

My Little Metro: 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. Staying cloaked 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 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 jaws 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 reach 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 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 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 my 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. My head swam with exultant joy and 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 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 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.

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 honorbound. 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 who 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.