

My Little 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 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 against the doorjamb 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. The lights I’d seen before seemed to emanate from the creature’s body itself, rising and falling in intensity at 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 and 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, before pushing past the pain and staggering upright. I couldn’t help but wince 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 heard my Geiger counter clicking wildly.

"That can't be healthy to drink," Sunny remarked. I agreed. We made 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, followed quickly by a sinking feeling in my stomach and a chill up my spine. My shoulders sagged when the sound of slithering reached my ears.

“Nothing’s ever easy, is it?” Sunny grumbled as we 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. Metal pellets from the weapon's gullet zipped and buzzed overhead like angry parasprites. Hunter had brought home such a weapon several times, and I'd fawned over how "cool" it was as a colt. Now I wished 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, honeycombing the surface just above our cowering heads. 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, 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. The sound of claws scraping and gouging the concrete was unmistakable.

Down below on the other side the catwalks and solid platforms were still intact. They

juttled 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 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.