worked up the courage to ask about anything again.

"Victory Spire?"

"A monument on the surface, built during the War in honor of Princess Celestia. It's a statue of her on top of some obelisk in the middle of Ponypal Park. Don't look at it."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Anypony who does vanishes."

"Just like that?"

"Well, you know, they'll walk towards it, vanish into the forest the park now is, and never come out again. Like they're in a trance or something. I never saw it happen personally, 'cause I never looked at it, and when I ran with other Stalkers we always went in groups so we'd snap each other out of it if some damn fool looked up. Best just to avoid the place entirely. If we had the tech, I'd try shooting it down, but of course... can't look at it."

"What about the north facing house?"

"You'll know it when you see it. Don't go in. No matter what. Something else is already inside it."

"What? A magical vortex that kills you instantly or the like?"

He leaned forward and fixed me with a strange, faraway gaze.

"Only thing I can tell you that I can be completely honest about, Lockbox? This world is strange. It's gone crazy, lost control of something deep inside... that's why being crazy like me is a good thing, you can get instincts and feelings you never thought about before. You can't fight what never makes sense. It's not even chaos, because chaos is some kind of order that came unraveled. This? This is *brokenness*. Something is very wrong with our planet and I can't even begin to tell you how truly fucked we all are. Mysteries are the only things that survive here... like you."

"Me?"

"Of course! You come all the way to Bucklyn through monsters and mayhem, you can survive an anomaly screwing with your head... you're not a trader, and you're not tough enough to be a wanderer, though you've got the makings of one. No, Lockbox, you've got something hidden... something you keep deep inside... don't look worried, I like that in a pony! You hold onto that secret, boy. It's one of the few things you'll ever own that you can say is truly yours. It's not like these other ponies, no, it's all secrets and *lies* with them. But you... ho ho, I can tell you've got something worth keeping your mouth shut for."

He smiled thinly. "Secrets are fun. They give a little drama and tension... can't have all the exposition at once, you know? Gotta have that one thing that drives you..."

"What drives you?" I asked.

Sidewinder didn't get a chance to answer, and I'm pretty sure he wasn't going to anyway. The door opened and the guards came again, this time pointing at Sidewinder. The rust-colored stallion stood up on his lanky legs and chuckled.

"My turn to be alone with the boys, huh? You want me to sweet talk you, or do you like to do it in silence?"

They punched him in the face and dragged him out. I was alone.

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My mind swam with terrifying possibilities of what they'd done with Sunny Side and Sidewinder. I fretted they'd been put up against a wall, and wondered if the same was coming for me. It wasn't too big of a leap of logic to assume we were nothing more than bandits who'd deserted their posts, or posing as spies and saboteurs. In a moment of bored bleakness I pondered what being shot in the back of the head would feel like. Would I hear the gunshot? Would I feel the heat of the muzzle flash? I wondered what it would be like to simply be dead, moments after living. How quickly did death come when it was so close and so powerfully delivered? Had the ponies I shot and killed died quickly? I hoped so, fervently.

I shut my eyes as the red light from above dribbled down out of Sweet Dreams' eyes. The tinny echo of my breathing in the small space reminded me of her screams, so I held my breath for a while.

Trapped in the middle of that awful, rotten cell I couldn't do anything but think and think some more. What Sidewinder said disturbed me. I'd heard tales before like his, of strange happenings wiping out whole stations and leaving no survivors, of terrible haunted tunnels and cannibals that stalked the shadows. Even my home station now had something terrible to deal with, those monsters the Dark Ones that couldn't be killed and struck

us down without laying hoof on us. It wasn't the first time terror rose up from the Metro's depths to overwhelm an entire station, but it was the first time I'd had to face the real, credible threat. The stories and night terrors were always plaguing some other faraway station, or at the very least some guard post at the four hundred meter mark. Now I'd stared right into the face of terror and come out alive. I wondered about the anomaly, and about the burst of strength I'd gotten to fight back the lurkers. Was the world really still speaking to me? Did I, as an earth pony, really still have a connection to magic that helped us, instead of striking out in a tantrum like the anomalies? Was my sensitivity and visions something I'd been ignoring up to now, or was I just going crazy? I couldn't tell, and didn't know if I wanted the answer either way.

I chewed on the idea that I'd already failed my home and that in a few short hours... or minutes, or days, or however long I'd been in here... I'd die, and then everything I'd accomplished so far would be for nothing. I didn't want to think about it, but my thoughts had nowhere to go in this small, red-lit space. Over and over I pondered how the Rangers could be dead before I even got here, or if the story was even true. Had it been Sixpence? Some new enemy I hadn't encountered? They couldn't have fallen prey to the bandits that plagued this station. And why had the bandits chosen now to start growing more bold? Who was this Auntie Buttercup I heard about back in the tunnels? And just what the *hell* was I going to do about Hunter's message? I didn't know where other Rangers were. The only clear goal left if they were gone was Ponyopolis... and getting *there* was a suicide mission.

I lay on my back, staring at that damn red light. It helped me focus, but then it began to grate on my nerves. I asked myself the same questions over and over but without solid information I could do nothing except dwell on my own lethargic despondency. That and the ache in my ribs and my leg. I found myself concentrating on that more than anything else. I didn't dare remove my clothing to look at the bandages, certain that my injuries were aggravated beyond repair at this point. The pain reminded me how fragile and vulnerable I was. How utterly helpless I'd been rendered.

I was in limbo, my mind slowly being stretched out by the endless monotony of timeless waiting, my thoughts spread thin until even thinking about twitching a hoof took an eternity. Flicking my tail was like a revolution of the Moon around the Earth. Having a coherent thought meant wrestling

my mind into submission, smacking it around and demanding it start working again for me. I didn't know how much time passed. The small red light continued to glare at me. The cramped walls hadn't gone anywhere. I wondered if my home was dead by now.

Then I noticed the small sliver of light coming from under the door. It wasn't a natural kind of light, but rather it was pure white, like the entire hallway was glowing. It crept over the floor and touched my hooves, and where it lay I felt a warmth spreading through my veins. Something big and wonderful and inviting was on the other side of that door. I lowered my head and tried to peer underneath, but the light was blinding. I put my ear to the door and heard nothing outside except the faint sound of wind.

I put my hoof on the door and pushed. It swung open.

A Dark One stood before me, silhouetted by the light.

Time... Lost...

My bowels loosened as I staggered back against the wall of my cell. "No, no!" I shouted at the monster, whose passive red eyes stared at me like charnel omens. "Stay back! Get away! *Help!*"

Seek... Truth...

It began to reach for me without moving, not so much advancing into my cell as *expanding* into it. The massive wings opened up, welcoming me, beckoning me. I clawed and raked the concrete with my hooves, shaking my head, in denial of the certain death that advanced on me.

"Get back!" I shouted. "You won't get me! You *won't!*"

If the Dark One heard me, it didn't heed me. Its blackness swamped the walls of my cell, the massive body filling up the entire space. I felt a great pressure on my head. In my *mind*. The static from Sidewinder's ghost story invaded my thoughts, tearing them asunder. I kicked and squirmed, but the Dark One continued to envelop everything around me. My world became its cold, dark flesh, my spirit sliced to ribbons by its powerful magic. I felt myself dragged to the door, towards the light. It snaked over my skin, which crawled with an awful feeling. It caught my fur aflame, and I

felt my own flesh sizzle and crack. I struggled to stay away from that gaping, yawning abyss where terrible things waited for me, huge and incomprehensible. The static had reached a fever pitch, gnashing against my ears.

“No! No, NO!” I screamed, struggling against the inexorable pull and the fall that would come afterwards. “Stop! I don’t want to! *Please!*”

The Dark One abruptly smacked me across the face.

“The fuck is wrong with you, boy? Snap out of it!”

And then the Dark One was the guard captain.

“Get up! We have some questions for you.”

I jumped up and hugged him, and got another punch in the face for it that made my nose bleed. I didn’t care. At least it meant I was alive and well, and still back in my small, safe, dark world.

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My captors were surprisingly gentle, but perhaps that was because I decided to walk on my own instead of waiting for them to drag me. I was herded back to the main part of Bucklyn Station, where I saw it was much like Exiperia, except that it was larger and more militant. The ponies here looked busy and sociable, if a little grim, and at least I couldn’t see too many beggars. But then, that was likely to be expected at a large, well-organized station like Bucklyn. Transients and traders were numerous here since we were on the radial, the great circle that stretched all the way around the Metro and connected every major line. Hoofsa, or the Hoofseatic League, or most officially the Hoofseatic League of Ring Stations, was the premier trading power in the station and ruled most of the radial with an iron hoof, but Bucklyn had not yet bowed to their pressure. The wealth given by being on the radial and being the so-called “guardian” of the northern stations and the eastern plantations gave them the means to buy electricity in amounts I had previously only dreamed of. Seeing wires and lightbulbs dangling all over amazed me, and I felt more than a little overwhelmed by being in a station that was so big and so self-sufficient.

We soon made a turn down into other hallways, taking us away from the hustle and bustle of the main station. Our destination was a large, open area with several rusty shacks and wooden construction making up most of the “rooms.” These were apparently offices of administration, as I noticed several busy ponies rushing back and forth in and out of them. The only actual rooms of the original Metro were reserved for the high ranking ponies, as was custom. I was led into one, apparently the office of the unicorn captain, which was brightly lit and crowded with papers, reports, and equipment. The captain bade me sit down at a chair in front of his desk, which struck me as odd. I thought I’d be strapped to a table and ruthlessly tortured by now.

“Sit,” he said, and his voice brooked no argument. I dropped onto the chair, grateful that it was large enough for me to drop onto my stomach like a regular pony. The captain seated himself across from me and put his hooves up on his desk.

“Before you ask, your friends are alive and well,” he began. “They told me, with some persuasion, their stories about where you come from and why you are here.”

Had Sunny Side given away my true goal? If he had, then the next question was probably going to be where Hunter’s token was. I resolved never to give it up.

“You obviously aren’t bandits. The pegasus is too soft and Sidewinder... well, fortunately for him a few of our ponies here were able to vouch for him. That just leaves you, Lockbox... apparently, the son of Cinder Block of Exiperia.”

I stiffened in my seat. I always knew my special position in Exiperia’s hierarchy would come back to haunt me in numerous ways, and now half of Bucklyn would know my name and face before the day was out! If Sixpence was still here, I was doomed.

“That much is... true,” I started carefully.

“If it is, then I apologize for shutting you up like that. Obviously your father has sent you on some important business if you came all this way alone...”

"That much is... also... true," I agreed again. The captain regarded me carefully.

"Okay, how about now we cut the crap?" he snapped, slapping his hooves on the desk.

"My name is Meadow Sage. You call me Captain Sage. Call me Meadow and I'll rip your damn head off. I'm already pissed as hell that I have a stupid-ass colt and his buddies mucking up an already bad situation. You aren't here on business for your station. You wouldn't be traveling with a Stalker otherwise, not if you're really Cinder Block's son... and forgive me for saying so, you're scrawny enough to fit the part."

I fidgeted self-consciously. I wasn't that physically imposing, but come on... I was an earth pony. Surely that gave me a bit more bulk than the average pony? Not compared to Meadow Sage, of course, who could probably punch me clean through a wall. Perhaps he was just used to belittling ponies.

"The fact of the matter is, you're a mystery I don't need to deal with right now, but at the same time, I can't just let you go. You're a suspect, and all of your friends are too. Not very likely suspects, mind. But we have rules. Ever since Aunt Buttercup and her cronies started setting up shop here to avoid the Monarchy and the Republic... well, you encountered them, didn't you? And somehow got through them alive."

He steepled his hooves. "But the question still remains... what do I do with you? A strange colt, from a friendly station but on some kind of journey. Sidewinder claims total ignorance and your friend remained tight-lipped. So. What can you tell me?" He shrugged.

I considered my options. Bucklyn wasn't an unfriendly station, per se. Then again, every station was unfriendly as a matter of course, and just because Bucklyn didn't take all my supplies and shoot me on sight didn't mean they were going to help my journey. And keeping my mission, if not my survival, a secret was paramount. Sixpence could come after me again, but at least entire stations wouldn't be working together to stop me if the conflict stayed between him and I. If I told Sage I was going to see the Rangers, I'd have to explain things, maybe even show them Hunter's

talisman, and that was beyond unthinkable. It'd waste time, as well. If I said nothing, they'd keep us here indefinitely until the situation with the bandits, the plantations, and the mystery of the slain Rangers was resolved. That could take days. Weeks, even. Again, time I didn't have to waste.

In the end I had to get to Ponyopolis. That was my mission. I'd have to sacrifice a little bit of secrecy, but-

"Well?" the captain asked. He had no patience for my space out moments. Then inspiration struck me.

"Ah... well, I'd been assigned to a goodwill caravan that was supposed to carry helpful goods and supplies to Draft Station, and would then continue on to here to gather supplies for Exiperia." I felt rather guilty, having not considered the fate of our former comrades since I'd been dumped off the cart by Sixpence.

"Yes, yes... they came through here, reported what happened. Your pegasus friend mentioned them. Your caravan had assumed you were dead. In fact, they left a few hours before you came here. The problem with that is, boy, why did you keep coming here when you could have just waited at Draft for them to return?"

Oh shit. I hadn't thought about that. Fortunately, I kept my composure, since the unicorn captain didn't immediately leap on my silence and call it a lie. So lie I did, right through my teeth.

"Another part of our mission was to try and gather news and information from other stations about what's happening in the rest of the Metro," I explained. "Also I had been carrying a proposal to the eastern plantations regarding new trade deals... they love our tea, you see. My father wanted me to do it, and obviously the caravan hasn't... perhaps they wanted to try and report my supposed death as soon as possible."

Sage regarded me with a level, quiet stare. I did my best to meet it. There was only the gentle murmur of noise from other ponies outside the door. At last the captain spoke.

"Quite a journey just to complete a request."

“From my father. To help my home. You know how important it is ponies keep their word down here.”

Sage shrugged. “Well, you came at an auspicious time, then. I suppose you’ll want to help us see what happened to the eastern plantations, since you were going there yourself, and... being such a dependable pony.”

Ah, now he wanted to trap me just like the Guild. I knew there were probably representatives from them skulking around the station... and this captain was no different. He was testing me. If I refused to help and complete my “mission,” the veracity of my tale was even more suspect. Then again, it was an excuse to get out of the station, find the Ranger base myself to discover their fate, and then find a way to wiggle out and get into the Metro proper. I had no idea what I’d do after that.

“Of course,” I said, and then I knew I was stuck. I’d just given my word again. My conscience was going to nag me the whole way.

“Well, in that case, you can provide the ponypower we *don’t* have. I can spare my sergeant and two others to keep an eye on you and help get past the bandits to the plantations, where you will then ascertain the true nature of what’s going on out there.”

“You have a powerful military,” I pointed out. “Those bandits are good, but not great. Even I was able to come through alive.”

“Through sheer luck and grit, and that’s not something a lot of ponies have here in the Metro,” Sage answered gruffly. “The fact is I can’t just throw my guard ponies at this problem as much as I’d like to fix it ourselves. I’d have to try and have them coordinating strikes on tunnels we rarely use and the bandits know well. They could get lost, they could get ambushed. You know what kinds of terrible things are out there. The beauty of this bandit situation is that they aren’t actually attacking *us*. It’s our caravans. We could just arm up every railcar that goes out there to the teeth, but that’d bleed us on the home front. Hoofsa is always looking for ways to prove that we ‘need’ their protection. Those bastards said they’d wiped out every bandit in the northeast sector, but here we are practically under siege... they’ll use this to their advantage as well.”

"If... I'm here," I began, "and you're telling me all this... then you must think I can do something about the bandits too."

"Well, well. The boy has a brain. I suppose you need one to have made it this far almost on your own. The most important thing is to reestablish contact with our plantations. If we figure out what went wrong there, we might be able to create a plan to deal with our station's troubles." He reached behind himself and pointed at a map on the wall, and a long arm of the Metro that stretched northeast. The eastern plantations weren't too far away, but going through the tunnels could take too much time. Days, even, to check all the stations. "The plantations are these four stations outside the radial, on the Green Line: Compass, Heron, Perchervoskaya, and Ponyevskaya. They were blessed with being right nearby the aboveground train stations and the agriculture brought in there, stored in underground basins that were mostly protected from the bombs. Good soil and other supplies were scavenged by Stalkers over the years, and there you go. But now we've lost contact."

"Why can't Otzark Bulvard check it out?" I asked, pointing at the station next to Bucklyn's on the radial, the gateway to the plantations. It was under their control, since a little flag with Bucklyn's symbol had been pegged on it.

"Otzark was always a small station, a transit point," Sage explained. "It's been mostly abandoned due to harassment from bandits, and they claimed that access to the plantations has been... cut off." He shrugged. "The ones who made it here told us a lot of things, from disease to monsters to living shadows."

My stomach began to twist.

"And now the bandits have made going to check almost impossible. We could just force our way through, but who the hell knows how *that* would turn out? The western tunnels are still open, but that won't last very long since the noose is tightening."

"So all underground access is done with. That just leaves..."

Sage fixed me with a very worrying look.

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“You’re insane. You both are!” Sidewinder exclaimed, trying to get up. Sunny Side grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back down. We were seated in a private area of the guardpony quarters, with bowls of mushroom soup sitting before us. I’d barely touched mine, though Sunny Side had eaten all of his and ordered another soggyweed sandwich. Sidewinder was too busy being obstinate to eat. “Why do I have to be part of this crazy scheme?”

“Because otherwise they won’t let *any* of us out,” I said simply, gesturing with my hoof. It felt good to finally be able to move it without pain; as a gesture of goodwill Meadow Sage had all of our injuries treated at the station’s infirmary, and now at last I could move without feeling like I was going to fall apart at the slightest provocation. Of course, that gave Sage considerable leverage over us; we owed him big for getting free medical supplies. “I gave my word I’d try to help, and this is the only way we can even get out of the station without risking another gunfight.”

“But the *surface?!?*” Sidewinder complained. “Just for this? You might as well go back to Ruby Red and ask her to sling a few slugs into your backside, and pretty please finish you off with a few free blunt instrument blows to the head!”

“Sidewinder, I know you have no obligations to us,” I pleaded. “But this situation seems worse than even you anticipated. Bucklyn is being squeezed by a noose, and we need to help them find a way around it.”

Sunny Side seemed sullen and apprehensive, staying quiet. He hadn’t agreed to this new madness, but he hadn’t objected either. Though he’d gotten treated just like me and had more than a few rounds in the flight room, he didn’t look comfortable actually going up to the surface for any reason. But we didn’t have a choice. I needed to know what happened to the Rangers, and this was the only chance I was going to get anywhere near their base, which was in a hidden part of the metro near the plantations. I’d managed to slip that into conversation with Meadow Sage.

I didn’t know what I’d find there, or if I wanted to. I just knew that for some reason, momentous events seemed to be piling up around me, and

all having something to with my mission, or preventing me from completing it.

“So what, then? You’re gonna go up there and find the reason for all this, stop it, be the hero?” Sidewinder sneered. “Face it, Lockbox, there are no heroes in the Metro. There’re just ponies with values, and the guns to back them up.”

“I’m not trying to be a hero,” I countered, and it was true. All these other problems were coincidence, and my home took precedence. If it was possible to slip through Bucklyn unnoticed, I might’ve just done that. I hadn’t even meant to go *this* far. Sixpence and the strange things that kept happening around me were the only reason I’d convinced myself to go the extra step. “I’m trying to figure out how to protect my *home*.”

“My home is wherever I park my little rump,” Sidewinder replied, crossing his forelegs. “This is a stupid idea, Lockbox. Nothing is this important; to throw away your life for a station that owes you nothing, the very idea!”

“We all have that little something that drives us,” I shot back. “This is mine. If it’ll help me get out of here and figure out what’s going on, then I’m going to do it.”

I looked at Sunny Side, who rubbed his temples.

“I’m not going to say this is the *smart* thing,” he said. “But we have something very important to do, Sidewinder, and... and it wasn’t supposed to *be* like this,” he insisted.

“I know,” I said. “I know...” Everything was coming down on my shoulders at once. I and Sunny Side were the only ones outside Exiperia who believed in the Dark Ones, much less seen what they could do. If we didn’t get to Ponyopolis... or the Rangers... with Hunter’s message, then the consequences could be lethal.

“Fuck!” Sidewinder said. “Well, you’re not getting me to agree to this. I can find my own way out of here.”

He left the room, but I didn't know if he'd truly abandoned us. I was grateful for the breathing space anyway; I needed to talk to Sunny Side.

"So are we going all the way?" he asked, taking a grudging bite of his sandwich.

"To Ponyopolis?" I answered, dropping my chin on my hooves. "I don't know, Sunny Side. I really don't. All of this seems over my head. The Rangers were supposed to be here, and now they aren't, and... we're the only ones who seem able to do it. Only the Rangers will understand what this token means and what Hunter found out. No other station has the means or even the will to help us out..."

He groaned and shook his head. I began to grow angry that even Sunny Side, my loyal friend, was starting to doubt me. There was no hubris involved here. I was the only one who could do this right now, and that was fact. Sixpence tried to kill *me*, Hunter had chosen *me*, and according to Sidewinder I'm the only damn pony in the Metro who can brush off an anomaly! I'm the only one with the token, I'm the only one... I felt angry and stubborn realizing that I was the only link between Hunter's request for help and the only ponies in the Metro who *might* answer the call. Therefore, all the hopes of survival for my home rested on me. That thought's weight crushed me, but at the same time it drove me to stand up. Perhaps there was a little pride involved. I wanted to prove to myself and all these dark shadows that stood against me that I *was* equal to the task. But all alone?

"Sunny Side, I *need* your help," I admitted quietly, looking at the table. "You're the only pony in this place I really trust. The only one I *can* trust. I need you as a friend."

"Neither of us have ever been to the surface before," he pointed out.

"Neither of us ever fought through an anomaly before," I answered. "Or even gone farther than Bucklyn Station our entire lives. Neither of us fought bandits and crazy ponies and hordes of mutants almost single-hoofed before."

"I wasn't trying to dissuade you," Sunny Side said, giving me a sad smile. "You're right, Lockbox. You're right. This whole mess has come down on our shoulders, for better or for worse. And damn it if I'm not going

to live up to my name and see the good side. At least we're alive, and well, and we've got a path. We *do* need to figure out what happened, and why the Rangers aren't here to meet us. We owe these ponies for giving us medical treatment."

He flexed his wing, which looked better than ever. My ribs still felt sore, but my hoof was much better. Those supplies and the expertise were expensive. I wasn't about to be known as a debt dodger at *two* stations.

"Before we even think of going farther, we *have* to figure out what killed the Rangers," I decided. "That takes precedence. Then we discover what happened to the plantations... I hope the two aren't related, or this could be a very big problem."

I thought about what Sage had said. Shadows, rats, and other terrible things were the only reports they got. Who knew what those fleeing from the plantations had seen? I wondered if perhaps the Dark Ones had stepped up their campaign. Wiping out four whole stations with many ponies living in each didn't seem beyond them from what I'd seen. I patted Sunny Side on the shoulder, giving him a smile.

"But it'll be nothing we can't handle."

So now we had a new course. Solve a mystery and perhaps help a station, if only tangentially. And then... depending on what we found... I faced a very long, very tough journey ahead. As I lay on a bunk in the same room, staring at the ceiling (I didn't want to go out in public much, just in case Sixpence was prowling around) I realized that all I'd been through had been put a prologue. The last several days were nothing but a little test. It wasn't until now that I'd really be plunging into the thick of it. The entirety of the Metro could be at risk if the Rangers and Ponyopolis didn't get this message *now*. If going through with this meant finishing my mission more quickly, then that is what I would do.

In my mind's eye, the yellow pegasus stood before me, beckoning. I stayed where I was.

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I checked and rechecked my supplies. I'd had to half my cartridges to buy essentials that Bucklyn couldn't spare freely; namely a medical kit that included five shockers, precious, precious ammunition, and a couple spare filters just to be safe. Gasmasks, of course, made it impossible to use the war reins unless they were militarized and created with special hard points that allowed you to fit a gun trigger inside. Magical charms created an airtight seal and you were good to go, as long as you didn't mind having a trigger in your mouth the entire time. It was worth the discomfort. Fortunately, since I'd been in the militia for a short while, my gasmask included these features.

"So this Aunt Buttercup," I mentioned to Sage as I prepared myself for the journey out into the tunnels. "What's her story?"

"I've only heard the name. Some bandit bigshot, probably connected to one of the crime syndicates down south... or she got kicked out and set up shop here on the northern arc. She supposed to be the one in charge?"

"I heard her mentioned by the bandits we went through, but that's all."

"I'll keep an ear out," Sage said, and peeled off to finalize preparations. We'd head out by way of a heavily fortified side tunnel called the Orange Line that led to one of the older, ungated entrances: a simple stairway that led down to the old remnants of the Orange Line. We would be joined by three members of Bucklyn's guard force: Maple Leaf, Ray Drop, and Sergeant Wind Chill, a tough as nails earth pony who, though only as old as Sidewinder, looked like she was ready and willing to shoot anypony and anything in the face if they looked at her funny. I noted her dull grey pelt and icicle cutie mark, and decided if she gave orders, it was probably best to follow them. According to Meadow Sage she'd been up to the surface only twice, and she was the leader of our desperate little expedition. I kept her at arm's length, knowing that more than anything else she was there to shoot us if we deserted.

I kept my hopes for survival well reserved.

I noted there were no unicorns in our group, which made sense. They were essential to the working of a station and could be its powerful defenders. Ultimately, us "less magical" ponies were more expendable. I also saw that Ray Drop was a pegasus, with a dark green pelt and vivid

purple mane. She possessed a cutie mark of a golden heart on well toned hindquarters she loved to show off by the way she walked. That she was a pegasus gave me some concern, as the possibility of going feather-brained was within every flyer, whether they admitted it or not, and actually being on the surface was a temptation for any pegasus to just fly away. She was, however, a much more sociable pony than Maple Leaf, a taciturn, beige earth stallion who said little and mostly just followed us around while Ray Drop tried to make us feel welcome. Mostly, I ignored her, but she latched onto Sunny Side, presumably because they were pegasi and he *didn't* look like he was about to go insane.

“So,” she purred at my friend, trying to look cute and failing due to her clunky barding. “How ‘bout you show me a little ray of sunshine?”

“Um,” said Sunny Side.

I was reminded very suddenly of Starry Gaze, alone and friendless back in Exiperia. Soon they’d get word I’d fallen off the cart and died, and Sunny Side disappeared going back for me. She’d take the news terribly, I imagined, as would my father... my father. I clenched my eyes shut as I thought of him, and guilt pricked me once more that I’d lied, and now I wouldn’t even be able to go back and explain to him what was going on.

“Ooo,” a voice said next to me. “We’ve got ourselves a little fellowship here. Trying to navigate the perils of the Ring, no less...”

It was Sidewinder.

“You’re coming?” I asked, honestly surprised. His presence wasn’t welcome or unwelcome to me; we didn’t owe each other special favors. But that he was here would significantly raise our chances of survival, assuming he didn’t ditch us.

“It’s a chance to stretch my legs,” he answered, fitting his gasmask on. “Either that or I sit in a cell for the rest of forever. Besides, I haven’t been up to the surface in a while. It should be fun! Or lethal. We could all die, you know, in new and exciting ways no pony has even imagined before! And I’ll get to blame it on you since you agreed to this. It’ll be interesting either way.”

“Lunatic,” I muttered.

“Don’t take the Princess’ name in vain, kiddo,” he muttered back and went to stand at the heavily fortified gate. We’d travel down the tunnel a ways before coming to a side tunnel that to a simple stairway to the surface. Up there lurked death of all kinds, and the eternal winter that gripped the land around Stalliongrad. Up there was a city full of crumbling buildings and strange ecosystems and horrifying magical anomalies that tortured the landscape. Monsters the size of houses and all kinds of danger.

Up there was our only way forward.

“Let’s get a move on!” shouted Wind Chill as she headed for the gate and waited for the rest of us to gather. We trooped on out through the gate, passing the rows and rows of sandbags and outward facing metal spikes, designed to funnel attacking enemies into an easy to hit cordon. We traversed the magical traps laid down, and I saw the protection wards sparking in their alcoves. The tunnel was long, straight, and forbidding, with no outstanding features save the typical river of pipes that swam over the walls.

“This entrance isn’t bothered much,” Ray Drop explained, fiddling with the guns on her saddle. “We get the occasional wandering mutant, but the entrance is too small and uninteresting for anything big to get in... we keep it open for Stalkers, mostly.”

“Heh. Hehe. You guardponies always did strike me as ‘back door’ kinds of ponies,” Sidewinder snickered. I rolled my eyes.

“Get your gasmasks on, all of you!” Wind Chill ordered, slipping hers on.

Trying to calm the shaking in my limbs, I slid on my gasmask, feeling the harsh metal and plastic rub over my face, enveloping my head. I clamped the hardpoint down over my gun’s trigger, and the outside world was closed off. Magical charms tightened the seals until I could literally feel the difference in air pressure between my skull and the rest of the atmosphere. I took a deep, sucking breath, and I could hear the strained, rough noise of air squeezing in and out of the filter. I was ready. We all

checked and rechecked our clothing and barding, since one false step could open up seams for radiation or the bitter, cold air to bite at. I'd been given a spare coat for the journey, and I prayed that it would be enough on the layers I already wore. At least they let me keep my helmet and flak jacket, slightly scuffed and damaged though they were.

"You know this is crazy, right?" rumbled Maple Leaf. "It's lunacy. I'm a guard pony. I'm not a Stalker. We should just send the Stalker!"

"Yes, send me," Sidewinder agreed. "Except according to your captain, I'm required to do this for free, or I rot in a cell or get put against the wall for 'spying.' Excellent motivator, he is. Bucklyn is fucking desperate to be reduced to this, and the rest of you can't claim a single supernatural event between the three of you! Even Lockbox here has a better chance of survival than you all. Are you all that soft, one bandit blockade and Hoofsa breathing down your neck, and you resort to throwing away expendable ponies on suicide missions?"

"Shut up, both of you!" Wind Chill snapped. "We won't be up there any more than an hour or two, we have a straight line to walk on and then we can get back inside. It's not that far to the next entrance."

"I wonder if we'll sight any demons..." Ray Drop murmured.

"Demons?" asked Sunny Side, eyes wide under his mask's visor.

"You'll know them when you see them," Ray Drop said ominously. "A Stalker party brought one back once, claimed they'd killed it. Ugliest son of a bitch I ever laid eyes on."

"They fly," Sidewinder said. "Better than pegasi. Some say they *are* pegasi. Or...were, rather. Watch out they don't mistake you for a long lost cousin and try to mate with you, ha!"

Soon we came to the platform that led to the surface. It was a cold, desolate place, with ice and snow covering almost everything. Old benches frozen solid still sat near the platform's edge, forever waiting for a pony to plop down in one. I looked up at the stairwell, through which streamed the pale light of the moon and gusts of snow and ice. They shimmered beautifully, but my geiger counter began to click every so often.

“Yeah, there’s always that,” Ray Drop explained. Her voice sounded like she spoke through a faraway radio through her gasmask. “If we’re lucky to live long enough we might even get cancer.”

“It’s been too long since there was a good case of cancer,” Sidewinder answered, staring up at the exit. There was a flash of lightning, but I could barely hear the thunder. “That’s a good sign your life is so comfy it breaks from living too long.”

The heaviness of my breathing grew the closer I stepped to that sacred portal, which shone with an unearthly light. Even in the middle of the night, I could see with clarity thanks to the moon. I was struck by a pang of lonely sadness that I’d never be able to truly enjoy my city in the full light of day.

“Here we go,” Sunny Side said, fluffing his feathers. I stared up at the portal, through which our old city still existed. It was a grim, terrible sight. The stairwell was choked with snow and ice that we had to force our way through. Icicles the size of my limbs hung down like the teeth of a great beast vomiting us up into the harsh world above. At last we broke through, squinting as lightning flashed above. Heads bowed against the wind as if forcing us to give homage to the ancient legacy above, shoulders hunched and ears already freezing from the cold, we entered the Dead City.

Chapter 8

Welcome home.

I froze in place as we came into the open. The city of Stalliongrad lay bare before us, magnificent and wretched. There was an almost unlimited amount of space here, stretching all around me, and all of it filled by dilapidated, worn out buildings. Around us were apartments and post offices, police departments and office buildings, all of them now worn away to pitted, grey sameness by acidic, poisonous rain. We stepped out into the streets, which were choked not just with debris but with strange plants that were slowly turning the city into an irradiated forest. The knobby, claw-like branches of alien trees poked through the facades of buildings, and twisted tangles of shrubs threatened to block our progress at every turn. All around us huddled creaking monuments that gaped at the dead world through broken windows and cracked doors. It seemed the entire earth was covered by these ancient skeletons, the broken bones of a once proud city, and from my perspective this was Equestria. An entire country filled by sad, empty coffins. Even older buildings, topped by cupolas and once painted with vivid reds, greens and blues were now cracked and shattered. The symbols of the Princesses, crescent moons and great shining suns, had fallen from the rooftops and littered the streets.

Above all else, I was astonished at the state of the sky. In my pictures the sky was blue and heavenly, falling ever upwards into Luna's vast night sky. Here too the sky loomed overhead, but instead of gentle blue there rested a low ceiling of brooding black and grey clouds, from which a drizzling sleet of rain and snow fell. Lightning forked every so often, frightening me. I'd never seen real lightning before.

"Nothing like a good stroll around town. Least there's no tourists this time of year," Sidewinder muttered, but I barely heard him. No pony told me to hurry up, and I didn't move for several long moments, staring at the vast, dead landscape. Even the Metro, with its infinite recesses and miles of twisting tunnels, seemed tiny and unimportant compared to the huge mausoleum of Stalliongrad. Such a tiny bastion of life, threatened on all sides... right in the middle of a vast and desolate wasteland where nothing

but monsters thrived. And below their talons we scuttled, eking out our pointless lives...

"Lockbox, come on!" I barely heard through the wind, channeled by the labyrinth of buildings and broken windows into a howling funeral dirge. I hurried after the others down the east facing street, filled with terrible visions of being lost and alone in this place. In minutes the snow and wind would cover our hoofsteps and nopony would ever know we'd even passed by. We tread where no ponies had for years on end. We weren't standing on our own soil anymore, but trespassing on land that ponies didn't belong to and weren't welcome in. I finally began to turn over in my mind the thought that this was the new world, and it was a horrid place to live. Was this really the land I'd once fancied saving, restoring? This broken and sad wasteland wasn't the Equestria I'd seen in my visions, the one I dreamed about...

We marched down the street in a straight line, with Maple Leaf bringing up the rear and Sidewinder staying in front to guide us with his expertise. I noticed Wind Chill stayed close to him, and her gun barrel was pointed more towards him than the surrounding buildings. Ray Drop ceased her friendly conversation and kept her eyes on the street. Maple Leaf seemed the most disinterested of the group. It was Sunny Side who worried me.

He stared almost continuously at the ominous grey sky, and I saw his eyes darting back and forth through the foggy visor of his gasmask, tracing the lightning. I wondered if he even felt some instinctive urge to use his magic to keep the weather neat and tidy, as pegasi did in days of old. I nudged him to help keep his mind in the present.

"This is it," he said quietly. His breathing was deep and labored through his gasmask, in awe of the utter devastation. "This is Stalliongrad. I... I had no idea."

"Nor I," I answered. "This is... beyond anything I'd imagined."

"Cut the chatter!" Wind Chill hissed. "Celestia knows what's lurking up here!"

As if on cue, Sidewinder held up a hoof and we all rushed to the side of the street, sheltering under rusted carriages and the husks of old cars, long since stripped of anything remotely useful. Thankfully, there were no skeletons... my fanciful imagination lent me visions of whole buildings still full of irradiated, mummified corpses. I huddled against a tangle of street sign and crashed sky carriage, finding himself right behind Sidewinder. He pointed up ahead, and at a nearby crossroads I saw my first glimpse of the many monsters that inhabited the surface.

There was a whole pack of them. They reminded me of wolves, which I'd read about in old books, but they had a vaguely reptilian shape to their long, lanky bodies and snake-like snouts. I then realized I hadn't *seen* them arrive, they simply seemed to show up out of thin air. I peered closer and noticed that only now, against the dull grey of the buildings, were they visible through the wispy, snow-white fur that covered their bodies. It seemed to me snow was drifting off of them, but on closer inspection I saw that it wasn't snow at all, but motes of light. These creatures were infused with magic, which confused their silhouettes and gave them the appearance of a wavering mirage. Sidewinder was perfectly still, and I followed his cue and barely even breathed. I didn't know what kinds of senses these creatures had, and the smallest breath would bring them down on us, all flashing teeth and merciless claws. If I even sucked in air too loudly I felt that would alert them to our presence, even at this distance.

A deep, bellowing howl reached our ears, and the beasts before us lifted their heads, snuffling and nipping at each other. They began to move away, towards the direction of the howl. I had trouble following their movements as magical energy bent and distorted their shapes into vague wavering blobs, a perfectly confusing camouflage. Soon the crossroads was clear.

"This area isn't safe," Sidewinder said, relaxing only after several minutes of silence went by. "We will need to cut through the buildings."

"We should stay on the path," Wind Chill retorted. "Straight down this street. It's the quickest way."

"You want to be right in the middle of an army of mutants with nowhere to hide, be my guest," Sidewinder growled. "Me, I give a fuck about my life, so I'll be going *that* way." He gestured towards a building at

the crossroads the wolf monsters once occupied. Its entire front face had collapsed, creating a large ramp of debris that led to the third floor. “I remember this area, traveled it a few times. There’s an indoor route that skirts around a creek, then an open gate to-”

“We will stay. On the path,” Wind Chill hissed. “If we don’t then we risk getting lost, and if we’re lost, then we’re *lost*.”

“At least you understand that much,” Sidewinder grumbled, looking up and down the street.

“Fine!” he snapped at last. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you. Any of you fuck up and it’s open season.”

“You seem to forget who is working for whom,” Wind Chill growled, but Sunny Side nudged her flank to get her attention.

“This isn’t the time,” he said quietly. Wind Chill growled at him, too, but as we were all anxious to get going, she complied. I felt we should heed the Stalker’s advice, but I also remembered I didn’t trust him and had very little reason to. Cautiously we threaded our way down and through the street, hemmed in on both sides by the ancient, crumbling buildings. Distant howls and hoots permeated the air alongside the ever-present moan of the wind. The snow and rain continued to drum down upon us, making me feel the chill all the way down to my skin. I wondered if it was possible the “demons” Ray Drop mentioned would hunker down to weather the storm. Unless of course they enjoyed hunting in weather like this to better stay undetected...

On both sides the buildings might once have been apartments and office buildings, but I couldn’t tell what true purpose they served from how broken and cracked they were. The paint had long since faded and peeled away. Twisted metal and fallen lamp posts were everywhere, and even the ground itself had suffered upheaval. I saw little hills and raised areas in the street where the asphalt had split into ditches and crevices, and some of the buildings stood askew upon their mountains of rubble. The sheer destructive power of the bombs and magic unleashed on Equestria had ripped the ground asunder. Here and there half-frozen puddles of radioactive sludge steamed and sizzled.

This is Equestria now, I realized, and the thought struck me like the lightning above. *This is our land. It's like this everywhere... nothing but snow and emptiness and sad, slow death.* I took a step forward, realizing for the first time just how terrible the War had been. This wasn't all stories and anecdotes; this was the harsh, dark reality. Stalliongrad wasn't just beaten, it was *dead*. All of Equestria was *dead*. From here it even seemed the entire world was well and truly *dead*. It was only then in those all-encompassing moments of realization that the finality of the War's end came down on my mind, pressing in on me, taunting me. The pictures of old Equestria I'd seen were not a contrast to this ultimate destruction, they were another world entirely. How could friendship and harmony rise from this?

"Hold," Sidewinder said, and we all stopped again. "Look up there."

I followed his gaze far upwards, to a tall spire visible between two fallen buildings. I feared it was the fabled Victory Spire, but there was no statue of Celestia, just a tall decoration. I didn't see anything at first. But then a shadow moved near the top, and the spire suddenly sprouted wings. Long, bat-like wings I could see the size of from here, and then they began moving as a sinewy tail trailed out behind them. Another pair suddenly erupted from off the roof of the building at the base of the spire, and a large winged thing shrouded by shadows launched off, circling the spire. It buzzed the creature that had claimed the top as its roost, making it leap away. I watched in amazement as the two winged horrors jockeyed for position in the sky, while more of their foul brethren joined the aerial duel, startled by the commotion. I couldn't even tell which was which, so frenzied was their activity, and that section of the sky was claimed by a whole flock of the beasts, snapping and screeching at one another. Then finally, for no discernible reason, the crowd of wings and shadows dispersed, and another had taken the place of the first, twining itself around the spire, hugging its contours until it was almost imperceptible from a distance.

"That's a building you definitely want to avoid," Sidewinder said grimly.

"Demons?" Sunny Side wondered. No pony answered. As we started down the street again now that the tumult had passed, I began to understand my city was now a foreign and hostile place. Pegasi didn't belong in the sky with those creatures.

"They flew so freely, like they owned the air..." Sunny Side muttered. I and Ray Drop gave him a worried glance.

Struggling through the snow that seemed to be following us, I began to wonder if Wind Chill had deliberately chosen this route because she was more used to it and wanted us foreign ponies to suffer, since it was mostly our fault she'd been chosen as our custodian. I knew I'd much prefer being inside the buildings, as ominously silent and empty as they were, if only it'd help us avoid the biting wind and rain. My breathing became more labored, and I could even hear the loud breaths of my fellows as we pushed on gamely, hugging the side of the street that sheltered us more from the wind. The deep, rasping sound of my own breathing gave me almost as much fright as the emptiness outside. I had no idea what was lurking just outside my field of vision.

I maintained a watchful gaze, as did we all, but Sidewinder seemed to know which howls were dangerous and which were just the distant keening of monsters marking their territory, so our progress remained thankfully steady. Every so often we'd have to pause and hack our way through shrubs. We stayed on a straight line like Wind Chill said we would, and soon we'd arrived at a street almost completely blocked by the fallen corner of a six story building, and the rest of it was choked with thick, woody vines. I saw the empty floors inside, all once full of furniture and living ponies. Had they been in there, I wondered, when the bombs fell? Was that desk I saw sitting in a corner on the second floor occupied when this city was scorched?

"We should be getting close," Wind Chill said as we navigated the broken piles of concrete. "Kuvoz Street is coming up..."

"Can't see a damn thing," Maple Leaf complained. "My visor keeps fogging up! Blast this snow."

"Don't jinx us," Sunny Side warned, but too late. The wind suddenly began to pick up again, blowing gusts of snow right into our faces. My gasmask protected me from the brunt of the shower of shining particles, but nonetheless I was struck blind if I looked straight ahead.

“Move to the side! Don’t lose sight of each other!” I heard Sidewinder command. We sidestepped to an alcove created by the rubble of a large building, and me, Sunny Side and Ray Drop huddled as far as we could into the meager shelter. Outside I saw the world become nothing more than a blanket of white and brown, the buildings nothing more than vague silhouettes. The howling became unbearable, and I lowered my cold-numbed ears against my skull. The speed with which the storm had blown up shocked me. I almost jokingly asked him to clear up the clouds, but I couldn’t even see his face through the mask.

Outside our meager shelter, I heard what sounded like a gunshot, and then my eyes caught some kind of movement. First it was there, then it was gone, a bulge of solidity in the shifting wind. I didn’t see what it was. Perhaps one of the snow wolves from before? I couldn’t tell.

The wind passed, and we crawled out of the alcove, our leaders appearing from under a destroyed carriage.

“Everypony all right?” Wind Chill called down the line. Sidewinder was with her. I looked behind... nopony else answered. We only had time for a cursory search.

Maple Leaf was gone. Nothing remained except his medical bag. Wind Chill didn’t want it going to waste, so she threw it over her back and we moved on.

/-/-/-/

“I love saying I told you so,” Sidewinder said with a leering look from under his gasmask, “so... ‘I told you so.’”

“Fuck you!” Wind Chill snapped as we squeezed into a doorway partially blocked by a fallen pillar. “Maple should’ve fucking stayed with us. He knew the rules. We all did.”

“If we’d gone with my path, he might still be here. We’d have shelter from this blizzard. I think it was a storm ghost that did him in... they love to hide in this stuff.”

Behind us, the wind raged again. I had no wish to go back out there and face the invisible monsters that'd stolen away Maple Leaf. Poor thing probably hadn't even known what hit him... or at least, I hoped he hadn't.

Ray Drop took it stoically, as did we all, but perhaps to alleviate the fear that spiked whenever a pony vanished, she began to speak. It seemed like instinct, to try and distract oneself from fear immediately after a terrifying incident. Her voice echoed in the small entryway, which seemed to be a lobby for a once opulent business. I saw a receptionist office and a hallway that led to the back which we walked into, entering the comforting darkness of the building. The lack of light and the closed space reminded me of the Metro, and with a glimmer of darkly humorous irony, I appreciated that.

"I never thought Maple Leaf would get done in by a little walk," Ray Drop murmured, sticking close to me and Sunny Side. Wind Chill was predictably too cold to maintain conversation with, as she was too busy fuming over Sidewinder being proven right and losing a pony under her command to talk. It didn't help that Sidewinder kept wheedling her with whispered comments under his breath. I didn't understand them through his mask, but I could tell they irritated the mare. What was his point? Did he just enjoy pointing out glaring failures in other ponies, like he'd tried to discourage me in that prison cell?

"He was always a strong pony, Maple," Ray Drop continued, filling the silence with her voice, which wasn't unpleasant. I kept my thoughts to myself. Was this wise? Were we all going to die up here? Our only chance was to trust that Sidewinder wouldn't abandon us and Wind Chill wouldn't lose sight of our route.

"You all seem like strong ponies," Sunny Side said. Ray Drop smiled (I think, I wasn't looking).

"Well, everypony has to be strong in the Metro," she said softly. "I have a sister, Cherry Pie... she runs one of the ammo shops in Bucklyn. We're the only ones left of six. The others perished from the plague. Hard times, when we had to grow up supporting each other..."

"My father..." Sunny Side began, and then trailed off. His father had been murdered by a scoundrel who didn't appreciate do-gooders calling

him out on thieving from our stores. My father had all the thief's legs broken and left on the surface for the mutants.

"I'm sorry," Ray Drop said in a whisper I barely heard, but the conversation sparked some of my own memories.

I didn't know what exactly happened to my real parents. Obviously they'd died in some way, or figured I was too much of a burden and dumped me in the nearest inhabited station. My father said he'd found me as an abandoned child in a station that'd recently been hit by a mutant attack, and none of the survivors bothered to take me in. I didn't dwell on it much. The truth was out of my grasp.

"It was a while ago," Sunny Side said. "Like you said, ponies have to be strong... I think that's why I joined the militia. So I could be strong for my station."

"A noble aspiration." Ray Drop's voice was soft, and not just for the sake of being quiet.

"Oh, look what we have here!" Sidewinder said cheerfully, entering a small side room. It was empty except for an old desk, smashed by the body of an earth pony who'd been driven through the table. His entire front had been ripped open and feasted on, his belongings scattered across the ground. I saw the flag of Stalliongrad on his shoulder marking him as a Stalker. His gasmask's visor had shattered, giving us a good look at his frozen, blank expression.

"Poor devil," Sidewinder muttered as he went right to work stripping the body of anything useful. "Where there's one, there's more. Check the other rooms, and for Luna's sake stay in sight of each other."

"We're wasting time!" Wind Chill growled. "We have to move, there's no point rooting around in a building for dead bodies!" I had to admit she had a point, but didn't voice my opinion. I was too busy fidgeting from the ticklish feeling I got in my side.

"Yeah? Just thinking ahead," Sidewinder said. "Just one minute, all right? It takes a bit... oh, an extra filter, thank you brother..."

“Piece of shit,” Wind Chill grumbled.

“Ignorant bitch,” Sidewinder shot back. “You walk around, take a stroll through the park, and you think you can order me around...”

“Five minutes!” Wind Chill hissed. “Then we leave.”

The tickling on my side got worse. It felt like something was buzzing inside my saddlebag. I began to move away on the pretense of checking another room.

“Sunny Side,” I said, giving him a nudge, and I headed for the stairs at the end of the hall, with my friend trailing behind me. Something told me to go... *up*. I didn’t know what it was, but the feeling was there, and it was definite. The buzzing in my saddlebag seemed inaudible and intangible to the others, but for some reason I felt it directing me. It wasn’t controlling my actions or my thoughts, more like... a nagging. A touch at the edge of my senses.

“Whoa, whoa!” Sidewinder exclaimed. “Stay alert. The beasts like to hide in upper floors.”

“I’ll be careful,” I said over my shoulder, but Sunny Side took the lead regardless, as he had more experience with such things. He pointed his Mule up the stairs. Ray Drop stayed behind to poke around the lower floor and watch Wind Chill’s back. I tried not to focus on how empty the Stalker’s eyes had seemed, like he had never been alive at all. Were Celestia and Luna really waiting for us in the afterlife? Was that dead pony now in a better place? I wondered and hoped... but there was no way to know. I followed my friend up the stairs, noting the third floor flight had been destroyed, rusted and rotten away until it collapsed. Floor two was the only one available to us, but as we came up I noted the buzzing radar in my head was satisfied. I looked around, feeling light-headed as Sunny crept forward, shining his light into all the dark corners. There was nothing... save a scrabbling noise on the floor directly above us.

We dropped down and froze on our bellies, staying stock still. For several long moments there was nothing but the sound of our raspy breathing through the mask filters. I noticed I couldn’t even hear Sidewinder’s muffled speech as he rooted around, looting his Stalker

brethren. The noise didn't return, and very slowly we stood up and began to move again. We didn't dare say a word to each other, Sunny Side because he was being careful, me because I was distracted. Something pointed me somewhere, teasing me at the edge of my perception. As Sunny Side swept his gun and light down the hall, I peered at a small corner where something glowed on the wall. It was an arrow, pointing down the hall. Fascinated, I moved towards it and scratched it with my hoof several times. It must have been a magical marker, because it wasn't affected by my touch, and its glow was undimmed. I looked towards Sunny Side, who was still creeping down the hall in almost perfect silence, sweeping his gun back and forth. He didn't need to be bothered.

I felt the buzzing clearly now, and this time it was more of a tingle, dancing over the surface of my mind. It was coming from where I'd placed Hunter's talisman. Was it guiding me somehow? I didn't want to entertain the thought that he was communicating with me from beyond the grave, but I couldn't take the chance that this was a trap or a coincidence. Not if it was from the Rangers. Another arrow on the ceiling, several rooms down, pointed to the back of the building which had mostly fallen out. I peered out the gaping wound and found still another arrow, glowing faintly and pointing at a small room at the end of the hall. I saw no traps, but then again, having to run across a long open hallway that was exposed to the elements and to the mutants outside was a risky proposition. But the arrow pointed there regardless, and I had to get there. Something inside told me to.

Boldly I stepped out into the open, keeping an eye on the skies; it'd be one of the flying creatures that did me in here since there was no easy access to the ground. I passed old cans that littered the floor, torn from their moorings. Something had already been through here, and I slowed my progress, sticking to the wall. I crept forward, driven by the strange tingling from Hunter's talisman. Perhaps this was how Rangers communicated. Was their base hidden in this dilapidated structure? I couldn't believe my luck!

It was at that moment I felt another little pulse from the talisman. I stopped, stepped back, and took a closer look. There across the hall where it ended in a T-section was a small length of rope, painted to hide it from the casual observer. But it, too, glowed in my sight like the arrows. A trap set by Rangers to guard their safe havens, no doubt. Perhaps Hunter really was watching out for me.

I might've questioned why I was able to see magical markers all of a sudden, but the drive to keep going, to uncover this mystery, prevented me from dwelling on it too much. After all, didn't every pony have magic of some kind? Mine, as an earth pony, was just less obvious, but that didn't mean I couldn't be sensitive as far as I knew. I poked my head into the hall and saw the line led up to a log stuck through with spikes and nails. Crude, but brutally effective on anyone not wearing heavy armor, and the only ones who had that were Rangers and Monarchy stormtroopers. I gingerly stepped over the wire and followed a final arrow into a small room in the back corner of the building, where there rested an impressive assortment of tools and gun pieces amidst a mess of ammo and random equipment. My eyes widened, raking over the treasure trove. Even if I didn't know the exact value of what was here, some vague subconscious knowledge I'd absorbed living in the Metro told me I was looking at a wonderful find. But what could I use here? I wasn't a gunsmith or an engineer, and most of it looked too bulky to carry... looking at this wonderful array of valuable craftspony's tools, I felt more than a little useless that I wasn't skilled in some kind of profession. I resolved to fix that if I survived the journey home.

And yet the talisman still nibbled at my senses from within the bag. I cast my gaze about the small safe room, looking for another glowing clue. Nothing immediately stood out, so I began opening cupboards and drawers. It was then I chanced upon two things that caught my eye. First, a flashlight to replace my tiny lamp, and a map of the Metro, which was covered in notes and scribbling about different places that I didn't know about, especially where danger threatened that a regular map didn't tell me. I pocketed it, feeling somewhat guilty, but the Rangers would surely understand? Perhaps it would help me know why their base had fallen silent. Other piles of papers told me little more than movement plans, but I stumbled upon a strange little note.

Tracer,

Take this package back to Outpost 6. Hunter says it's important. Key phrase 'sweet gold terrace.'

Another quick check of the room told me the package was no longer here. Tracer had done his duty and taken it away to this mysterious Outpost 6. I put the little piece of paper in my saddlebag regardless, and took a few hooffuls of ammo and several military grade cartridges. If I was

going to all this trouble, might as well make sure I had money... But my actions gave me pause. I had believed Sidewinder was out of line and rather disgusting rooting through dead bodies, and here I was stealing from the Rangers. But to accomplish a mission Hunter had given me. I resolved to somehow pay them back.

I forgot about that once I saw the heavy jowls and boxy head of a mutant poke through the ceiling. I fired automatically and didn't stop to see if I'd killed it. A bellowing howl erupted from the floor above. Something collapsed on a table in the room as I bolted for the exit, rushing into the hall. My hooves clattered. Something's claws scrabbled, something hot breathed on my flank.

Into the hall! I tripped on the wire, falling flat on my face as I skidded into the open hall. I heard a snap, a sharp whistle and then a meaty wet *thunk*. Something screeched and squealed in horrible pain, like the sound of metal being rent asunder. I turned back, saw the beast tangled in the thicket of spikes and rusty metal as it flailed, ripping apart its own insides through its panicked struggles.

Before I even got a good look at the thing, something heavy *slammed* into me from the side out of a half-broken door. I saw a blur of grey fur and felt claws wrap around me, digging into my thick clothes. The world spun into a vortex of wild shapes as everything blurred together and went red. There was nothing but the sensation of falling through open air and then the loud thud that came with the landing, before we started rolling and skidding. Reach, reach! Fire! I couldn't do anything, everything was happening so fast, couldn't do anything except scramble and throw my hooves out for purchase. I heard a clatter of equipment and tangled limbs as we rolled down the long slab of icy debris. Something was growling right in my ear, sharp teeth tore at my barding.

At last we hit something solid and the weight on my back fell away. I snatched a piece of rebar sticking from the snow, too late, and was yanked away as something caught my hind leg, dragging me the rest of the way down. My face smacked into stone and my visor cracked, leaving a scar over the corner of my vision. I didn't have time to worry about whether I'd start suffocating. We hit the snowy earth hard. I spun and came face to face with the boxy maw of a mutant coming straight at me. Kick! I struck out with my front hooves and it went sprawling. Not nearly as durable as

thumpers, at least. My body knew what to do before my mind even registered what was happening, and as the beast stood up to attack, I greeted it with a spray of bullets to the face. I noted the new holes that sprouted over its limber body with satisfaction. Mules weren't accurate and overheated like hell, I remembered from Arsenal, but praise the Sisters they got the job done if you held the trigger long enough.

Two more, from the left and right, one standing tall, three times the height of a pony, howling... that same bellowing call I'd heard on the street and in the building. Howlers, were they? Calling more of their brothers to come get the fresh meat.

Not me. *Not me.*

The first took a few more bullets than the last, and the other was almost upon me as its cousin fell, claws reaching out as it pounced. I spun and rose on my hind legs to meet it, letting my knife spring free, one little claw against many. But I had the strength of the earth on my side.

And support from above. Twin shots rang out and the howler promptly collapsed at my hooves. My epic duel was left unfinished, and I dropped back on all fours. Ray Drop and Sunny Side had zoomed out from... somewhere... and lent their support as more howlers entered the small plaza like area I'd dropped into.

"Lockbox, go! Get across the yard! We'll cover you!" Sunny Side shouted down, and somehow I could hear the happiness in his voice. Up there was where he belonged, doing his job to the best of his ability. My heart swelled upon seeing him flying in tandem with Ray Drop.

"NO!" I heard Sidewinder's voice, choked and fuzzy through his gasmask. *"Get down! GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE SKY!"*

I didn't have time to worry about who was shouting at what. I had a pack of howlers bearing down on me and needed to run. I charged across the open area, noting in a flash I'd entered a... a courtyard, that was the word. A broken fountain in the middle, stony walls marking raised islands where lush little gardens once stood to entertain the pedestrians... all barren, or choked by the twisting, knobby plants of the new world. Across the yard, another row of buildings, what appeared to be a stairway leading

down at the rear of one... I had no intention of staying on the surface, and instinctively marked that covered stairway as my goal. Forget that something might be living at the bottom.

I heard more shots echo through the courtyard. Sunny Side swooped overhead, followed closely by Ray Drop. Nothing else stooped down to hunt them. In that moment, pumped with adrenaline, dodging a howler that leaped over a low wall and blasting it with my gun as I leaped to one side, I wondered if Sidewinder's warning was unfounded. The demonic winged beasts hadn't come upon us yet, we were far from their territory... I felt almost invincible, and thoughts of murdering ponies and the weight of my mission gave way to sheer emotion. I scrambled over a dirt island, dodged under a branch and heard a howler land heavily atop it before being hurled backwards by strafing fire from my friends.

Friends... Ray Drop was saving my life, without being asked and knowing she wasn't getting a reward. Sidewinder wasn't here, and I presumed Wind Chill was elsewhere, probably dead? I didn't know. I knew Ray Drop was my friend now, and the thought of it being too early to decide never even entered my mind. We fought for each other, supported each other.

That's what friends are for.

I saw a howler rise up from the stairwell and veered away, noticing a gate at the far end. That was my next goal. The howlers, having suffered casualties, began to peel off from their wild pursuit as I thundered towards the gate, clearing the distance in seconds. I saw a lock on the gate, spun, and with a powerful buck smashed the rusted hinges open. I came to a stop when I saw the next area was a small loading area for trucks that once serviced these buildings. All the roads back to the street were cut off; somepony would have to fly me over. I looked back for Sidewinder and Wind Chill, and saw nothing. Then, Sunny Side scooped me up and flew me over a debris pile, back to the main street we'd been traversing so far. The howlers wailed, but they had given up their pursuit, confused by the staccato bark of our guns.

"So much for indoors being safe!" Sunny Side remarked, and looked flushed and excited under his gasmask. He'd never, *ever* flown in such wide open spaces before. I couldn't imagine what effect this was having on

his psyche. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was aware I should've been worried, but right now we needed to keep moving.

"I've never been so... active before!" he said with a wide grin, looking up at the sky. "Maybe I should go higher. I can... I can scout the area and find the next Metro-"

"No!" I barked. "Sunny Side, we should get going. The Metro shouldn't be too much farther..."

"It isn't," Ray Drop said, consulting her map. "Just up the street, really. All this noise is going to have attracted more creatures. We have to get moving *now*."

"But..." Sunny Side said, fluttering a few feet away from us. He turned back to the sky, looking up. "But we... it's right there..."

A chill that wasn't the wind ran through me. All the good, triumphant feeling of the battle before evaporated. "Sunny Side," I said sternly. "We have a mission. We have a duty. We can't turn aside now. I need you back down here!"

Sunny Side struggled, shaking his head quickly as if clearing it of cobwebs. I stood frozen, ready to act, afraid to act, knowing Ray Drop was our only chance of catching him if he made a break for it. My heart thundered in my chest. In an instant he could just flap his wings and my best friend would be gone, gone...

"Sunny Side," Ray Drop said, flying up next to him and putting a hoof on his shoulder. She said something quiet to him that made him look intently at her. I didn't see what passed between them, but I had to assume it was a look of understanding, or something else that made the moment pass and reign in my friend's impending lunacy. Sunny's wing movements became less erratic and more focused, and he gently began to lower himself to the ground again.

"All right, I... I dunno what came over me. I'm okay, now."

"It's okay, Sunny," Ray Drop said, her hooves not leaving his shoulders. "We all feel it."

Ray Drop screamed and pushed Sunny Side away before zooming upwards. I turned, realized the scream wasn't coming from her, but from a huge black shadow that weaved expertly through the alleyway we'd just left. The two pegasi lurched in midair, spiraling, Sunny Side went one way and Ray Drop another... and I ran.

I had no intention of abandoning them, no. I had to get to higher ground, to shelter, fire from a protected position. I heard gunshots in the air behind me as I charged into the first building on my right, turned back just in time to see more shadows darkening the air as they swooped to the kill. I charged at a flight of stairs near the back of the room, and staggered up to the second, then the third floor. I prayed Ray Drop and Sunny Side had the sense to get inside like me. The air was thick and dusty in here, and I had trouble breathing. Then I realized it'd been a while since I'd changed my filters; they were clogged and deteriorating quickly. I looked up at a tall, narrow window as I gulped in a final breath of air and punched out the old filter, slapping a new one in its place. The fresh air I sucked in was like a gulp of cool water. Occasionally the moonlight outside was shadowed by a winged thing that growled and hissed as it passed, searching for me and my friends. I made sure not to linger near that opening. Once I regrouped with my friends we could find a basement or another sheltered alleyway and move on.

Sidewinder and Wind Chill were on their own for now.

I heard more gunshots above and hurried along to the third floor, as the fourth was blocked off. Maybe I could get to the other side of the building, find another stairwell... my mind swirled. How long had it been since I'd just tumbled down into that courtyard? A few minutes? An hour, it felt like. And already our chances of survival had plummeted. This was my fault... my fault. If I hadn't run off to chase Ranger ghosts, I wouldn't have gotten separated, the howlers wouldn't have come, Sunny Side and Ray Drop wouldn't have had to rescue me and attract the demons. Sweet Celestia, it was all my fault!

I heard another gunshot, and then a feminine scream followed by a loud crash and a creature's grizzled snarl.

“Ray Drop!” I shouted through the ceiling. I heard more sounds of struggle, more gunshots, more snarling and scratching. I hurried down the hall, turning left and right. Stairs, stairs, where were the stairs!

“I’m coming! Hang on!”

At last I found them, the damn stairs. Thank the sisters. I tripped and bumped my cheek on the way up, flailing clumsily up the last flight.

“Ray Drop! Answer me!”

Silence reigned on the fourth floor. In the dim glow of my flashlight I saw dust curling and spinning in the air, a sure sign that something big had come through here. I ran to the main hallway and looked down its length. Bullet holes and spattered blood was all over.

“Ray Drop!”

I was answered by a plaintive growl. At the far end of the hall, one of the winged demons crawled across my field of vision, staggering as it bled from many bullet holes that lined its body. I dashed forward, pulling down my trigger and holding it for all I was worth. The demon screamed in rage and pain and flinched away from my thunderous assault, disappearing down the next hallway. I followed it a short distance before I saw it stagger to a window and drop out. It didn’t take to the air again.

I spun when another noise came from behind me.

“Ray Drop.”

She lay there in a puddle of blood, beneath another window with an iron screen over it. Deep gashes and claw marks ravaged her body, her barding and clothes turned red from arterial blood that came out in gruesome squirts. The demon had torn her to shreds, but her life lingered still, and by the signs of epic struggle I’d seen, she’d sold it dearly. One of her wings hung limp and ragged at her side. The other flapped uselessly, slowly in the air, like a child attempting their first flight. The sight was so horrible and wretched I struggled not to vomit.

Her eyes, distant and pale from shock, looked right at me from under the visor. I think she said something, but it was hard to tell from the ringing in my ears.

No. Celestia, please, no... not like this...

I took a single, numb step forward. A shadow filled the window.

Another demon slammed into the iron grate and thrust a claw through, grabbing her already mangled body and lifting it clear off the floor. She was saved only by my reflexes and the iron bars that checked her progress. She whimpered and struggled vainly, hooves windmilling in the air as her remaining wing flapped uselessly.

"No! NO!" I shouted, wrapping my hooves around Ray Drop and pulling. My impotent rage was drowned out by the horrid snarl of the beast as it began a gruesome tug-of-war, with Ray Drop's torn body as the prize. Latching on to the pegasus with all my might I braced my hindlegs against the windowsill and *pulled*.

I am the earth. I am the earth.

I knew the magic wouldn't fail me. It couldn't. Not now. I had to save her. I *had* to. I didn't care how beaten and battered she was. I wasn't letting this dark world take another pony away.

I heard something tear and give. I looked up and my mind went blank with horror. The creature's toothy maw was full of Ray Drop's other, working wing. It trailed blood and tendrils of flesh as the limb sheared away from the pegasus while she squealed in pain and kicked mindlessly. Cartilage and bone snapped and crunched, and at last the entire appendage was ripped clean off. My eye twitched. I'd never seen such a macabre thing in my life. Ray Drop's scream tore into my ears. She shook her head in fierce denial of her awful torment, shaking and shivering, unable to coordinate her movements due to the sheer amount of agony she must have been in. The only thought in mind was to pull, to get her away from the window. If I did that then everything would be all right. I hauled us backwards, and even against the beast's prodigious strength, I began making progress. The earth felt so far away up here in this cold, dank hallway, but I felt it lend me strength still.

The demon needed to give only one good tug before it lifted us both off the ground again. I slammed against the iron grating, my face full of the demon's slaver jaws. It roared at me, hot breath washing over my face. I could smell its putrid stench through my filters. I felt its raw, animal rage at having its meal interrupted. I saw Ray Drop's feathers stuck in its teeth.

"F-fu-FUCK YOU!" I retorted. The beast had lifted me up to where I could get a good sight of him... and where my bullets could reach.

It wasn't an impressive barrage. I was almost out of ammunition. But three or four bullets right to the face will deter almost anything. I saw every clear detail as my last few cartridges slammed into its open mouth. Its tongue was severed, its cheek opened, a nice clean hole appeared in its neck. The demon wailed and dropped its prey, wheeling away from the window and retreating into the cold night air. I collapsed, Ray Drop fell on me, and I dry heaved into my mask. I'd done it. I'd done it. I saved her. Hadn't I?

"Ray Drop," I said, hugging her still form to me. Her blood steamed in the freezing air and felt warm on my exposed ears. "Ray Drop, I got you... don't worry... I'm gonna find Sunny Side. We're going to get you out of here."

"Don't..." she whispered. I wasn't quite sure what I was doing. She was damaged beyond repair, but I still jabbed three shockers into her system, making her convulse violently. Blood continued to spill out of her. Death hovered over us, waiting to take her. But I couldn't just leave her here to freeze like the dead Stalker.

Get out of here, a little voice in my head commanded as I clumsily wrapped her up as best I could, with bandages and the strips of her thick clothes. Just get her up and walk. If I make it to the Metro, then everything will be fine. Everything...

I struggled to get her on my back. She groaned as broken bones rubbed against each other and her remaining wing hung limply at her side. Dead weight, that's all she was, but I refused to even consider dropping her. It didn't come into my head. I focused entirely on getting Sunny Side

and then getting back below, and then we'd get Ray Drop help, and she'd be fine, and my mission could go on.

She was already dying. I *felt* her dying. Felt her warm blood dribble onto my barding through the bandages I'd so hastily slapped on. Every wobble brought more, and going down the stairs was torture for us both. I heard her voice getting weaker every time she said something, mostly incomprehensible gibberish born from shock, but what she could say both steeled my resolve and chipped away at my reserves of kindness.

"Don't... don't leave me... don't leave me Lockbox..."

"I won't. I promise," I said. I had given my word and now I'd keep it.

"Don't leave me alone... don't leave..."

"I'm here. I'll get you out."

"Don't leave me here... don't leave me Lockbox..."

"..."

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I made it back outside to the stormy, alien streets. The clouds seemed to roil and fester above, and the poisonous rain was falling harder now, chilling me. I didn't know where to go, and Ray Drop had lost her map in her struggle with the demon. I just knew I had to find an entrance to the Metro. Sunny Side was nowhere in sight. I didn't dare call out. Demons circled above like vultures, but they either didn't care about me or didn't notice. I stuck to the shadows regardless, moving through alcoves and under old awnings that groaned with the weight of snow and many years.

Ray Drop felt heavier with every step. Her blood continued to dribble out, gushing from her wounds, steaming on the air. I was a walking buffet table for any creatures that picked up the scent. I didn't care. One hoof in front of the other. I had to get inside. I had to survive.

I didn't know where anypony else was. I prayed constantly to the Royal Sisters like they were gods, dead or no, because they were the only

higher power I'd ever heard of. I prayed for Sunny Side and Ray Drop, myself and Equestria.

I can make it. I can make it. The mantra was repeated with every slow step. Ray Drop died a little more every foot I covered. I'd already failed her, but the thought refused to materialize in my head. *I can make it I can make it I can make it I can make it...*

"Don't leave me Lockbox," Ray Drop said.

"I won't," I whispered back. *I won't, I won't, I won't.* Don't mind the weight. Don't mind the blood. Don't think about it. Keep walking.

"Don't leave me here."

I began to suspect she was already dead, and her final thoughts were stuck on that one small line. One last spark in her brain that ran through the same circuits over and over, slowly receding into darkness.

"Don't leave me. Please don't leave me. Don't leave, Lockbox."

"I won't."

Was she even aware anymore? Couldn't I just... no. Sunny Side hadn't left me. *She* hadn't left me. I wasn't going to leave her. Without loyalty, without sacrificing of myself for other ponies, what hope was there for any of us? For the Metro? I couldn't leave her. I couldn't.

"Damn it. Where's a fucking hole when you need it?" I gasped in frustration.

"D- don't... don't leave me here like this..."

"Stop it!" I said, louder than I intended. Oh, Luna, I could feel her blood seeping through my clothes. I looked back. Her face was pale, her eyes dim and unfocused. She was completely covered in blood. My skin crawled. I looked around to try and distract myself. Another faceless street. Another grove of scrubs, more dead cars... but something was different here.

The street and the ground underneath had been literally ripped open, a giant gash that reached down the street and through an underpass farther down the road. Water and sludge had pooled at the bottom, and my geiger counter went crazy as I peered over the edge. The water was lethally radioactive. It steamed for reasons I couldn't see. More water dribbled out of the exposed pipes in the ground. What terrible force could have split the earth like this, like a pony ripping open a garment? I saw a street sign hanging precariously over the unnatural river: Kuvoz Street. My eyes widened. That's the one Wind Chill had told me about! I almost laughed with triumph, but I was interrupted by a howl nearby. The wind began to pick up again. Lightning flashed overhead. The hellish, oppressive landscape was quickly starting to drain my stamina and my earlier confidence was already wavering. At least the storm was keeping the demons at bay. I was so close... I just needed to find one place. A hole, a stairway, anything.

I saw movement. Something skittered through the ruins to my right. Another howl. They were everywhere. Waiting for me to stop. To put down Ray Drop and give in to my fate. I wanted Sunny Side. I wanted Sidewinder. I wanted my father and Hunter... I'd never felt this alone and vulnerable. It was an awful feeling. The wind began to pick up, and Ray Drop groaned.

"It... It hurts... hurts... I can't... I can't..." I could barely hear her breathing now.

She'll be dead soon. Drop her.

No. No. No.

You'll have a better chance alone. The mutants are tracking you. You can see them.

No no no... please, Celestia, Luna, anyone that's listening. Don't make me do this.

The wind continued to gain strength. I found an old bakery and kicked down the door, staggered along rusted aisles that hadn't held food in ages. I went to the counter and slid Ray Drop off my back, breathing heavily. Not

from fatigue. From fear that gripped my heart. Ray Drop was gone, now. She just sat there and mumbled inanely. Deliriously. Loudly.

“Lockbox!” she gasped, perhaps vaguely aware I’d set her down. “Don’t leave me! Please don’t. Don’t leave me like this.”

I put my head against the counter. My helmet clanked. I wondered if a baker might show up and give me some bread. That’d help quite a bit right now, some nice, warm, crunchy bread. I’d thought Ray Drop was too weak to keep carrying on. But she did. And she kept bleeding. She was literally being held together by the magical healing I’d smothered her with. But it wasn’t enough.

Another howl. Close this time.

“Don’t leave me, Lockbox.”

A sob hitched in my throat. I’d given my word. My word. But the Metro was still so far. I had so much left to do. And she was...

She was already dead. I turned to look at her out of the corner of my eye. The sound of my breathing through my mask was louder than any storm. My heart pounded. My head felt light and fuzzy. She’d still be alive when the mutants came for her. There was only one thing I could do.

“Don’t leave me, Lockbox.”

Another howl from outside. I slid off the counter and looked into the storm, wondered if the snow ghosts or demons or whatever in Hell’s name waited for me out there would come first. My breathing seemed louder than thunder, rasping in my ears.

“Don’t leave me here, Lockbox...”

“Hush now.”

“Don’t leave me all alone...”

“Quiet, now.”

My hoof felt like lead as I checked my gun's safety.

"Don't leave me here..."

"It's going to be all right."

I turned back to her, and looked her in the eye. She deserved that much at least.

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I still carried Ray Drop. I'd found a picture on her. One of her and who I assumed to be Cherry Pie. An old one, taken when they were young. It rested in my saddlebag alongside Hunter's talisman. I still carried her.

That's what friends are for.

I trudged down Kuvoz Street, hurrying away. Away from... everything. My steps felt light and undirected, and I didn't even lift my head when I heard more howlers wailing in the distance. Something peered at me from an open window. It never ended. It didn't matter how many monsters I killed. This place was deadly and dangerous. I wanted nothing more than to get back below to the equally dark and deadly Metro, but at least I was familiar with it. Other ponies lived there.

I could breathe without having to forcefully suck air in through a filter; that had to count for something. I had to knock out another one and replace it. I did it in the middle of the street, I didn't care who or what saw me. The whole incident seemed so far behind me now. Everything did. In this cold blasted landscape my mind could run away, far, free of guilt and conscience. I began to understand the logic behind going feather-brained. Just fly, and never stop, fly far far away, into the Sun that didn't exist anymore behind the clouds. With the pegasus' blood now cold and indiscernible from everything else, and her weight off my back, I was surprised how easy it was to forget. I just felt empty and light, free from burden, from thought... It was all behind me, a different time, forever ago in a distant life. Ray Drop? Who was that, just some vague face from a photo album? Sunny Side? He was friends with that Lockbox character, right? Sidewinder, ha, don't get me started on him! Sidewinder is a kind of drink, isn't it? I felt surprised by how little I puzzled and mourned over losing all

my friends in the space of a few hours. I didn't feel as terrible as I thought about Ray Drop, and if their ghosts visited me I felt I'd just walk away... I didn't want to think about the mission that'd been thrust upon me or the lives it'd taken just to get this far. I imagined by the time I got to Ponyopolis there'd be a long line of corpses, trailing all the way back to Exiperia. And there at the head was me, the bearer of a dead soldiers' epitaph and harbinger of the Dark Ones, of death.

I felt so alone.

I came to a large park area, and it was full of trees. Sunlight, warm and bright, filtered down through leaves so green and succulent I thought I could suck on them like candy. I smiled and touched a little bunny on the head that came up to sniff me. I bent my head down and snipped some grass with my teeth, chewing on it. I had no idea what it was supposed to taste like, but I imagined it was sweet and juicy, with a rough sort of texture.

I came to a small grove in the middle of the park, and there sat the yellow pegasus with the pink mane. She looked at me with such a gaze of sadness that all my previous feelings came rushing back. My knees grew weak under the weight of my crushing guilt and I dropped down onto my belly at the edge of the grove. My breath shook, and I realized that I still had my mask on. I didn't know what I was seeing but I didn't care to know if it was fake or real.

"You can't stay here," I heard Hunter say in my ear, whispering furtively. "You have to keep going."

"I'm sorry," I said to the yellow pegasus. "I'm so, so sorry. I had to. I had to."

She didn't say anything, just looked at me still longer with those eyes that held nothing but infinite kindness. What did she *want* from me? A fever dream, I snapped at myself. Nothing but a crazy vision! You're dying and you're just seeing something you long for. I crawled forward, desperate, wanting to know I'd been forgiven. I had been able to push my thoughts away so far, but there she sat, that symbol of the old world, and how much further I was getting away from it. I couldn't stop. Didn't she understand? I couldn't stop, my home meant everything to me, not even something like this could keep me from accomplishing my mission.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "If I could take it back I would. I'm sorry." But I knew it wasn't her I should apologize to, and the way she looked at me it was as if there was nothing to forgive. Like she understood everything and I was just babbling like a child trying to explain why he'd raided the cookie jar. I clung to a desperate hope that Ray Drop was somewhere nice now, where this yellow pegasus and all her animal friends were.

"There's danger, you have to go," Hunter said. I had almost reached the pegasus. She smiled sadly at me as I reached out.

"I didn't want... I'm so confused, I..."

My hoof touched hard stone. I blinked, and there was nothing in front of me but a statue. A broken statue of a regular old pony, cracked and pitted. My hoof dropped. A dream. Nothing but a desperate dream from the pit of my soul. Well, that's it. I decided I was going insane.

"Lockbox?"

I spun. Sunny Side stood before me, wide-eyed and shaking.

"Oh, thank the Sun!" he gasped, and rushed forward to embrace me. "I got separated by the demons. It felt safe here so I waited. I was so worried! I can't find the others..."

He stood back and noticed my lack of response. For some reason I didn't feel happy to see his darting eyes, his twitching ears and stumbling hooves. Something was dreadfully wrong.

"Where's Ray Drop?" he asked quickly.

I stared at him. He began to pace nervously.

"Um... I found the entrance at last!" he said, and his voice quivered as he pointed over his shoulder at a metal awning that hung over a deep, black hole that was the entrance to the Metro. Helpfully, giant letters that spelled the words "Stalliongrad Metro" hung over the doorway, but they were covered in ice and several had fallen off, so it looked more like "Stalingrad Met." I nodded dumbly. It was just across the street, but

something about it seemed a little too dark and ominous. The giant icicles reminded me of the demon's teeth.

"We should go inside," I said simply. "We have to go back, Sunny Side. There's nothing but nightmares up here."

"Um. Yes. But don't you think we should wait a little longer? Out here? There are no mutants here..."

I raised my eyebrow when I heard a far-off howl.

"Well, none close right now. I just think we should wait outside."

"We need to go in, Sunny," I said, very slowly and clearly. "Back home to the Metro."

"What about Sidewinder?" he babbled, turning away from me.

"He can take care of himself. Let's go, Sunny Side."

"No no no, see... I think... those clouds aren't far off, right?"

I took a step forward, noticing the way his hooves trampled the snow and his wings shivered on his back, ready to shoot open.

"I can feel the sky," he said in a hoarse, far-off voice. "I can feel it calling, Lockbox. I'd never noticed until now. It's so close, like I can touch it... like a blanket that needs drawing back..."

"Sunny Side." Another step closer. Fervent prayers ran in circles through my head. Not him too. Not him too, not after all this.

"It's still there, Lockbox! The Sun... through the clouds... and the Moon. They're there. Calling for us. It's just these clouds in the way. I can get rid of them! I just need to..."

"You need to come back!" I snapped at him. What had Ray Drop said that calmed him so last time? I began to breathe faster, took another step. He didn't seem to notice. Just another foot or so and I'd get him.

“No, no... the Sun, she needs to shine again. If we, if all the pegasi, could clear the clouds... we’d melt the white snow... the Sun’s warmth and beauty would shine on us again.”

“You’ll go blind, remember?” I growled, trying to imitate Hunter’s deep, commanding voice. “The Sun is too bright for us now. If you go up there you’ll fry your eyes... and the storm and the radiation will get you.”

Sunny Side’s wings began to spread, achingly slow. “I just need to...”

I bolted. Sunny Side saw me coming and jumped, his wings snapping open, but not quick enough, not with a flap that would’ve sent him launching into the air. Just a hop that I managed to match, catching his back legs in a snarl of limbs. I clung fast and *dug* my hind legs into the earth. I *am* the earth. Sunny Side can’t lift the whole thing!

His progress was miraculously checked. I didn’t know how, but somehow I kept him weighted, some invisible tether had wrapped around me and kept me anchored to the ground. Sunny Side could only flail helplessly, reaching for the sky with his front hooves like a

“Let go!” he screamed. “*Let go of me!*”

“No!” I snapped like a petulant colt, dragging him back with all my might.

“Lockbox! It’ll work! It’s *right there! I can do this!*” He was shouting, sobbing, hysterical. The louder he cried, the more I clung fast, keeping him from his death wish. He screamed at me and I screamed right back, dragging him inch by inch to the earth no matter how hard his wings flapped. I didn’t care how pained he sounded, it was just the sound of madness and grief, some deep instinctual well of sorrow that all our kind shared in our subconscious for our lost world. It screamed at him to set things right, like the way the yellow pegasus looked at me, but there was no way, just tears and grief and madness, longing for a home that would never come back. I wasn’t losing another friend to this aimless, screaming hysteria. Not again. Not again.

“That’s not going to work.”

“Sidewinder!” I shouted into the empty air. I’d almost gotten Sunny Side to the ground again... I lunged upwards and wrapped my hooves around his middle, bearing him to the ground while he wailed and struggled. We wrestled on the ground for the upper hoof.

“Sidewinder! Help me!” I shouted. His voice came from far off.

“It’s his choice, Lockbox.”

“Get away! All of you! Stop bothering me! *Help me!*”

“Sidewinder, I swear if you don’t get your ass over here-!”

“You’ll what? You’re crazy, Lockbox. That’s blood, isn’t it? You tried to carry somepony... Ray Drop?”

“Fuck you, all right? *Fuck you!*”

“Let go! LET GO!”

“Sunny Side... forgive me.”

I clobbered my friend in the side of the head with my hoof. I feared I’d struck him too hard, but it was through his helmet and it simply dazed him. I took out some rope and began to bind his legs. I could barely see Sidewinder through the swirling snow that cascaded around us. He looked like another statue.

“Let him go, Lockbox.”

“NO!” I shouted into the wind, louder than I’d shouted anything before. “I don’t know what drives you, Sidewinder! Survival? That’s it? You survive to survive some more? You don’t know what I had to do back there! You don’t *know* what it was like!”

“I do. I’ve done the same thing...”

“You what? Carried them? Or just gave up on them?” I finished tying Sunny Side’s wings down as best I could. “Where’s Wind Chill?”

Sidewinder looked away, to the Metro entrance.

"Where's Wind Chill?"

I heard something like a chatter of gunfire from far off. It faded on a howl of wind. The snow was coming back again in force, thickening in the air around us like fog.

"She fell behind."

I gulped.

"You know, Lockbox, you used to be a mystery, but I think I've figured you out..." Sidewinder was moving away as I heaved Sunny Side onto my back. "You're a fool. You have so many ideas locked up in your head you're confused which one to go with. You want to do so many things... the Metro is too small for your big head, Lockbox. And I've fulfilled my obligations to you twice over now."

"Sidewinder, we have a mission! The plantations... you have to help us reach them!"

"Oh, no I don't. You see, this entrance? It's been blocked off."

My heart sank. "No..."

"Yes. I scouted it out while your friend was walking around like a loony out here. Somepony blew the place and destroyed it. Got a nice little nest of snow ghosts in there now too..."

"Then... then help us find another entrance! There must be another close by."

"Yeah." Sidewinder was moving south. I hurried to keep up but the snow was closing in fast, and he was still moving, too fast and nimble for me to follow.

"Sidewinder?" I asked, at first sounding questioning, then sad, then angry. "Sidewinder. *Sidewinder!*"

The snow began to close up over us, shrouding him as he leaped up onto a pile of rubble, blending in...

No. No no no!

"Sidewinder. You can't do this! I can't leave him! Come back here!"

The snow swallowed everything. He was gone. I heard something move on my right, turned and fired, made sure that Sunny Side was still on my back. I backed up and found the little statue where I'd seen the yellow pegasus, hoping she was still with me. I huddled against it, wondering how I was getting out of this. I had to wait until the snow passed... assuming I lived through that... and then find another entrance to the Metro, get my bearings, and move on. I had to find the Ranger hideout first and foremost. I filled my head with plans while the wind filled my bones with cold.

And I listened to the howling.

"Come on. Come on, you bastards..." I whispered into my mask, making sure I stood directly over Sunny Side. I tugged the ropes around his hooves free. He seemed to have fallen asleep, perhaps overcome by the intense nature of his madness. I hoped it would pass when he woke up.

I heard steps on the left, saw something amorphous and shiny. I didn't shoot at it. They were circling me like... like sharks? I'd read about sharks, distant and monstrous predators of the sea. Once apex hunters in their environment that enjoyed circling, testing and teasing their prey to find out if it was worth eating. I'd just have to make myself too unpalatable to devour. I wondered if in our poisoned seas there existed something worse than sharks now.

"Come on. Come on. I'm waiting. I *want* you to come at me. Come on."

Another blur in the blizzard. A snow ghost or just my imagination? I continued to wait, shivering. I had to be as patient as these beasts. I touched my saddlebag, where the last memories of two friends now rested. I wasn't going to add a third.

I am the earth. It is with me. I am strong.

The first one came straight at me. An excited juvenile, maybe. I saw it coming because it left its mouth hanging open as it sprang out of the snow, panting. A burst from my rifle put it down. Magical energy flashed before my eyes as its cloak of camouflage fell away, smoking and curling up in wisps around its sleek, snow white body. I extended my knife and held my hoof up, waiting to strike. I knew the next one would be much more careful.

I was right. Another creature streaked in from the left and then darted away again, leaving me open for an attack from the right as one slammed into my side. Sharp teeth dug into my barding, heavy paws pushed down on me... and I slid to one side, but didn't collapse. I reared up and twisted, coming down hard with my front hooves, pulverizing its hind leg and burying my knife into its flank. The creature wailed and kicked me, giving me a retaliatory swipe over my face, cutting me open at the neck, but not too deeply. I felt something crack in my gasmask. The crack in my visor grew.

Another from behind while I struggled with the first latched onto my face. Buck, stomp, snort! I missed with my back kick, scaring off my other attacker for a moment, but the one under my front hooves struggled still, ripping open the front of my jacket. I lifted my head to keep my vulnerable neck clear of its snapping jaws, and continued to stomp all over the beast's chest until something cracked. The snow ghost wailed and curled up under me as I stepped over it, slashing my knife wildly as the third one snapped at my hindquarters, tearing open my trousers and scoring deep gashes in my skin. I bucked again and felt a satisfying crunch, and the savaging teeth left me, disappearing into the wind. If these things wanted to eat me, they'd have to earn their meal.

I was already bleeding, and the snow was picking up. This was going to be my last stand. Protecting my friend from certain death. I supposed there was some honor in it, and anyway I didn't think about it much. I was tired and angry. I was sad and stubborn. I just wanted to keep stomping and kicking and shooting and venting.

The wind closed in on me, driving me against the statue again as I waited over Sunny Side, who began to groan and stir. I didn't plan on stopping him from flying away this time. Adrenaline pumped through my

veins like liquid ice, making me jolt and twitch at the slightest provocation. They waited for me in the snow. I heard their growls.

“Lockbox?” Sunny Side questioned. He sat up and saw the still twitching snow ghost I’d trampled. “What the... what the hell’s going on? Where are we?!”

“Get up, Sunny Side!” I shouted over the roaring wind. I saw enemies everywhere. “You’ve got to... got to...”

I heard a sharp, loud crack and then an explosion of noise. The blizzard nearly drowned it out.

“Got to go!”

“The hell I am! What’s happening, is this... are we still outside?!”

“Sunny Side don’t question me, just-!”

I felt something touch my shoulder and lashed out... but I didn’t see the maw of a snow ghost. I saw a very pony-like face covered by a gasmask and a darkened visor. They were covered in dark, thick clothing, but bore no weapons that I could see. I stopped midway through my swing. My eye twitched. I didn’t feel done or satisfied with violence just yet. And yet I was pleasantly shocked to find I wasn’t going to die just yet.

“Come with me!” the new arrival shouted. “It’s not safe here. I scared them off for the moment.”

“The entrance is blocked,” I answered.

“No, my friend. Come! I know another route. We should hurry; dawn will be here in a few short hours.”

Sunny Side was quicker to trust than me. He rushed forward and bumped his head against my backside, prompting me to move. I wondered if he was no longer mad because the sky was covered by the snow overhead. The other pony nodded and led us back towards the Metro entrance, where I saw a little furrow dug through the snow clogging the doorway. Had this new pony just come out of there? Right when I was in

danger and needed an escape? I almost refused to believe it, and thought it was another insane vision of mine. Our new friend slipped back into the calm dark of the Metro, and we followed him gladly.

“How’d you come here? How’d you find us?” I asked. All around us was a blasted, dessicated corpse of a Metro lobby, with ticket booths and benches and turnstiles all over. Sheets of metal and marble had fallen and collapsed, lying amidst mutant guano that covered whole swathes of the floor.

“It was easy,” answered the stranger. I couldn’t tell their gender, as their clothes were too thick to discern the shape of their body, and their voice was strangely distorted through the mask. I didn’t see a horn on their head, so they were no unicorn using a magic spell to change their voice.

“I followed the white rabbit.”

I stopped, and Sunny Side did too, but he seemed more disoriented and confused than baffled by what our new friend said. White rabbit. I’d seen rabbits before, around the...

But then our new friend laughed. “I’m kidding! It was a miracle, really, or whatever you like to call such things.”

Somehow I didn’t believe him. Something was ahoof here. Had the yellow pegasus really been waiting there for me? I kept vacillating between believing in my visions and thinking they were the product of a feverish, inexperienced mind... but our friend seemed certain of where he or she was going. They led us to a rickety series of escalators at the back of the large lobby, which were defunct and creaky. The path plunged down into darkness so deep my Ranger flashlight barely penetrated it, but that comforted me. The darkness was easier on my eyes and wrapped around us like a warm blanket, and soon we were even able to slip our gasmasks off again. The trigger slid out of my mouth and I worked my jaws; they were sore from clenching in fright so long. Sunny Side gave one last wistful look over his shoulder at the outside, and then we shouldered our burdens and continued on, away from the nightmares we’d endured above.

Back into the claustrophobic dark of the Metro. Back home.

Chapter 9

*Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.*

“Starry Gaze?” I asked.

“Yes?” she answered, wrapping her forelegs around me and cuddling her head up under my chin.

Her horn bumped my jaw, but I didn’t mind. We lay together on a hill overlooking the ruins of Stalliongrad. Though we were without our gas masks, each breath I took was full and cool, without any of the awful, lung-tearing pain that usually came from the poisoned air. Overhead boiled an angry, storming sky. Demons swooped back and forth between the lightning bolts, performing feats of aerial acrobatics I’d never seen before.

“When do you think the Sun will come back?”

“Silly,” Starry Gaze said, tracing a circle on my chest with her hoof. “The Sun’s gone forever. She abandoned us long ago. And the Moon died with Canterlot.”

I took a deep breath of her scent, nuzzling her mane with my snout.

“Starry Gaze?” I asked, gently rubbing her back.

“Yes?” she answered, tracing my jaw with gentle, loving kisses.

“If the Sun left us, do you think she’ll ever come back?”

“Never,” she said. “You’re going to die in darkness and shadows. The prophets have no words left, because this is the end of everything.”

I pondered this for a while, letting her lavish her attentions upon me, kissing my cheek and letting her lips brush over the contours of my face.

Her breath was wet and warm over my fur. For some reason, I felt her warmth more than I felt the cold of the wind and the snow around us, like it was all in the background.

“Starry Gaze?” I asked. My voice had become slurred, the words heavy and clumsy as she rubbed her body against mine.

“Yes?” she asked, and I noticed she really *did* have stars in her eyes, and her mane was a lot pinker than I remembered. Her buttery yellow wings swept out and folded us both up in an embrace as cold as death. I put my mouth to her neck, nibbling gently, making her squeak.

“How much farther do I have to go?”

“As far as it takes,” the yellow pegasus said with breathless abandon. I pulled back, brushing her lips with mine, eyes half-lidded. She held my face with her hooves, gazing at me with her infinite compassion. Then she let me drop. I fell away, seeing her recede into the shadows, watching me with a far-off, indifferent gaze.

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I opened my eyes. All four of my legs were wrapped around a duffel bag in a manner far more intimate than one should be with their supplies. I noticed my mouth was full of one of the straps, and I’d been gnawing on it in my sleep. I spat it out and rolled my tongue around in my mouth, trying to get rid of the dry, velvety taste. In front of me crackled a small fire, over which bubbled a kettle of tea that I didn’t remember either me or Sunny Side preparing.

“Well, well,” Sunny Side said as he appeared directly over me, looking down with a tired grin, “looks like somepony was having a hell of a dream.”

I shoved his face away with my hoof and pushed the duffel bag to the side. I didn’t remember where it came from, nor did I want to know how I’d ended up cuddling it in my sleep. Sunny Side went back to the fire and stoked it gently, scattering ashes about. I didn’t say anything, nor did I want to. The memory of the surface and what had happened there was still terrifyingly fresh. I hadn’t told my friend what really happened to Ray Drop,

and he didn't ask. Just like I didn't bring up his episode of madness on the surface, and he didn't turn to me about it. That seemed to be all we needed to say on the subject. It wasn't as though I bottled it up for the sake of remaining stoic. I simply knew that nothing was going to change what happened. Nothing would reverse the awful finality of that final bite on the trigger, the jolt of a discharging gun that felt stronger and louder than any I'd fired before. It was for the mission, which depended on my survival. But inside, I still felt the sharp prick of guilt, about what I'd done and how I chose to lock it away in my mind like the many memories I pinned to my Wall. I made it a post-it note I'd feel bad about later. And yet they'd been living ponies. Three more lives gone for the sake of my mission. They hadn't known I didn't really plan on getting rid of the bandits or breaking any blockades, but they'd died getting us this far regardless.

We were in a large hallway that led towards the platform of the Green Line. The walls were coated in tiles. Some enterprising artist had once tried to make something as droll and drab as a walk in a hall entertaining with pictures of frolicking ponies and magical Princesses, but the overlooked masterpiece was in pieces. Many sections were cracked and fallen, the gaudy mosaic of colors now faded into muted greyness. Far away, wind churned and spun through doors and cracks, swirling down till it echoed through our hall, an empty, hollow noise. And yet in the middle of it I thought I could imagine the buzz of pony conversation, the soft clip-clop of hooves. It wasn't a big tunnel, just enough to accommodate a large flow of passengers, but it was enough for us to stretch out in. I watched smoke pool under the ceiling and waft gently back towards the surface, still clutching the duffel bag and chewing thoughtfully on the strap. I tried not to think about what I'd been dreaming; the physical pleasure was overshadowed by the confusing words and prophecies.

I sighed and reached out for the tea, taking it off the fire and pouring myself a cup. I still couldn't recall how it'd gotten there, but I decided it best not to question it. It smelled wonderful, reminding me of home, and it was smooth and gentle going down my throat, washing away my concerns... yes, this was Exiperia level tea.

Tea was such an innocuous thing, and yet it reminded me so much of home I had to take another sip to push down the lump in my throat. The tea would never change at Exiperia, of that I was sure, no matter how many Dark Ones assailed our gates. I'd always have that to look forward to. And

yet, in light of recent events even the steaming hot drink couldn't stave off the chill that settled into my spirit. Good tea was a pleasant, but momentary experience like so many other "small things" in life. Who could bother appreciating the "small things" when I was in a rush to save the life of everypony in my home? The tea didn't chase off the Dark Ones or the threat they posed, it didn't stop me from fretting about our route. I took another look around, noticing the shadows the fire cast, noting how deep and dark they were. I could've sworn one of them even *moved* when I looked at it, but I passed it off as my hoof nudging the duffel bag and the excited dancing of the flames. Tea didn't chase away night terrors like that moving shadow. My gaze kept going until it landed on Sunny Side, who stared towards the Green Line.

"Any idea where to go next?" I asked him.

"I'm not sure," he admitted with a sigh. "I thought you were the one with the big mission in mind. And... without Sidewinder..."

"No more about Sidewinder," I said, sharper than I'd intended. The lanky rust-colored pony had proven all my nasty suspicions and then some, and I didn't want to waste time thinking about him. I tested my legs, finding my hindquarters had been bandaged and tended to with expert care, though my clothing and flak jacket were even more torn up than ever. I remembered keenly the feel of ghostly teeth ripping into the fabric, pulling, tugging... Sidewinder was the least of my worries now that he'd abandoned us to the mutants and monsters of the Metro.

Instead I felt around in my saddle bags. Hunter's talisman was still there, but it no longer glowed and buzzed like it did on the surface. I surmised it was some kind of enchantment that reacted when it approached anything made by the Rangers, but it had a remarkably short range. I could wander the tunnels for weeks and never enter that small circle the talisman needed to detect the Ranger base. Then I remembered the strange map that I'd found in Tracer's hideout and unfolded it, looking it over by the light of the fire while I sipped the tea.

Most maps of the Metro only outlined very dangerous, well known places, such as the radioactive tunnels near Marestra or the locations and movements of the Lunar Republic and their Celestian Monarchy rivals. This map seemed to go into much finer detail. I noticed only now that it'd been

drawn, not printed, and to a degree of accuracy that shocked me. In between the stations and the many criss-crossing lines of still usable tunnels, arcane symbols had been scribbled in very small, fine print. Arrows and lines pointed to tunnels and locations I'd never seen or heard about before, added in what I guessed to be Tracer's blunt, well-organized hoofwriting. The symbols glistened in the firelight, and if I looked close enough, I perceived some of them actually appearing to *move around* on the paper. My attention was tugged between them, and they seemed to leap off the page in anticipation of my gaze... like they were trying to *show* me something. Deliberately grab my attention...

Hunter's talisman buzzed quietly in my saddlebag. I peered closer, losing my sense of time as I pored over the map, trying to glean some kind of clue about where the Ranger base was. I focused my attention on the intersection between Green Line and the radial, seeing that it'd become crowded with letters and symbols intended for use by the Rangers alone. Something was *there*, just barely escaping my notice, and it kept slipping in and out of my perception. My mind tightened its grip and the sandy idea crumbled away, but I knew it was still-

"That looks like a Guide."

I looked up at the same time as Sunny Side, and saw the strange shadow from before move again. That wasn't the duffel bag's shadow, but a *pony*! A pony who'd been sitting right there without either of us noticing? I couldn't believe it. Sunny Side was just as incredulous and sputtered, pointing a hoof at the stranger.

"You... you're the one who led us down here!" he exclaimed.

"We were led?" I asked, and flicked my ears. I didn't remember being *led* necessarily, more just... following a feeling... I suddenly began wracking my brain for memory of this pony. It started on the surface, in the snow, just a scant couple hours before. I remembered the horrible, desperate fight on the surface over the body of my friend... that was going to be burned into my memory for a long, long time. I'd keep it with me for years. But suddenly everything was more fragmented. I remembered the strange, dark-clothed pony that came to us and told us to follow them, going down into comfortable darkness, vaguely hearing Sunny Side or

somepony suggest we stop and rest. The memory slipped through the cracks in my mind like a dream. But it was certainly this pony.

“You saved our lives,” I said breathlessly.

“No, I was walking along and saw two ponies in need of help. If I really saved you, then you’d have no more problems,” the stranger answered. “Not many things bring me to the forefront, but I perceived you were a special pair. You’re very... noticeable. Like a picture in three dimensions, jumping off the page.”

They tilted their head. It was still covered by the dark-tinted gasmask, so they exaggerated the movement to show their curiosity.

“You know, most ponies aren’t even surprised when they see me again. They just keep talking as if I’d been there all the while...” They fixed their gaze upon me. “You noticed how incongruous I was. You can see more than just the immediate. I think that’s why you’re able to look at the Guide so long... you’re no unicorn, but you’ve definitely got a touch more magic about you than most. You should use that.”

I stared, unable to decide whether this pony was a threat or an ally. Unlike Sidewinder, they’d found us and helped us without any action on our part. They’d offered to help us find a way past the supposedly destroyed Green Line and into the plantations... on the other hoof they were very queer and I wondered if they had some kind of special powers. They might’ve been a unicorn who’d shaved their horn... and I felt my eyelids grow heavy the longer I looked at them. Something was trying to keep me from focusing my mind on their presence. I shivered the more I thought about it. I wondered in a fit of supposition they might’ve been some kind of mass hallucination both me and Sunny Side were experiencing. Honestly, who ran around in almost pure black clothes, hid their face when there was no need, and spoke like they knew things we didn’t?

I noticed quite suddenly how surreal this whole situation was. After escaping a life or death struggle I suddenly found myself here, with good tea, a fire, a duffel bag bursting with... I opened it with my hooves... bursting with food and other supplies! And me without even a memory of when this pony appeared! Who were they and why had they come to us?

“What, are you going to be our new guide? Just like that?” Sunny Side asked. The stranger shrugged.

“You’ve already got a Guide; your friend here just needs to figure out how to read it. Strong magic protects it from unworthy eyes seeing what it really is... it’s a perfectly functional map on its own, but without a key, you won’t see past the enchantments on it, and it’ll never lead you where you *really* want to go. Of course, with your desirable sight...”

“Who are you?” I asked. My surprise was fading fast, being replaced by annoyance that this pony who’d saved our lives couldn’t even give us the courtesy of an identity.

“Call me nopony, because that’s what I am, though that duffel bag *is* mine, and I don’t think it appreciated you cuddling it so,” Nopony answered, with a small hint of amusement. I sighed heavily, looking away. Nopony! Great. Nopony followed us, Nopony spoke to us, Nopony had a bag full of food and blankets... this was all far too convenient. The aftertaste of the tea was made bitter by my suspicion, which I knew wasn’t too off base because of Sidewinder’s abandonment.

“Look, we thank you for your help... and we’d be dead right now if not for you,” I said, trying to sound truly grateful. But I’d had enough of mysteries and strange night terrors. I didn’t want a ghost pony following us around on top of everything else. I collected my things and made a great show of getting ready to leave. Where, I didn’t know and didn’t even care at the moment. I just wanted to get away from here, away from the nasty memories of the wrecked surface that clawed at the inside of my mind. Away from this strange pony who’d probably stab us in the back like Sidewinder! “But there’s a lot we have to get done. The eastern plantations are in need of assistance, and, and... and creatures, and the Green Line is destroyed, and we need to go!” I rambled, but I didn’t care. Memories and feelings struggled to be given voice. Ray Drop’s memory pleaded for grieving and regret, my father and Starry Gaze demanded my guilt, Sidewinder pricked me with anger, and the Dark Ones filled me with an awestruck fear. I shoved the lid back down on them all and locked them up tight. I’d deal with them in good time. I needed movement and action to distract me.

“I told you on the surface I know another way,” Nopony responded, gesturing with his hoof. I supposed it was a he, anyway, for the sake of convenience and my sanity. Nopony was a he! And that was final. “If you’d stop pacing and worrying your friend, I could show you.”

I stopped, realizing poor Sunny Side was looking between us both, lost and somewhat confused. I knew the events from a few hours ago must’ve been weighing heavily on his mind, but I didn’t stop to really think about it until now. Sunny Side had nearly gone feather-brained up there. He didn’t need me going crazy too over ghost ponies and directions. And I needed something to keep me going in the face of my fear and my doubt. We both needed a decision.

“Then we will follow you,” I decided. This Guide, which I was sure would show me the Ranger base if I could only break the enchantments (impossible without this “key” Nopony mentioned, or a very strong unicorn), was useless at the present time. I felt jittery and alert, but too much. High strung was a good way of putting it. I checked the locks on my memories and waited for Nopony to get up. He seemed quite content to move at his own slow, leisurely pace, which frustrated me to no end as he slowly picked up the duffel bag and slung it over his shoulders, letting it hang where a saddlebag normally went. The strange pony started down the tunnel and we followed like lost pups. My mind was ever on the mysterious “Guide” and why Nopony had been able to identify it so quickly. Was he a Ranger? I couldn’t see any of the markings that normally indicated he was one. He wasn’t even carrying weapons that I could see, save the tools and knives one might need.

“Remember,” he said, and his voice seemed to be coming from far away even though he was directly ahead, “to stay behind me at all times. If we don’t stay in sight, then you forget I was there, and I can’t guarantee I’d find you again... there are only certain paths in life I am bound to take, and those alone can I walk.”

I did my best to suppress a shudder. I could just pass off this pony as insane, but he’d been able to hide in plain sight by methods I couldn’t explain. Something was very off about this overly helpful pony. Sunny Side, though he still looked worried and unnerved, seemed willing to follow me as long as I followed Nopony. I kept trying to wrap my mind around that; was I really following Nopony? But Sunny Side saw him (her?) too. I decided for

now that questioning things wasn't wise. I didn't want to look a gift pony in the mouth.

The Green Line was blocked off not far down the tunnel by a huge collapse of debris and dirt, as Sidewinder had said. Perhaps mutants had begun to use it as an entry point and the plantations had had enough. Instead we were led down into a side passage through a rusty old door, into the maze of small hallways and rooms between main lines and stations. We clattered over a catwalk that led over an open sewage pipe, through which still flowed dirty, muddy water. My geiger counter clicked.

No pony led us to a grate and pulled it back. We clambered down a ladder into darkness. "There is a railcar station not far from here; it was used by the defenders of Heron before they were forced to abandon the entire station."

"All of Heron?"

"Yes. They were pressed hard by mutants on their northern border and the station has been abandoned... we will bypass Heron and move on to Ponyevskaya. This passage leads to a secondary tunnel we will use to avoid the infested tunnels, and get to the railcar."

"How do you know Heron has fallen?" I asked, feeling my heart gripped by fear. An entire farm station destroyed didn't bode well for the food situation in the north. "And why didn't they send word out? Otzark Bulvard connects to the Hoofsa stations; surely Hoofsa would send help if the plantations were under attack!"

"Not so much," No pony answered. "Hoofsa has been determined to be the sole ruler of the radial since its inception. They desire complete control of trade around the Metro. If other stations must be sacrificed to prove that they are the only ones who can provide for the rest of us, then so be it. You are from a station that has been able to keep out of the wars and politics of the Metro, so you don't know the lengths ponies go to control one another out here. Hoofsa would sooner let every plantation burn to the ground than help them without a guarantee of subservience afterward."

I almost gagged at the thought. Hoofsa claimed to be a protector of trade and free flow of goods. I'd heard stories of their power, how they'd

fought a war with the New Lunar Republic long ago and won, and managed to push the bandits out of every station from Macinskaya to Elusive. But to hear it so plainly said they'd let the main source of food in the north and most of the Metro be destroyed simply because they couldn't turn a profit from it?

"You are surprised, don't be," Nopony told me. "I have studied ponies all my life. I think it is natural they desire control and security. Though that desire has been blown up to exaggerated proportions here... You have crafted a semblance of civilization and order down here, but deep down, I think you can all feel it. The brokenness. The wrongness. The knowledge that the world is very much out of your control... ponies hate that. They hate it because they fear it, and they fear it because it is unknowable. There is a legend that speaks of a place far to the south, known as the Everfree Forest. It existed in the time of the old world, outside of a small town called Ponyville. Do you know why it was called Everfree? Because like the surface now, it was totally out of pony hooves then. Monsters lurked there. The trees and clouds moved and grew and died all on their own. It was never touched by ponies, save for the brave and the foolish, and was one of the most well known landmarks of old Equestria."

"I remember," I said, thinking back to my Wall. "I have pictures. It... looked... better... than what we have now."

"Any good green forest is better than radioactive ice and snow, I agree," said Nopony. "But the point is ponies were afraid of it. They wouldn't touch it and they wouldn't go near it if they had a choice, because they saw such anarchy and danger as unnatural. But what did they care? They had all of Equestria to roam and live in peace. But now Equestria is gone. And now the *world* is Everfree. And so we are afraid, and we do desperate, terrible, awful things when we are afraid. Hoofsa, the Monarchy, the Republic, Bucklyn... you two. You've done strange and terrible things to get here. And you are driven by fear. Wherever you are going, your fear is pushing you on."

Sunny Side hung his head and sighed. I looked at him with pity. My hoof touched my light charger and pumped it. Just to make sure. The area we traveled in was pitch black, and I knew if we took our eyes off Nopony for just a moment, he'd vanish into thin air like Sidewinder. I began to seriously ponder the merits of what our one-time ally had said about earth

magic and how it helped him to scurry about and blend in. Had this strange pony unlocked the secrets too, and used them to stay hidden?

“If we weren’t afraid, we’d be foolish,” I said quietly. “We’d just stand there and let the danger destroy us.”

“I’m not talking about being afraid of mutants. That simple drive to preserve oneself is always going to be there, and it’s saved my life more than once. I mean real, soul-crushing fear. The primal kind that reaches into a part of your mind you barely even touch. The fear of the Everfree Forest, and all that it implies... that is the fear that is destroying us.”

“How do you know so much about this?” Sunny Side asked. “You some kind of seer?”

I turned to look at him. Seers were usually just tricksters and hustlers looking to make a quick bullet. He shrugged.

“I heard stories, you know. Usually they were unicorns, of course... ponies that could look into the future and use their magic to divine secrets from our hearts!”

“Ah, ha. Have you ever met one of these vaunted seers?” Nopony asked.

“Well, no. But every station claims to have one that I know of... they never show them off. Just say they have them.”

“That is because the real ones know to stay hidden and never let their talents be known. A pony who truly has such power comes to one of two conclusions: that they must take responsibility and only allow themselves to use those powers for something greater than themselves, or they become greedy and selfish, manipulating those around them.”

“So they’re real?” Sunny Side asked, hopping forward like a colt at story time.

“Many things are real that I hoped were not, and many things do not exist that I wish did,” Nopony answered. Sunny Side fell back a few steps, looking sullen and dissatisfied. This Nopony seemed intent on making

everything they said seem grand and mysterious, but I still had my lingering doubts.

And then we came to a certain door in a certain part of the back tunnels. There wasn't anything special about the door. It was just a simple metal door in a simple concrete wall. The room we were in was just a simple, empty square. An abandoned drake's nest was in one corner. But something made my ears perk up and twitch and my mane bristle. Perhaps the charm that had been set on the wall near the door was what did it. The charm itself also appeared simple and innocuous. Nothing more than a little circle of twisted metal and rebar, with a small sprite-light set in the middle. I felt a tingle as I approached it.

"Who put that there, if nopony has used these tunnels?"

"Please keep the lights on while we are here," Nopony said, passing over my question. "This particular tunnel has not been used in a long time, and I doubt the plantations have sent guardponies this far north to scout out their extra tunnels."

"But you said this tunnel will help us avoid the mutants," Sunny Side pointed out.

"Yes. It will help us avoid the mutants," Nopony answered, and I felt a chill swim down my spine. He pushed open the door and peered up and down the tunnel.

"Please keep your lights on at all times," he repeated quietly, though I didn't know who he thought would overhear us. "It seems to have grown worse than the last time I passed through it." He turned to me, and I could very vaguely discern the shape and brightness of his eyes beneath his gasmask. "Do consult your Guide. It will help us here, I think."

I quickly pulled it out, feeling strangely determined to heed his advice. How did he know whether this tunnel had gotten 'worse' without even looking inside? The Guide didn't give me much to go on while I pored over it in the dark, though I did get that strange swimming feeling from before. The symbols remained mostly unknown to me, but I could clearly see that this particular tunnel had... nothing wrong with it.

"It says this place is clear," I said quietly.

"Hmm?" Nopony shook his head as he looked down at the Guide. "No, my friend! Can't you see? This here?" He pointed at the line we occupied, the secondary tunnel that stretched out from behind Heron and curled back towards the Ponyevskaya-Compass line. "It's marked clearly as dangerous!"

I looked at the Guide. The small tunnel we were in had no markings, and nothing on it that I could see that made it particularly imposing. We just had this pony's word and the strange chill in my spine to go on. I showed it to Sunny Side.

"Makes about as much sense as an explosion in a tile factory," he said after a cursory glance, being even more lost than I was.

Nopony looked agitated, stomping a hoof. "Are you willing to see or not? Bah, never mind! It might show itself in due time. Just stay close to me, at my back, and *keep the lights on at all times.*"

He led us into the tunnel. It was a dark and lonely place, clearly having never seen use, or even felt the steps of ponies, for many years. Cobwebs hung in thick clumps from the ceiling, and radioactive mushrooms sprouted from various damp patches on the ground. The wires were withered and exposed, the pipes rusted and failing.

We wandered through the deserted corridor, saying nothing to each other. I and Sunny Side stayed at Nopony's back like he instructed, and I kept my light on him at all times, though my eyes followed the faint spot of Sunny Side's headlamp tracing the long, dilapidated snakes of wire and pipeline. The walls had been punctured by the roots of alien trees from the city above in some places, and dirt had piled up and over the tracks where they had. The twisting, gnarled roots appeared to me to be the appendages of some long lost creature forgotten by time, sending its tendrils through the Metro in a slow, eternal search for something only it could sense down deep in the earth. Our hoofsteps echoed through the silent hall yet nothing and no pony called out an alarm, no mutant growled that we'd intruded on their turf. There were no bodies here, no spent bullet casings or any sign that any life came through here at all. The floor was empty; the walls were bare, save for the undulating trunks of twisted trees.

Sunny Side and I kept giving each other sidelong glances, as if to reassure one another that we were still there. The darkness here, apart from our headlights, was total. Everywhere those thin white beams didn't reach there could have been anything, or nothing. I remembered Sidewinder's story about the unicorn who vanished into nothingness, and stories of hapless Stalkers who'd dared to break the rules and also slipped out of all reality. And the darkness seemed to creep into my mind, darkening my already bleak thoughts, crushing the weak hope that'd been dying ever since we'd been abandoned on the surface. It seemed the darkness was a presence in itself, surrounding us, yet there was never anything there. Nothing but the dank, horrible silence that filled my senses and roared against my eardrums. I knew it was nothing but night terrors, the instinctual imagination of ponies who *need to know what's there*, but I could barely stop the fear gnawing at my insides and the darkness was overpowering. Something was wrong with the way it seemed to cloud around us as a thick body instead of just a lack of light. It teased us, dodging away from our thin little lights and returning the moment we glanced away, hovering over our shoulders and poking our backsides, looming overhead at the front. The chill grew worse until I began shivering in my boots, and Nopony turned to look at me. I could've sworn that somehow that dark, blank gaze was self-satisfied.

"Ah, you don't see it, but you can still feel it!" he whispered. "That's good. You have a rare talent my friend, and I think I should like to see you live to use it."

"Why's Lockbox get all the special ghost-sensing powers?" Sunny Side mumbled as we continued on into the darkness of the tunnel. "First the anomaly and now this with the haunted tunnel..."

"I don't have any *powers*, all right?" I blurted out, frustrated. Couldn't they *feel* how wrong this place was?! Why were talking in such level tones when the dark itself was coming to get us? "I don't know how I felt the anomaly coming, I just did! Fuck it, we aren't even supposed to *be* here! *I'm* not supposed to be here! We're just three crazy ponies in this sick fucking tunnel with no idea where they're going or what's ahead!"

Both of them didn't breathe a word for a time after that. Oppressive silence fell on us again. The silence was so pervasive my mind began to

exaggerate whatever sounds I heard, and I found myself very thankful that I wasn't alone. Even if the sound was a mutant howling our death, I began to grow desperate to hear something, anything. Every hoofstep, every puff of our breath was a salve on my burning ears. I had to hear, I had to see, otherwise my companions might disappear and the darkness would swallow me up. I watched Sunny Side and Nopony closely, the former seeming as terrified as I was, his eyes darting here and there, his breathing deep and even in a desperate attempt to stay calm. Nopony took this suffocating darkness the best of us, taking calm, measured steps. Were it not for the tell-tale sucking sound of air going in and out through a filter, I'd never even know he was breathing.

Did ghosts breathe?

I froze. Something... *something* just tickled the very edge of my consciousness. A vague thought, a notion, a tremor that sent the whole of my high-strung senses quivering with anticipation, like a spider senses a twitch in its web. Except even though I was the spider, I was blind and deaf too, and I knew it wasn't a harmless fly that pricked my web. I stood still, coiled, ready... only then did I notice Nopony stopped moving exactly when I did.

"Did anypony else hear that?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Hear what?" Sunny Side asked.

"That!" I said. I barely even knew how to describe to *myself* what it was, how could I tell the others!

"That, that... *that!*"

"Hush," Nopony soothed, and kept walking. Sunny Side took it as a dismissal of my alarm and shook his head.

"Lockbox, come on, stop imagining things, we're under enough stress as it is," he said, louder than he should have. I wanted to slap him. I knew what I felt... didn't I?

I began to match Nopony's steps as I continued on, wondering if the way he walked let him hear the dangers of the Metro. Had he been right

about the Guide? Was I just a blind, deaf and dumb spider at the center of his tangled web, feeling only nudges and ripples of the truth? Or was I just letting my imagination run away with me? Celestia, where is your light when we need it... where is Luna, who rules the darkness and keeps ponies safe as they travel through the shadows that belong to her? Dead, dead and gone! Nothing but creeping things and mutants rule the night now, and the daylight hides itself from us... curse this darkness.

And there it was again. I'd been watching Nopony closely, and this time I was certain that he stopped the moment that strange feeling swept over us again.

"You heard it!" I blurted out, desperate for some support this time, some affirmation I wasn't just going insane. "You heard it didn't you?!"

"Just keep shining your light if you give a fuck about your life!" Nopony hissed back at me. Sunny Side gulped and huddled closer to me, throwing his light this way and that.

"Hallucinations," he said quietly. "Lockbox, you don't feel the way you did when the anomaly came-"

"Fuck you, all right? What are you, deaf?" I snapped without meaning to. The darkness clouded my thoughts, pressing in on all sides. Something rumbled in the deep shadows, traveling down the pipes. I heard one of them shake in its moorings.

"Okay... *that* I noticed," Sunny Side said, his wings sprouting from his sides. I put out a hoof to keep him steady. I wasn't going to lose him to that particular insanity again.

"Keep moving!" Nopony warned us, and I heard his voice as it came from far, far away... he seemed to be much further along the tunnel than us. Or was he? It took me only five steps to catch up again. Or was it ten? The distance seemed to stretch out before my eyes. The spot of light on the wall of the tunnel from my headlamp seemed to be further away than before.

"Lockbox, what... what the hell is..." Sunny Side swayed on his hooves and staggered, but I was there to catch him. I pointed my Mule

backwards, into the dark, waiting for something to come at us. But nothing did.

“Do not listen to the pipes,” Nopony exclaimed, beside me suddenly. “They sing only sad songs.” He propped his head against Sunny Side’s shoulder and helped pull him along. I watched the darkness closing in around us. Wait a minute. It was *actually closing in!* The darkness... the shadows... I could see them creeping around us, moving like they had some kind of awful intelligence all their own. Wherever I shined my light they retreated, but... somehow even when the light wasn’t there, I could see it. Feel it. I felt tiny claws pricking my hide through my barding, felt fingers rasping through my mane. I shook them off and struggled to keep moving.

I told myself that the earth was with me. But when I tried to summon the magic, something felt wrong. It was far away. Everything felt so far away. I even felt myself begin to slip away from my own body, as if my mind was slowly crawling out of my skin. I felt nothing but cold slush beneath my hooves. Earth magic couldn’t help me against this.

“What the fuck is going on!” I cried, but no answer came. I began to stagger as I went, beginning to hyperventilate. My body shivered and I felt queasy.

“Something’s happening,” I mumbled, feeling like I was walking through a thick sludge. I looked down and saw that I was indeed walking through thick sludge. How... disgusting. Where’d it come from, anyway? Was that an eyeball floating in there?

“What’s happening is you’re not concentrating on your survival!” Nopony’s shout dragged me back to reality. The dark pony had somehow come right up next to us, and in the grip of near hysteria I must not have noticed. In an instant the sludge felt less like blood and body parts and more like normal sewage. The darkness was ordinary lack of light, and I no longer felt the terror of something dark and scary pursuing us. “If you can’t keep a level head on your shoulders then I swear I will leave you here! Quit panicking.”

I turned and looked at his blank, black visor. So dark and empty like the darkness around us. But it didn’t crawl over his face and leap out to get

me... in fact, nothing did. I shined my light behind us, certain to find some horrible creature loping along to devour us. My light pierced the infinite gloom and showed me darkness there, and nothing more. I looked ahead again, my heart still racing. Nothing was there. Absolutely nothing. I didn't know if I'd truly been hallucinating or something awful had just nearly taken our lives. All I was certain of was Sunny Side slowly coming to, having definitely been under some kind of ill effect to make him almost pass out. Yet he'd still walked with us, as though in a daze...

"Ugh!" he said, shaking his head. "I feel like I just had a nightmare!"

"You did," I answered. "Or... we did. We are. Let's just keep walking."

"Good idea."

I wasn't sure how much longer we 'just kept walking.' The tunnel's bleakness stretched on and on, and I wondered if we weren't caught in some of vicious anomaly that looped our paths over and over again. I couldn't tell if any of what I saw was something I'd passed before. The same looking bundles of wires and pipes stretched interminably, while the sludge beneath our hooves remained still and cold and stagnant. All I knew was that the strange feeling that'd nearly overwhelmed me before was gone, for now, but something still didn't feel right. My stomach still felt nauseous, exactly like when we'd faced the anomaly, and the darkness was still extremely unnerving.

"Was that real?" I asked at length. No pony shook his head.

"It is what it is," he said. "These tunnels are full of death... ponies who crowded them in the final days of the War, desperately seeking shelter from the bombs. Trains that crashed when the city fell, and the countless others who died in the tunnels in the years after. Each and every tunnel now has had at least one pony die in them, not even counting the Diamond Dogs that scabble at the edge of our society. I have been studying the phenomena that inhabit these tunnels. What you just experienced could've been anything, but I would say it was the voices of the dead."

"Pshaw!" Sunny Side gasped, and I could tell he was frightened. "Anomalies and psychic mutants I can take, but ghosts?"

“They are all around us, even when we don’t feel them,” Nopony answered quietly. His low, distorted voice echoed eerily through the tunnel, seeming to rebound and come back to us, and we heard the echo instead of his actual voice. “The poor souls trapped here have nowhere to go. This plane is still finite... one day our world will end, you see... but they are still souls that cannot be destroyed, nor can they move on. Their torment will last forever, so long as this world remains dead and broken. It would seem their supplications do not reach the afterlife, if the afterlife does still exist. Their voices instead echo through the pipes and the tunnels, you see... I have heard them more than once.”

“Why do you believe the War happened?” I asked, believing the question to be very important for some reason.

Nopony was quiet for a while, until he looked over his shoulder at me.

“Ignorance,” he said. “Ignorance of the world’s true nature, of the true nature of ourselves... we’d forgotten who and what we were. The Princesses were ignorant of what their real duty was, or they’d chosen to forget.”

“What do you think happened to them?” I wondered. The questions came unbidden, and they at least helped keep my mind off the creeping darkness all around us.

“... I do not like to think of such things,” Nopony answered. “But I think the answer we can all settle on is that they are no longer here to help us. I would say it is very likely they are both dead, or at the least their influence no longer ripples through the world as it once did.”

“Do you think we’re all that’s left on the earth?” Sunny Side asked. “That we really are the last city?”

“Who can say?” Nopony answered. “It certainly isn’t something I think about. The Metro is all we have. All we know. And even that is now under threat.”

I tilted my head and sniffed. Did Nopony know about the Dark Ones? Or was he just talking in generalities about the mutants and the other

factions? I felt as though my thoughts were like this tunnel: endless, dark, and without any answers.

“Are we almost there?”

“Nearly,” Nopony said, and then pointed straight ahead with his hoof.

There was a light.

We all trotted towards it, eager to be out of this strange deathtrap. It was a tiny, almost pitiful parasprite-light that hung over another of those circular charms, which decorated a rusty old door. One of the many bundles of pipelines that threaded their way through this horrid tunnel came to a stop at the door, curving into the wall and disappearing on its strange, unseen journey. I noticed that one of the pipes had burst open at one of the valves, and gaped obscenely at us through a jagged maw.

Nopony approached it and put an ear to the opening, and then nodded with satisfaction.

“Yes,” he said, and pushed open the door. “It’s as I feared. We should go, now. There is nothing we can do for them.”

“Them?” I asked. “The dead? But there was nothing in this tunnel. Just... fear. We saw no ghosts.”

“Precisely,” Nopony answered, holding the door for Sunny Side as he all but leaped through, eyes wide and eager to be away from this surreal place. “There is nothing in this tunnel.”

I looked further down, past the doorway where we’d stopped. I pumped my light up to maximum brightness, and saw the faint beam disappear down into the tunnel’s depths. If this was just a secondary tunnel, I realized it was an extraordinarily long one.

“It should’ve ended by now, shouldn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes,” Nopony answered. “In normal construction, this tunnel would have joined its brothers by now.”

“How far does it go?” I asked, my voice quiet and hushed.

Nopony looked towards the darkness that seemed to stretch on forever.

“I have no idea,” he said at last. “I have never gathered the courage to go further than this doorway.”

I felt a chill as Nopony stepped away, leaving me alone. I stared at the opening in the pipeline, wondering what he’d heard. I was still monumentally confused about whether this tunnel was truly dangerous or not... and I resolved to find out for myself. If Nopony said I could hear and see things that nopony else could, then why not?

Without giving fear time to halt my legs, I stepped up to the opening and boldly thrust my ear towards it.

Nothing.

I waited.

Nothing at all.

I felt almost cheated, even regretful as I stepped away again, my ears still tingling, waiting, desperate to hear something, anything... anything to confirm mine and Nopony’s suspicions. I almost wanted there to be a horrible *thing*, just so it would remove this awful tension, this... emptiness.

“Hello?” I said at the pipe. “Are you there?”

It didn’t answer me. Its hole continued to gape, dull and dark as it would be for all time, with nopony around to even hear the quiet. I took one last look up and down the empty tunnel filled with nothingness and silence. I wasn’t afraid anymore... just lonely, and very, very sad. What Nopony said was true.

There was nothing in this tunnel.

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“Ah, shit!” Sunny Side yelped, jumping at a drake that leaped from behind a crate, sending an empty can falling as it went. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I wanted to grab every moment of normalcy ever since the journey in that strange tunnel, but I knew that poor Sunny Side was still very high strung. I wondered how he was handling this journey, and his moment of insanity on the surface. Still, he hadn’t come to me about it, so I wondered if it needed discussing at all.

We were nearing the railcart station that would take us all the way into Ponyesvkaya. Nopony had said nothing ever since we left the haunted tunnel, and I didn’t press him for more information. He seemed distracted, perhaps focused on finding the way out. We traveled in pitch blackness once again, winding through tiny side corridors and passing by small, forgotten rooms inhabited only by radioactive mushrooms, and the occasional skeleton or two. We found only one dead pony, a unicorn, their body long since rotted away and their bones scattered by scavengers. Judging by the hole in his skull, he’d done himself in. I found the pistol not far away, with still six bullets left in the magazine.

With only a slight twinge of guilt, I took all six.

Nopony asked to look at my Guide only once more, and seemed satisfied with what he saw.

“Look, you see?” he asked, pointing at it again. “There is our mode of transportation... it is marked clearly enough that even you can see it.”

Ever since the tunnel had proven to be empty and devoid of the danger the Guide had promised Nopony, I was skeptical of the Guide’s powers. But this time, the signal seemed to reach me much quicker than before. Hunter’s talisman buzzed, and I saw a small mark on the map, written as a tiny magical rune. I was shocked and overjoyed when I found out what it meant:

Transportation.

Nopony only nodded and turned away.

“Stay here, you two. I will scout the rest of the way and make sure the railcar is even still there...”

That left me to pore over the map to see if more of its secrets would reveal themselves to me. deduced that somehow, the talisman Hunter gave me was altering my perception in some way, using magic to help me decipher the secrets of the Rangers. But why me? Why now? Was it supposed to do that, or was I just caught in some incredibly lucky malfunction? And why hadn't Sunny Side noticed any of it, whenever the talisman flared up to guide me? I thought back on what Nopony said about the voices of the dead, and the spiritual side of me almost wanted to believe that Hunter was speaking to me from beyond the grave with his talisman. But that was rubbish, because I didn't even know if he was dead. Perhaps it was some kind of Ranger secret they would divulge when I finally found them...

I was distracted by the sound of weeping nearby. Fretful it was a ghost I raised both my light and my gun. It was Sunny Side, his face buried in his forelegs. I was frozen, uncertain what to do.

"I'm sorry, Lockbox," he blurted out. I tilted my head, and my heart softened just a bit.

"Sorry? What for?" I asked. "You've been nothing but a good friend and constant companion."

"No, no..." he moaned. "No. The surface. I almost left you. I almost... I almost...."

I gave him a moment to catch his breath as he dropped into inconsolable, gasping coughs and sobs.

"I almost destroyed myself," he whispered. "I didn't even know what came over me. I barely even remember it. I just remember the sky... it was so close... I felt I could *smell it*, Lockbox! Smell the sun and the fresh air beyond the clouds!"

"You know there is no fresh air left up there. Even beyond the clouds," I whispered. He nodded brokenly.

"I know. I know... but the point is I wasn't a strong pony. Like I'd told Ray Drop. I joined the militia because I thought I could actually do

something for my station. Make my parents proud. Be somepony that Starry Gaze would..."

He trailed off. I gave him an encouraging nod, hoping my silence was understanding instead of guilt-inducing. He needed to say these things.

"Gosh, I miss her," he whispered. "She had kind words for almost everypony, you know? Not just you. She just wants to be happy, like the rest of us. I joined the militia to *help* ponies, you know? But I almost died... I almost killed myself because..."

He trailed off again, hiding his face. "I *wanted* to do it, Lockbox! I wanted to just... fly away. Leave it all behind. My head was full of all these crazy, *crazy* thoughts, and I *knew* they were crazy but I wanted to do them anyway!"

"Well, that's why they call it feather-brained," I said with a shrug. I stood up and went to sit next to him. "Sunny Side, I am not very good with words. But I can tell you this. I don't blame you for what happened. You shouldn't blame yourself either. This world is hard on all of us. Stronger ponies than us die every day. Moments of weakness... they just happen. You know I've had many on this trip. But the point is you are my friend, and I am yours. As long as that never changes, then I think we will be all right."

I touched his shoulder with my hoof. "We've taken care of each other so far. I don't plan on changing that."

Sunny Side nodded quietly. I don't think I helped as much as I wanted to, but his grief seemed to pass.

"Thank you, Lockbox," he murmured. "You... you are a good pony. And I am glad we're friends... sometimes I think that's all we ponies have left."

I almost told him the truth about Ray Drop right then. Almost. But it remained locked away, like so many other things.

Nopony came to fetch us a few minutes later, and we piled onto the railcart he showed us to. It was a cobbled together vehicle, crafted by Metro ponies and rickety to the point of being unsafe. The engine sputtered

as Nopony literally kicked it to life, and a single sprite-light hung at the front. No fancy electrical headlights for this car. I noticed the driver seat was an old wooden chair with a dumpy cushion wrapped in tacky flower pattern cloth. It was faded and ugly, and creaked as Nopony sat on it. As the cart trundled forward, bouncing and jerking, I gulped and grasped the railcar's thin, scrap metal sideplates tight, as it to keep them from wobbling off.

Naturally, Sunny Side elected to fly overhead, until he almost bonked into a low-hanging pipe. He dropped down next to me after that. We traveled in complete silence, listening to the clack of the wheels on the rails, and the worrisome coughs of the engine. It reminded me of home, and all our improvised, scratch-made comforts, and so I didn't disturbed the silence. I just looked forward and enjoyed the ride. It was a small, well-deserved time of peace and quiet.

I was surprised when Nopony spoke up. I'd all but forgotten he was there in the last few minutes. His own brand of magic at work, I supposed.

"I haven't been to Ponyevskaya in some time, so I am uncertain what the current situation is," he said. "But I can tell you the plantations have always been an unfriendly lot. They know how important they are, and being important means they are almost always under threat. They are reclusive and only communicate through their supply caravans... they jealously guard their unicorns from Hoofsa, and the Guild of Magic hates them because they are good at magic, yet won't share their trade secrets. Very family oriented lot, the farmers are."

He fell silent again for a moment.

"I've also been thinking about you boys' journey. You don't work for Bucklyn, do you?"

We froze and went silent, perhaps the exact wrong thing to do if you want to hide something.

"I thought so," said Nopony. "The plantations aren't your final destination. You've got something much bigger in mind."

I hung my head, the impossibility of our mission weighing down on me again.

“Tell me. Wherever it is you are going... is it where you truly hope to end up? Or is it the only path you think is available?”

Neither of us answered. Soon, there was nothing but the noise of the railcart.

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The entrance to Ponyevskaya was a forbidding place. We stopped at the old north section of the station, which had been mostly abandoned. We'd deliberately tripped several magical alarms coming in, which was unavoidable and we didn't want to give the defenders a surprise anyway. We'd be greeted with guns, but it was worth it for not being shot up on sight by surprised guards. The railcart was left behind at the hundred meter mark, though I took the sprite-light and held it in front of me, praying that it'd be enough to identify us as ponies and not mutants. Many magical traps were indiscriminate, and I didn't know how thoroughly they'd enchanted their northern borders since Heron had been destroyed. We also traveled without passports, and would likely have to bluff our way inside. It was times like this I sorely missed the presence of a unicorn... my mind went back to Starry Gaze. She'd certainly be able to read the glyphs and let them know we weren't a threat.

The tracks split into two around a large central island. Swooping arches and pillars gave the area a semblance of dignity and importance, but as trains no longer ran through here, it had been converted into a fortress. We stopped just in front of a formidable network of metal spikes rammed into the ground along with other obstacles, and called out.

“We are ponies! Ponies!” Sunny Side shouted.

I saw a light flare up farther down on the island. Both tracks had been almost completely walled off by barricades and makeshift gates, with the raised island in the middle acting as the base of a squat guard tower. A spotlight swung its light towards us, and a loud, gruff voice answered us.

“Step forward slowly! We will deactivate the forward defense charms!”

We came forward and hopped up onto the island until we looked directly up into the guard tower. From beneath the gunner's nest a thin rope bridge swung down, and several ponies pointed or floated guns directly towards us. I was the first up the little bridge and was immediately blocked by a big, tough earth pony with a welder's mask acting as a helmet. He was a lean, muscular fellow with a mean squint in his eyes.

"Tell us your business," he growled.

"We want to go through," I said. "We're here to scout out the situation on Bucklyn's authority."

"Fuck them," the earth pony growled. "You came from the north, that used to be Heron."

"We used an alternate entrance on the surface because of the bandits in the tunnels east of here," I explained. "There was no other way."

"Though you didn't make it easier blowing up the Green Line like you did," Sunny Side interjected.

"Well we don't believe you, and we don't give two shits if you were boss enough for the surface! You've got no papers you're from Bucklyn, and to hell with Bucklyn anyway. They weren't there for us when the bandits and mutants came! So you're only two travelers wanting to get into our station. That's five cartridges for the two of you and another three each for bringing in weapons."

"Half a magazine to get into the gate!" Sunny Side objected behind me. "On whose authority?"

"Ours, you featherbrained pissant," the earth pony grumbled, and jabbed his weapon towards us. All of his fellows seemed equally surly and unfriendly. "Pegasi aren't too common in these parts. You better keep your head down."

I felt a sudden urge to shoot this puffed up guardpony, leeching off travelers while stations all around us suffered. A sudden indignant rage welled up inside me, that familiar anger at being called useless or being

forced to accept what others side. My mission was noble and just, and this pony only cared about lining his pockets.

“And just to make sure you aren’t bandits we should confiscate your things as well. Ain’t that right?” the guard said, and turned his head just to the side to speak to his fellows.

I seized my chance, driven by anger. Leaping forward I shoved myself into arm’s reach of the other earth pony, imagining myself to be a great hill that was tumbling down. My chest collided with his with a meaty thump, and his eyes widened along with my own as I felt myself dig into the ground, push upwards... and lift. We were both on our hind legs with my head jammed up under his chin, chest to chest, and I quickly slapped my Mule down to the ready position so the barrel pushed painfully into his neck.

I heard the clamor of ponies yelling and Sunny Side barking something angrily, but I didn’t care. I’d been through too much for one ugly bastard of a guard to extort me. My family was in danger, my whole station was in danger, and I couldn’t be delayed by something like this. I didn’t give a bit about this pony or *his* family, which my anger extended to. They must have all been mean and ugly like him to produce such an unfriendly creature. I was sick of things not going my way, and apparently my earth magic had agreed with me, giving me the strength to lift this jerk almost clean off the ground.

“So, then,” I whispered heatedly into the fur of his neck, working the trigger into my mouth. “You don’t think we’re *boss* enough? Well I have a whole magazine here for your *toll*, and I think it’s going right into your brains...”

The earth pony seemed rather unmoved, or tried to be. He sniffed disdainfully. “So what, kid? You gonna shoot me? Forfeit your life? What’ve you got that’s so damn important?”

“Lockbox, they’re just bullets! For Luna’s sake!” Sunny Side gasped behind me.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell at them and point them down the tunnel I’d just come, at the dark secrets that threatened to swallow us all

up. Of course they were just bullets, that was the point! There were so many more important things to know about! The Dark Ones were coming, and I found I didn't care if they wiped this entire station off the map purely because of this one grouchy guard pony. Just the thought of his smug little squint being victorious over me was almost too much to handle. Didn't they know? Didn't they see how terrible they were being to us and each other? I'd been manipulated and left for dead, led three ponies to their deaths, been abandoned and had my life threatened more times than I could count in the space of a few days, and I had to bow down to this stupid, insignificant-

But wasn't I the one who thought all ponies were significant? I blinked rapidly as I suddenly seemed to realize what I was doing. I shoot this pony, threaten his life and then what? I get...

I get nothing. I let out an audible sigh as I remembered a beautiful smile framed in yellow and pink, strong cyan eyes staring me down in disappointment.

Regardless, I still held the gun to the other pony's chin, if only because he refused to be intimidated and I refused to back down after threatening him. I wasn't about to be the weak one in this confrontation.

"I don't think all this violence is necessary," said a familiar voice. Everypony turned to look at Nopony, showing no reaction on their faces to him suddenly appearing next to me and my hostage. As if he'd been there the whole time. As if he was a trusted member of the station... then I realized I didn't remember him coming with us into the station at all. Had he even been driving the railcart? Just what strange magic did this pony exert on us all?

"Surely we can work out a compromise," he said, and fixed me with a stare through his gasmask. I grunted with anger and pushed the barrel of my gun up under the other pony's chin a little more, satisfied to at last see his eyes widen a bit in fear. That's what I wanted to see. I'd gotten what I wanted. I'd gladly pay a toll now.

"Three bullets each," I growled. "And no stupid weapons charge."

“... Four,” the earth pony growled. I nudged him with my Mule’s barrel again and he gasped. “Fine, fine, fucking three!”

I gently lowered my weapon and stepped back. The guard looked like he wanted to knock my block off, and I felt glad to oblige him to a fight, but then Nopony stepped forward again. I felt a noticeable change in the air. A shift in momentum towards the dark-clothed pony, like an invisible change in some sort of tide. The guard pony actually lowered his eyes and mumbled something noncommittal as I fished out nine cartridges for their ridiculous toll, jamming it into one of his saddlebags. Nopony dropped off a tin of canned food.

“For emotional injuries,” he explained, and all three of us passed the miserable little group of guards, who’d only gotten half of what they’d wanted. I didn’t care. I managed to exert a little authority, which was saying something in the Metro. I tried to feel satisfied and proud I’d at last showed some spine for myself. Instead I felt nothing except a little queasy from the adrenaline rush.

The back of the guard tower led back down onto the twin tracks which disappeared into Ponyevskaya, which had the fortune of being quite spacious due to extra construction of tunnels and side passages. The plantations were sprawling places, with several layers to them. Most of this space, I presumed, was taken up by the plantations, where they tended specialized magical crops and the few livestock animals that were still with us. The entire operation hung continuously on a knife’s edge, as the slightest disturbance could ruin whole harvests due to bad soil, radiation leaks, lack of water, too little care, too much care, the wrong or right treatments and magical spells being delivered at the wrong or right times. Say what I would about the friendliness of their guards, the farmers took their work seriously and had managed to deliver for many years, and their important place in the northern tunnels was appreciated. Most of what they grew was mushrooms and the strange new plants that could flourish underground. Milk was at a premium everywhere all the time, because in these four (well, now three) stations the only known population of cows remained.

We came into the main body of the station. The tracks we followed went under huge iron doors, then split further until the island between them became a sort of station unto itself, a large open area crowded by

ramshackle living spaces constructed over market stalls. Two train cars had been laid on top of each other on one set of tracks and glowed with activity. Ponies bustled back and forth, all of them looking dour and harassed. To the left and right of the great hall, which extended across both tracks and the island, were wide staircases that led into other areas of Ponyevskaya where it seemed the farms must be. The entire area was lit by magic, with only a smattering of electric lamps and lightbulbs. I also smelt the faint scent of kerosene.

I saw a cow being led gently by a harness through the crowd, a unicorn holding it with her magic. The cow looked dull and dumb, and looked neither left nor right.

"The destruction laid down by the War affected minds as well as bodies," Nopony said quietly, though I didn't see where he was speaking from. "Cows once could talk and think like us. But the ones on the surface were changed by the radiation and war spells before they could be brought down... they are no longer sentient creatures like they once were."

"How sad," Sunny Side whispered. I turned away and noticed all the dark glares we were getting. Outsiders weren't welcome here. Family oriented ponies. Selfish, I thought. I wanted to find out what was going on and get out of here as soon as possible.

"We should keep heading south, to Compass and Percherovskaya, and then Otzark Bulvard," I said. "Perhaps there we can get a message to Bucklyn." If I still felt like delivering it. I sighed heavily. We kept going back and forth, all around... never *closer* to Ponyopolis. I resolved not to be distracted again. I had to keep moving... if all these stations were going to keep asking for help and snubbing me when I risked my life, then I'd just have to stop thinking of helping them until my mission was over.

"Guards are following us," I heard Nopony's voice in my ear. "Or, well, you. They will probably be wanting to interview you or take you to the mayor."

"They should come to us," I said with sniff. "We're the ones who risked our necks getting here."

I took another look and saw that most of the ponies seemed high strung, or bored. They were under siege from mutants and bandits and probably had nothing to look forward to but the next daily grind, performing their everyday duties until the next assault came. I knew if mutants had been tenacious enough to force Heron to be abandoned, they'd be coming for Ponyevskaya next. I heard the soft mumble of conversation from above; the ramshackle construction continued overhead, covering the roof here, meaning ponies lived right on top of each other. It reminded me in some ways of Exiperia, just more open. The same tightly drawn, anxious faces were here, the same concerns. Yet we thought so differently from one another, and just a few minutes before I'd wished this whole station would die just so my mission could be a little easier.

"It's not going to be easy getting through the other stations," Sunny Side warned. "Not if they aren't expecting or wanting visitors from Bucklyn. Or if they even believe that we're from there."

"We will have to proceed with caution," Nopony warned. "Clearly these ponies are very worried, though I would be too if an entire station nearby has been annihilated."

"I know what to do!" Sunny Side said, rearing up. I looked at him in surprise... then saw where he was looking. An earth pony was cooking soup and mushrooms nearby in large metal drums, stirring them with a bored expression. Sunny Side was regarding the steaming food with naked desire. I punched his shoulder.

"What?" he asked after he noticed the stare I gave him. "We haven't eaten since we were on the surface, and tea doesn't really fill you up..."

"As long as you are here, you might as well have real food," Nopony suggested. "My supplies are only palatable in emergencies."

"I suppose you have a point," I muttered, and headed to the food vendor with him.

The earth pony noticed us approaching and quickly backed away from his stall. He looked back and forth as if trying to signal some kind of intervention, but he stayed still when all the other ponies kept ignoring us, carting crops and dirt and manure between the two large stairwells.

"Are you not *wanting* to make a sale today?" I asked snippishly.

"Just a couple bowls of soup, that's all," Sunny Side asked. "We'll pay. And, um... some soggyweed if you have it."

"How do you even stomach that stuff?" I asked.

"It's for Ponyevskaya ponies only," the cook grumbled. "I don't deal with foreigners."

I wasn't willing to give up more cartridges to these selfish cheapskates, but I pulled out my store regardless. The sight of a full magazine made the cook's eyes widen.

"Three each," I said, noting the sign put the price at two bullets for a bowl. I was going to be bankrupt before I even got back to the radial, but I had to admit I might be in a better mood after a full stomach. The cook regarded me nastily even then.

"One extra for your winged friend. He might cause trouble. You know how they are."

"I know you're about to give me that food for free, just because I said so, if you don't agree to my price," I whispered quietly. "Now food, and don't insult my friend again."

The cook looked positively murderous, though for the sake of getting whatever cartridges he could he quickly spooned out two bowls for us both, but did not get Sunny Side's coveted soggyweed.

"Don't even tell ponies I did that," he whispered, glancing about furtively. "Now go away!"

Sunny Side began slurping at the goopy, lumpy mess before he even took a step away, clutching his bowl in both hooves. I grabbed the handle on the bowl with my teeth, went to the nearest abandoned corner in between two buildings and sat down. We ate in uncomfortable silence, noting the way all the other ponies, mostly earth and unicorn ponies, ignored us pointedly. Such large stations, yet so insular... it was a wonder

the plantations weren't a faction unto themselves, with how much they seemed to be willing only to deal with "local" ponies.

One snatch of conversation from two passing ponies, hauling bags of feed and underground seeds, caught my attention as we ate.

"Did you hear? Two guardponies... vanished in the western auxiliary tunnels! Just like that poor farmer."

"I'm telling you, it's the mutants! They found a way past the blockade and there's probably some dropbears or something set up where our patrols can't find them!"

"But it's always in the places you least expect. And there's no sign of them anywhere! Just some blood and bullet holes. Somepony is-"

"Shut up! We're not supposed to talk about *that*."

I looked their way, and the two conversing earth ponies saw me looking and walked away with a glare.

"Something is going on here besides bandits and mutants," I declared. "There's no reason for them to be so unfriendly."

"Is there?" Nopony asked. "There's a lot to be unfriendly about, the fact that you are foreigners notwithstanding. These ponies are frightened and feel abandoned by those who claimed to be their protectors. The plantations have always been reclusive. And for whatever reason, pegasi are generally unwelcome here... they believe if one doesn't "

"Exiperia is facing far worse," I grumbled. "And we don't extort ponies and threaten them."

"Maybe so. But this isn't Exiperia," Nopony advised me.

It was only then I noticed that cook hadn't even reacted to our dark-clothed friend's presence. He hadn't even looked his way or offered him a bowl to. Another chill ran through me, like when I finally realized what the true nature of the haunted tunnel was. Who actually saw this pony? Why

us? What strange influence did he exert over other ponies? And was he somehow influencing me and Sunny Side?

“Why do you wear your mask all the time? The air here is perfectly good,” Sunny Side asked him out of the blue. Why hadn’t I thought of that? I leaned forward, eager to hear the explanation for his bizarre behaviors. Nopony, if he was taken off guard, didn’t show it. He just waved it off in a gesture I was certain showed amusement.

“Oh, young colt, it’s simple! My lungs aren’t what they used to be, and I find it far easier to breathe filtered air rather than have to force air we all know is contaminated down my throat all the time. Smoke and other toxic materials are in the air all around us... your lungs are still young and strong, but one of these days you will feel it. Perhaps in a less acute way than I; I am very sensitive you see. And, please, I know what your next question will be. I am very used to running on little food, but I *do* take off my mask to eat.”

Sunny Side and I exchanged glances. It was a valid reason, but still struck me as strange. I decided to drop the issue as did Sunny Side.

“So how are we going to get information if these ponies are so unfriendly?” I wondered aloud.

“I thought you’d know that one,” Sunny Side said with a strange smile. “You’re the one who’s been all for pushing on. Ponyevksaya is far north, and the bandits are to the south. There’s nothing we can do about the mutants, so we head south for Otzark Bulvard... get closer to the problem and maybe we’ll find a solution.”

“Or a way to push on through,” I mumbled, and turned to Nopony. “Is there any way you can get us past the other stations entirely? I don’t want to face these roadblocks and glorified toll booths more than once.”

Nopony regarded me with an inscrutable look, and Sunny Side actually looked a little nauseous. I glanced between them and tossed a hoof. “I promised Bucklyn I’d get information back to them about what’s going on. I didn’t promise we’d actually solve any of *their* problems.”

“Indeed. Perhaps a wise attitude to take if you’re in such a hurry,” Nopony murmured, rubbing his chin. “More and more you tell me you are on a mission you consider supremely important. Somewhere deeper into the Metro... there are only a few places there worth going.”

I felt my mane bristle aggressively. “I don’t remember saying I’d tell you anything.”

“I never asked about it. You’re the one who assumed I was prying,” Nopony said, pointing a hoof, which somehow only made me more annoyed. “But as you say, you’re in a hurry, and I think the only way to bypass the other stations is to crawl through the secondary tunnels... there just so happens to be one that goes from Compass around to the radial, coming out near Otzark Bulvard. But it is a dangerous tunnel and has perhaps been sealed off to prevent the bandits from invading here. Look at your Guide, but make sure nopony sees it!”

I turned to the wall and took out the Guide. Sunny Side looked over my shoulder. Sure enough there was a thin line that connected Compass and Otzark Bulvard, which I presumed had been taken over by bandits by now. There was a little symbol that glowed to the west of Compass, a little south of Ponyevskaya. It hovered near the secondary tunnel, so I pointed it out to Nopony.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Is that the danger symbol?”

Nopony stared long and quiet at the symbol I pointed to, and then turned to me. My ears twitched, wondering if I’d said something wrong. I’d read the Guide and got it wrong and now Nopony was going to tell me how stupid I was.

“... No,” he said, and his voice was soft and not at all condescending. “No, that is not a symbol for danger at all. My friend, it is the old Equestrian symbol for *safety*.”

My mind reeled. Something about that word... ‘safe’... sparked a rush of memories, and I noticed with a gasp that Hunter’s talisman was buzzing again. Bucklyn reporting the loss of Rangers... finding a Ranger hiding spot on the surface... my mission... rumors of a Ranger base near the farms...

western auxiliary passages... something sparked within me. I knew what that symbol *really* meant. At last I had a clue where to really look!

I rolled up the Guide.

"All right, forget the secondary tunnel. I know where we're going next."

But before I could stand up, a group of guards descended on us, led by a stocky, bright, snowy blue earth mare with a caramel brown mane run through with white highlights, dressed in tough soldier's barding. Combined with her fierce, aquamarine eyes, she looked like she'd fit in well on the frontline of a Monarchy assault squad, and her little posse of guards looked equally dangerous. But instead of an obscuring helmet, she wore a wide brimmed, high crowned hat. Her voluminous, and I had to admit, attractively well kept mane flowed out from under it. I found myself intrigued because of that hat, having a single picture of old Appleloosa that showed ponies that wore such hats before the War. It must've been some family heirloom.

The mare looked far less impressed with us.

"So'm Ah gonna have ta' choke ya'll with my lasso o' truth, or are ya gonna admit ta' bein' spies straight up?"

"You don't wanna get choked by the lasso o' truth," growled the guard next to her. It was such an absurd thing to say I wondered if they were joking to put us at ease, but the glares did not abate.

"You know... this is the second station that's accused us of being spies right off the bat," Sunny Side grumbled, flattening his ears. "Are they just *that big a problem* in the Metro?"

I wanted to look to Nopony for advice, but he didn't seem all that talkative. And anyway, I figured telling the truth in this particular situation was for the best. I didn't want my lies piling up as high as my doubts.

"We're from Bucklyn," I said. "Not that your guards at the gate believed us. We're here to figure out how to deal with the bandit situation to the south."

“Oh?” the mare scoffed. “Listen up little ‘shroom. Since Ah’m a polite pony, Ah’ll introduce myself. The name’s Snowglobe. Proud daughter a’ Ponyevskaya, captain of the Ponies of the Underground, premier guard team *in the Metro*, an’ half the reason you get food in your belly. Ah got mutants runnin’ down our throats from the north an’ bandits bumpin’ flanks with us to the south. Ah got politics, a serial killer an’ who knows what else goin’ on *in mah station*. Everypony from here to Perch’ is scared stiff an’ not in any condition to do anything ‘cept huddle down an’ defend their own! Ah don’t *need* two little salt licks like yerselves runnin’ around causin’ trouble if you’re all the help Bucklyn kin be arsed to send!”

I stood up and matched her glare, feeling satisfied that I was in fact a little taller than her. “They have problems of their own,” I said. “If there’s so much trouble involved in keeping us here then show us a quick way south and we’ll be out of your manes.”

“Ho, no! Ah ain’t takin’ no chances with, uh... what ch’all call it, Abacus?”

“Uncertain variables,” the guard to her right patiently explained. The mare nodded once.

“Right! What he said. You two might as *well* be spies given all that’s been goin’ down! Why, Ah should buck ya’ll right back where you came from! But seein’ as we’re such *hospitable* ponies,” she hissed, “Ah’ve been given the go ahead to send ya’ll back to Perch, an’ you can make your *own* way from there. Right now!”

“Under guard and at gunpoint?” I muttered. “Not the most *hospitable* way to treat ponies sent at risk of their own lives to help you. We were forced to travel across the surface and lost good ponies getting here!”

“An’ we’re losin’ good ponies who just wander off down a dark hall on their own!” Snowglobe shot back, shoving her face into mine until our noses scrunched together. Was this her idea of coercion? Just shout as loud as she could to cow us into submission? I was getting more put off by the second.

“Now ya’ll gimme any more lip an’ Ah’ll see to it you spend the rest o’ yer days cozied up in our jail cells till all this is sorted out! We don’t take kindly to strangers pokin’ their noses into our stations. Bucklyn’s so high an’ mighty, but it never lifted a hoof to help us until it was too late! An’ *now* they can’t even keep up communications so they send two little errand boys who rough up *my* guardponies, bribe *my* cooks, and insult *my* dead ponies by tellin’ me my methods are too rough! We got this all sorted out without outside interference. So ya’ll scoot your little behinds on outta here.”

“And what are we supposed to do when we *get* to Otzark?” Sunny Side asked. “Ask the bandits to pretty please let us through your deadly blockade?”

“Never hurts to try,” Snowglobe sniffed, finally getting out of my face. “Now come on. Ah can’t waste good guard ponies guardin’ you two forever. Sooner you’re outta our manes-”

“I don’t want to go that way,” I said. Snowglobe tilted her head.

“Kindly repeat that bit o’ horsefeathers?”

“We aren’t going that way. I want to know what this business is in the western passages.”

Snowglobe raised a severe eyebrow. Clearly, I had gone straight from ‘slightly more than pond scum’ to ‘actively loathed and despised’ on her list.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I am here to do a job. I want to see it done. Bucklyn must know what’s going on.”

Snowglobe regarded me frostily. I could almost see gears turning in her head.

“Ah think it best if you just clear on outta here, stranger,” she murmured. “This is a volatile situation. We need only ourselves, an’ ponies that can handle danger.”

“Try me,” I muttered, matching her steely gaze. “I just want to take a look. That’s all.”

“There’s an unhinged killer runnin’ loose in those tunnels,” Snowglobe explained. “Ya’ll sure you can handle a stone-cold murderer?”

I remembered the horrors I’d faced so far. The creatures I’d killed and the ponies too. The Ranger base was somewhere in those passages, hidden away, and I needed to find it. This time, it was me that stepped up close to Snowglobe, looking down her snout and straight into her eyes, close enough that our forelocks brushed. She didn’t blink or pull back, but she didn’t snap at me either.

“This is the Metro. Stone-cold murderers are a dime a dozen,” I said quietly. “And I’ve killed far worse than that.”

Snowglobe stared at me a little longer.

And then she burst out laughing. There was an awkward moment where I thought she was going to shoot us both, but she calmed down quickly enough.

“All right... all right, don’t get all saddlesore. Ah c’n tell you got balls, pal. So we’ll let you have yer little look-see. But straight after it’s mah show again, an’ you’re leavin’.”

She turned about and whapped me in the face with her tail.

“Come on, might as well get this over with... not that we’ll find anythin’. Bastard never strikes ponies in groups. Abacus! Rawhide! Get your rears in gear an’ give this little colt an’ his featherbrain friend a crash course in ‘shuttin’ up an’ doin’ as we say.”

Sunny Side stepped up close to me as she stalked off to do whatever she needed to do.

“We’re never going to lose them,” he murmured. “And something doesn’t feel right. She agreed too easily.”

“I agree,” I replied. “But she’s letting us get closer to where we need to go. For now we will play along. But we get what we need to know... and go.”

“What if things get complicated?”

I shrugged. “They always are.”

Chapter 10

“Lord, what a splendid world we’ve ruined...”

I didn’t understand why we got as big a guard as we did. The trip to the western warrens (calling them tunnels would’ve been a compliment) wasn’t long, but Snowglobe didn’t take any chances. I wondered if she thought we were going to bolt as soon as we were out of sight and suddenly commit to a guerilla war against her station. I held that thought with vindictive relish, finding a greater and greater annoyance with the Ponies of the Underground with every step I took. They seemed to believe they were a step above the regular guardpony, holding themselves with pride for accomplishments I didn’t know and didn’t care about. I walked behind the one called Abacus. He looked thin, but in a slender, agile way, like Sidewinder. Nopony and Sunny Side trailed behind me, flanked by Snowglobe and the rest. There were five of them in total but Snowglobe assured me that they were a strong and numerous unit, spread through the three remaining plantations. The thin side hall we traveled down, clean though not well lit to preserve energy, was filled with Snowglobe’s rambling.

“We’ve pretty much got the monopoly on bein’ badass here in the north. Hoofsa actually contracts us to keep an eye on the trade routes between here an’ Bucklyn, all the way down to New Trottingham. But even still we know where our loyalties lie... Ponies of the Underground will always be loyal ta’ the farms, an’ so ta’ *me*. Not that you Arm Stations would understand about that.”

Arm Stations were any stations that weren’t directly connected to the inner Metro, and were stretched out along the long outer tracks outside the Ring. It wasn’t necessarily derogative, but I still didn’t appreciate the subtle jab at my ignorance and inexperience in inner Metro politics. I was happy to be from an Arm Station, because it kept me further away from troubles and wars that plagued the stronger, bigger stations. I was about to point out that the plantations were on an arm themselves, but thought better of it and let Snowglobe talk. It was clear she was very proud about her station... or she wasn’t very confident and all, and made up for that with her bluster.

“Heron’s destruction was awful for all of us. But we’ve rebuilt. We gave the ponies of Heron new homes. We adjusted our plots an’ now we’re working more efficiently than ever. Shame ya won’t stick around an’ take a peek at our operations. Maybe you’d learn a thing or two about ponies what actually stick together an’ watch each other’s backs.”

I stared at the ground, trying to drone out her incessant blathering. If *this* was the commander of the Ponies of the Underground, this arrogant and confrontational child, my opinion of them was lowering further every second. I resisted the impulse to ask her why they’d lost Heron in the first place if they were so tough... but the question nagged me anyway and I modified it to be less rancorous.

“So how was Heron lost, anyway?” I ventured, expecting to hear some grand tale of defiance and danger in the face of impossible odds.

“Treason,” Snowglobe spat. I was surprised by her honesty. “We didn’t stand a chance, really. Somethin’ or somepony opened up a key blockade we’d set in one of the auxiliary tunnels... an’ then the damn rats just spilled in.”

“Rats?” Sunny Side asked. “You were beaten by rats?”

“Yeah. Big rats the size of foals that came in the dozens and didn’t stop till everypony was dead or gone,” one of the other ponies hissed at my friend, who wilted under the vicious stare. “We managed to cut our losses and seal up the other tunnels in Heron’s direction. And we hold the line and make sure the rats don’t find another way in. They’re attracted by the smell of the livestock and the plants we grow, we figure. Every so often one or two slip through. Once Hoofsa clears up this business with the bandits, they’ve promised to send us heavy guns and ponypower to help clear the little turds out. Gonna be a hell of a day of reckoning when it finally comes... everypony in Heron was family in one way or another.”

The thought of a giant blob of mutant rats pressing against the walls of the station, multiplying until they burst through with the pressure of their own collective weight terrified me. I wondered about the farmers’ situation, how they had to constantly fight for their lives against monsters from the surface and the underground, and realized it wasn’t so different from the state of Exiperia. I didn’t dare open my mouth and try to build bridges with

talk of the Dark Ones, but I knew that at least we weren't alone in our terror. It made me wonder how many other stations were like ours, all around the Metro, stuck between the frightful monsters outside, and the selfishness of the stations behind them. I realized that they weren't just fighting to keep the Metro safe; they fought for their own turf and their own survival. Give up a little ground and the noose we called the Ring is tightened a little more, until there are too many ponies and too little space, and everyone chokes on each other's bullets when they find there's not enough generosity to go around.

But if everypony faced the same doom, what was the point of my mission? If we stopped the Dark Ones who knew what would come to another station, wipe them out and push us all in a little closer together... no, no. I couldn't think about that. I couldn't stop, and I couldn't wonder. That was a pathway to a dead end. There only lay purposelessness and defeat, and that was something I'd never consider. Not after all I'd gone through already, and how many ponies had died. Ray Drop and all the others deserved better. Hunter and my father deserved better. I'd given my word. I wouldn't give up, and I wouldn't die until my mission was complete.

"We're not going to find anything just taking a look around, I hope you know that," Abacus said over his shoulder. I didn't answer him. He didn't know the Guide I had, or the little talisman that would guide me where I needed to go. I just needed a way to lose them once we were in the tunnels... perhaps I could convince them I was too much trouble to keep looking after and they'd abandon me?

"We just make a clean sweep," Snowglobe answered for me. "An' when we don't find nothin', we just head on back. This killer ain't gonna jus' pop out of the woodwork when we swing in."

"Why is he doing this?" I asked.

"He's a loonybin, why else?" Snowglobe snapped. "Ah don't reason with murderers an' killers. Far as I'm concerned they're all just targets in mah scope. If we do run across him, an' you better hope we don't, cause he's a mite more dangerous than the average lunatic, first thing Ah'm doin' is puttin' a bullet in 'is brain. The killing all happens in these tunnels, but there ain't any evidence beyond bullet holes. An' any gun in the station could be usin' the calibers we find."

We came to a doorway that had a magical rune etched into its surface. A teal unicorn in the group came forward and disarmed it.

"We've got most of these tunnels sealed off," Snowglobe explained as the door swung open into pitch blackness. She bravely led the way. "Because we don't use 'em for much more than storage. Just a bunch of back rooms an' whatnot nopony knows the point of. We've made a few sweeps of 'em an' found nothin'. But ponies kept dyin' in 'em, so we just keep them closed off until we can get a good fix on the perpetrator."

"What of magical charms? Scrying? They can spot and find ponies easily," Sunny Side said.

"In case ya didn't notice," Snowglobe drawled, tossing her mane as the door was shut and re-sealed with the runes behind us, "we aren't exactly swimmin' in magic. The unicorns we got don't have talents turned towards that business, an' we've lost two already in scoutin' groups. Bastard picked 'em off in the same damn rooms, even..."

I gulped. A pony that could kill others in the same room as other ponies... and yet escape undetected? Was it a pony committing these murders, or had a relative of the Dark Ones found their way to the plantations? Either way I didn't want to stick around and actually meet this character. I was here for something infinitely more important than a single station's troubles... a single station that held foreigners at gunpoint and insisted on kicking them out at the earliest convenience at that.

"We should be wary the further back we go," Abacus warned us. "There are cracks in the ceiling where some of the radiation and poisonous air has leaked in from above."

The air grew cold and stale as we traveled further into the warrens, which were dusty and crowded with the refuse and useless things the station didn't need and couldn't find space for. The only lights came from that of our lamps, and I felt rather claustrophobic in these spaces. The tunnels of the Metro winded and twisted on into the darkness, at least giving you a chance to see that you were going forward or back. But these tight corridors ended after a few hoofsteps, twisted back on each other and were struck through with many small rooms I couldn't tell the purpose of.

One place had a series of dusty old consoles long without power, another held massive generators that Snowglobe explained were damaged beyond repair, and needed expert runemakers and magic users with knowledge we didn't possess anymore.

"We'd be able ta' power the whole northern section of the Metro," she said sadly. "Wouldn't need half the unicorns we have ta' keep our plantations going. But we just don't 'ave the means, the time... the knowledge."

I shook my head. Somehow, knowing that we'd literally forgotten how to maintain certain parts of our city, and we didn't have the time or the resources to recover that knowledge, struck me as one of the most tragic things I'd ever heard. So much was being lost at a prodigious rate, and I couldn't keep up. I recalled my Wall, my pathetic contribution to the preservation of the species... I thought of Hunter's talisman and Ray Drop's picture in my bag. Was it silly to try and help our species survive by keeping those trinkets? I never thought so until now, when I had a massive treasure sitting right in front of me and couldn't even summon up the will to try and figure out how it worked.

But like the ponies here, I had more pressing concerns on my mind. How could I sit in this little room and uncover the secrets of a bygone era when my family's lives were on the line? Knowledge was a luxury, survival was a necessity.

We wandered those back rooms for an hour or more, growing bored and restless when we couldn't even catch a glimpse, and Hunter's talisman didn't glow or buzz even once. I wasn't willing to give up. I knew that somewhere in these tunnels was the answer, and I couldn't leave. But I couldn't shake off all these guards, and I couldn't find a good spot to find an excuse to really start searching without them herding us everywhere. When we found nothing but a pile of rubble from a cave-in at the end of a long hall, with graffiti on the walls across from it. The symbols were nothing but incomprehensible gibberish, left by some silly adolescent years ago. I stopped moving entirely, sighing.

I closed my eyes, wondering if we were starting to waste our time. Snowglobe was sticking to us like glue, and I was stuck on an adequate way to get us out. Were we going to have to waste time doubling back once

we were kicked out? I'm sure Nopony had some kind of idea or map, or the Guide could lead us back...

Nopony looked up suddenly. "In what manner were these ambushes conducted?"

"If you're asking whether magic was used, then of course," Abacus answered. "It's the only way he could stay hidden so long."

Nopony moved to the front, touching my shoulder. He pointed me towards a spot in the wreckage of the cave-in that seemed unremarkable at first glance. It was just a place where somepony had left more graffiti on the wall... But as I stood and stared, I noticed a change in the pile of rubble, much like the symbols of the Guide, changing and warping before my eyes. It was still an incredibly alien and unsettling experience, but at least this time I knew what was happening. My eyes were riveted to the spot, though I kept my expression neutral, not wanting to draw attention. The mess of graffiti suddenly made *sense*. The talisman triggered something, or changed my perception, or my own mind changed something in it... but I could see the word in the middle of the morass: safe.

Next to it was an arrow, pointing down the hall. Blindly, I began to follow.

"Is he feelin' all right?" I heard Snowglobe snark at the edge of my senses. Sunny Side was quick to cover for me.

"He, ah, gets like that," he said. "Shoulda seen him back in Bucklyn... poor guy got hit on the head, you see, few years back. But he got healing from a local seer, says it helps him see things now. Sometimes he spots something interesting and just can't let go of it!"

It was a ridiculous story, one you'd have to be extremely dense to even think it was credible. But I didn't hear the others answering or even rebuking my friend... I heard them following. I didn't know what I must have looked like, taking slow, measured steps down the hall. I didn't even really feel anything in those few minutes except a certainty of where I was going and what I was doing. The talisman began to buzz and hum as I dragged the entire entourage behind me. I felt purposeful and confident for the strangest reasons, and that confidence must have bled off me and into the

group that followed behind. I didn't see them as barriers to be overcome, but fellow travelers. And so we went, into the dark, far away from Ponyevskaya. The tunnels twisted in on themselves, and we went under half-open gates, past a room full of lockers rusted and plundered, and once through a sewage canal. It made no sense to some small part of my mind that watched my sudden change in behavior, though somehow I felt I was following a very particular path that needed no explanation... only a pony's hooves following it. Time passed until I thought for sure the guards would think I was trying to get them lost. Sunny Side, bless him, kept his faith in me and never once complained, knowing that I had a plan and this was probably part of it. It didn't even occur to me that I might be under a spell until my wandering came to an abrupt end. We were in a small room with three doors, lit by our lights and the faint glow of radioactive moss in one corner. I noticed the walls were pocked with bullet holes.

"This was where Pickaxe bought it," Snowglobe spat, and the other guards seemed uncomfortable too. But I knew this was my best chance. Here I needed to search for the next route. I and Sunny Side made a great show of examining the room closely, while the guards, already bored and indifferent to our fate, leaned against walls and spoke quietly to each other, keeping an eye on their surroundings instead of us. No pony stood in the middle of the room, quiet and unnoticed by any pony except me, it seemed. I hadn't even seen him come into the room with us. I pondered asking him if he could slip away, but I was loath to approach him lest it break whatever spell he kept cast on ponies around him that kept them under his influence. Snowglobe, however, stuck close to us and didn't let us out of her sight.

My saddlebag tingled, and Hunter's talisman hummed. I almost couldn't contain my excitement, and began searching the room in greater earnest while Snowglobe regarded me oddly.

"You look like a drake what just caught scent of a dead body," she observed.

"I think I did," I replied, which gave her enough pause for me to lift up a rock. Underneath was another arrow, pointing at one of the other doors. My eyes widened, though I pretended to have more interest in the rock than the floor.

Snowglobe growled and turned away. "Useless!" she snapped, fed up at last with our aimless wandering. Now that I'd reached this room the strange charisma and influence I'd exerted before... perhaps with Nopony's help... had vanished. Snowglobe took aside one of her lieutenants and they spoke in hushed tones as I looked at Sunny Side, who joined me in inspecting the floor.

"This is it," I whispered to him, and nodded towards the door the arrow pointed us towards. Of course he couldn't see the arrow, but he trusted me. I got up and pushed it open, the loud squeal of the hinges drawing Snowglobe's attention.

"Hey!" she barked.

"There was a door there?" Sunny Side asked.

I ignored them both, entranced by what I saw beyond. There was another hallway behind this one, gutted by fire judging by the scorch marks on the walls. At the end was another door, dented inward and hanging loosely on its hinges. Sunny Side gaped, and others erupted into panicked whispers.

"He found it! Holy shit, he found it!" I heard one of the guardponies say, and Snowglobe kicking him in the shin. Nopony ushered Sunny Side into the hallway with me as the Ponies of the Underground went into another whispered conference.

"Tides are changing," he murmured. "Hurry! Find what you need!"

"Lockbox?" Sunny Side asked. "How... how did you... was it the-"

"Shh," I said, and walked slowly towards the busted door, feeling strangely detached, like I was floating. Sunny Side almost cowered behind me, clearly unable to comprehend what was going on. What was so strange about a door with a hallway behind it, I wondered? Couldn't they see it? I reached the door and pushed it the rest of the way open, with Hunter's talisman now releasing a high pitched, crystalline tingle. The door had been very sturdy once; it looked like somepony had taken a battering ram to it to force it open.

Inside was some kind of armory combined with a base of operations by the look of it, big enough for four or five ponies to stand comfortably in the middle of the weapon racks and small consoles. All of the consoles had been smashed and their innards scattered over the floor, many of them shot to pieces. The room had been looted as well as destroyed, with scrap metal scattered all over the floor.

The high pitch whine from Hunter's talisman still sounded in my ears, and I gently drew it out of my saddlebag. The Ranger symbol was glowing a gentle dark blue, holding my eyes. Sunny Side looked over my shoulder.

"Is this is it? Did we find it?"

"Unfortunately."

I spun about, still holding the talisman dumbly in one hoof. Snowglobe stood there, her gun prepped and pointed at us. Nopony was nowhere to be seen, which somehow didn't surprise me.

"You know, I'd really wanted ta' trust you," Snowglobe began. "Doin' this is harder than it looks. Weighs on the conscience heavy-like. But we gotta."

It took a few seconds to register what she was talking about. Suddenly everything came flying back into focus, my body began to shake and my eyes narrowed. Clarity was restored to my thinking. I gently replaced the talisman to its place in my bag.

"You're going to kill us. You knew this was here," I said quietly. Sunny Side opened his wings, ready to fight.

"That's the idea," Snowglobe said. "Don't bother fightin'. I didn't think you'd actually stumble on this place. Celestia's honest. Hell, I don't even know why I let you get this far... I guess I thought you'd actually be able ta' help. Even after you found the door, I kept thinkin'... jus' maybe we can work this out. Dumb luck on your part, or magic or somethin'. I hadn't made a decision until just now. But that there talisman..."

She pointed at my bag. "You're one a' them. You ain't goin' back ta' Bucklyn."

“Are you saying you did this?!” Sunny Side gasped, horrified. “You... you destroyed this place? You...”

“Killed the Rangers,” Snowglobe finished. “Eeyup. An’ now we gotta do you.”

I saw her mouth tighten on the trigger. I wondered if I’d be faster, if my hoof flying to my head could prepare my gun in time... maybe if I’d actually gotten it ready before we got here... kept it tacked... Sunny Side’s wings blurred as he hurtled forward...

And then everything went black. It took a moment for me to realize that I hadn’t fainted; everything had literally gone dark, as if the light was suddenly sucked out of the room. Snowglobe cursed. Sunny Side yelped as he crashed into something, perhaps one of the empty weapon racks. A weapon fired in the dark, deafening in the enclosed space, and I saw a flash of Snowglobe standing angrily in place, eyes closed, and Sunny Side flailing on the ground.

More gunshots from outside, and shouting. I couldn’t hear it well; my ears rang with a high pitched whine. I fumbled about in the dark, not daring to fire lest I strike my friend, trying to find something, anything that might give me light. I hit my light, saw its beam pierce the gloom, but somehow it seemed less strong than before. The light seemed to be at half-strength, everything was shrouded in blurry shadow...

“What in tarnation! Damn it! Stupid scum-suckin’ piece of-” Snowglobe spewed.

“Aw, crap, I bit my tongue,” moaned Sunny Side.

I lunged towards the sound of Snowglobe’s voice and caught a flash of her face scrunched up in an angry grimace in the dull beam of my headlight. I swung with my hoof and connected with her jaw, knocking the trigger out of her mouth and snatched at her gun when she staggered, ripping it back up into the harmless ready position. She recovered with startling quickness and I felt a strong, hard hoof slam into my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. Gritting my teeth against the pain I sprang on Snowglobe and pushed against her, trying to pin her against a wall or the

floor so I could land a good hit, flailing my hooves and landing hard but ineffective blows on her armored back. This time, the strength of the earth came unbidden to my legs.

I shoved, chest to chest with the struggling mare... and then she shoved back.

The next thing I knew I was lying in a pile of broken machinery, nursing a sore back. My headlight sputtered, showing me the grey ceiling.

"You aren't the only one who knows a few tricks!" Snowglobe spat. "Stay still an' this'll be easier!"

"Captain!" I heard Abacus shout. "It's him! It's hi-!"

He was cut off by a loud, angry yell. There were more gunshots, but they sounded further away. Snowglobe cursed in the dark. "Boys! Talk ta' me!"

It was then I heard a loud crash, and a yell from Sunny Side. Two more gunshots exploded in my ears. They were harsh, high-powered booms, most likely from Sunny's rifles.

"Stop shooting!" I yelled. No pony answered and the sounds of a struggle ensued. I stood and leaped forward, tripping when some pony's hoof swept mine from under me.

Sunny Side yelled in pain.

"Gonna rip yer damn hides open-!"

I swiped blindly with my hoof knife. I felt the serrated blade catch on something, tug, pull, and tear through.

Snowglobe shouted in pain. Knowing I'd landed a hit I pressed on, but her hooves were in the air, catching mine. I swung with my other hoof and felt it smack something soft. Snowglobe went down, or at least I thought she did from the heavy crash I heard. The earth's magic had served me well, giving my punch a little extra power... though I'd gotten

very lucky to land it, I knew; the dark and the distraction of the fight outside had cost Snowglobe her attention.

“Sunny!” I gasped, groping around to find my friend before Snowglobe got up again.

“She cut me...” Sunny groaned, and then something touched my shoulder.

That time, I really did faint.

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Something was eating my insides.

I lay in a dark tunnel, tangled in a formation of stalagmites. My eyes were wide open, staring at a blank stone ceiling. I couldn't move my limbs. Dead mutants lay nearby. I hadn't killed them in time. They'd chewed me to pieces. I felt my intestines squirm as they were shifted about inside my gut, and I slowly looked down. A shadowy, pony-shaped figure was rummaging through my guts. I saw my kidneys laid out next to my liver.

The shadowy figure lifted my ropy intestines, scrutinizing them closely.

Then it put them in its mouth and began to eat them.

My eye twitched.

“... F... Forgot... Path...” I mumbled without knowing why.

The figure leaned forward. It was Sweet Dreams.

Her eyes were missing. They were nothing but bloody sockets.

“This is the way you're going to die,” she said, squeezing my blood between her teeth, sloppily licking her lips. “This world is going to *eat you alive.*”

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When I awoke, I found myself in an unfurnished, concrete room, perhaps still in the western tunnels of Ponyevskaya. A little fire simmered in front of me, nearly burnt out. I was reminded immediately of our first encounter with Nopony, but there was no tea brewing this time.

“Thank goodness.” Sunny Side sat across from me on the other side of the fire. There was a bandage wrapped around his neck. Ah, he’d woken up before me last time too... I must have been a heavier sleeper than I thought.

“He’s awake?” a quiet, gruff voice said on my right. I turned and came face to face with a gruff, angry looking unicorn the color of ash, with a light grey mane spilling over his features. He was fully dressed in a combat uniform only worn by soldiers, with plates of armor and assault webbing covering his chest and limbs. Ammo and equipment covered his body, ready to be taken out at a moment’s notice, all packaged and organized in neat little rows as befitting a pony who knew what he was doing. He was big, too. Not as big as Hunter. But he had muscles, giving him girth that could challenge any big earth pony in Ponyevskaya.

“I’m going to ask you this once,” he snorted in my face, and Hunter’s talisman floated in front of my face, wrapped in magic. “Where did you get this?”

“... Why should I tell you?” I said, feeling unafraid.

“Lockbox, he saved our lives,” Sunny Side whispered. I shot a glance his way, and then looked back at the unicorn, who had added a pistol to the talisman, pointed at my head. I stared it down, my expression remaining neutral even as I felt the familiar twist of fear squeeze my stomach.

“Because your life depends on it,” he answered me.

“I think you already know where it came from,” another voice interrupted, and suddenly Nopony was standing next to the unicorn, staring him down. “He wouldn’t have it otherwise, would he?”

The unicorn, to his credit, didn’t flinch at the sudden intrusion. “My brothers can’t take chances in these dark times.”

“So don’t take the chance that this might be the wrong pony to shoot,” Nopony said with a simple shrug. The unicorn did flinch this time, away from Nopony, away from the strange echo of power in those simple words. The strange old stallion was working his magic again.

Sunny Side’s eyes flicked between the two, his muscles tense, clearly ready to take a shot at the slightest provocation, while I stared at the barrel of the gun in my face. I wondered why I wasn’t dead yet, with all the near death experiences I was having in rapid succession. Perhaps there really was something to that business about fate and destiny. In any case, I didn’t find myself nearly as afraid as I might have been not long ago. A matter of days had hardened me, begun to make me think that guns in my face was a natural and expected occurrence. I didn’t even think much about Snowglobe and why she’d suddenly turned on us. I just knew that I hadn’t trusted them since the moment I set foot in their station, and that lack of trust had been completely vindicated.

“You know what the talisman is,” I said quietly. “You know what it’s for... otherwise you wouldn’t be doing this.” My eyes widened. “You’re a Ranger,” I whispered in awe.

The unicorn blinked, and the pistol floated back into its holster. Nopony stepped back to be unnoticed once more.

“That I am,” he said quietly. “You’re not one of us. The only way you could have this...”

“Hunter’s,” I said. The name made him twitch, his eyes widening with recognition.

“You know Hunter,” he said. “Are you the kid he talked about?”

“Lockbox.”

“Cinder Block’s son.”

I was starting to get tired of being identified that way. First bluffing my way into Draft, then this Ranger jumping straight to that... I wondered if

perhaps my father had a more storied past than he usually hinted at, and resolved to find out when I got back.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Tracer.” The unicorn stood back, letting me stand. “My apologies about the welcome. Any friend of Hunter’s is a friend of mine. I’m short on trust these days. After what those damn farmers did... they murdered my brothers in cold blood. The bastards!” he spat, pacing back and forth, and I saw him shake with sudden anger. It gave me pause. This was a Ranger... one of the heroes of the Metro. I hadn’t had the best introduction to him, but even this seemed out of character. Something terrible had happened, I deduced, but to make him like this...

“Why have they done this?” I asked quietly. “What were they hoping to gain killing Rangers?”

Tracer growled. An actual deep, guttural growl. I saw his eyes, wide and vaguely unfocused with anger. His strong limbs trembled, unable to contain his fury. Sunny Side wisely remained quiet, staring at the fire. The sight of this pony who had dismantled an entire squad of supposedly “elite” ponies angry beyond belief made even me recoil. The way he spoke was even more unnerving. His voice never went above a husky, quiet tone, never quite matching the anger I saw in his eyes.

“They’re all traitors. They’re working with Hoofsa and they’ve turned on Bucklyn. I and my brothers found out they were planning to let Hoofsa right past their gates, cut off Bucklyn, put Hoofsa in a position of power... they want their guns and ponypower to fight the mutants from above, even knowing we would help without hesitation. And when they knew we would warn Bucklyn as a matter of course, they turned on us too.”

He sat down heavily and stared at the wall. I wondered at his emotional intensity, remembering Hunter and the other Rangers who visited with him were always stoic and reserved ponies, save for when they were in combat.

“We should’ve seen it coming. I should’ve. But we didn’t. We thought we could perhaps contact Ponyopolis. Everypony would respect them as mediators... but the farmers acted quicker than us. We were only four. A

force to be reckoned with, but the farmers had dozens... and they knew these tunnels almost as well as us. Surface access was cut off before we even knew they were coming.”

“Farmers managed to overwhelm Rangers?” Sunny Side asked, amazed. Tracer laughed bitterly.

“They have to protect themselves from everyone and everything. Just because they farm doesn’t mean they aren’t dangerous. They came in force. Their unicorns blasted right through our runic defenses and enchantments, and they used fire to funnel us into tighter spaces. I managed to kill at least six of them before I was forced to run. Fortune smiled on me. Or perhaps it frowned... I was cut off from my fellows, who were driven back to the safehouse and, I suppose, all died near there. I’ve been hiding in these tunnels ever since. It’s been about five days. They know I’m back here... but a single pony skilled in magic who is very careful can hide where four in a known base cannot.”

I looked around the room, suddenly getting a cold chill in my stomach and a slight headache. If Tracer had gotten us out of there, and he was victim to the farmers’ attacks, and he’d been the only one back here with motive for vengeance...

“Are you behind the murders?” I asked in a hoarse voice.

“Murders?” he asked in a suddenly hostile tone, swinging around to face me. “No, not murder. Justice. By attacking us directly, the farmers showed they were no better than the Monarchy or the Republic... just another arm of Hoofsa.”

“But you can’t just declare war on all of them,” Sunny Side protested. “They provide food for almost all the northern stations. You’ve been killing ponies that keep us alive!”

“They’ve already declared war on us,” the Ranger answered, his tone even and neutral once more. “The fact of the matter is, there’s nothing in this Metro that isn’t leaning towards war already... space is getting less as more and more powers consolidate. Things are very... tense.” He waved a hoof. “I was starting to wonder if I’d run out of ammunition and have to go

out in a blaze of glory or the like. But with you all here I think we have a chance. After all..."

He pointed straight at me.

"With what you are carrying, it has now become my duty to escort you to Ponyopolis to the best of my abilities."

I wasn't sure how to think about that. Certainly I knew my mission was important, and I knew without a doubt I'd risk death, and see other ponies die in front of me without slowing down. But to have it confirmed like that so suddenly was a new experience. I hadn't even adjusted to this new pony's presence, and he was talking about things like war and death and politics, and how I was suddenly the valuable cargo instead of the talisman. I'd just been starting to get used to the idea that I'd be going on to Ponyopolis alone, and now all this was coming up. That, and I'd found out that one of my childhood heroes was a cold-blooded murderer with almost no regrets that he'd slain who knew how many ponies in an act of petty revenge. But then, hadn't I been about ready to murder the guards at Ponyevskaya's gates? Wasn't I shrugging off their problems, about to leave Bucklyn and the farmers and all these others to their respective dooms without batting an eyelid? Was I any better considering the ponies I'd killed so far, and led to their deaths?

I wondered. And it scared and surprised me how little it mattered that Tracer was a killer of ponies... I remembered my father's words then and there, pondering the strange unicorn's appearance. Could I trust this Ranger? Yes, I could, that I knew beyond a doubt. I could at least be sure he'd do his best to ensure I reached Ponyopolis. Any friend of Hunter's was a friend of mine. They were dedicated to protecting the Metro, eliminating threats that would overtake us all... even if those threats were other ponies. I knew this. I didn't like it. But I understood it. And I knew that I couldn't let it stop me.

"The Rangers are not like normal ponies. They're... dangerous. In more ways than one."

"Why do I have to be there?" I asked, my inquisitive and more cautious side demanding an answer. "You have Hunter's talisman already. I thought... I wondered if I'd just be able to pass on the message."

“That doesn’t mean I know what he wanted to say,” Tracer said, and I swore I thought I could hear something else behind the words, something dark and unspoken. “If he gave it to you, he meant for you to deliver the message yourself. Besides, it is far too dangerous to see you back off on your own. You need a way to get out of the plantations alive... they will surely kill you on sight now that you’ve wiped out an entire squad of theirs. And don’t tell me you think you can make the journey all the way back to Exiperia relying purely on your wits and skill at arms.”

I looked at Sunny Side, and he looked at me. It was true. Nopony had made no promise of everlasting friendship, saying only that he would travel with us as long as we went in the same direction. Tracer was right; chances were slim we’d get back alive.

“Hold on,” I said, and I sprang to my hooves, feeling a shiver run down my spine. “So... Snowglobe and the others...”

“I didn’t check to make sure they were all dead,” Tracer said with his chilling monotony. “But of those who might still be alive, I don’t think they will have many nice things to say about you when they get back home... and either way, *you and your friends* were the ones last seen going off with them. I’m sorry to say, boy, but by the end of the week every farmer in these stations will know you as a murderer.”

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And so it went that we began to devise a plan for getting out of Ponyevskaya as quickly as possible, penetrating the Ring, and getting into the inner Metro so I could begin the trek to Ponyopolis in earnest. I still had many, many questions for Tracer, but they could wait until we had gotten to safety. They had to.

We vacated Tracer’s small rest area and did something I believed to be rather counter-intuitive: we went straight back towards Ponyevskaya. The going was slow, as the farmers had put up numerous traps and runes in the areas they didn’t patrol constantly, on the lookout for Tracer and now us. I wondered about how I seemed to be making enemies wherever I went, and only the ponies that traveled with me now were the ones that I could trust. The only ones besides those back in Exiperia that I felt a

reasonable attachment to. I certainly didn't have the time, the resources, or even the willpower to stay behind and help the farmers fight off an army of mutants from the surface... at the same time, I chose not to think about how close their situation was to Exiperia's. I didn't think about it, that was all. I had my own mission. If I didn't see it through, how could I go back to my father empty-hoofed, look everypony else in the eye and say I gave up halfway just because an alternative presented itself? I didn't want everything I'd been through so far to be for nothing, for it all to just be some "experience" I would relate to my grandchildren.

And that was all supposing that I actually lived to tell the tale if I gave up and went back on my own now.

Nopony had gone on ahead without anypony's consent, saying only that he'd make sure to meet up with us again. Before he left, he bade me take out the Guide and look it over, marking two certain spots on the arcane map. One was near the exit of Ponyevksaya, where there was a railcart tunnel that made for quick and easy transport between the remaining plantations. It sat directly parallel to the line the plantations sat on, and would be our one and only chance of escaping this place within the day. The next was a place right on the rim of the Ring: the place Nopony assured us he would meet with us again, prepared to help us on into the inner Metro.

"Can't we just follow you?" Sunny Side asked. "If you are going to be sneaking through the entire route yourself then surely-"

"The places I go, you do not want to follow," Nopony said simply. "Only trust me, as you trusted me to deliver you safely here. There is something that must be done by you, and I am one of those lucky enough to help you along the path. But for now that path does not go the same way... I will make sure the door is open when you get there."

I noticed he'd been looking straight at me when he said that.

The actual plan was simple enough, one that almost made me indignant at how ridiculously uncomplicated it was. Get back to Ponyevskaya, sneak aboard the railcart that delivered supplies between stations, and ride it all the way out. Then jump off, find Nopony, and move on. All we had to do was get there.

Tracer led us on a winding, dark path that seemed to me to go in a huge semi-circle. He avoided whatever runes he detected, using his horn to find and uncover whatever traps the farmers may have left. The speed and efficiency at which he moved amazed me; the way he almost effortlessly disabled any runes and enchantments we came across made me wonder why he hadn't tried to make an escape attempt before. To turn off an alarm was one thing; to be able to turn it back on again after passing so those who set it didn't even have a clue that something was wrong? To even be able to predict when and where such traps might have been set? That took skill beyond what I knew in normal unicorns. It also made me extremely happy that Tracer, of all the other Rangers that had been with him, was a unicorn himself... what use was a pegasus or an earth pony under these conditions? If Sidewinder were here, I'd have been very interested to see how he handled it. Horn envy wasn't something that struck me often, but in those confined spaces, it did.

We snuck through tunnels that had been stacked high with old supplies and preserved foodstuffs, guided by Tracer's silent, comfortingly strong presence. He gave us only a few whispered instructions here and there, telling us when and where to go. Occasionally we would be told to wait and hide even when there was seemingly nothing there. Only twice did we run across guards thanks to Tracer's expert pathfinding, and twice we avoided them. There was little tension, as we watched Tracer at work, moving as expertly as Sidewinder, but with much more control, much less... randomness. Tracer knew just what he was doing, and knew it before he even did it. Every movement was controlled and measured, precise and confident. He never said a word, and I couldn't even hear him breathe.

The fact that he was a killer was lost on me. In some ways I even agreed with his logic, though it still appalled me that this had happened at all. The Rangers were the ones who protected us. The farmers were in a bad spot, but they had chosen their side, and committed a grave error in attacking those who would have helped them. Hoofsa was a powerful ally, but I knew from rumor they likely couldn't be trusted, especially since I remembered they seemed to be getting close to the Monarchy, which everypony who was not one of them knew they were the most dangerous threat to the Metro's freedom. What worth was my private morals in the face of all that? When even the strongest ponies proved to be at a glance

as full of vengeance and disgust with their fellow ponies as all the rest? Tracer was capable, strong, tough, and he'd endured things I doubtlessly could only dream of. But a hero? A real, live hero who did everything in his power to save the Metro and the world, consequences be damned?

No. I didn't see that about him. Not the way he looked at me, or the way he glared viciously at the farmers, the only thing stopping him from killing them with his bare hooves his iron self-discipline and training. What worth were morals when all they were was words on a page, thoughts in the brain? When trying to put them into action was as useless as trying to drain an ocean with a thimble?

What was the point of believing in them if I knew they could never truly affect my world? By Celestia. This journey had already plundered the idealism I'd held onto so surely at the start.

In the end, I knew where my loyalties lay. With Exiperia and those who helped its survival... and as dangerous as Tracer was, I knew I could trust him to help me much more than Sidewinder. That and we really didn't have a choice. I felt more and more like I was an observer, grabbing every chance I could to keep moving forward. Was it fate or chance that led me to those who kept helping me, even inadvertently, on the path to Ponyopolis? As long as I was moving toward my goal, I felt I was doing all right for myself...

We came out of a small tunnel that we'd been crawling through with great difficulty, as it used to be part of the ventilation system for the Metro which had broken down many, many years ago. All around us were boxes. Giant, wooden boxes with strange labels on them I didn't understand. Off in the distance, I could hear ponies working and talking, and the sound of a crane.

"We're in the loading zone of Ponyevskaya's docks," Tracer explained in a whisper. "It's here we're going to fetch our ride."

I wondered how exactly we were going to do that. Sunny Side's guns were still rather loud and cumbersome to carry around, but there was no way he was going to abandon them. Tracer explained his plan quickly as we scurried furtively around the big crates, listening to the shouts beyond. I was surprised there wasn't tighter security if they knew that Snowglobe's

group had been taken out. I didn't feel much pity for Snowglobe, since she was a part of all this nasty business and had doubtlessly taken part in the ruthless killing of the Rangers. Was Hoofsa that all powerful, that fearful, that the plantations would risk making enemies of the Rangers? The only reputable military group in the whole Metro? I wondered at the ability of ponies these days to forget friendship and harmony when they were faced with the chance of quickly and easily improving their station.

"It should be a simple matter to sneak aboard one of their carts," Tracer explained. "Cattle shipments move regularly between stations... helps keep down the filth and doesn't attract as many mutants. It's something they do quite often, so they will likely be lax about security. It is lucky you came when you did... a day later and this shipment would have moved on, and we would have to try something drastic."

"Hiding among cow carts from ponies who want us dead isn't drastic?" Sunny Side asked incredulously. Sure enough there was a deep lowing from one of the unfortunate creatures as they were led down to a large railcar for transport. Tracer led us closer, until we could see the ponies busily finishing preparations to leave.

"No. The cows are too closely checked. There's only one chance, so listen closely."

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I'd never ridden in a war wagon before.

War wagon was a catch-all term for the Metro's improvised armored vehicles, cobbled together from spare parts and metal plates slapped onto the bodies of railcars. Any and all manner of weaponry and equipment was placed on a war wagon. Our model was a two-seater that came with a standard heavy machine gun turret in the back, which I had no idea how to shoot apart from aiming and holding down the trigger. I'd wondered where the farmers got such heavy-duty equipment, and Tracer explained it was probably a goodwill present from Hoofsa, proving that they could provide better armament and protection than Bucklyn could ever hope to. Which was true, and why they were well on the way to controlling the entirety of the Ring Stations.

Luckily for us, the war wagon hadn't been loaded onto the main tracks just yet. Tracer had led us around to the side docks, where railcars were prepped for transportation. The war wagon was being prepared by the two ponies who were supposed to ride it: a stallion and a mare who diligently loaded the ammo box next to the heavy gun, cleaned the barrel and greased the wheels.

In a couple of minutes, they would both be unconscious. Or at least I hoped so. I'd asked Tracer not to leave a trail of bodies right at our exit, and he'd fortunately agreed to the wisdom of that. I would kill to keep going, that much was clear. But the thought of *being* a killer still turned my stomach. I didn't *want* ponies to die. But of course, that didn't stop them from dying anyway, or stabbing me in the back, or me from killing them if they got in the way...

Tracer hid behind a nearby workbench, waiting for the clamor of heavy machinery and box loading to become loud enough to make his move.

"Did you hear about the latest catastrophe in the western tunnels?" the stallion asked as he fed bullets into the machine gun's ammo belt. "They found Snowglobe and what's left of her squad."

"What! Th' commander? That tunnel rat got her too? Naw! Is she all right? Concord must be in a right tizzy!"

"Yeah, she was messed up pretty good, and three of her own squad were dead at the scene. She and the rest are in the hospital."

"Damn, poor kid. She's barely gotten a chance to prove herself, an' now this."

"It's a sorry state we've got ourselves. But once this business with Bucklyn is over, Hoofsa's promised us an *elite* squad of unicorns ta' help flush out that murderin' bastard. Meantime security's gonna be tighter'n ever... higher ups are still convinced it's a group a' ponies with secret access ta' the surface."

"Hogwash. It's one a' them Rangers. I still say it was a right horrible thing we did to 'em..."

“You sayin’ we *deserve* ta’ get picked off like flies?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’! Just thinkin’... I dunno, we was rash or somethin’...”

There was a loud whine and a buzz of hydraulics and turbines as the crane strained to lift a particularly heavy load.

Tracer made his move as quick and smooth as a snow ghost. He rushed straight up to the mare while she moved closer to the stallion to speak over the noise, both of them facing away as they checked the cleanliness of the gun barrel. He tapped the mare on the shoulder, and... that was it. She dropped, out cold. The stallion went down moments after. Tracer gently lifted their bodies and lifted them behind cover.

The entire operation from start to finish took about six seconds. Sunny Side and I took our places as we’d been ordered, having wrapped our scarfs around our snouts and popped our collars to help hide our faces, and placing the jackets of those Tracer had incapacitated over our regular clothes. Sunny Side, who had handed his battle saddle over to Tracer for now, would have the cover of the armored plating of the driver seat, and I was snug inside the turret. Chances of being spotted were slim, especially since we were at the head of the four car column. Unfortunately, our plan stopped there. Getting past both Percherovskaya and Compass was going to be another problem entirely.

I had been told our plan amounted to “go as fast as possible and hope they don’t catch us.” They’d know we were fakes the moment we stopped moving, and so we had to be going as fast as we could for the inevitable moment they found out we weren’t on their side. In essence, I was about to engage in subterfuge with ponies who had indirectly been giving me and my station life for the last twenty years. I was going to gun them down, flee from them, and betray them... just like they’d tried to do to me. My mind was full of conflicting feelings... none of which helped the nausea that came up as soon as Sunny Side started the engine and we began trundling towards the main tracks.

Tracer had promised he’d be nearby, sneaking aboard the personnel cart near the end of the column. I didn’t see him do it. He had vanished the

second I got into the turret. It was a miracle we hadn't been spotted yet at all.

The war wagon rumbled forward. I felt numb. Detached. Queasy and uncomfortable in the cramped space of the turret. Only a thin opening allowed me to see the world outside. Sunny Side was keeping his eyes firmly forward. We were both keenly aware that, as we came onto the tracks and passed through the eyes of the guards, we were surrounded by ponies who wanted us dead, and they weren't even "bad ponies" by any stretch of the imagination. They impeded our mission. Sought to end our lives. Wanted to protect their own families from the wrath of both Hoofsa and Bucklyn at any cost, just like me.

For this, some of them would not live to see tomorrow. Or I wouldn't. This wasn't going to end well. I knew it. No sunshine and rainbows for me.

This world is going to eat you alive.

I placed my back hooves in the stirrups of the turret, locking them tight into place. With a push of my left or right leg I could turn the turret in the corresponding direction. I pressed my front hooves into the sheathes of the trigger mechanism, up against the pedals within. I just needed to press down on both those little levers and I'd be spewing hot lead death. Best not think about that. It made the cramp in my stomach worse.

Somehow, we made it to the front of the column. Sunny Side had switched on the headlights, making himself that much harder to see. His bulky saddle mounted guns were being carried by Tracer... somewhere.

A guard came right up to Sunny Side, and my heart stopped beating.

"Hey Good luck out there," he said, knocking on the armored plate of the driver compartment. This is it. He was good friends with the correct driver and he'd see right through our disguises and I'd have a few seconds to take as many of them with me as I could. It was over. We were going to die.

Sunny Side gave a timid wave.

It was enough. The guard turned away, and my blood resumed normal flow. This seemed almost too easy. I stopped that thought process... whenever a pony started thinking like that, things turned against them. I somehow knew my so far charmed life would collapse if I gave too much thought to how and why I'd survived, why tiny things like that little interaction still worked out all right. If Sunny's eyes had been showing better from under his driver's goggles, if he waved the wrong way, if I sneezed, if the two unconscious ponies woke up too soon, if, if, if...

Something had kept me going so far, and I decided to stop questioning it.

"All right, ponies! Let's do this nice and smooth!" called out the caravan commander, seated in the personnel cart just behind ours. Behind his was the livestock and the second supply car. "To Compass and back before tea time!"

I gulped as Sunny Side waved at the gate guards to show he was ready. I could hardly believe it... we were actually going to make it. We were going to make it out of the the gate! As the war wagon rumbled over the tracks and into the darkness of the Metro, I almost believed that things would go smoothly.

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We'd made it to Percherovskaya. It was a long, tense trip, but we moved fast and made no stops. The tunnels between the plantations were well guarded, with regular foot patrols back and forth and numerous rune traps. But it wasn't mutants we were concerned about, it was the very net of safety that kept them out.

As I sat in the turret, never daring to raise my voice and speak to Sunny Side, I almost let my guard down. It was relaxing, being driven like this, snug and safe inside a protected, armored compartment. The straightness of the path helped me to believe things were actually going well, and the carts full of a dozen ponies who'd kill me without a second thought weren't really all that dangerous. All that bothered me was the cramp in my legs.

Even the guards and dock workers that swarmed the caravan to take off and load on more supplies didn't bother me all that much. I just kept the turret pointed straight ahead. I didn't look to the left or the right. I didn't breathe too loudly. I made a show of adjusting my weight and getting comfortable inside the turret. We needn't be bothered. We were just two bored guards waiting to get going again. I felt as long as I stayed still and never spoke to anypony, I'd become invisible like Nopony and they'd never even remember I was there. I focused all my willpower on that one little thought.

Stay invisible, stay quiet. You are not there. You are not important. Everypony who looks at you doesn't need a second glance.

Somepony knocked on my turret. "Hey, Pewter Smith!"

Damn it.

"You want somethin' ta' drink? You look cold in there."

I peeked through the long, vertical slit that my gun poked out of and shook my head. I hoped that would be enough, and he hadn't seen me too closely through my goggles. Pony eyes were large and notoriously expressive.

"Right, whatever," the guard said, taking a swig of his flask. "You know, Pewter, I wanted to apologize for what I said. You know, about you and, ah..." He nodded towards Sunny Side. "I know you two are a thing. She's... she's good ponies."

I gulped, turning away a bit. The cloak of invincibility was falling away, piece by piece! If I said a single word it'd all be ruined!

"Well, come on, Pewter, say something!" the guard asked, looking hurt. I shook my head and turned away.

"Can you believe this guy?" the guard asked Sunny Side. When he didn't get an answer from *him*, either, I knew we were doomed.

"... Cabbage Patch?" he asked. Sunny Side looked straight at him, hearing the uncertainty in his voice like I did. Time was up.

My friend punched him in the face, sending him sprawling onto the tracks.

“Go go go!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. Sunny Side gunned the engine as I slid my hooves into the trigger guards, feeling my stomach clench. I didn’t want to kill them. But I would, and I’d do it without hesitation. Sweet Luna, what was I turning into?

“Ponies of the Underground! Enemies in our midst! *Stop that war wagon!*”

The turret rattled and shook, my ears rang with the cacophony of bullets striking my armored plates. I ducked my head and didn’t managed to get a single shot off; I didn’t even manage to fire the gun until Sunny Side had started us rolling down the tracks. I didn’t have the courage to swing the gun around and open even that tiny gap in my armor to the guns of the enemy. I just hunkered down and shut my eyes as tightly as I could, completely at the mercy of the opening barrage. When it finally slackened and I felt our speed picking up, I raised my head. The turret was no long shaking from bullet impacts. I saw three smoking holes in the walls, just above my head. *Damn.*

“Lockbox! Bring the turret around! They’ll be coming after us!” Sunny Side barked. I realized that we were back in his element; the place of firefights and violence and guns. He was a militia pony at heart.

The turret swung with agonizing slowness, squeaking on its little track, hydraulics groaned and wheezed. The quickly receding lights of the station were swarming with shadows, ponies scrambling to prepare their carts for pursuit.

“You’re not going to stop me,” I whispered, watching the lights of other cars and war wagons shine towards us, like the eyes of predators.

“What about Tracer?!” Sunny shouted over his shoulder. He accelerated the wagon to top speed; I felt every little vibration as the wheels struck bumps and imperfections in the tracks.

“Tracer can make it on his own!” I replied, looking down the barrel of the machine gun. I’d fire as soon as they started getting closer. I had faith in Tracer, the Ranger. He would do his best to stick to his duty, unlike that bastard Sidewinder... if he could survive days being hunted in a confined space, he could catch up to us. Right now I was focused on saving our skins.

“Shit! Checkpoint on the left!”

I swung the gun around and watched several shocked Percherovskaya ponies fly by, their faces blurred. I caught movement towards another war wagon, which rumbled to life in seconds and started down the track after us.

“Shoot them! Shoot them Lockbox! I’ll keep an eye on the tunnel ahead!”

My stomach clenched again. I was strangely terrified of the blindingly bright headlights of the wagon as it hurtled down the tracks, rumbling towards us. It reminded me of my visions. They probably wanted to take our wagon intact, and would do their best to disable us. I’d be shooting to kill. I didn’t want to. But I did.

They were about fifty meters back, and the silhouette of their wagon was lost in the muzzle flash of my gun. It *thundered* in the small tunnel, each deafening report rattling my very bones. It felt like a sledgehammer was cracking into my ears. My front legs already felt sore from the vibrations, but I kept firing, blind and deaf and senseless from adrenaline.

Fireworks must have sounded like this, I thought. I could see the bright sparks of my heavy caliber bullets smashing into the armored compartments of the wagon behind us. They returned fire, aiming beneath me, at the engine compartment. The wagon shook and jolted with each blow, like a demon was trying to punch its way through. The turret wall in front of me dented inwards from a ricochet, making me blink and jerk my head back. I squeezed my eyes shut and pushed down hard on the triggers, not even knowing where I was aiming.

Stay steady. You are the earth, I heard a voice in my head say.

I forced my eyes open, and aimed for the flashing of the other wagon's muzzle. I could do this. Don't think. Shoot.

Pok! Pok! Pok!

The gun bellowed and roared, spitting lead fury. Still I did not let up, past the point of sensibleness, past the point of reason. I didn't just *shoot* at the other turret, I buried it in bullets until the barrel of my gun smoked and steamed, hissing from the exertion. I kept shooting until it couldn't shoot anymore, triggering a safety mechanism that kept it from overheating.

The other wagon was slowly pulling away, battered and torn, its steel skeleton cracked and shattered. The other turret was nothing but a smoking mess. My head swam with victory.

"Ah, shit! Front! *Front!*"

I swung the turret about just in time for our wagon to crash into the rear of another with a horrible *clang* and an eerie screech. The impact was so jarring I was actually able to go sprawling inside the turret, my face smashing into the cold steel wall, my chest crushing hard into the back of the machine gun. Where the hell had *this* wagon come from? A side tunnel perhaps-

"Shoot him! Shoot- fuck it!"

I peeled my cheek away from the turret just in time to see Sunny Side stand up in the driver's seat and aim his war rein at the other turret, spraying it with a loud blizzard of submachine gun bullets. The turret sparked and screamed with the rending noise of metal being torn apart, and I saw a shadowed figure within flail and burst open with hot red explosions of blood. The poor pony within had been ripped to chunks.

My own turret burst into light and noise again; the impact with the other wagon had caused us to slow down just long enough for a large sentry station to take notice of us and open fire. Bullets whizzed around us in a deadly crossfire. The station was made of three tracks arranged parallel to one another, where other trains in early days stopped and exchanged passengers. Now it was deathtrap for us.

“Oh, Celestia! Hang on, Lockbox!” Sunny Side shouted, gunning the engine and crashing our front plates full on against the weight of the other wagon. The other driver must have been confused. He accelerated, giving us space to speed up and smash into him again. We slugged our way through the barrage, though we were accelerating slowly enough that the others could keep pace with us.

I stuck my pistol, which had been the weapon mounted on my war rein to save space, through the gap and fired all six shots at the nearest enemies. I thought I saw one go down, but I couldn't have been sure, as at that moment a pony's face leered at me through the gap.

Without thinking, I thrust my hoof knife towards his face, cutting open his cheek. The wagon continued to crawl forward as the other pony tried to crawl into my turret from above, punching and hacking with his knife while I screamed obscenities and did my best to stay alive.

I wasn't sure how the other wagon in front of us managed to limp out of our way; I was just suddenly aware we were going faster again and my opponent still hadn't let go. I felt his teeth bite into my clothing, his knife edge dangerously close to cutting into my side. Our screams and cursing and our hot heavy breaths sounded tinny in such a small space. His hoof thumped onto the back of my neck as I punched his armored chest. I squirmed violently, getting my legs under me before I shoved upwards, sending the other pony off balance. He flailed, and my knife found a gap in his armor, cutting deep into his armpit. He wailed pitifully and fell backwards, dropping away with some help from me.

I heard him crunch as he fell on something hard, and thanked Celestia I hadn't seen it happen.

“Is that it?!” I shouted.

Sunny Side gestured wildly. “We haven't even reached Compass yet! Fuck if I know how we'll get through there!”

I had no choice but to huddle up in the turret again and wait, watching the tunnel fly by. Those few minutes felt like hours, the high pitched whine of moving air and the rumble of the uninterrupted by other patrols.

“All right, all right! When we get there, you just keep shooting and don’t stop!” Sunny Side commanded. “We’re fucked if we slow down, so just pray there’s nothing on the tracks to stop us this time!”

I gulped, watching and waiting for the lights of Compass to appear... I saw them soon enough, little pinpricks slowly building brighter and brighter. I could only hope and pray we were moving faster than any messages they might have sent on ahead. Our plan was horrible. I knew Sunny Side just had the idea to smash right through the docks and hope we’d get all the way through intact; but then, that was our only chance.

I felt a strange sense of peace as I settled into the turret once again, the trigger guards feeling more familiar this time. I’d gotten this far, hadn’t I? We still weren’t dead, even after that frantic chase. This wasn’t going to stop me either. My home was still in danger, and my word and my mission were still on the line. No, as long as I had this, with my goal in front of me, my responsibility driving me forward, I *would not die*.

I tried not to think of the ponies I’d shot as being not quite as evil as the bandits.

When we hit Compass, my turret was ready to fire again. I saw a few of the guards raising their hooves, telling us to slow down, and running for their lives when we didn’t. We burst into their main docks in a fury. The dock workers were taken completely by surprise, scrambling out of the way, dropping boxes of valuables. We careened to the right, the tracks having been diverted while a supply car took up the main rail. I felt the wagon lean dangerously and my weight shift as we took the corners hard, heard the indignant shouts of ponies, thinking we were insane or pulling some kind of prank.

At first, I thought we might just be able to breeze through the whole station without problems. We’d be able to just push on through and make our way to Otzark Bulvard, where yes, there were bandits, but there was also the gateway to the inner Metro, the powerful and dangerous world beyond the Ring.

Instead, we crashed headlong into a railcar full of supplies, and at last our battered wagon could take no more, hurtling off the tracks. It happened so quickly I barely even registered the impact.

Suddenly my world was a blur, everything I heard turned into a dull roar of noise. I felt the strangest sensation of floating, and then I hit the side of the turret wall harder than I'd hit anything before. I was jolted as the entire wagon *bounced* off the ground a short distance and smashed down again, spilling me unceremoniously onto the ground. I rolled and rolled and rolled, wondering if I looked like some silly pillbug that planned on rolling his way out of danger, and then hit a wall in a daze.

I couldn't hear. I couldn't see. All colors and sounds melted together, becoming an amorphous mess in my head. I thought I was standing up, or perhaps the world was just spinning around me, and then I fell down again. The wall in front of me burst, pieces of concrete bouncing off my helmet. It took me a moment to realize that I was being shot at.

I rolled away, towards the wreckage of the war wagon. It was on its side, just a useless hunk of metal on the tracks. I couldn't get the gun out of the turret if I tried. The jungle gym of twisted metal plates gave me a semblance of protection as bullets kicked up the ground, hissing and snapping their deadly intent. I looked left and saw a knot of guardponies firing into the wreck; they must have seen me crawling. I looked to the right and found Sunny Side in the driver's compartment, wagging his legs aimlessly.

"S... Sunny."

"Huh."

I ducked my head as bullets ran a trail across the wrecked wagon, just above my helmet.

They are remarkably bad shots, I thought.

"We gotta get out of here."

"Y... yeah."

I reached out and grabbed him, pulling him free of the twisted compartment. I fell backwards and my vision kept going, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as another wave of dizziness overtook me. As I

lay on my back I peered down the tunnel, seeing a large junction where several tracks came together, with a high ceiling dominated by broken pipes, and pillars on top of concrete islands between tracks. Beyond three different tunnels split off at different junctions. In the center was the one that led to Otzark Bulvard, the gateway to our freedom.

It was blocked by another war wagon, and ponies were spilling into the tunnel alongside it. They were not wearing the colors of Compass, but had ragged, dark clothing and a mish-mash of weapons. They fired straight down the tunnel, over our heads and at Compass' ponies. Ah... so we weren't dead because they weren't aiming at us. Just our luck we crashed right into the middle of a war.

I looked at Sunny. He looked at me.

"Now what?" he asked. Being caught in a deadly crossfire wasn't my idea of a great way to end my life. We had to cross the tracks and reach the side tunnel... the one on the left, I thought, pointing southeast.

"We run," I said. "And we pray."

But unfortunately there was no way to run now. If we were spotted, who knew what the combatants would make of us? We were trapped and we both knew it, huddled under a wreck that was turning into a grave.

Fate again made its decision for us; with an errant glance back towards Compass, I saw a unicorn clad in Ranger armor swoop down on a group of guardponies behind cover. They didn't even stand a chance. The Ranger laid them out flat with swift, lethal kicks of his hooves and clean swipes of his knife. There was no beauty or elegance about the way he dispatched them. Each strike was designed to inflict maximum pain and damage as quickly as possible, every stab of the knife slid between ribs and chinks in armor. An assault rifle hovered next to his head, swiveling in midair, making deadly sweeps over any ponies who hadn't taken cover. He moved like an engine of death, brutally cutting down one opponent after the other and moving on with machine-like efficiency. His movements made me feel sluggish and stupid, remembering my awkward struggle with the guard in the turret as we fled. The Ranger would have killed him in the time it took to blink.

I knew it was Tracer; he was the only Ranger that it could have been. He jumped onto the track and charged, firing nonstop, reloading his weapon without even looking at it. The attacking ponies focused their war wagon's gun on him, but he was too fast, leaping between pillars, seemingly appearing and disappearing at will. Several small cylinders floated out of his saddlebag and zoomed straight towards the wagon like missiles, jamming into the turret and the engine compartment.

The wagon blossomed into flame, and the shockwave sent me sprawling with a frightened yelp.

Tracer appeared next to me.

"Get up!" he shouted, grabbing my clothes and pulling me up. Sunny Side staggered next to us as Tracer bodily hauled us up onto one of the islands, telling us to crawl and keep our heads down. Bullets whizzed overhead, chipping away our cover as we went on our bellies to the far side of the tracks.

"Who the hell's attacking?" Sunny Side shouted as we huddled against one of the pillars, listening to the deafening report of a heavy machine gun ripping the air apart.

"Bandits, probably the same ones besieging Bucklyn. They're getting bold. Or desperate," Tracer answered, and then shoved us onto the final set of tracks. An explosion battered my ears as out of one of the side tunnels appeared the boxy shape of an armored railcar, bearing a massive gun on top. That was no mere machine gun, it was a *cannon*! The rolling siege engine chugged slowly onto the main track to Otzark Bulvard, in front of where the bandits were attacking from. The gun on top swiveled with menacing leisure. It knew it was going to kill *something*.

It fired. Another gigantic *boom* rocked the entire station. My mane fluttered from the sheer force of the monster's roar.

"They're going to collapse the tunnel at this rate!" Sunny complained.

"That's a Hoofsa tank," Tracer explained, peeking over the edge of the island we sheltered behind. "They don't care... they have the resources

to rebuild. Okay, okay. Only one tunnel left, that's the auxiliary one on the left. See that? I'll cover you... go for it on my signal!"

He raised his assault rifle over the ledge and fired towards the bandits. Sweet Celestia, but my ears *hurt*.

"Now!"

We ran. We didn't look back. My legs were springs, coiling and bursting over and over. I felt like a thumper, hopping over wreckage and a couple dead bodies, towards the darkness and safety of the Metro. I imagined myself as a little scurrying drake, no need to be shot at. Just a little creature hurrying to the shadows, moving between the legs of giants, scampering between the paths of ricocheting bullets.

Jump, run, scurry, leap, don't stop, don't even think about stopping.

At last I gained the portal, and into that small tunnel we fled. Like the monsters that had claimed our world, I felt safer now in the shadows. Yet still I didn't stop moving, and neither did Sunny Side. Running was all that mattered, getting away from this pitstop of a station, and all the blood on their hooves.

Behind us was a scene of dominion and devastation. Hoofsa was on the rise, ready to claim its new subjects. The plantations would gladly end their independence for the sake of survival, and soon Bucklyn would also be forced to bend to their will, by bit or bridle. The bandits had made a bold decision, but they'd soon all be massacred underneath the hammer of Hoofsa. In the end, all that would really change was that a lot of ponies were going to die very soon because there wasn't room in paradise for them all, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. My home was still in danger, and all these ponies could think about was killing one another for the sake of one more station under their banner.

What was *wrong* with us? Why were so perverted in nature that we were reduced to this? Why was our magic now so tainted and deadly? Was I ever going to find out?

Did I really want to?

I knew this: I was moving south at last. I wasn't being shot at. A Ranger traveled alongside me. My friend was still alive. I had a goal, and a path to it. Ponies were dying all around me, but as long as I had those things, I could ignore it all with a clear conscience.

The thought brought tears to my eyes.