

Chapter 1

Return, Reload, Re-route

Convincing Rocks Roll Mossless that the pegasi were harmless was easy enough; he was satisfied simply by the fact they were without barding or weapons that they posed no real threat. But Locked Gold remained suspicious, and arranged for a guard sitting in a now empty upstairs stall with a window overlooking the Vine/Weeds house. Complaints that sky-rats had never assaulted the village with brushed aside with "I mistrust anything with wings, young colt."

And four mares had already called on the household to inquire in the most indirect way possible about what the needs of the household were ... as none of them were pregnant yet and seemed to think Doc Cannonbone was a creep and Ridge Runner was maybe a bit too old.

"Pink Drivetrain seemed nice" Nuage muttered as he sipped on his too-hot tea. "She's only about twice my age, too"

Pear Rump probably rolled her eyes as she explained "You can't get married in this town yet. Get with one mare and they'll all pester you for a foal. My baby brother only gets to walk down the streets unmolested because he tells them he's too young still."

Grey nibbled on the cornbread and offered "I might be"

"An' they don't know how long mah pills stay active." Stormflight had already down his two bites of cornbread but was trying to savor his slice of apple without letting any juice drip unlicked. "Heck, I don' rightly know mahself."

Pear & Grey's mother had been surprisingly coherent and reasonable about having strange ponies stay overnight. She complained about the extra mouths to feed but not about the visitor's wings. However not surprisingly she had yet to notice or acknowledge her daughter's eyes were missing. Her madness was her defense against going insane with her grief, so this seemed to follow naturally, what she would see, and what she wouldn't.

His breakfast finally finished, Stormflight Trees asked the locals about the guard. "Am I gonna get y'all in trouble if I fly out? Or go out at all?" He pointed a hoof in the direction of the cave-pony watching out his window, even though the group weren't near a window so no one could see the other party.

Pear's opinion was it was going to be a very touchy subject. "Maybe Grey should go with you when you fly off. And don't come back with more ponies than you left with." Her eyes burned away by an alicorn monster's fireball spell, she now just stared straight ahead rather than turn her nose to the most recent speaker.

Grey thought there was more going on. "Its true that our inability to guard against both fliers and burrowers simultaneously has left some a bit nervous, it's not like you're that threatening looking. Still." He looked around as if he could see the town gate, the guard posted, the communal apple tree that still grew. "The real thing here is probably, check in and out with whoever is guarding the front door. Even if you go over the wall, let them know you want in and out, so they can feel you're civilized enough to follow their rules."

Nogg shook some of his unruly green forelock out of his eyes, and added "Somepony should talk to that guard, see what they were told to do. Maybe they'll want to keep tabs on where the sky rats are more than actually intimidate their movements." Setting his teacup on the metal floor, since the only table in the house was too small for this many ponies to gather around, he flapped his wings and offered "Actually, why don't I do that now? I'm probably the least scary of our group, aren't I?"

No one stopped him, so he clip-clopped to the door, and by the lack of clanging after that, had made himself airborne. Pear sighed, and looked at the floor, so Grey got up and scooted closer to her, so he was in contact with her sides. Blinking away tears, the larger

pony said "Is it even safe to cry? It feels like a bunch of modeling clay was shoved into my eye sockets and I'm kinda afraid I'll just start bleeding if I blink to much."

"When somethin' similar happened in the clouds, maybe six or seven years ago," began Stormflight "The doctors I guess decided there was some chance of damage, though not that high, I guess? But the pony wouldn't know he was bleedin' from the face, and ya' cain't really apply pressure very well because of all the bones, meant to protect that area from pressure." Pear had raised her nose again, and Grey watched Stormy unfold a wing so he could nervously look down at it rather than over at Pear Rump. "So they carved out an acrylic eyeball shape, and coated with something, never heard what. Painted then coated so it looked like an eyeball though tweren't the right color." Here he did look up, trying to make eye contact with the mare but settling on Grey as much because Grey was looking at him as that he had eyes to make contact with. "Almost looked worse, in a way. Freakish not-eyes never quite pointing the right way. But he could blink, and he said, I think I remember him sayin', that too much stuffed in feeling went away when he had his eyes in. But ya hafta clean 'em real good. Speck of dust gets on the back of your eye, might never work its way out."

Of course, no one here had any such tools, expertise, or materials. But while everypony contemplated what the next step might be a loud CLANG from around the corner signaled the return of Nuage Cadeau, who seemed to be happily trotting to return. His dark blue eyes bright with the enthusiasm of youth, or possibly success, he smiled at the group. "Hey guys the guard says he's just supposed to keep track of our times in, and out of Vine-Weeds' house. Also, he says we shouldn't fly higher than the walls, so everypony knows if we're inside or outside the village when they see us."

"So, in & out through the gate, like Grey said." was Stormflight's response. To Grey "Ah know old glorious leader don't like me none, and him bein' some kind of unkillable spirit demon don't sit well with me neither, but it's the only town Ah know of. We ought to go back and ask about gettin' fake eyeballs made, see what kinda answers we find."

Grey nodded. "Let me putter around town, get some water bottles and turpentine. Make a proper run of it." No ponies had made wisecracks about his flight harness' resemblance to an S&M get-up, but he still would have preferred to wad it up and levitate it until outside the walls. But the palladium levitation rod, and the majority of the magic

conversion clamp simply refused to be levitated, converting magical energy into physical form upon contact. *Maybe I can make a cloak to go over the straps.*

Pear sighed heavily and turned to her brother. "I can't scavenge anymore, can I?"

Grey leaned the side of his head against her neck. Warm, solid, well muscled. She'd always been one of the strongest mares in the stable, but that's because she didn't stand still or hold back. She'd have to slow down a lot, and while her emotional strength might hold up, she'd lose some of her muscle. "Maybe for a while. I promise you won't be retired as a broodmare or something stupid like that." Several tears dripped from mostly empty eye-sockets onto Grey's nose as his sister sniffled, then sighed again.

Pear tried to smile, grimace, sniffle and laugh all at the same time, as she pushed her brother off her side. "I'll figure something out. Can still find my way around this house, at least."

The wasteland was hard on ponies. A few years ago almost two thirds of the village had been picked up and carried off, no warning and no recompense. Now Pear couldn't guard anything, hit the broad side of a stable. She'd slowly wither and be killed by something she couldn't see. To say it wasn't fair was to make light of this situation, and only at times dared Grey take the time to feel the loss, or he'd be stolen away and eaten while he was whimpering. Grey sighed, and looked to Nuage Cadeau. "Since your reason for being here, is not to be at the other village, you're staying put. You can play seeing eye pony or something." Grey found the other winged buck was blurry. "Stormy you'll come wi.." and now he was crying, voice refusing him.

"Yeah Grey I'm with you. Whenever you're ready I'll get my stuff by the door."

With enough blinking, he was able to see stuff again. Grey had sorta dumped his flight suit by the door too. Not yet trusting his voice, Grey nodded and got up to strap himself in.

Chapter 2

Boys Night Up, Out, Under

Empty packs attached to his flight harness helped the S&M vibe a bit. Not a lot, maybe but some. The apple tree guard agreed to six apples for the trip after Grey explained their resale value. Two ponies, two days, four apples! But if the other two could be sold for something that other places could make but the village couldn't, well. It's not like it rains very much anymore, anyway. Stormflight seems uncomfortable when the small talk drifted to the weather on the ground.

Water was easy enough, but bottles to keep it in were a bit scarce. Still, some old glass foalfood jars from before the war had no jobs just now. Turpentine metal bottles had been reused since forever so again, nothing extra there. The comment from the cave pony working the distillery had an odd comment though, seeing Grey float around next to a living, talking pegasus pony. "Time was, when a pony wanted to fly, he'd need wings that flapped. You've converted magic into flight, with nothing holding you there but concentration and the whimsy of an old-world artist."

Grey looked his "wings" over nodded. "Magic can be a fair approximation of lots of stuff."

To which the cave pony replied "I guess when magic is free enough, it begins to resemble physiology." He pushed his hat a bit farther back against his ears to appreciate Grey's flight, and in return Grey nodded and smiled as he rotated and flew off.

Not too high, wouldn't want to freak out the guards, or even the off duty ponies. Landing in front of the guards at the front gate, he realized their shocked stares meant

they hadn't seen, maybe hadn't even heard how airborne the remaining townspies had become. "Afternoon" started Stormflight, although it was about 9:30 but neither seemed to care about the faux pas. "We're heading out, but if you'd like, you don't have to open the gate. We'll just pop over the fence?"

Both ponies, of the earth tribe though only the mauve mare to Grey's left had that rumped, shaggy unkempt look of the caveponies, they looked almost straight up at the top of the wall, more than fifty hooves up. The orangeish off-white mare to his right walked to the door and glanced through the view lens and muttered to them "Nothing out there. Guess you can take whichever way. Go ahead."

The other guard piped up with "Do please stop at the door on your way in too, thank you."

Stormflight used a hoof to flick an ear at her, and eased carefully upwards. Grey didn't easily have that kind of control of his energy output so it was a bit more of a leap at speed, then unaccelerated almost too much and he bumped his front two hooves on the wall as he crossed. Stormy looked askance as they shifted directions to aim towards the hole in the ground village. "You can go fast, or slow, but I see you ain't done too good in the middle of stuff."

Grey hadn't explained about the broken front legs memory orb yet. But he did try to ease into a bit faster speed. "Right, well. On a completely unrelated note, I'd like to make a side stop at another hole in the ground. Do you know much about prewar tech? Magitech in particular.

"Ah just shoot things Grey. Didn't test real high in anything on my goat, just got a job where they needed another pony."

Grey managed to fly sideways, having rotated to his left and overpowered the left rod a bit so he was still traveling in the same direction as he looked Stormy in the eyes and asked "You finished off a goat? Some kind of initiation test?"

As Grey straightened out he saw the pegasus look askance again, before explaining "That's what it is, but it's a paper test. Well, no they use your pip-buck but I hear it used t' be a paper test when the first foals were graduating after the war." Stormflight was able

to look with his whole head and neck without shifting flight. "Generalized Occupational Aptitude Test; Don't your village have something like that?"

They were currently about two hundred hooves above the ground, and so long as they didn't fly over any raiders that would be high enough. Grey thought about rising up a little more, but he waited to ask the more experienced flier why he'd chosen this particular altitude. As to testing foals "Not really. We're half of us from a stable but it was above all else, practical. Survival and enthusiasm surpass bureaucratic assignments. It's been discussed but the cave ponies especially don't want to be told what their cutie mark means to the rest of the stable." Then after a moment, remembered something he'd read in a pamphlet he'd found when he was fairly young. "I think ours was called Great Overmare's Assigns and Tasks."

"Overmares being told they were small princesses. Ain't a fan, but somepony's got to be in charge." Just about then, the scuttering, clicking sounds of angry radroaches sounded below them. They couldn't "spit" their venom, but seeing Stormflight shiver the unicorn obliged his friend a chance to speed up a bit until they were well past. "So, seein' those critters on the ground reminds me o' somethin'" Here he surreptitiously looked skyward, scanned the featureless cloud ceiling before blowing a breath through pursed lips. "Since I'm dead, I ain't supposed to be flyin'. So, if we see any patrols drop outta the sky, I gotta drop to the ground before they see I have natural wings." Looking over to the younger stallion, he expounded "Ah'm not sure if your weird flight rod will attract their attention to how I don't have one, or away from what I look like, but I think durin' the day we need to keep it in mind."

Grey nodded, suddenly realizing his question about the altitude had just been answered. "So, they don't have any way to see down here aside from dropping below the clouds?"

Stormy shook his head, saying "They have plenty of cameras pointed down here, but there just ain't nothin' to see, and aside from our flight from the alicorns last week, we ain't given 'em no reason to look closer." That had been quite the harrowing time. Grey, passing out at fifty thousand hooves, his passengers left to hang on for dear life as their sled went into free-fall. Then the alicorns set fire to everything before being eaten by a sea monster. It had happened so fast, or at least with such intensity he still hadn't unpacked what all had happened, or in what order.

"Takes a monster to out monster a monster being monstrous."

For the third time today, Stormy just looked askance at Grey.

They had not been hurrying, but it was still a few hours before Grey found the slope dropping from the featureless desert. Grey pointed it out, then looked up and down for anything that might follow them in. Stormflight looked up, and then down, following Grey's careful descent that still ended in a jarring 'thump' as he let the emitters die having forgotten that traveling forward while following a downslope meant three strides out he wasn't on the ground yet, but still several hooves above it. Still, it felt good to unclip the converter from his horn and hang it on the end of his neck. "Imagine, Stormy," he would get a fourth sideways look but so be it. "If you could cast magic, but in order to do it you had to bind up your wings. And the more skillfully you told your straight jacket you were flying, the better the spell you cast while you stood there."

As Grey illuminated his horn and walked under the roof, Stormflight responded "T'would be disconcerting, fer sure." Grey nodded, at least mentally, while reviewing the slightly odd levitation spell needed to unlock the outermost door. And the next two were more straight forward, each lighter and flimsier than the last. "Not the normal mindset, these doors. What do you know about it so far, Grey?"

The third door saw everything open up a bit, thought it was all still pretty linear. There were four hallways, although each one split off at different depths. The farthest left as you came in, had the food supplies Pear had pilfered while he finished viewing the memory orb. The pair hadn't left anything, but there was more writing in the desks on the farthest to the right, and it was the third longest, beat out only by the almost straight inner-left that had the door to the storage room. Hoping to find more about his wings, Grey looked at many of the papers, explaining what he could remember from the orb. "Pinkie made the memory orbs, I guess? And the unicorn who made the wings was managing a cross-ministry agreement between Arcane Sciences and War Time, I think?" The papers mentioned Brushy, apparently a GS5 under MWT, and indeed the palladium production had been shunted into making magic proof barding *That's not how that actually works, you cavepony!* But no mention he could find of Ruby Cloud, so maybe he'd been right about Brushed Steel and Shrubbery Brush, collectively known as "Brushy & Brushy" to their detractors. *No imagination, sometimes.* Not all of the earth tribe were that limited, but Grey had encountered enough that proved the rule.

"Your stable don't put education of history too high up the list, does it?" The question caught Grey by surprise, and he looked up from these desks to shake his head. "Before the war, Celestia stepped down, and Luna asked Twilight Sparkle to help run the country – that's when the six governmental ministries started. Applejack ran Ministry of Wartime Technology, Twilight went with pure magic, known as Ministry of Arcane Sciences, and Pinkie Pie had a somewhat creepy number called Ministry of Morale."

Something Ruby Cloud had said about Twilight was suddenly put in a new light, given that harrowing run through a pegasus Sky-town. "Did Twilight Sparkle's unhealthy obsession with making more alicorns result in those alicorn monsters?"

The question set Stormflight back, who worked his jaw and smacked his lips as the question rolled through his head. "I haven't heard anything like that. Don't mean it didn't happen, but I wasn't taught that it did happen that way." A bit more thought, and he added "I wonder how much of the wasteland is because of some misstep taken by looking too closely when the ministry mares shoulda been keeping a soft gaze on the horizon."

Parts of history never stuck in his head. It's why he relied on Pear to fill out his storytelling. "What were the other ministries? Which mare went with each? They were the Elements, before the war, right?"

Grey nodded. Staring at the ground to orient his thoughts he said "Rarity, a unicorn, had Ministry of Image. I guess they printed some books and unprinted some others. Fluttershy just kept everypony healed up, Ministry of Peace."

Grey watched as Stormy's eyes sorta glazed over, and he looked away, into the dark corners of this hallway. "Rainbow Dash had been the element of Loyalty; how did she help the princesses at that time?"

Not looking back at him, not focusing his eyes, he said a little flatly "Ministry of Awesome. Trained the best to be shadow bolts and go be awesome at something but I've never seen a single report of what they did."

Hmm. Dash? Dashite? "Is that why you were labeled a Dashite? Because they said you interpreted loyalty the way your Ministry mare did?"

Stormflight Trees clenched his eyes, a tear falling before he opened his eyes and looked approximately at Grey. "We have a sort of complicated set of stories we tell each other about Rainbow Dash. The Enclave wouldn't exist without her, but her system of choosing what and who she was loyal to seems a little ... well, some call it mysterious, others call it sketchy." He took a deep breath, and his head dropped a little, and with his eyes closed explained "Yes, though. That's what the title means. Why I'll be killed if I go back."

It occurred to Grey that if they were both mares, she would reach out and tap the other pony on the shoulder. Maybe offer a hug. But stallions responded to the harsh wastes by being harder, and so he felt the tiniest bit bad that he just stood there waiting for Stormy to pull himself together. "You'll do fine down here. I wanted to talk to you about a particular device in another room." And, satisfied there had been enough time between Ruby Cloud's research, and the simplification of Brushy & Brushy, he strode confidently away, looking for the pilfered potion making device.

Much as he'd warned, Stormflight didn't know what exactly was missing. There was a tube at one end, clearly lined with palladium which didn't "play" with magic, and a capping device at the other, but the middle part was missing. Grey cast a shield spell into the tube, which dripped out into the blank spot and exploded into a small burst of many colors. "You think you can make healing potions with this?"

Grey smugly seated himself and smiled. "I would need two things. One, is whatever component goes in the middle. It would hold the bottle but might do other things. Second, of course, is I'd need to know how to heal things by casting through my horn. I don't have in my repertoire a generalized 'get better' spell but if I did, this tube would turn the intentions of my magical energy into a physical form resembling a fluid. Then you cap it off before it evaporates, and look! You have a new healing potion."

"Sounds useful, lacking those two things. Any plans to pick them up?"

A wry grin, rather than an eye-roll. "Currently my plans involve blind luck in finding not only either, but both. Still, I thought it worth our time to ask you about it."

Stormflight nodded. "There are Enclave unicorns. Four families, I think? They keep that pretty close to their chest, as it were. But I've never met one myself, and never seen a potion bottling machine."

Chapter 3

Stable familiarity, Crushing + Darkness.

Not knowing how vital the super arcano battery was, or how to recharge it safely, Grey spent some time looking through the storage room again. "Can't stay here too long though." He emitted a super-thin, super sensitive shield, which whorled and whirled with many colors, indicating it was being influenced by thamaturgic decay. Radiation.

Stormy nodded. Pointing a hoof to where the now dissipated shield was, he asked "Do you know how to read that? Like, in rads or anything?"

Grey shook his head, and trotted off to point out the somewhat more recent skeleton and its exploded super-battery. Trotting on, this time to a darker corner in the opposite direction he and his sister had traveled when they stayed the night on their last trek through the desert. Only able to cast one spell at a time and having no reason to believe his shield, made of magic, would protect him from magic, he illuminated the darkened aiseways. Mostly he was hoping to find the door Ruby Cloud had let himself through, but in his travels he found four more super batteries. They weighed three times, he'd recently tested and confirmed, what a normal arcanobattery weighs, which at six pounds was not exactly light. Still, there must have been a reason these wings were built around this much power. Turning to his traveling companion, he asked "Do you think you could carry one of these around awhile?"

Stormy nodded slowly, the look on his face dreading the weight. But what he said was "Be easier to carry two. One would through my balance off but one on each side would just be heavy." As he carefully slid one onto each saddlebag, Grey joked about just levitating four of them and Stormy could carry Grey instead of explosive batteries. Stormflight blinked. "Would that even work? I mean, yeah you weigh just about four of these but would the levitated things be weightless?"

Grey offered a wry grin, though for different reasons as before, as he turned to walk down the nearly pitch black aisle. "There are several versions of levitation. The more common one is yes, to make the thing weightless. It has limitations, like moving things around when you can only levitate-with-force the aura around the weightless thing. And they'd be tethered to the unicorn, so you'd feel the weight accelerating, and probably at landing too. But in the middle, just going in a straight line, they wouldn't interfere." Mentally, while rambling about variations of a single spell, Grey was drooling at the stuff on the shelves. Angled gears, probably for taking or giving force at a right angle to the gear's own axis, and were probably of a hardened metal no post-war blacksmith could match today. Perhaps not for another two hundred years could true industry be restarted.

"I'm guessin' the roof didn't always slope that way?" Stormflight had stopped in the middle of the aisle to stare at the just barely visible ceiling, which Grey realized was indeed sloping down into greater interaction with his hornlight. The immediate implication of that was the door he'd been looking for was crumbled.

"I think there's a chance that door still works though." The four corners of the door were still in a square, and the wall had crumbled in the same waffle pattern meaning the hinges hadn't broken. But what had happened to the radioactive lava river the smaller flight-rod had been lost into? As there were sizable gaps between the door and the wall, they might still pry open but Grey could also use this opportunity to test how bad that room was. His thin-shield erupted into a aurora of bright and dark, and as the edge of the shield almost touched the edges of the door and wall, the energies inside burned through, causing his shield to actually catch fire and burn quickly away like a cellophane film left too long against the hot bulb.

"Ah'm guessing we don't want to try openin' the door?" Dry humor aside, Grey couldn't agree more.

Suppressing a shiver he turned perhaps a little too quickly, almost bumping into the pegasus stallion. "I've never seen it do that before. Ever." Grey helpfully pointed with a hoof back the way they came, and the pair didn't try to pick anything else up on their way to the office / living space. Taking a long look at the disjointed spell distillery, Grey listed out loud what a return trip would need. "Potioning equipment. And if a suit for descending into tartarus exists, bring that too."

Chapter 4

That's Cold

With that taken care of, the pair exited the almost stable into the cool, dry afternoon air. "It was warmer when we went inside, wasn't it?" Stormflight was testing the air, pointing his nose this way and that, ears twisting in a hint of concern and confusion.

Door re-locked as he'd learned on his first trip through, he felt the chill in the desert air. "Yeah every few weeks it will just go cold. No pattern to it." Grey started up the ramp back into the light when he realized the pegasus was being far more hesitant. "Hmm? What does cold air down here mean?"

The older stallion pointed briefly to the sky that was not yet above them and explained "Sometimes it means they've moved a cache of water to another town. Sometimes it means the alicorn monsters are battling with us directly and one side or the other is using heavy magic that breaks open our compressed cold-magic we use to grow winter wheat. But none of that should take up so much space." Walking with determination now, Stormy shuffled his wings as he considered the weather. One they were back on the sand, he started looking carefully at the cloud curtain, and pointed out some miles distant a hole, where sunshine burst through, and white cold-steam drifted lazily down in what must be unspeakably huge volumes. Ponies flew frantically around it, looking like so many angry ants protecting their nest from an intrusion.

Grey arranged his wings into flight configuration and considered at least flying straight up to get a better look. But from here, "I only see pegasi. No alicorns." Grey scanned the rest of the sky, and found no sign of other fliers.

Stormflight was wincing, not unlike when he'd been told Pear would have to re-break his wing because the health potion had frozen it into a non-flapping configuration. "Could be the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ." Looking askance through slitted eyelids, Stormy explained "Temnyy. We don't have any way to combat that infection. Or pony, I guess but it moves around and we've never thought to talk to them. It. Him, whatever."

Temnyy Kogot, which wasn't his name, was creepy, and unkillable. But that hole in the curtain wasn't really in the right direction, was it? "Too far east, assuming he'd go mostly up. Also, isn't that like, your major failing as a society? You don't talk to the people in it?"

Stormflight Trees responded by easing himself just twenty hooves above the ground, and telling Grey Horn "Don't get too high – the guards will be extra suspicious of odd fliers just now." Drifting North-East he called over his shoulder as Grey secured the energy converter to his horn "That cold-magic gets used sometimes. Freeze everything that might have been infected, and let it all drop to the ground. Burn any survivors if they try to come back."

The desert just east of the psuedostable was especially featureless, so while Grey honored his friend's request to stay low, he was going faster just to get back to the wastes that still had tracks and dunes and buildings. Passing the older stallion, he called back "He might like that, you know. Fewer sky rats up there, and potentially more down here." Stormy didn't respond.

The camped for the night in some ruins that didn't have a roof, but did have plenty of walls. Several doors too, but that was still better both for safety and for comfort. No water sources yet, which meant low risk of raider but also meant they needed to dip into their stores a bit to wash the packaged food down. Grey spent the evening experimenting with energizing the converter when the wings were disconnected and folded, to see if it might be recharging the battery. He also tried swapping one of the new batteries for the used one to see if "charging" felt different. His magic was definitely being absorbed and sent away from the converter but he couldn't tell if it was reaching anything.

Stormflight spent a bit of time sweeping the building and the grounds around for bits of old trees or shrubs that could be burned for heat, since the cold wind was definitely blowing this direction. But there was no luck to be found in that field, so he harrumphed

and settled for sitting very close to Grey, who was used to sometimes being cold and never having control of his climate. "Are you actually cold?"

Stormy harrumphed as he dropped to his belly, ribs still in contact with Grey's haunches. With the pegasus' head resting on a fetlock, he said with eyes closed "The clouds get cold, but you have armor on usually, which has climate controls." Stormy pursed his lips a moment before adding "And I have bad memories of the cold."

Grey put away the converter and dropped to his belly, most of his body in contact with the definitely warmer pegasus. Setting his chin on the leg away from Stormy, he asked "You've met that pre-war former unicorn before? That the griffon named Temnyy?"

"Ah know now that I haven't. But at the time I thought fer sure it was the infection." A deep breath, and no further comment for several breaths. Grey was weighing pressing his traveling companion but sometimes you just weren't ready to talk about things the wasteland showed you that were "uncomfortable." But eventually he did start the tale. "When the cold magic comes out of the sprayers we use offensively, it ... breaks things. Pony legs shatter, and they're half way to the ground before they melt enough to bleed. Never did find out how that band of raiders got into the cloud, but they could cloudwalk, and were trying to eat a mare they'd trapped." Here he jerked his head up. Grey didn't move, so could see it, but the voice was definitely coming from above his tail, and was facing him. "T'weren't even a guardspony; was just some farmer out adjusting cloud seeding equipment."

Cannibals. "We shoot those kind too. It gets messy, but they're not ponies anymore." Grey looked up. He'd never actually seen stars, but he'd heard the tales about Princess Luna putting dots in array so ponies wouldn't get lost in the sunless night. "I hope the Princess can place their souls somewhere good, where they can remember what this place made them forget." Turning his head to just make out Stormy's eyes, glistening with tears, Grey suddenly felt the need to belt out "Don't ever forget you're a pony, Stormy. Even if you starve to death friendless down here, don't let the Enclave or the raiders or Temnyy take your soul from you. Always remember you're a pony, Stormflight Trees."

Grateful that the darkness covered his blushing face, he laid quickly back down. As

they were still in contact, Grey could feel Stormflight with a bit more control lay his head down too, and pretend to be asleep.

Chapter 5

Buy Low-Sell. Hi!

In the morning the pair ate a little more of their food and packed everything into saddle bags and lifted off. The cloud cover had been repaired, and no pegasi could be seen anywhere in the sky. Not even Stormflight, since he had been declared a Dashite, and since such ponies weren't welcome in the sky, their kind didn't consider them pegasi anymore. And Grey was a unicorn.

This more direct route, now that Grey knew approximately where the hole in the ground was, meant the building they zipped past were different ones than they had come through the first time, and their pell-mell escape last time might have been completely different or the same but somewhere they crossed the chasm. "You almost died down there, you know." opined the pegasus.

"Gee I hadn't noticed, since I was too busy barfing." This was one far end of it, then as there wasn't room for him to have done more than crawl down, let alone fly. But the depth, and the glowing ... *fluid* had been about at the same depth. "You think it's the very same crevasse?"

It was well behind them now, but Stormy nodded confidently. "There're a few cracks around, but only that one that has a toxic, glowing river of death at the bottom. Though the quarrey eels are around, even I suppose if there's no cliffs for them to stick their head out of.

That had been fairly early in their day, which meant they were probably pretty close. Grey looked about at horizon height for sign of a column of smoke, and thought

he saw something off in the distance. "That's where we're going, right?" He pointed out the column of smoke appearing slightly above the horizon, and Stormy nodded. "Only about a couple hours away, right?"

Stormy considered the distance, their current speed, and that there still were no raiders. "Yep I suppose. Why?"

"I see in the distance, leaving north from that town, some other traders. If we're not carrying it so far, we should root around one of these buildings for salvageable electronics, which I seem to be better at collecting and utilizing than others, and so maybe it won't have been collected yet. We can get more caps or metal ingots or some barding for our time."

"If you say so Grey." So they descended to the next plausible looking office building ruin, which garnered "Why do you suppose, in an empty field with no roads or houses, they had an office building?"

The door was locked, though it was a simple lock and Grey was able to use levitation and a random strip of scrap metal that would fit into it to work his way through the mechanism's tumblers. "I assume they needed the space, though maybe no pony wanted to live near what they did here."

"That don't bother you none?" Stormy asked as Grey closed his saddle bag again and cautiously opened the door.

"Honestly it excites me. It means this contained things we can't grow, and won't be able to make again for generations." Levitating his revolver, he eased in, no light. There weren't any electronics, though. Not that Grey couldn't find them, but each door used a magilock that would have been signaled by a gem or some sort of company ID, and he would have loved to removed the card readers but they were deeply embedded in the walls there was no removing them.

"You cain't grow one of them." Stormy pointed at an auger almost as wide across as Grey's chest, and forty hooves long before reaching the now folded up deployment mechanism near the pyramid like ceiling. The hole it was here to make had long since collapsed but there was definitely an indentation in the ground inside the protective

railing. As with the magilocks, it was integrally bound to the building itself, in addition to being too heavy to carry. Grey harrumphed at it.

It wasn't a total loss though. Grey was able to add an auto-loading pistol and two magazines, both of which had a pair of suitable rounds, and Stormy found more MREs, fully packaged and salvageable foodstuffs. More than they had carrying capacity for. But with a bit of shuffling, they grabbed twenty meals total, and also the box of 20ga shotshells that seemed to have been separated from its gun. "Somebody will want to buy ammunition."

Back out into the sunshine, and they were greeted by an earth pony colt with ocher coat, short vermilion mane, and deep red eyes. His cutie mark seemed to be a carrot and a lump of meat sitting on a grill over an open fire, but cutie marks in general were so symbol heavy and compressed, especially on the young, it could have been a point of discussion, what his mark actually looked like. He was avidly dragging a heavy sack in the direction of the door they'd just come out from, and didn't immediately notice the pair. When he did, Grey noticed a certain necklace, made of about seven glowing-red cubes, jingle against his chest.

"Oh! Excuse me I was about to store some merchandise for I KNOW YOU." He interrupted himself to point at Grey, then looked up and down at Stormflight before adding "Unbranded, as I recall?"

"Yeah shaving off my cutie mark makes me look younger; thought I'd leave it blank a spell, see how the ladies liked it." When he'd been dumped by the Enclave, they'd used a magic solution to dissolve his cutie mark but didn't want to take the time to record his Dashite proclamation so they just told him he was dead, and left him for dead. Which would have worked if Pear & Grey hadn't shared their food and water with him.

This colt didn't respond to the humor, and instead looked back at Grey. "So, I have almost uncovered the plot to destroy me, but I'm leaving it to Broken Claw to redeem himself. So when you get to town, don't mind that Desert Rose walks a little funny, he, she, whatever is taking notes from her 'supervisors' in the coup attempt so Redwing can execute them once the evidence comes out."

Grey had to ask, even though that string of names made it abundantly clear who this was. "Temnyy?"

That did get a reaction. The colt twisted his ears, and dragged the bag a few hooves closer to the pair, and thus to the building now behind them. Finally looking up and turning fully to face the ponies who actually looked like adults, he said "You understand that's not properly my name, right?"

Stormy shrugged, and said "What wouldya like to be called, sir?" Which was met with a somewhat confused stare confounded by several staccato blinks of the colt's eyes.

Shaking his head, the colt looked back and said "Former Unicorn? I think there was a glitch during the initial flurry of transfers, the day the bombs went off. I died fifty times or more in the first hour. Most of that in the first few seconds."

Grey worried he was swimming too deep to be asking, but he was an inquisitive colt by nature and couldn't really help it. "You forgot your name the day you became immortal?"

The colt was fishing a ball, about the size of a memory orb, but swirling gently with blue, red, and a sort of creamy pink transition color between them, which was hanging on the end of a string. Setting it on the ground in front of him, Former Unicorn grinned, and said, oddly toward Stormflight not Grey, "That's my story. And I'm sticking to it." With that, he picked up the ball by its string, and strode confidently toward Grey, who as he had the first time he realized this was the actual Muhavé Gōn Dolæ, was sweating visible but not twitching any muscles.

He did manage to squeak out "Sticking to it because you're lying but don't want no one to track down where you keep your soul?"

Only six hooves in front of Stormflight Trees now, he hung the ball on a raised foreleg and grinned, almost laughing as he replied "That's either true, or it's not. And I'm not clarifying. I am donating though. Partly because this amuse the absolute heck out of me, and as I believe Redwing said, I like to make ponies uncomfortable in the best of ways. Bring your nose down here."

Grey watched carefully to see what the ball would do to Stormy, but he didn't dare plan on shooting Former Unicorn, because that would just result in an automatic 'full transfer' to the mortally wounded pony body, and Former Unicorn would be currently,

again, a unicorn. And that would creep Stormy out way more than he was having to put up with now. Probably.

Stormy reluctantly lowered his head, eyes never leaving the colt's ears, and said earth-pony colt threw the string over Stormy's ears, then waved his head back to normal position. The ball slid down Stormy's neck, and came normally to rest against his chest. Stormflight was still breathing, blinking, and decidedly not making eye contact lest he lose his wings to a manual 'full transfer' which could, Grey remembered, be triggered during eye contact, or skin to skin contact. *Your coat counts, your contact lenses if you actually find or manufacture them out here, don't. Neither does barding or plain hooves, though your sole exposes your soul.*

What happened suddenly, is the bag opened itself, and a pegasus mare with pastel sky-blue coat and mane with three shades of red, mostly a light pastel form of brick red, like the clouds at sunset, jumped up and looked around, quickly latching onto Stormflight's frame. She quickly walked over until she was about six hooves to Former Unicorn's left, and perhaps eight to ten hooves from Stormflight. While her mane could imply a sunset, her eyes were a light orange as of a beautiful sunrise.

Stormy blinked several times at her before proffering "Low Sale?" which seemed to embarrass the mare deeply as she blushed, and turned her head to look at the sand off to her right some distance.

Temnyy, or Former Unicorn or whatever, lopsided grin and eyes shining bright, started explaining. "That is a training ball for your new pet. I recommend you not sell her but when I'm ready to take up her training again I'll buy her back from you at full price, typically four hundred caps or so. That ball, in addition to being proof of ownership, is also what's left of her soul, which is why she knows you're wearing it; she feels a little 'pop' when she changes owner."

Still soured on the theft of the pegasus colt that grew up to be Nuage Cadeau, or Nogg, which meant "Cloud's Gift" in Fancy, Stormflight was looking pretty soured on this new arrangement also. "Do Ah rename her Clouds Gift then, mister Temnyy?"

Unperturbed, Former Unicorn replied "Rename her whatever you want. The pony that used to be, if that was her name, isn't. This isn't a pony, because pets are weak,

fragile, and most of all, not people anymore. I trust you'll keep her in line, but you should understand the best ways to punish your new pet for misbehaving." Turning to the mare, the colt exclaimed "Miss? What do you say to your new owner?"

The mare took a deep breath, tried to steal one glance at the colt selling her, and faltered even in that. But was able to look Stormflight firmly and begin. "Welcome sir, I'm supposed to tell you how to use my training ball in the event it becomes necessary to hit me, you have options that won't leave any marks. Let's go ahead and walk through that, sir?" Here she looked down at Stormy's hooves as she raised one of her own. "Imagine you have a dial, and a button in front of you. Great big, easy to use dial." Hoof still in the air, she made eye contact with Stormy again. "There are six settings on the dial, and it sits in neutral between zero and one. I want you to imagine turning it to the left, to zero, then pushing the button."

The mare pantomimed twisting left with her right front hoof, then she put it down, to pick up her front left, and stabbed it into the imaginary button. Stormy looked down at the sand between them, one hoof in the air vaguely copying her motions, when he suddenly jerked his head up, and looked first at the pegasus mare, then to her left and right, before centering on her again, his face tight, his ears showing confusion.

Here her eye contact faltered as she set her hooves back down. Still looking down with her eyes but not her muzzle, she suggested "I want you to imagine taking your hoof off that button, then press it back down. Go ahead and do that a couple times." After a second she re-lifted her right front, just a couple inches, then after a moment stabbed it back down, then picked it up, and quickly twice in a row dropped her hoof then raised it. Hoof still in the air, she made herself look at Stormy again and said "As you see I can feel when you're doing that. So, I'm going to take an incredibly small flight around you. If you trust me you can close your eyes, since my trainer is here and will force me to come back if I leave. Or you can watch me, but I want you to leave that button pressed in at zero for a little longer."

With a dark glare at the still grinning colt, Stormflight sat his haunches on the ground and closed his eyes, at which point the mare jumped into the air, and flew a quick zig-zag flight, and at a height of no more than fifteen hooves, flew a circle around them that was perhaps forty five hooves in circumference before landing where she had been,

and she stood looking intently at her owner, who offered a frightened look of understanding toward the pet.

"So, anytime you think I might be straying, or want to know if I'm staying in my playpen you can ask my training ball, and at literally any distance within this universe, it will tell you where am am and what speed I'm moving at." Without her voice breaking she transitioned to 'hitting', with: "In the event I have stepped outside my playpen, or am eyeing your food, or doing anything else you're trying to train me to stop doing, you can grab me and shake me, or yell at me, or you can move that dial to one, then press it for a brief moment. Or longer if you think I'm trying to ignore you. I don't have any words for how it feels, but I will attempt to not react and you can"

Here Former Unicorn held up a hoof. "Wait, I have an improvement. You." He tapped the mare's rib cage. "Turn away from him. Explain then, that you'll not react, so your owner will know your reactions are to the training ball's instruction." When she had repeated his words, she the smiled a little sheepishly and turned and sat down, back to Stormy and eyes and head also straight ahead, away from him.

Stormy swallowed, and a moment later the mare's ears drooped, and twitched a bit. Then they straightened, and she shuffled her wings into more formal arrangement, before again she took a sharp breath and her ears showed a little discomfort. When next she was able to sit straight, she stood up and slowly turned, looking a little frightened at her owner. "If you're done with that level, then. Were you to use setting two on the dial, it's likely because I showed resistance to level one. You've told me I have to wait for my dinner, or that I can't look at you when you eat, but I keep doing it. Let's go ahead and demonstrate, shall we?"

Again she turned from him, and sat down as neutrally as she could. Stormy was clearly uncomfortable, but the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ was sitting there, hooves away, watching the demonstration eagerly, gauging Stormy's face and body for signs the training from his new pet was adequate in getting her abilities across. So he lifted his hoof, and rotated it a little, and then set it down again.

This time the mare tensed all through her body; her breathing was just a little bit labored. As soon as Stormy bent his fetlock joint, she breathed deeply, then hissed it

back out but was breathing deep, cleansing breaths. She looked over her shoulder, not quite turning far enough to make eye contact. "If that's enough, sir?"

With Stormy's ascent, she turned around, and now her voice did crack. "There is a steeper climb, from two to three. Three is for when I have deliberately disobeyed, such as hiding something from you, or telling you no to your face. But since you can't tell what I'm feeling, I'm not, unless you're specifically curious, usually required to show you my reactions. So then, three is for actual punishment and it will, as an example, knock me out of the air, although it might not cause me to fall down, especially if I'm already seated." A deep breath as she steeled herself to continue. "Four is for grievous violations, such as attacking your or damaging your property, or telling your guests I'm a pony, which since I have no soul and didn't have the strength to save myself when I was caught, I am a pet, not a slave and certainly not a pony." She was sitting down, but she shrank in on herself, legs in closer, tail tucked tightly against her leg, eyes almost closed. "Five is intended to kill me. But I have during training, endured twenty seconds of continuous punishment, and been able to resume my petly duties within about thirty seconds after that. But I can't breathe or see when you use that level so use it sparingly, such as if you feel the need to disable me, or you just want me to understand you're angry enough to want me dead even if you're not ready to bury me yet."

At this, the colt raised his nose, and eyes tracking something invisible, poked the air, and dragged sliders around that weren't there. Then after a few seconds of this, he closed the distance to Stormflight and laid his hoof on Stormy's left shoulder. The pair stiffened, eyes glazed over for about ten seconds before Former Unicorn stepped away to his previous place, and Stormy began drooling though he quickly regained control of his senses. Stormy took several deep, shuddering breaths, and the colt explained to the other two quadrupeds present "He's experienced all five levels personally now."

With that, he turned, and grabbed his now empty bag, folding it several times before staring off into the empty wastes, calling out "I'll catch up with you later, then. Good luck." and just walked off.

"Are you allowed to fly still?" Stormy whispered to the pale blue mare.

"If you let me sir, yes."

Stormy nodded, and pointed at Grey's wings, and horn converter before whispering "We need to move."

A little ashamed he hadn't made a move to prepare for a more precipitous departure before now, Grey Horn quickly snapped his converter shut and began flying straight up. Low Sale stayed at the same level as Stormflight, and they proceeded towards the town, more or less. The column of smoke wasn't visible, but Grey thought that's where it had been.

Stormflight flew as fast as they had their first flight together, and at least as high, perhaps three thousand hooves; roughly a third of the way to the cloud curtain above them. Seeing another lone, probably abandoned ruin he sped down straight at it.

Grey Horn was still not good at applying forward thrust; at stopping. But seeing what his companion was planning and fully understanding his emotional state for doing so, he tried to improvise and hoped he didn't get killed doing it. He stopped forward thrust, and while in free-fall he rotated so he was falling / diving backwards. Then he applied full forward thrust, which quickly brought him to a stop but left him falling straight down at still two hundred hooves above the ground. Hovering forces he could manage under pressure, so he was able to more reasonably land with his tail to his friends, who had already entered the building without him.

Running to catch up, he found the room they were in, at least, was empty but for the two pegasi. Stormflight was in tears, trying to offer the mare her 'training ball.'

"I can't Stormflight! It wreaks all sorts of emotional havoc if I'm my own owner. I can't stand it for even a minute and I'll be in tears begging you to take me back. I'd rather give my last shred of a soul to one of the ground filth than try to keep it in my hooves." her hoof clearly indicating Grey as he entered.

Grey was about to butt in, explaining he wasn't a raider, and yes there was a different, but apparently in the heat of the moment Stormy did it for him, as the mare expelled all her breath in a whoosh; her eyes wide as saucers as she fell to the ground. Stormflight dropped the ball and jumped back from it, and almost immediately the mare sat back up, silent now as she tried carefully to make eye contact with Stormflight, who was still in tears.

"Ah'm sorry Ah over reacted that weren't ..." Stormflight stopped talking, trying to get his hyperventilating under control.

The mare almost whispered "What did I say?" To which all Stormy could do was vaguely indicate Grey Horn with a hoof.

"I'm not a raider." That had been creepy, but he didn't know that pony in front of him, so seeing her reduced to an automaton didn't hit quite as close to the core of his being. Although he probably wouldn't sleep well tonight either. "There's a difference, as I know I'm a pony, but raiders have forgotten what that means." Grey was looking down at the mare's training ball, which was emitting a little light but not as much even as the memory orb he'd seen had. "Oh, also I saved his life. So that too."

The mare looked back and forth a few times between Stormy and himself, and after a few seconds said "I'm sorry." Then more firmly to her owner, "I'm sorry sir."

Looking to the Dashite, he asked "Do I get to ask some mechanical questions? I get that this is all messed up but I'm curious." When that didn't get any response, he turned to the mare and asked "Is he still your owner even though he dropped that orb?" She nodded, so Grey turned back to the stallion pegasus and asked "Can you use it from this distance, or do you have to be touching it?"

Stormflight stood back up, clearly shaken but able to talk again. "It ain't good but for spanking the poor girl like she was an ill trained puppy."

But Low Sale interjected with "Use zero. Just ask the ball where I am; that's pretty harmless and I don't need to take it to mean anything unless I'm sneaking around where I shouldn't be."

With a sidelong glare at Grey first, Stormflight closed his eyes, and said "Zero." As he raised a hoof, turned an imaginary knob to its lowest setting, and depressed it. He then raised his nose and swung it back and forth a little before pointing it straight at the mare before letting go and opening his eyes. "Yes Grey, I can still use it."

Stormflight wouldn't know this next question, and honestly he didn't really trust the mare would have the right of it either, but he felt now was the time to ask "What if we crushed, or otherwise destroyed that ball? Would you be free, or your own master with the curse in place?"

A sad look met his question as she said "Dead." She shuffled her hooves a bit nervously, a bit distractedly before looking back to her training ball. "I was told most of my soul was extracted to power his extra, well he said extracurricular machines. But anyway, all I have left is in that ball, and if it goes, I go with it."

That's a fair sight worse than a memory orb was his first thought. But out loud Grey blurted "Wait who's running his town?"

The mare said "He seemed to think it was a lost cause, so he used up a couple of his pets, stolen back from owners that died trying to defend their takeover attempt." Still that small, sad look, still overly calm for having been told all of society was excluded from her life now.

Stormflight had finally pulled himself mostly together, though he was just looking at the ground between himself and the mare. "Low Sale what in the name of Celestia were you doing near that curtain breach?" Here he looked at Grey long enough to say "Ah told'ya that break in the clouds was your friend Temnyy."

Grey's ears pricked straighter, his tail involuntarily swished as he retorted "He's not my friend he's the unnamed leader of a town I'd never heard of more than a week ago when Derpy Hooves gave me a reason to travel that far."

The pegasus mare somewhat distractedly asked "The ghoul that survived Cloudsdale?" as Stormflight pawed angrily at the sand covering the wooden floor. Then she looked over at Stormy herself and said "I think the hole was a distraction. A bomb of some sort went off and opened the curtain; from what I overheard there were filthy earth ponies with cloud-walking charms standing around looking for trouble."

Suddenly realizing she might have repeated her earlier offense she snapped her mouth shut and blinked her now very large eyes, glancing back and forth between Stormy & Grey Horn, who reassured her with "If there were just there looking for trouble, they were probably raiders. Since I imagine we can't ask them now we'll just assume you mean raiders. By the way," it seemed natural to Grey that he would be called an earth-bound pony by a pair of natural born cloud-walking pegasi, but down here there were further standards to adhere to. "I'm not an earth pony. I may be earth-bound, but I'm not anymore because I found this palladium rod, and also, I'm a unicorn. Everybody draws the distinction between earth pony and unicorn pony."

To which Low Sale politely nodded once and looked back to her owner for a time before asking "What's the food program down here, anyway?" to which Stormflight burst out in laughter and Grey smiled, offering "Well, this building might not have been picked over; if we find some haycakes packaged up before the war, we can split those."

Stormy had dropped to his belly and was massaging his face with a hoof, and Low Sale briefly looked aghast before she regained her composure and said "Oh! You mean for me, sure. But the ponies have real food for themselves, right?"

Grey sat down as Stormflight got back up to retrieve the training ball. To the Enclave mare, her cutie mark of a rolled up paper, a pen, though not a quill pen, and two prewar bits, Grey said "We'd probably have crops to sell you if you'd cut holes in your curtain, and give us some more predictable rain."

Now wearing the slowly swirling ball, Stormy mumbled "Grey if you say that to every Enclave you meet sooner or later you're going to get a hoof through yer face."

As Stormflight turned to walk deeper into the office space building, Grey called after him "Under current social mores the only pegasi I ever meet are Dashites anyway; it's not like you have any stake in keeping the cloud curtain intact anymore." The pegasus mare had pulled her ears back for a moment, was now looking at him with a somewhat glued-on smile. She had even less say than Stormy did, I guess. Offering a hoof motion of condolence, he added "Or whatever she is." to which her glued on smile widened a bit before she turned to follow Stormy.

The door they'd come in was a mud room, or the like. There were shelves of stuff Grey didn't think would matter to anypony, and at the end of it were two doors. To the left was a broom closet, and straight ahead was a door that went to an ell-shaped corner of a hallway. Stormflight had already started walking straight ahead, which would cut across the narrow portion of the building. To the right, Grey could see windows, desks, and paper piles that had adhered together from five quarters of a century of stagnant air. Low Sale had caught up with Stormflight, and was trying to just touch her chin whiskers to his flank

Stormy stopped, and turned his head, not quite able to make the pegasus' gaze. Grey was still eyeing the hallway ahead for movement and kept walking past the two as Low

Sale asked "I need to know if you would like me to talk like I was still a pony, or if I should just follow you around like a hound dog would, and bark at things to distract them while you shoot them."

A slow blink, a slow drawl in response. "Y'all know just because we both lost our flyin' privileges don't mean Ah think you ain't still as smart as you used to be."

Low Sale nodded, blinking understanding and said "Noon Treetops is doing well. Hadn't had the foal just yet but she's been approved for citizenship, since she lost you to the ground just as she found out your attempts were successful." When Stormflight started silently crying, his breathing speeding up, Grey who was now in front of the pair, nearly to the door to the next room, saw Low Sale blink a few times and cautiously ask "I never heard any wedding announcements though. Wouldn't you have been on the pill?" And after a short gap, added a perfunctory "Sir?"

"Ah am now. Tweren't then." Straightening his neck out he looked out past Grey, who was testing the lock on the door. "Mah squad said they'd say Ah'd been killed in battle, so she'd have a chance to file for a hardship exception." He wiped a foreleg across his eyes and added "Ah guess surprise is on them, since I didn't die by raiders after all."

Grey, ear nearly on the door, lock almost unlocked, whispered "Not to disturb the news report, but there's something moving out there." He'd been hearing a clank, clank and occasional other noises, and it was definitely a thing walking around. The metallic clanking was at the same two points, one near and one further away, and had happened twice now, evenly spaced. *Mechanical actuation? Or a nest of giant ants?* Only one way to find out, and it could be dangerous considering he had a revolver with fairly limited ammo, the new member of the party could be pressed to carry goods but had no weapons, and Stormy had four remaining rounds for his rifle plus about ten rounds for his heavy duty, heavy hitting revolver.

Stormflight was clearly doing the same math. "Do we have the firepower to even open that door?" but he was readying his rifle in case Grey just charged in.

"I at least want to look. We'll run pell-mell for the door if it's bad." And so saying, he finished throwing the lock which operated the door mechanism too. Creaking just a little, the door opened inwards enough that Grey could see, but he didn't throw it open

so the pegasi could see anything more than his reaction, which involved a lot of blinking, and a slight head tip as the meaning slowly dawned on him.

Stormy crept up and peeked over Grey's ears at the treaded robot with several mechanical appendages attempt to tighten a few screws, push a lever that was missing entirely, and pull and push other things around it. It was surrounded by a conveyor belt that met with other belts, pulling things in from two columns that went up through the ceiling and apparently would take the product out two small doors; one door would have taken things to the rooms to the right that had been bypassed, and the other would be to the far half of the building they were in. Something sizable had fallen into the robot's path in two places, and as the tracked entity went over it the whole robotic contraption clanked, causing the noises he'd heard before.

Grey quietly tapped Stormy's foreleg with one of his own back feet, and now that he had room, he closed the door carefully. The group walked twenty hooves from the door and discussed the best options available. "Ah ain't got armor piercing rounds Grey; in the cloud cities any robots we set up have friend-or-foe logic and at least minimalistic weapons."

"That thing has been mindlessly trying to maintain production-line throughput for at least twelve decades!" Heretofore every piece of old world technology Grey Horn had encountered was at the very least unpowered, usually attached to damaged-beyond-repair devices. The idea of building a full robot had never occurred to him, and the thought that one built would still be doing anything was simply mind-blowing.

Stormy was less surprised. "They built 'em heavy back then. Earth ponies are like that, over engineering every Celestia Blessed thing they put a hoof to." *Well, that means it won't stop working in the next few weeks.*

"Alright we'll come back when we're equipped to dismantle robots but I **need** that thing scrapped and into my hooves." Grey was about to turn and ask Low Sell what her input was, but then he remembered how often he'd had to cover for Stormy being his pet, saying to clerks and vendors 'yes I let my pet talk' in the town where the Former Unicorn (called Temnyy by the griffon guards), stole the sky rats he hated so much and ... broke them. *Just so he can sell them cheap to his citizens.* So he made a point of reminding himself not to look at her as he turned back the way they'd come.

It felt like a long walk back to the open desert. It used to be that scavengers would all hide when the sky rats dropped into view; they never attempted to communicate, and they could be seen shooting up ground-bound ponies. Who were, Grey admitted, generally crazed, thoughtless cannibalistic thieves. But Grey never went out of his way to find and kill them either. So it had been, that those ponies wearing black barding that covered everything including their tail and feathers on both the top and bottom of their ostensibly pony-like bodies, garnered the nickname of "sky rats." But while their culture was xenophobic they were not actually incapable of compassion – his run from the alicorn monsters while Stormflight was slowly dying of poison saw some random couple follow his flight as much to verify he'd left as anything, had also dosed Stormy with something that saved his life, which meant he'd recovered enough to save Pear's life when his sky-sled fell apart. It had to be said, and it had not yet. "I guess pegasi are ponies, too."

He'd intended it to be redirected towards Stormflight but it was Low Sale that quietly responded with "Most of them, yes. And it seems the hype about ground ponies is overdone too." to which Stormy offered a light chuckle.

Chapter 6

Trader's Parking Lot

It was several hours later when they finally found the hole that was shielded by an invisibility spell that protected a small town from random passersby. As this trip, everyone could fly and was in the air, they bypassed the super narrow stairwell to the first floor where the same earth pony mare, dingy yellow coat and mane looking disheveled in addition to dirty and dingy of color, signed them all into the Republic of Dave.

"You have two pets?" When Grey shook his head she remembered "Oh right he's a Dashite. And..." She was looking at a space about halfway between Stormflight and Low Sale when she realized Stormy was still wearing the mare's 'training ball' at which she scrunched up her face for a moment and made a note on their entry. "That's a first; Dashite with a pet." And with that Firelight Coins, Grey finally remembered her name, let them move to the staging area which had two other parties already repacking their wares, one earth pony couple seemed to be selling housewares and other random junk, and the other was an energy weapons specialist, which meant most of his cargo was locked containers that were either empty or nearly so, since there wasn't much in the way of energy weapon or battery cells to be found this far south.

It occurred to Grey that since he wasn't exactly competition, he should be able to coax the route used by these two ponies – more towns to trade with meant the wasteland would recover that much sooner. "All right you two." Grey said over his shoulder as he unequipped his flight harness, glad to finally be free to use his horn as he saw fit, and not to look like he was Stormy's **other** pet. "I'm going to talk to the traders about where else they trade."

But a quiet voice from the female interrupted his departure. "Sir?" Grey turned to make eye contact with Low Sale, who explained "Since I'm not a pony, you should remember not to include me in the count of ponies you're talking to. In this town especially, it will get you dirty looks, and I might be beaten for pretending to be a pony."

Much as when he'd first heard of this town's overstallion making "pets" out of injured or captured Enclave pegasi, Stormflight was gritting his teeth and squinting at nothing in particular. As an unwilling Dashite with no equipment and no familiarity with the ground's layout, resources, or culture, his friendship with Grey Horn was literally the only thing he could rely on to keep him alive. And Grey was trading in a town where the natives kept getting surprised that Stormflight could talk. So it was Grey that responded, trying to match the quiet tone, with "have you ever **been** beaten for talking near a stranger?"

She blinked several times and started nervously looking at the speed-bumps that separated trader's rows for a few seconds before admitting "I don't know."

This started to set off quiet alarms in Grey's head, indicating there had been some deception that was perhaps a bit bigger than explained, but he finally understood what was bothering him after he listened to the two pegasi discuss it with each other, starting with Stormflight asking "Like when the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ generated a hallucination that I was in a dungeon getting zapped at levels three through five?"

Low Sale's eyes widened, and her ears flicked away, not pinned but pointing backwards, as if she'd been threatened and she didn't understand what brought that threat against her, and she stammered "I wouldn't think so. Sir. I was led to believe that hallucination thing was a type of soul magic, so it shouldn't work an me."

"But ya don't specifically know if y'all have, or have not, been struck by passersby for jumping up on them and wagging your tail, or speaking out of turn?" Stormflight still looked glum, but was offering eye contact with his 'pet'.

This eye blinking looked more like she was scrambling around for a suitable answer. She straightened her back, and pinned her wings close to her body as she said, looking straight ahead as if at attention. "I'm too well trained to speak out of turn, sir. I'm also potty trained so you don't have to remind me to go before we leave on a long trip."

Stormflight gently laid a wing across her back, and said "Ah promise not to be less proud of you, either way. Ah ain't questionin' what yer training taught you, Ah just was wondering if you knew fer sure, if you'd ever been struck by anypony aside from yer" Here Stormflight had to bite his tongue, as whatever pet name he was about to spit out to call the scourge of the Enclave even a century after the bombs had fallen, wouldn't have sat well with this broken pegasus mare. He smoothed his face back out, and finished "yer trainer."

Now she let her face fall into sorrow, and sniffing a little she looked resolutely down at Grey's hooves, and answered almost in a whisper, "Just surprised looks. The beatings were all in hallucinatory set-ups."

Grey pieced the first and the last parts together, and said (but only in his mind) *That is only possible if you have a soul. But how can I ascertain this without hounding her about questions she has stock answers ready to keep inquisitive ponies at bay?* Aloud, he decided on "I'd like to change the topic, a bit, if I can Stormy?" Hoping she was still looking too far down to see his glare, Grey glared menacingly at Stormy, who raised an eyebrow in response. "Is there a breeding program in this town? Since there are pet mares, and pet stallions?"

This at least got a surprised look as Low Sale looked up at Grey, probably trying to ascertain what answer was expected. *Good, no stock answers so I can trap her, or at least expose the truth to Stormflight.* "I haven't heard of anything like that. Certainly my trainer didn't bring me to another pet owner for ... oh!" Now she smiled, and tried to look like she was feeling embarrassed with her ear-set but she wasn't blushing or stuttering. "If you're asking about breeding me yourself, I can promise you I won't put up a fight since there would be too much chance of my owner here misunderstanding or just thinking it wasn't right for a pet to fight against a pony."

"But technically that pairing would be bestiality, wouldn't it?" Assuming she's now an animal just because she claims to have no soul.

The accusation shocked Low Sale back into stuttering and frantically trying to eyeball dust motes around Grey's hooves. "Yes. Yes of course sir I didn't mean to imply you'd be interested only trying to answer your question. I haven't seen any pegasus foals in town." Just as Grey was trying to choose the wording to move to the next stage of the

argument, Low Sale made it for him by turning to her owner with a sly knowing grin and said "If he's asking for your sake I'll tell you that even though he's right, a lot of stuff goes unnoticed in the wasteland; I'll forget whatever you tell me needs to be forgotten so neither of us will realize what happened."

Grey tried not to pounce on the suggestion, but may have said just a little bit too quickly, "But your body wasn't modified; you'd have a foal, eventually anyway, and one parent would be a pony that will live eternally, and the other parent will cease entirely once her body fails her." This might have a stock answer too, actually. He was kinda thorough about some things. "Will the foal be a pony, or an animal? Either it will have the right to order you to provide milk long after the foal should be weaned, and can make you stop trying to potty train when it likes making you have to change diapers. Or it would be appropriate to wean the foal as soon as it can eat hay, and sell it off before the thing gets sick and dies of any of the many things this Princess Cursed wasteland has that kills quadrupeds."

That diatribe did get a long, slow burning glare of disbelief from Stormflight. But it also got a stock answer, as she shuffled her hooves a little and said, again to Grey's hooves, "Yes, you're right. If I have a foal, let me know when it's born what you see, and I'll behave accordingly." She looked over to her owner, whose wing was still resting on her back, and added "If it's a pony, I can never spank it, but I can refuse to help spoil it, and I can let you know what I saw – so you can spank the foal later after you get back from work or wherever you are."

Grey was grinding his teeth, and turned all the way back towards the two pegasi, having originally been facing the other two traders. He didn't really think he could un-train her, now, here, but he still let himself say out loud "That it's up to a decision by a recognized pony, means either call is equally valid. That means he lied to you, and you still have enough soul to properly be considered..."

He was interrupted by a hoof against his lips, shushing him; Low Sale had bounded silently and with incredible speed to close the gap and keep Grey from speaking against her status as 'just an animal'. Hoof still in place, she whispered "Please don't speak against my status. Not in this town, where the infected live." *'Infected' must mean the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ. I'll have to explain it's just one unicorn that can't die even when he's killed.* As she dropped her hoof she glanced quickly at the two traders, who had not taken any

notice of this interchange, and continued, trying to sultry with a strained whisper "Any foal I have will be at least a year away, so it doesn't matter right now, does it? And if you want to practice making foals, there are things we can do that will make sure your practice doesn't make you upset; no winged foal that you have to explain and if you have a wife or whatever is done down here, she'll still have a foal without you needing to explain why your equipment doesn't work." A breath, and he eyes wandered around the room for a moment as she changed gears. "I just really need you not to question my acceptance of not having a soul anymore. It's really important"

Grey swallowed. This was going to get awkward, moreso than it was now. But here in this town where Former Unicorn, how ever much of him was left after the constantly body hopping of twelve plus decades, he considered himself the supreme leader, and his only law was you not make him look like a fool. Not by disrespecting your fellow pony, not be telling his pets they might actually have enough of a soul to go back to their former life. Or any other life that ponies might live out under the cloud cover.

Lacking any sort of sensible, logic fueled response, he reached up and 'boop'd the mare on the nose and turned again to the weapons dealer.

The dark gray unicorn stallion was levitating the last of his rifles *Four if I was seeing right; two pistols.* into a box and locking it as Grey approached. While his coat and farming-soil dark orange eyes looked clean enough, his black pseudo-leather cloak looked to be a hand me down from not only previous generations but alternate continents that spared even less water for washing than the desert dwellers did. He interrupted Grey's approach with "Evening Burnt Sole not open for business check with me in the bazaar at radius two fifty at oh seven thirty hours how else might I help you."

He clearly had never been approached by a fellow trader as he was totally poised to rip open a lockbox and start shooting this interloper. "Grey Horn; so, sole like the bottom of your hoof or soul like the center of who you are as a pony?"

The poor stallion was so flustered he accidentally knocked over one of his lockboxes while he stammered "Yeah they are well I guess never I can't so you know Tia curse it." at which point he stopped talking or looking at Grey so he could right and rearrange his locked wares boxes and turn back to look at the younger unicorn. After a moment's

measurements he seated himself. "I sell the highest quality MEWs to the most discerning customers. What's your angle?"

Still standing, facing the larger unicorn with a soft, easy grin, Grey replied "Whatever I can find that other ponies don't have. Right now it's prewar electronics; circuit boards, batteries, arcanomechanical motors, that sort of thing."

The dark and edgy unicorn softened some of his edge, subtly showing sign he was telling himself to shake his mane free, although other than a slow eye blink and the twisting of the nose Grey didn't see him actually move much. "See, my mother migrated from one raider family group to another that didn't have anti-unicorn mores, and to do that she had to walk across burning coals, which hurt, she told me years later. Since she burnt her soles getting across she assumed I, still in her belly, burned them too."

While that might explain the cloak's condition, he was fairly well spoken to be a crazed raider, or raised by a single mom who went from one crazed group to another at critical juncture in her life. "Congratulations on making something of yourself, then. Does your extended family deal with outsider traders or only extended family?" *If he still lives with said raiders, I doubt this will yield much information.*

While Sole was unsure at first about being the point of discussion, he seemed to warm to it. "Raiders aren't always so bad. My uncles would eat griffins live if they could catch one but they always gave trespassing ponies a chance to explain themselves." *Yes, completely sane* thought Grey "nothing at all like those winged freaky ponies like you're keeping over there." He casually pointed a hoof towards Grey's traveling companions.

Grey almost took a second to consider his words, but having decided he couldn't trade with Burnt Sole's family group he just leaned on the town norm of "dont start fights if youre civilized" and said "Pegasi can be okay. Yes the Sky-Rats don't deal with the ground but if this town's overstallion is successful we'll have an avenue of trade with the clouds in a decade or two." Looking over his shoulder Stormflight sharing his mashed carrots pack with Low Sale, both cautiously trying to talk to each other, Grey added "They aren't either of them my pets anyway. The stallion is a Dashite; he got kicked out of the clouds. And the mare was a pet gifted to him by Temnyy Kogot himself."

That got his attention. "Swear to Luna, you spoke with the mysterious overstallion yourself?"

Grey wasn't sure if the arms dealer was asking him to swear by Luna's eternal princess-hood to the truth of his assertions, of if Sole was taking Luna's name in vain over having met the real Temnyy. Trying to guess at a good balance of reactions after the odd turn of phrase settled in Grey's mind, he blinked a few times and said "Pretty sure. He keeps his secrets but they stand out once you meet him. Red, glowy necklace, as you've probably heard. My sister had the chance to find out, without getting in trouble no less, that trying to wear the actual necklace cuts off your air supply if you aren't the overstallion."

That, in turn, caused its own set of oddities to settle in the trader's mind, as his head drifted to a neutral position and his eyes glazed over to a thousand-hoof-stare. Since the fully grown stallion was taller than Grey, or perhaps just because of the weight of the memories coming to Burnt Sole just now, he dropped slowly to his belly, legs folded neatly under him. "You know, my mother said her first tribe attributed their survival through the balefire to some quick acting by a MAS scientist who kept dying but was okay because whoever killed him would pick up his glowing necklace and go back to building a roof that would resist the balefire's fallout." Here the deep orange eyes turned to Grey, a nostalgic wistfulness to them. "If I heard right, the pony's name was Diamond Point Spark, but he doesn't remember that now. He got into a fight with some Grand Enclave pegasi that were trying to take the metal structure away and Diamond Point found out and fought them, but the Enclave either had special equipment or special knowledge, and almost killed him." And now the eyes were in focus again, gauging Grey's stake in the matter. "Maybe, don't tell him about that? It might not even have been him."

This sounds familiar. "About seventy years ago? A balefire bomb destroyed a small cloud built forward base. Glorious Leader, who doesn't trust normal ponies with his real name anymore, tried to parlay with the Enclave in favor of the ground, he said to the Dashite over there, and ended up with a giant megaspell'd hole in everything when it went sour."

Sole grinned, and standing back up he looked around surreptitiously. There was no new ponies or griffons around. "He's so angry; it's going to get him killed for real some day."

Grey nodded slightly. "What I actually came here to talk to you about was your trade route. Who else do you visit to sell or buy energy cells? Also there's a super-battery I've encountered that you might be interested in buying."

Sole was definitely sorry to hear that question. "Well, actually it's just the two raider camps. They're both due north from here. Like, three days and once you're on dirt, not sand, just start looking for holes to buried buildings or caves and there might be a few ponies living there but ... most of them don't want visitors, and don't have spare money anyway." Now Sole looked rather sheepishly at the stone walls surrounding him and confided "Honestly I just come here for the chance to kill the mutated animals that get in my way. But I've found so many different rifles I thought I should try selling one or two."

Not honestly that different than my story. "I don't think anyone from my village would want to buy an energy weapon either, since we have some resources for making conventional ammo but not recharging batteries." Grey Horn bid Burnt Sole a good evening and good luck on his return journeys, and went to the other traders who seemed to be finished staging their wares for deployment. Offering a greeting so as to be sure not to startle them, he walked over to his left a bit so there would be one of those speed bumps between his hooves and their good, which were mostly in burlap sacks. Sitting down, not twenty hooves from the pair he noticed he hadn't really been acknowledged yet when he called again to introduce himself. "I'm Grey Horn, one of tomorrow's competition I guess; curious what you're selling and where you're from."

The mare was probably a bright yellow but was so dirty that it was impossible to tell what shade of yellow she probably was normally. She had a doubled burlap cloak tied across her withers and her loins with some a pair of belts; this covered up her cutie mark. The stallion was as dirty, and probably a pale mint green but his right flank had been sheared down several inches some time in his past, so his coat, some muscle, and certainly his cutie mark was missing from the right side. The left flank was covered in so much dried mud it looked like some sort of fungus was growing out of his flank.

When they finally finished messing with their stuff, they stopped and looked at their visitor, and smiled. For as worn down and used up as this couple was, their eyes were bright, despite the dark, deep green that they nearly shared; the stallions eyes were a bit more of a pale color, where hers were definitely green. It was the mare that spoke first. "Evening, then, pony and Celestia's light on this meeting. What can we help you with?"

The second reference to the princesses. Is my village just atheistic compared to the other survivors? "I'm a fellow trader, except this is the only town I know of. I was wondering

if you'd share your trade route so more villages could benefit from resource sharing via sales and purchases as they saw fit?"

The stallion squinted at Grey, lips pursed before turning and mumbling to the mare. *Definitely seem to be husband/wife, sharing secrets in the open like that.* "East, young one. A hard journey, many plants that you must avoid. Thankfully we're not so far into the soiled lands that Killing Joke has taken root but plenty others with their own danger."

Grey nodded. "Out where we live there's a variation of a venus fly trap that spits seeds at you, which will burrow through you and use the dead pony for fuel to grow a new trap." The stallion raised his eyebrows and muttered an exclamation of surprise. "Due east? Do you visit any other towns or just go between here and your home town?"

This garnered a earnest, concerned muttering rapidly issued from the stallion to the mare, who waited a time, then smiled and place a reassuring hoof on his shoulder. "Just the one town, young one. But we've been taken advantage of by other bands of ponies, so if you find your way to our end of Equestria, you will have to do all your trading through us, or perhaps the day will see another emissary chosen for the task."

Grey tipped his head as a sort of permanent nod, smiling softly and replied "It's good to be cautious. Does your town have walls?" When the stallion nodded affirmation Grey continued "That makes trading easier, because I can set up just outside the walls, and your neighbors might be able to see what I've brought with me, or make shorter work of sending requests for price quotes or the like."

The mare sighed, and nodded, and briefly pointed her nose towards Burnt Sole and cautioned "Never trust red & black ponies, young one. I don't know where he came from, or what burning buildings he walks through to look so messy, but his tail and forelock are as black as Nightmare Moon's mane, and his coat is as red as blood, and never with such glee have I seen a pony spill the blood of living things."

Grey glanced back at the stallion, who was currently curled up between some boxes to nap. After a moment to consider the advice, he asked "You're counting giant radscorpions amongst the protected category of 'living things'?" *of course, he also claimed to be descended from crazed raiders.*

"Aye, for it has never before the war, been the pony way to take the life of another

breathing thing." Grey glanced over their packages briefly, and didn't think he saw a good place to keep a rifle stashed, and they weren't carrying pistols themselves.

I think this will have to be categorized as 'agree to disagree' But with a smile he acknowledged their stand with "Ideally, yes. At any rate you've been helpful, and good luck selling your wares; I'll have water and turpentine mostly, in the morning, myself. Good day, then." Both the ponies raised a hoof to wave farewell as Grey turned to rejoin the winged pair he'd come in with.

Stormflight was sharing his evening prepackaged meal of what used to be hayfries with his 'pet' Low Sale who didn't seem to know if she should evoke images of unspeakable gratefulness for each bite of once-food, or focus on looking cute and playful as she at off his spoon. "Well, there aren't many towns that know about this place, I guess. Some raiders to the north and a cave of religious crazies to the East."

Snaking his way along the wall, looking furtively at every shadow, was a slender unicorn with light wood-brown coat, cooking-fire-coal orange eyes, and a brilliant ultrablue mane with streaks of normal blues in his tail. Having cleared the last of the frighteningly empty shadows, he broke the wall and made a bee line for Grey Horn. Stopping a scant six hooves from him, and still not looking AT him but still at shadows, and not at the other traders either, his voice called out smooth, clean, and a higher octave than stallions Grey remembered from before they were stolen. This befitted his slender frame, he supposed but even at close range couldn't tell if his cutie mark was of an ice pick, a lightning bolt, or some esoteric symbol contained within a toothed ring. "My name is Desert Rose; I'm led to understand you've met me?"

Grey was racking his brain for where he might have met, or been told of this stallion and his hard to forget mane colors. But it was Stormy who was able to place the name first. "Ah'd understood that, when your town's leader told Nuage Cadeau that you were 'gone' that meant 'dead'"

Ears twitched in anticipation as he turned his head to the speaker "Yes, well I You have wings." And was stopped cold when he realized he was speaking to a pegasus, and a brief eye glance, no head movement, to verify the third pony also had wings. Turning back to finally make eye contact with Grey Horn, he finished his first sentence. "I got better. The poison was good, but I guess not great."

Now Grey remembered. The first time he'd met this town's leader, he was wearing the body of a dusky red roan earth pony mare, whom Nogg recognized as being Desert Rose, except Temnyy was pulling the body's strings. This appeared to be the head of finance, more accustomed to being an earth pony mare but of course the once-unicorn stallion would, when possible, prefer to be a unicorn, and a stallion. "Does your leader know you're not dead? He seemed worried the town was going to fall apart just as it was building momentum." Thinking of the construction that was somehow hollowing out the hole, making new cave-like rooms and hallways, he added "And housing to support them."

The unicorn shook his head, saying "He's been gone since I woke up again. Skulking through the wastes I guess."

Grey motioned a hoof to the pegasus mare, saying of the skulking, "And messing with certain of the winged, while he was at it. Looked like a fairly young earth pony colt when he happened across us."

The once-mare and the once-pony made eye contact, and Grey thought he saw in both faces, the hurt of loss shared between them. But Desert Rose blinked slowly, and turned back to Grey, asking "So, Nuage is with you? The foals of the Third Floor say they haven't seen him in nearly a week now."

Thinking of the pegasus colt stolen to be trained up as an ambassador to the clouds from which he'd been stolen, made Grey sit down, feeling his own sense of loss, or rather his sister's. Nogg had said he'd heard his 'uncle' Temnyy speak of machines that could heal even more accurately than healing potions. *The kid might have misheard; he has more than his share of foalish misunderstandings. But it can't hurt to ask.* "Yes, he's safe at my village. Temnyy wanted him to leave in case violence broke out while he dug around with the plot to kill him via you via poison via a lot of distance." Rose very slightly retracted her head, and slitted her eyelids as she both twisted and pursed her lips. "But Nogg mentioned that Temnyy Kogot might have access to, might share the use of a healing machine to restore my sister's sight."

By this time Stormflight had figured out something was up and folded his wings off Low Sale to stride up beside the much shorter unicorn. "What's up?" was said to Grey while the eyes and ears were firmly on the newcomer.

Grey introduced them, turning to Stormy first. "You remember when Nuage first greeted the town leader, and asked where he'd put Desert Rose, and the pony we learned was Temnyy said very indirectly that Desert Rose was no longer with us?" He turned and pointed a hoof at the darker unicorn with the wild colored eyes. "This is what their leader had been looking like up until that point."

Stormflight gritted his teeth, ears trying to pin and Stormflight deliberately trying to unpin them. "Thrice cursed 'full transfer' nonsense from a dang pony who lost the dignity to die when he was shot, or burned."

Rose smiled sweetly, and softly added "Or poisoned." a gentle, accepting smile on the pony's face.

Grey stared at the flat, featureless ceiling, mentally counting to three. "Celestia, Luna ... who else is cursing the existence and use of soul magic?"

One of his long looks askance, but at least Stormy's ears stopped twisting as he replied "Ah guess Discord, if you need a big name fella to issue yer curses." Hmm, Celestia, Luna, and ... Discord?

Grey shook his head, retorting "You may as well throw in Grogar and Maneiac if you're going to invoke great evils to curse the work of ponies' hooves."

Rose softly interjected, perhaps hoping to quell an argument, or perhaps hoping to feel out the loyalties and strengths of the pair, saying "Well, there you go. Interstitial pipbucks are cursed by each of Discard, Grogar, and Maneaic – three great evils that might still exist if that knew what our leader has learned." Since Grey didn't know whether to trust this pony or not, he just put on a generic tight-lipped grin and maintained eye contact with Desert Rose. Stormflight didn't seem to like being contradicted with an agreement so he just clammed up and also looked the unicorn in the eyes. She didn't seem perturbed or distracted by this reaction. "Now, why do you ask about healing if you're well enough off to have bought some potions before you headed back with cargo as valuable as he must have impressed on you, was Nuage Cadeau?"

I'll have to trust her with something, then. "On that return trip, we were attacked by a trio of alicorn monsters. One of them used a fireball spell which burned my sister's

face completely off. But she was able to find by feel. Or?" He turned to Stormflight for clarification "How involved were you?"

Stormy rotated his ears in recollection, eyes moving to a corner of the room. "I decelerated her. Put a potion in her hooves I think."

Looking back to the finance pony, who may or may not know anything about what Nuage thought he'd heard uncle Temnyy talk about some super-healing mechanisms of the old world. Grey continued, "The healing potion restored most of the flesh but her eye sockets are empty."

Now the unicorn Desert Rose seated himself, and inhaled deeply, slowly. The pony held it a time before exhaling in a soft sigh. "No, or at least I haven't heard of it. But I can help, yes. There was a pony that lived here who was born blind. Temnyy agreed to build a mask that held visual sensors from old world arcanotech, and weave energizeable threads into the cloth that held the sensors in place." The pony raised a hoof, conspiratorially indicating how important this was. "The pony was of the Earth tribe. Parents might have been too I don't remember the story fully, and I only met her a couple times as a filly. So the parent would get a unicorn to 'recharge' the blue wires, and that would let the sightless filly see. Of course, none of the sensors were for the colors we can see but she grew up to build barding and knives for the guards here. That mask's blue lines where where we developed our ambassador blue, leader red rules." Here the unicorn laughed, covering his lips with a fetlock. "Well, I mean and the fact he would brutally rip apart anyone who impersonated him."

Grey raised a hoof to hold Rose's attention, then trotted the two steps over to Stormflight's pack where he fished out one of the super batteries. It didn't have a carrying strap by itself, but it didn't seem to have any palladium either so he was able to levitate it back to the head of finance who hopefully would have a notion of this battery's value.

Apparently it was high. The taller unicorn's eyebrows shot straight up when he read the writing on the label on the side. Finally able to look away at the two traders in front of him, the pony professed "There were only one hundred of these made, and not only do I know we've burned through fifty of them, I don't know where you might have gone to retrieve this one. It is ... intact?"

Thinking of the multi-color nightlight that was an aisle over from him flight harness, Grey Horn nodded solemnly. "They get pretty messy when they crack open." Which received one sharply raised eyebrow coupled with a sharp intake of breath.

Looking back down to appraise it's value again, Desert Rose said "I'll have someone come by within the hour to test it. Meanwhile I need to look for that vision mask." The pony started off, but looked back over his shoulder to offer "I won't see you again tonight, so goodnight and thank you for visiting." And then went back, sticking to the walls just the way he'd arrived.

It was late by this time. The fire river nearly a dozen stories below them was providing enough heat even though open windows simply overlooking the fire that it would never get bitterly cold, and since there was a full roof above everything here keeping the wind out it ended up being nearly as comfortable as sleeping at home. *Except there I have a bed that keeps me off the steel plates, where here I'm right on the stone floor.* But the crew hadn't brought any means of keeping any warmer aside from one blanket each, although Stormflight was next to his new pet who just fit under their blanket, so they could share body heat. They all fell asleep, despite the snoring earth pony couple.

Chapter 7

Sell It and They Will Buy.

Stormflight was awake first, it seemed. The sound of ponies walking by, the clanking of wares being packed up to set up in the designated bazaar woke Grey but Stormflight was already sitting upright, watching everypony do their thing. It looked to Grey to have been light for twenty minutes or more.

As Low Sale stretched, rolled onto her belly in preparation to stand upright, Stormy muttered to Grey "Still ain't used to hard surfaces. Clouds are kinda nice to sleep on, I guess." Then he used a fetlock to wipe sleepy dirt from his eyes and perhaps tried to look apologetic, having realized how the ground-bound might feel about having their beds maligned.

Low Sale flapped her wings a few times, then neatly raised herself by flight rather than press her hooves against the stone floor. Grey had already put his pack with the for-sale stuff on his back, when a griffon guard approached (It filtered through Grey's mind that here they expected you to say griffon-pony, but he had never seen evidence of hippogriffons, the hypothetical offspring of any hooved pony, and these clawed fliers of their own mixed heritage). The guard was wearing heavy cloth barding with minimal blue threads, but with him was an earth pony mare carrying various old-world clanky and jangly things.

Pastel orange coat, an orange mane and tail that would have been bright once, but was faded to gray now though the rest of her didn't seem that old. Her cutie mark was of a stopwatch, or at least a watch face that didn't seem too useful for telling time of day.

She pulled a couple long, skinny probes that had wires going back to one of the jangly bits with meters encased in glass. "Hello, I'm here to test the megaspark battery? That there, I presume?" She pointed a hoof to the one visible beneath his sleeping blanket he was using to cover up his flight harness, and was already walking towards it.

"No!" He quickly moved to intercept the mare's travel, adding "I need that one. But ... hmm." While Grey Horn was looking around and remembering Stormflight had them both, Stormflight was fishing one out of his bag. Grey tried to levitate towards himself but was too bleary eyed to focus, as it was heavy, and very dense. Sliding it over to the mare, he said "I'm keeping the other one as a spare because that one" He pointed a hoof at the one this mare had started toward "Is used and I don't know either how much bigger they are or how much power my" Grey faltered, not wanting to explain his flight harness because he didn't want to show her what to every normal pony looked like the fastenings for a gimp suit.

The mare hesitated, looking up with incredulity at the young unicorn. "You have ... **three** megaspark batteries?" Straightening herself up and setting the probes on the floor, she asked "Do you have the whole supply of them?"

Grey nodded, explaining "I suspect, but they're going to be hard to get to. Also as I said I have a use for them and I don't know if I can just use a regular spark battery. Which are also rare, I seem to have noticed."

She had a sheepish, pleasant smile, and tried to explain "These aren't just bigger spark batteries, dear. They're a mega-spell framework surrounding a normal arcanomechanical gem, very similar to a spark battery." The only megaspells Grey knew about, were the ones that had wiped out all civilization. At his look and confusing and dawning realization, she added "They're a million times stronger. If you survived finding them, they're retrievable."

Grey thought about the rainbow goo near the one broken battery. "One definitely has been leaking."

She pursed her lips, tapping a hoof on the opposite leg. "Hmm. Very many ghouls around it, then?" *No, there wasn't enough flesh and barely enough bone to pretend to be alive anymore.*

Aloud, he replied "Just one except he didn't survive long enough to become a ghoul; just a glow in the dark skeleton with some tattered remnants of his uniform." *Of course, it might have been a mare.* The pelvic bones would have revealed, but that was the part most covered by uniform, and Grey had been reluctant to pursue idle curiosity about items that could melt your flesh.

More tapping, now she was staring at the floor, sweeping left to right as if the entire trader's staging room was a giant dial caliper. "Probably still intact, then. Would depend on some important details." Now she looked up, made eye contact with Grey again. "Well, first things first. Let's prove we have here what we think we have here." She held the probes against the battery's contact points, then glanced furtively at her gauge which hadn't moved. She smacked it with a hoof, then looked again at the battery and reversed which hoof held which probe, and tried again. The gauge pegged so hard it swung forward on her back nearly a hoof's distance and shoved her back onto all four feet on the floor.

A satisfied grin on her face as she began putting her probes back into the hanging accouterments, she called over her shoulder "Grind?"

Which was the name of the guard, it seemed. He produced from a fold in his cloth barding, what at first glance looked like a tribal ritual's headdress, with eight round shiny objects, not gems but polished somethings, four on each side held in place by a braided combination of leather strips, glowing blue bands and burlap adjustment straps. The mare explained "You'll need to re-energize it about once a day. Any unicorn can do it it's not a spell, just cast light but without the lighting part, until you feel the spell snap back at you." Humming and Hawing, she looked around, then noticed Low Sale's training ball against Stormflight's chest. "Since pets don't have pets, I'm assuming you're a Dashite."

Stormy nodded and strode forward the half step to be beside Grey. The guard laid the headdress on Stormy's face, and Grey realized the curves in the middle were to more fully go around the eye socket and balance on the nose, then bend again and lay flat across the jawline and clip together well behind his chin. The guard tapped a claw at the square polish thing at Stormy's poll, just behind the ears. "You'll need to energize it here. With it in place it will bond to the wearer right away, so if your blind friend takes it off at night you may need to recharge it in the morning even if it was last evening you

'topped it up' so to speak." His voice was light and scratchy at the same time, but not thick or hard to understand.

Grey held the tip of his horn to the square, and having been fairly well trained to summon thaumaturgical energy with no end goal in mind because that's how his flight gear worked, he 'energized' the square, which immediately got a "whoa." from Stormflight, but Grey continued for perhaps thirty seconds before he was definitively cut off from energizing it any further.

Stepped back half a step to observe, Grey saw Stormflight was holding his eye perfectly still with regard to his skull, but slowly turning his head back and forth, eventually opening "That's weird." then closing his eyes, he repeated the motion, making eye contact with each of the three entities in front of him. Low Sale was politely waiting at the back of the crowd for the ponies to finish doing pony-things before talking again.

The orange mare tapped her chin and watched Stormflight's usage of the headdress. "We don't get many Dashites. I thought they stopped allowing that, in fact."

Still sweeping the room slowly, Stormflight blurted out with his eyes still closed "Whole mess o' raiders stormed us, shot everypony's wings up, I didn't want to be blamed for their deaths so I jes' ran." Before any present could question this alternative narrative, Stormy opened eyes and looked at Grey, saying "Should work fine for her." and then started trying to unclip the chin piece. Grey levitated it off his head and under his blanket with the flight harness.

The orange mare, who hadn't introduced herself, had already thrown the battery onto her back, balanced between a couple of boxes that seemed to be tied in place. "We'll have to speak another time about the place where you got this. I'm not sure what the appropriate price would be for salvage rights there, but you'll be able to finagle it, I'm sure." The guardponygriffon nodded, and they turned and went into one of the normally locked, private stairwells with the spare battery.

Turning to Stormflight, Grey tried to say something, but just yawned. "You sleep pretty heavy, don't you?" asked Stormflight. Of course, just at that moment Low Sale had to stuff her muzzle under a wing to hide her rather loud yawn, followed by some lip-smacking as she straightened back out. Grey was very glad that long look askance was not aimed at him this time.

Grey shrugged at Stormflight and said "You can hang out here or you can come watch me try to make caps. Once we've got something to work with we can buy brunch there should be food vendors if it's like last time." When he strode off to the area open to the sky for vendors to set up kiosks, he heard and saw the pegasi striding after him.

There were no tables. Presumably the locals who sold here all the time knew that, and would bring their own, but Grey was not the only one to make such a mistake as the MEW rifle vendor just laid his wares on top of the lockable cases. Grey looked around and tried to guess where the traffic would come from, as there were several pathways from lower levels, or of course griffons could drop straight down if they saw this place. *Which was unlikely since there's an invisibility spell on the edges; can only see it if you're immediately above.*

Coming up from one stairwells that went to the farmers and 'never-do-wells' of third, was a zebra. A stallion by Grey's guess, and tagging along behind him was a young foal with faded stripes and a pastel yellowish-orange backdrop behind the blue-tinted stripes. He glanced briefly at each vendor and their fancy tables and pursed lips, and made almost a straight line for Grey Horn. Stormflight Trees seemed not to notice, or at least wasn't looking that way when he stood up and surreptitiously re-positioned himself between the oncoming stallion and his pet mare. Grey remembered the awkward discussion the last time they'd all been in this town, at a hotel of sorts where Stormy said he was raised to believe all surviving zebras would pursue pegasus mares to make unwanted foals for the resulting tax fraud it would facilitate. Grey internally sighed, and tried to look neutral, which apparently even the deliberate non-eye-contact was more inviting than any other vendor.

"Shopping on such a fine day! How much, the water, and how long your stay?" The smile seemed genuine, the attitude normal. He seemed not to notice the two local food vendors glaring at him just out of sight.

But the rhymes caught him a bit off guard. Blinking a bit, he tried to remember what water even cost here. "Twelve caps. If I set up a regular run I'll have some cooked goods involving fresh vegetables but once the water is sold I'll probably look for an industrial vendor for the turpentine and go home."

The mention of turpentine, which had a hastily scribbled note in front of the cans

labeling them as such, suddenly drew the stallions attention for a brief moment. "So many caps and I have such a small sum! Will you trade for ammo if it matches your gun?"

Even Stormy had to look over at that comment. "Ah only have a few reloads for the forty four." he tried to hiss inaudibly. Low Sale was taking cues from her owner and sitting pretty looking like no pony was around. Stormy stiffly straightened his neck and likewise stopped looking like he knew there was a customer.

The filly had heard, however. "That's all the way at the bottom, daddy!" and she jumped up and threw her front half into the zebra stallion's pack. Now it was the zebra's stallion turn to stand stoically and pretend no one else was around.

Amused, Grey couldn't help but inform the assistant "My revolver uses .32acp, so if you have moon clips or that caliber, I'd consider it too." From the bag came a muffled acknowledgment and shortly she was pulling mouthfuls of live ammo and standing them up next to Grey's rows of water bottles.

Grey considered the ammunition, and it's known scarcity, to what he'd heard about clean, fresh water. He arranged one small bottle next to two of his smaller pieces of ammo, and a medium sized bottle next to a two .44 and four .32s. Then six .32s next to another, and four .44s next to another, pointing them out as not really fair but neither party had smaller change to make up the difference with, which garnered a very satisfied sounding "I agree to this assessed price; dealing with you has been nice." At which point he grabbed each water bottle and tossed them into his bag except for the small one. That bottle he grabbed and cracked open on the spot, placing it in the hooves of his young filly.

Halfway through it, she stopped and looked up at her father and commented "It doesn't taste like chewing on iron foil. It's kinda weird really."

The father took a sip and handed it back, looking a little sad about it. "That's what water is supposed to taste like honey. That's why this stuff is so expensive." Tossing her forelock he added "And why we're buying you special drinking water."

Foreign cultures seem to interest Grey, so despite the pegasi's discomfort he added, figuring it was pretty obvious the mother was a normal pony, he blurted out, trying to

check his volume so no one be sure what he'd said, "Why didn't you send the mother? Wouldn't she get less push-back?"

A wry grin and a defeated look met his question with "Father and foal should have matching stripes normally; but pony and half-breed are often refused formally."

"And you only rhyme when talking to the first three pony tribes."

It was the filly, vibrant and full of life, and also answers, who replied. "They call the guards and say he's behaving 'strangely' when he just talks. Don't worry mister he only does that up here even the other farmers don't have to figure his rhymes out."

The zebra stallion mocked surprise, eyes wide and pointing at the filly to reply "So many words of wisdom you have! Surely for every ill your words are the salve!" Which was met on her part by giggling and a hug. The zebra rolled his eyes and waved good bye to the water vendor, who was busy trying to bite his tongue and not burst out laughing.

Once the pair was definitely out of earshot, Grey leaned over and conspiratorially whispered "Y'all know that was one of those Zebrican, right?" Grey looked over at Low Sale, who had a sort of glued on neutral expression. Whatever she felt, she wouldn't be comfortable chiming in.

So Grey looked back at the Dashite and replied in as straight laced a voice as he could manage, "No?. I didn't notice. It's not like I checked ID, but you figured he was born in Zebrica, or just recently immigrated to Equestria?"

Stormflight blinked slowly, once. "Ya know that cloud cover you keep going on about? It's there because of a certain war." Straightening back out like everything was normal again and he was just the bodyguard, he finished with "A war with zebras."

"That was a long time ago, Stormflight. Do you know that sky rats are looked down on too? Because unlike that fine gentlecolt, your kind only come down here when they want to kill something, or when they're stolen by incredibly focused magic fueled foal-napping excursions." Grey straightened, himself. With no further interest right now in his reduced inventory, he added "I had to discuss with myself whether sky rats were worth saving, you know. The zebra mare went after me, and you had to take on the griffon who ripped out your throat and I almost didn't save you because nopony cares about sky rats."

Low Sale actually winced, lowering her head with pinned ears at 'no pony cares' even though she hadn't seemed to react so much to 'magic fueled foal napping' Also, so far he hadn't gathered any caps so buying lunch would be hard. But just at that point one of the normally locked doors, almost behind Grey, unlocked and opened, with a brilliant purple stallion and a pastel blue unicorn mare hurrying out and locking the door. They, too, made a fairly straight line to Grey's region, having to carefully step around Low Sale to face Grey. The mare looked over at Low Sale's training ball, then up to the pegasus stallion's face but only briefly.

"Hello, welcome what can I interest you in? Water over here," Grey levitated a small bottle, then pointed a hoof at the other end of his 'stall' finishing with "turpentine over th..."

The mare interrupted with "Yes the turpentine. How much for all of it?"

He had fifteen cans, plus some glass bottles. Fourteen caps each? Counting the glass bottles two to a 'can' that would be about "Two hundred sixty caps." Which didn't have a volume discount at all, but she sounded pretty interested, too, and he hadn't marked it up over that.

She narrowed her eyes and was most of the way through saying "How about two hundred even?" Just as the purple stallion said 'Outrageous! One sixty would be too much.'

Grey decided to close the sale quickly rather than spend time haggling for an extra ten caps. Pointing at the unicorn, he said to the stallion "She already offered two hundred, so I think you've been outbid." At his disapproving scowl he looked back to the unicorn mare who was glaring while squinting. "I'll accept your offer, I guess. But if you want to buy it on the regular, you'll need to scrounge up a better supply of caps for it."

Without moving a muscle, she levitated the stallions bags open, and counted out a stack of two hundred caps, setting them in front of Grey in stacks of ten, and as they counted themselves in front of him, the cans levitated back into his bag. They apparently didn't know the five glass bottles were turpentine too, but the stallion objected to them being in his bag. "They'll shatter from the stairs' jostling by the time I get down there." So harrumphing and dismissively waving the stallion away, she strode off levitating the bottles of turpentine herself, leaving him to jostle the cans greatly trying to keep up.

Grey waved a pleasant goodbye to the couple and waved Grey over. Counting out twenty caps into his flimsy saddlebags, he told Stormy to get himself and his change a meal somewhere. *Of course, if they're that wigged out about a friendly zebra, a talking pegasus might not go over much better.*

Grey didn't get a chance to see how it went however, as another earth pony mare, a stark, brilliant lemon yellow with pastel blue mane & tail, was making her way towards him. She wasn't striding confidently like he was the only vendor on the floor, but neither was she pretending to look at other vendor's wares either. When she was finally within speaking range if she had spoken up, of Grey she stopped. She stared ahead, to the wall to Grey's right for a few seconds and he considered calling out to her first but she turned, gulped down her fears, and took half a stride toward Grey. "Hello I was told by Brilliant Stripes than you have somehow uncontaminated our water?"

Seems a simple enough misunderstanding. Bit of an over reaction over it, but... "No ma'am we still have a working water talisman. Cracked and under-performing but you do what you can. Twelve caps for the medium bottles, fourteen for either of the big bottles and ten for the little ones." The big two were half again the volume of the most common bottle he was selling, and truthfully the bottle was, for him, three quarters of the cost. But to be fair the small ones were exactly half the size of his more common bottle so the inequality of price worked out. *I'll have to set up a system of buying back the empties, especially if I'm the only water seller in this desert. Wait, Stripes, the pony?* "You know the filly has a father, who also speaks Ponish."

Blushing deeply but not making eye contact, she pulled out a small hoof-towel and laid it out and began pulling vegetables and setting them down. Two very large, bright red tomatoes, eight tiny tomatoes, a sizable bundle of celery, one pepper of every color it seemed, for a total of six bell peppers plus long, skinny probably too-hot-to-eat peppers and three rutabagas, Grey was guessing. Having made an end of the finished product, she looked up and said "I have seeds, too." And then began laying out very small bags, six in total. No idea what they were of course as he wouldn't personally know wheat from carrot at the seed stage of things.

It was a nice arrangement, and Grey was just about to agree when something occurred to him. "So you can get enough water for tomatoes but not...no, wait." And he cast his extra thin shield out, and let it sweep slowly over the towel and it's contents.

His shield warbled and wavered a bit, but not wildly. Even the seeds were still a little bit hazardous. Also, technically there wasn't anything that he'd held back for the return trip, and there was a third pony to consider now. So he hemm'd and rubbed his chin, considering again the size of the load, and it did include seeds, which would work very well at home as his village still had dedicated and skilled farmers. So he laid a hoof on one of the tall bottles, and said "Okay I'm going to hold back this one, and you can have the rest, for what you're showing here."

She nodded and reach again into her now very skinny, flat saddle bags, and pulled out fourteen bottle caps. "I'll take it too, please." Just as Grey was inhaling to laugh at his own favorable misfortune, the mare mistook his reluctance, and pulled a fifteenth cap out, at which point he gracefully levitated the purchase price for the last of his group's water and began levitating all the produce carefully as she stuffed every bottle of water until her bags were overflowing with containers. They bid each other good day one last time and off she went, and he looked around for the pegasi he knew as he headed off to his hopefully untouched belongings.

There were three pegasi in the bazaar, carrying packages to and fro, all with nicked ears, bald patches on their coats, but none of them were familiar to him. He had made it back to his pile of stuff – just his flight harness and seeing eye headdress, as Stormflight had the rest stuffed into his pack. Stormy and Low Sale were trotting towards him, all hooves on the ground and making a solid clip-clop sound on the stone, and the poor pet mare looking wide eyed and terrified.

"Congratulations kid, you sold out in an hour. I'm thinking we should go now." said the stallion, which was punctuated by vigorous head nodding by the mare.

This town enforces its laws with capitol punishment only. We should get out while the getting's good. So Grey distributed the vegetables carefully between his saddle bags, Stormflight's, and even Low Sale who had somewhere acquired her own flight dress or something, with integrated bags. *Or bags with integrated cutie mark covers.* The saddle bags had a thin cloth extension, all undyed and an off-putting off-white that reached just past the base of her tail and down the sides enough to cover her flank, with a strap that secured just below the hocks to keep it flat against her hide. "What'd you do?"

Low Sale offered a quiet, firm, fast "Not here please" still looking like dinner plates

Chapter 8

Longest Journey Might Not Need Any Hoofsteps

(That Is, If You Fly the Whole Way)

Grey was quickly stuffing everything somewhere and turning to walk out, when Desert Rose stood in the middle of their path, looking slightly upset and very unsure about standing so far away from a wally. Grey had half a mind to just keep walking as if he didn't see him, her, whatever but when she looked up at Grey the unicorn stallion swallowed and said "Have you decided on their offer, then?"

"No decision has been reached." Grey blurted out, simultaneously hoping it wouldn't make these last few steps harder. *Of course if I slap my converter closed we can all float out straight up above the fire.* Until Grey remembered most all of their guards were griffons, who could also fly.

Sounding like he wished could escalate to physical violence, Stormflight spat out "Not fer lack o' trying. Was offered every mare's trainin' ball in this and three other towns."

Grey blinked. *Those would have to first, be stolen. Pretty sure Temnyy would feel that was inappropriate, even if pegasi being soulless pets squeaks by him.* Behind him he heard Low Sale whimper, just a little bit, and the other sound was probably Stormy grinding his teeth.

Desert Rose just looked at the three of them solemnly, then nodded. "Thank you. I guess the best way forward is to keep your battery stash to yourself. That means not stopping there on your way home as some of the guards are purchasable, and they claim to be able to see the ground in great detail even a few hooves into the cloud curtain."

Grey wasn't specifically planning on stopping there anyway, but if these batteries were that important he'd have to watch his back. *Of course we repurposed our metal plating on protecting from burrowing insects instead of flying menaces.* A sensible decision at the time, but currently a little more worisome. Putting on his best game face Grey responded "I plan on returning to this and other towns regularly anyway so when the local politics settles down I can bring a few more batteries then."

The finance pony nodded, and mumbled almost inaudibly "Do be careful. Those are megaspells, even if they're not bombs." and turned and went down a stairwell.

Climbing back into the desert, and with at least a few steps between the invisibility border and their party, Grey asked about food supplies. "Th' vegetables, of course. Don't want to take too long gettin' those back."

Low Sale made a point of standing to Stormy's side and facing him, reminding him perhaps more loudly than was needed "You also bought extra supplies for me that I wasn't expecting so can take a few extra days if you want." Which garnered a long-suffering sigh from Stormy but it inspired Grey Horn, who clamped his converter over his horn, and hovered a little bit, and looked out at what around here was a trackless waste.

"Alright, fresh tomatoes that need to be canned, and the camera headdress for Pear. Then we need to go somewhere else to throw off our pursuers." Grey tried to burst off into the sky like he'd seen pegasi do in historical depictions of pre-war law enforcement employed bird horses. He wasn't sure he was actually all that fast, but he still got vertigo when the ground went from two hooves below him to three hundred in just a few seconds.

When Grey dared glancing back (*It's not like there's anything up here to run into; I could fly backwards, probably, and be okay.*) he saw both pegasi were avidly using their wings to keep up, though neither looked pressured or surprised or even intense. *But is this an all-day pace or will I burn out all of a sudden?* But it made him feel good to feel like he was hurrying.

Grey tried to keep an eye on the cloud cover, and did see three teams of armored Enclave ponies drop out of the sky, corkscrew into some seemingly random direction, and fly off thataway until they were too small to make out. None seemed to have taken notice of these three unarmored ponies who were moving quickly but staying about three hundred hooves or less above ground. There was a raiding party of four scarred, skinny earth ponies that unpacked rifles to take aim at them but Grey never heard a shot fired, and no one dropped suddenly from the ground so maybe they decided to save their ammunition.

But he'd sold all his water, even the last bottle he was going to save for the return trip and even though his legs weren't moving, the constant energy outflow from his horn was starting to make him sweat. In this wind it would make him cold too. After what he guessed to be a quarter day, maybe four hours, he called behind him that he wanted to land. Dropping half way to the ground and letting a fifth of his groundspeed drop off, he looked around for anything resembling a cave, a building, and he saw a dark spot surrounded by a depression in the sand. Pointing at it, he circled around since he hadn't understood what he was seeing until he went past it, and managed an almost normal landing by dropping down.

"A much better landing, Grey. Usually ya coast in like a hot air ballon or zeppelin with no fans." Grey wasn't sure if Stormflight meant that with a side of sarcasm, or was trying to be encouraging of dropping straight out of the sky like a thaumaturgically suspended rock. Low Sale of course had almost no experience flying with Grey and didn't want to get between her owner and his friend regardless of what the pegasus Low Sale might have thought of this. *That's another thing that would have a stock response trained into her wouldn't it?*

Walking up to the cave, for it was a natural hole not pony-made, Grey stowed the converter and levitated out his semiautomatic pistol. "Storm, Low Sale, any idea what kind of thing makes burrows like this?" If it was too big and fast, this would be too dangerous. But if it was here because the occupant woke up, then left, it might be its own form of danger in that it would collapse about the time they realized it was an empty nest.

Stormflight gave a non-verbal headshake, and Low Sale almost called herself a pony with a job, saying "I remember how to keep supply lines populated with movies supplies.

And not anything at all about supplying things on the ground with our populace."

Grey was up to the edge now, horn light at full illumination in broad daylight hoping to expose something about what they were about to go into. Stormy gave the mare's words some consideration and said "Y'know if quarrey eels live here.."

"In this soft sand? Not their style is it?" Of course Grey didn't actually know that much about the giant eels but it seemed not their sort of place. This weren't ants either, as they pushed out debris from their tunnel, leading to a stylistic mound around each opening. Stepping now into the slop enough to see some of the dark edges, he cast his thin shield, showing almost no radiation messing with the color of his magic. "It's wet though. You smell that fetid air?"

Low Sale by this point was almost hyperventilating, and leaning on Stormy's left shoulder, staring hard into the darkness. Stormflight finally noticed, and asked "Are ya claustrophobic? Cain't stand small enclosed places?"

She finally broke eye contact from the darkness to look at Stormy, and tried to unclench her jaw so she could answer. "It's the dark, actually. I've never seen any place that's as dark as the ground at night, and that looks a lot darker." One last look into the gaping maw in the earth and she looked pleadingly back to her permissions giver.

Stormflight seemed unsure how to handle it, so Grey suggested "She doesn't have a weapon anyway. How do you feel about leaving here out here? She can run in and find us if a flock of catbirds descend from heaven guns blazing."

Stormflight looked briefly at the cloud cover and said to the mare "If ya'll could stay outta sight of the sky? That'd be enough for me." Which got an enthusiastic nodding reply. When the trio was far enough into the shadows that she wouldn't stand out too much, and by that point was not visible directly above anyway, Low Sale stopped and waited with her tail to the earth and her left shoulder firmly holding the compressed soil up. Trio a pair, the boys continued down.

The sand was rapidly giving way to a hard clay, and the portion under their hooves was damp and slippery, though not enough to put them at risk of failing to run away. *Still, Grey kept his wings in extended form in case he needed to fly quickly. That will lose me this pistol, of course.* Stormy had his revolver in his mouth already, and Grey considered

adjusting his illumination spell. At full power, the likelihood something could sneak up was dependant on how fast it was, and where it came from since his illumination didn't let him see below ground or around corners, but critters could easily detect him by his light, so unnatural to this place. *So unnatural that even just enough light to not trip over a rock will get us noticed long before we see them get up and run for us.* So he left his light at full illumination.

The tunnel turned left, and the clay dried out. It curved back around to the right, so far that it was going to the right from their original descent they were more than a right angle to the right from their first flight down. The path slowly flattened, which was good as the moisture was back. Grey had never had the opportunity to experience a large clump of decaying vegetation, so he didn't quite understand the smell that now was so thick it was a feel that added itself to the hot, humid wetness he was swimming through. *Good choice to find water, but what trouble comes with it?*

Another left turn, and their hooves were sinking in now. Stormflight opted to hover instead of walk, and as the roof was high enough to not risk a clipped wingbeat, he didn't begrudge him that. But Grey was a unicorn, and valued his magic defenses before his newfound flight. Still, they walked on slowly until a sudden shimmering light flashed in front of them. Terrified for that instance, Grey dropped his light. In the darkness nothing shone, and there were no sounds, and no further flashes.

Bringing his horn light up more slowly, he now saw it was a reflection. He couldn't quite make out why the reflection from his light was so sparkly and refracted until Stormflight said "Lake."

Well, you wanted water. Looking left and right, and seeing no side tunnels, and no prints in the watery mud, he strode forward cautiously to the edge. Casting his detection shield he found it was ... not clean water, but better than most sources out here. Maybe we should try digging a well back home. Still untrusting of his fortune, Grey put his pistol away and fished out two empty canteens, consumed on the way in.

He filled them, and tasted it. Brackish, greasy, something was in this water that he should teach himself to filter out, if he came back here often. Fishing through his pack for any empty, watertight containers, he grabbed some random bottles he'd forgotten he had, and filled those too.

Just as he'd sealed them and was fitting them back into his pack, two orbs popped up out of the middle of the lake. Grey hadn't considered how huge this body of water was, but the green orbs were fifteen hooves apart, and at least fifty hooves away, maybe sixty. And a nictating membrane sluiced across the orbs at that moment.

Something erupted from the water, blocking out all sight of the lake with its amorphous, undulating mass that suddenly left Grey deaf as Stormy's revolver went off. As the bullet tore through the ... flesh, the whole of the creature, nearly a third the size of the lake, rolled back and exposed a bulbous tummy now nearly reaching to the ceiling.

Six more orbs, smaller distances from each pair, erupted from the surface and blinked at him from the very back of the lake.

Grey took the split second to stow his pistol as he slapped the converter down. In his haste not to mention the sudden, absolute darkness, he rocketed to the ceiling and bashed himself against the cave wall, his horn converter and all embedded in the mud. Disoriented he fell, the converter staying in place but yanking on his neck, which caused enough pain he couldn't concentrate until after his hooves sank into the mud, the waves from the fallen monster soaking his hind halfway up his ribcage. Just as he managed a more controlled burst to pull his legs free *And thankfully not of my sides, just the mud* he would later opine about that moment in the story, The glowing toad from the farthest left and back leapt in one jump to a distance maybe fifteen hooves away, surely within sticky tongue range, the lake's water splashed almost far enough knock the pair out of the air again.

But grey was airborne and he started by backing up, then neatly slid around to face back up the way they'd come. Don't hit the wall again his bruised back and sprained withers plead of him and he promised back. The glow was rapidly diminishing as the toad wasn't following, and there wouldn't be any more light until after he'd navigated a few important, but invisible turns.

Making a bit of a wild guess about his speed and the distances, he slid to his left and banked hard, sticking his hooves into the air. It was too soon, and he had started to fall and roll back down but still all four hooves landed painfully on the wall, a cascade of sand pelting his right side, a few grains landing in his eye. *How sharp was that corner?* Grey

tried to think through terror both of being eaten like a defenseless fly and of causing his own burial through flight from the former terror.

The tunnel wasn't exactly straight, as the flight rod, which stuck out the most of any part of him, four times started to drag on the wall, threatening to slam Grey into something. But after what seemed the most interminable six or seven seconds he'd ever remembered, he realized he could see the wall ahead. *Last turn, daylight visible from there!* Grey unconsciously sped up, increasing his chances as an inexperienced flier, to misjudge the last turn. But again, he banked and dropped his right shoulder, this time landing squarely in the muddy walls with all four hooves. This part of the tunnel was secure, and there were no threats of a collapse.

Coming up this direction, it seemed to Grey that Low Sale had slid down further into the tunnel, and now she was facing into the darkness, watching for their return. Having no idea where Stormflight was but trusting he would be able to stay aloft, at least, he shouted to the mare "Get going we're not staying here" And hoped she wouldn't feel obligated to stay and wait for her owner. Later, Grey would remember that had Stormflight died, Low Sale would be an incoherent mess, desperate to climb into the hole for her one ticket to some kind of salvation – finding the training ball and somepony to give it to, or death's release from the former unicorn's terrible magic. That she simply lifted herself and followed close but in Grey's blind spot behind him should have told him something about their flight out of the depths.

Letting his terror at the unthinkable take visceral form, he poured himself into flight. Still only a hundred hooves above the ground and his landmarks to find his home not visible yet, he was going as fast as he ever had, and the wind made his scratched eye hurt something fierce. Blinking against it but not slowing down, he finally let himself look back, to see if Stormflight made it out with him.

Revolver in his mouth, nose less than one hoof behind him, was Stormflight the pegasus, sweat still dripping off his face, whites of his eyes still showing. Low Sale was working hard to keep up, and in the distance I didn't mean for that to take them, but I'll take the blessing in disguise anyway. were four darkly feathered griffons dropping, doing their corkscrew turns that natural fliers took for granted, and disappearing down the tunnel.

Hoping to lose them when they realized nothing but water and amphibians were down there and came bursting out at the same speed he'd used, Grey made a sudden right turn, and dropped next to a sand ridge, hoping to stay out of sight. The existing wind had suspended grains of sand this high, and while it wasn't normally blowing too hard Grey's own speed meant he was slamming into a veritable sandstorm and it freaked him out all the more.

When the ridge ended he eased up a little, so the sand wasn't blowing in his face or pelting his hide anymore, and he thought about places to hide. Even at these speeds the crevasse was an hour's flight away, and few buildings or ground features were common until they crossed to Grey's side of the underground fire-river. Could they keep this speed up that long? Grey pointed at the ground in general, and started slowing down. As he did so, he realized how much his horn hurt. Looking to his right, there was a low ridge, more of a natural sand dune that ran their way but wouldn't cover them unless they were walking. *Fine by me, I think.* Making eye contact with the other travellers he pointed at the low spot in the desert, and aimed for it.

Landing, he first checked for things that would kill him, and found none, so he ripped the converter off his horn dropped to his belly, panting. Stormy fished out one of the bottles and held it away from himself a bit. "I ain't normally given to drinkin' bath-water." Grey saw him lower the water bottle a bit to look at Grey and add "Y'all know some toads are poisonous, right?"

When Grey had caught his breath, he turned his head to look at the pegasus stallion. "You'd taste it though, right? Those poisons were designed to make them taste unpalatable. So if you can't taste anything, it won't hurt you." Grey could see poor Low Sale was dripping now, with sweat. She'd need a fair portion of the precious water just to keep her from getting sick, and then if they camped outside tonight she'd get shivery in the desert cold. Laying his head back down on his forelegs he advised "Stormy give your pet some of that water she hasn't had to fly for her life like that in forever."

With his eyes closed he didn't see her open, or take a sip, but he heard when she asked "This ... was worth risking your life for?"

He stood back up, and turned around, explaining, *probably to both of them come to think of it* "The talisman makes purer water but it's limited. With you coming home too

it'll be twenty eight, thirty ounces a day at most per pony." *But have we expended more than we collected with this foals venture?* Making eye contact with the pet, and then with her owner, Grey continued "And some day it will break, and wells and oases will be our only source. Best to get used to it now."

Speaking of things to get used to An armored pegasus, alone, was descending rapidly, and Grey was going to call out a warning, but Stormflight had already seen it, and was prepared to meet the princesses, given his stature of slitted eyes, a turned head, and no weapons drawn. The black menace made a loud thump, spreading sand everywhere, as it hit. Low Sale was wide eyed with surprise but not fear or shock, and Grey felt confident neither of his pistols would penetrate that pre-war armor. Standing upright now, the lone soldier looked between the two winged ponies, and ripped his helmet off and was about to hover a few hooves up to point accusitorially at Stormflight Trees when he looked over his shoulder, at the low dune keeping him from sight of the toad's cave, and landed again, dropping his helmet to point at Stormflight, anger and betrayal wrinkling his nose.

It was Stormflight who spoke first. "Cloud Drop, right? Clouded Bolt's nephew?" Cloud Drop's mouth was frozen, teeth bared for a biting retort. During the angry pause, Stormy sullenly introduced the no-longer-pony standing a few hooves to his right, saying "This is Low Sale, you'd have seen her come and go by now."

Cloud Drop closed his mouth long enough to look at her, who was standing innocently motionless and silent, watching the new comer with idle curiosity and nothing more than that visible in her body language. Cloud Drop was about to open up on Stormflight, front right ready to point vehemently again, when he did a doubletake and stared again at Low Sale, who still didn't respond. Now fear governed Cloud Drop's face, and he took a few steps back.

Grey Horn mentally grunted, and piped up quickly and a little angrily saying "If you're thinking she's infected, she's not. The 'infected' is just one pony, and that pony isn't here though he's injured Low Sale irrevocably, yes." Cloud Drop didn't look at Grey, just ping-pong'd back and forth between the pegasi a few times.

Twisting his head sideways in confusion, Clouded Drop snaked his head out and sort of shouted in a whisper at Stormflight "You were reported dead. What, pray tell happed

mere days after your wedding night would cause you CLAIM you were dead and refuse to come back? No Enclave armor or weapons you're trundling around on the ground with the dregs of equinity so you can have a quick fling with the supply agent who had a dangerously close call with the infected that start calling themselves the dalea downs, though thank the princesses she's alright"

Stormy raised an eyebrow, didn't say anything more. Low Sale managed to overcome her programming long enough to assert "I'm not alright." but maintained her look of idle curiosity.

Grey again tried to explain. "Not down-hairs or an undercoat. His name before the bombs dropped was Diamond Spark Point. The name he gives the Enclave is the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ. But the caveponies knew of a time he tore apart a self-righteous clan of unicorns. He told them his title was the Quisatz Haderach, the ultimate unicorn pony." Grey sat down, and eyes closed, reviewed the few tales he'd heard. It wasn't much more than he'd said aloud, but some of the unicorns, it was said, tried to talk the unkillable unicorn down, using his pre-war name having known him then. "The stories didn't say what they meant when they called him unkillable, but now that I've met him I've put it together." Opening his eyes he looked to the interloper, who still wasn't looking at the pony that was speaking but at his uncle's squadmate.

Cloud Drop finally spoke, steam nearly coming from his ears by the look on his face and the set of his ears. "I still don't know that I shouldn't report you as infected. What is this thing even talking about?"

Stormflight took a breath, and said "This pony saved my life when there was no more room in the clouds for me."

"You declared yourself a Dashite?"

"Nah" Stormy replied calmly. "Just dead. There weren't no wedding. I jus' weren't on the pill since I didn't have no marefriends." Here Stormflight indicated Grey with a forehoof, and added "This here is Grey Horn, and I've met his sister Pear Rump. Fine folk, just strained for resources like we are up there."

Finally Cloud Drop made eye contact with Grey, and through gritted teeth asked "You're the CO here? Somehow you're in charge of two educated, healthy pegasus ponies?"

Grey twisted his ears in greeting, offered the newcomer a smile. "Just lived down here longer. Teaches me things like, that you didn't come here from above that cloud curtain of yours just to find a corpse and berate him for breathing. How can we help you today, fine sir?"

But instead of offering any reply to that, he looked angrily, though now somewhat spent from his tirade a moment ago, at Low Sale, spitting out "What's your angle? What am I to make of you travelling with an undeclared Dashite who supposedly already died?"

Here she did lose her cool, Low Sale's ears trembling, her eyes darting around for something safe to look at. "I was forced to the ground by the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ. He was going to cut my legs off and bind my wings before tossing me off the curtain's hole." Finally finding something safe to look at, on the inside of her eyelids, she was almost hyperventilating when she finished with "I should have made him actually do it."

"Some sort of soul magic. Not like anything I've read about, but I'll freely admit my knowledge of the war itself is lacking." Grey had pieced together now how the unkillable once-unicorn kept switching bodies, but he wasn't sure if that explained directly, how that pony damaged other ponies like Low Sale. Looking up at Cloud Drop's combined disgust and confusion, Grey pointed at Stormy, saying "Her soul was torn out and stuffed into a memory orb with some pain inducing spells. Whoever has that shard of her soul can order her around."

With a lackadaisical pinning of his ears, Stormy added "...Or kill her."

Cloud Drop was back to ping-ponging, and Grey still didn't know what he was actually here for. "So, that's what life down here is like. What's up with you? Pardon me for not wanting to stay here too long I'm a little worried about a certain band of griffons that might survive the trap we accidentally set for them."

Stormflight quickly scanned the skies, all around and Low Sale retreated into her idle curiosity face. Cloud Drop had to, again, look Grey in the eye and it took several attempts at working his jaw before he could speak to the unicorn. "Yes, about that. Intelligence collected says they're planning some sort of move against the clouds. I won't get into our history with them but what do you believe they were after? You said that cave was a trap; what evidence to you have that it wasn't simply a drop transfer of goods?"

Stormflight actually chuckled, and seated himself, asking the younger soldier "Do y'all believe I'd turn on mah home so quick?" But after looking again at Cloud Drop he asked "You mean the Bladed Wing gang? Ah thought we decimated 'em right proper the last time they raided our homes."

Cloud Drop begrudgingly nodded imperceptibly, answering the elder stallion with "Yes and what's left has changed their name to the Claw Gang. They've teamed up with some political uncertainty down here hoping to steal materiel during the coming breakup but we don't know much more because we can't find the town."

Here Low Sale gasped, then realizing she'd drawn attention to herself looked at the sand between everpony's hooves. Stormy was caught a bit off guard by her reaction and was busy watching her when Grey explained "There's a strong invisibility spell, and the town goes straight down into the ground. Also," He stood up and turned sideways to show the Enclave soldier the battery, attached to his flight straps. "Do you know anything about this type of battery? They're apparently valuable."

Cloud Drop looked intently at the battery for a few seconds, then shook his head. "No. Large spark battery, that's all I see."

Straightening and sitting down again he explained to the soldier, who couldn't possibly much more than a year older than himself, "I've been told this is actually a megaspell framework with a spark battery shoved into it. Only a hundred made pre-war, the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ burned through fifty probably building that weird tower town, and they're all scrambling for the chance to find my stash."

"Too bad they couldn't offer to get my cutie mark back, I mighta let 'em have it to actually have a wedding with Noon Treetops."

Cloud Drop looked long and hard at Stormflight Trees, before suggesting "They might make you choose between staying dead, and aborting the foal."

Stormy let his eyes roam across the cloud curtain before nodding. Taking a steady-breath he looked down at Drop's hooves, and replied "Ah guess Ah already made that choice, didn't I?"

With Drop's eyes still aimed at Stormy's nose, his own nose pointed now at Grey and he asked "So what was actually in that cave?"

Low Sale started shaking, and had to squirm a bit to stay quiet, although she did mutter "A lot of dark."

Grey levitated out one of the bottles, explaining "Drinkable water." Which only got a raised eyebrow from Drop until he added "And mutated frogs that could eat you as soon as blink. If we're all lucky, the Claw Gang has been decimated yet again. Though that won't keep Temnyy's opposition in his town from vying for some way to oust him and his weird non-laws ways."

Cloud Drop had his answers, and was putting his helmet back on. "I have no idea how you'll manage Stormflight Trees. I hope you can at least die with honor instead of simply starving in a forgotten hole."

"Tell Noon Treetops I miss her." A tear actually fell from Stormy's face as he added "If you get a chance?"

"You know I can't promise that." And so saying, the Enclave and his black armor shot into the sky, straight up at first and slowly spiraling out as he climbed, a circle easily a hundred hooves across as he disappeared scant seconds after his hooves last touched the solid earth.

Grey had already slapped his converter back into place and was hovering. "Well." After levitating the bottle, it felt weird to not have magic available. But every flight he took made the process of being a pseudo pegasus a little more natural. He rotated around to face the direction of their town. *My town; theirs too unless they wanted to move out. We aren't at all like their home.* "I suggest we get going, if we've rested enough?"

Low Sale looked to her owner, who was unfurling his wings, so at a somewhat more sustainable pace, they proceeded. Grey took a few brief looks back, but didn't see the griffons following them. That could mean a few things, and he daren't assume anything good of it.

But not only were there no sign of the griffons the rest of the way, there were no further life threatening situations at all, now that the whole party could fly above the venus flytrap's spitting range which seemed to be capped about ninety hooves above them. *Quite the spitting plant, actually.* But in addition to taking a minute or so to re-fill whatever propellant was in use, not all plants even noticed them. *Generally rely on hooffalls, I suspect. No hooves on the ground, no reason to think they can spread right now.*

Chapter 9

Return of the Blind Sniper

Getting into town with yet another pony could prove difficult, of course. Since there was a newcomer Grey argued they should land outside the gate, and walk in. Stormy thought that sounded a bit excessive, claiming landing inside by the guards should prove adequate. Low Sale thought she didn't count as a new pony, but accepted that no pony that saw her would understand she was missing most of her soul.

As it turned out, she was welcomed despite being yet another mare, and several who said hello assumed she was the long lost marefriend that got Stormflight kicked out. "Soon t' have flyin' foals abound, neigh?" And Stormy didn't take the time to give a fuller explanation beyond "Oh! No, this isn't her, here. They've met but no, different pony, different problem."

Nogg exploded out of Grey Horn's house while the trio were some distance away, and more or less glommed onto the two bucks, hugging Grey's neck and Stormy's. "Welcome back! Everything's been going fine here, more or less. Vine Weeds is off having tea with her friends so she doesn't have to come up with an explanation about Pear's eyesight that might damage her protected worldview." *Sounds about par for the course, yes.* Grey thought to himself. He was worried things were going to get awkward when he asked the new pony, but had forgotten Nuage had grown up around 'pet' pegasi. "And hello to you, what... oh. Yes hello. I'm Nuage Cadeau. Uhm." Nogg looked at the bucks' chest and found Stormflight had the training ball. "I'm sure you'll be comfortable here, miss. Your owner knows all about winged creatures so it will work out fine."

Stormflight was staring glumly ahead, and Low Sale was blinking politely at the enthusiastic winged colt. A certain item in Grey's pack weighed heavily on him just now, and he just said "Where's Pear now?"

Still not wearing any head covering, tapping her hooves lightly on the walls as she went, she was standing in the doorway now, nose facing off into space as it was an incline to get from the walkway to their house but she was looking a cheerful and serious as she always did, orange coat still in full winter fluff. "I'm here Grey! Sounds like everybody made it back? Who's the new pony?"

This time she did pipe up, seeing the problem with Pear's lack of certain facial features. It still wasn't clear if the coat was going to grow back where the skin had melted away and been regrown from magical potion. "My name is Low Sale, I guess" She glanced at Stormflight, who was still staring glumly ahead but gave no contradictions about her new name. "And I'm not a pony I'm Stormflight's pet pegaszz." Perhaps realizing there were two pegasus ponies that lived in this household, Low Sale choked up on what kind of a pet she was.

But ever the situationally aware one, Nuage turned and rushed back up to Pear, and while he wasn't whispering, because Grey could make out the words, he did lower his voice when he said "You remember how Temnyy Kogot doesn't like the Enclave? Well, miss Low Sale used to be Enclave and now she's ... not." At a quereluous look from Pear, he added "You'll figure it out; just don't expect to have a conversation with her."

And with that enigmatic statement out of the way, Grey trudged up the ramp and pointed inside with his nose, and Nogg retreated. Within whispering distance of his sister, he said to her "I think we can start to fix this, but let's go to the main room inside." She wouldn't budge without a hug first though.

She walked slowly, tapping hooves against the walls when she expected to be near a wall, and with her nose down at countertop height when she wasn't. Grey slid the table to the farthest corner, and instructed Pear to sit down. He levitated all the pieces of the headdress out, and carefully arranged them on Pear's head, and buckled everything in place. Then with a deep breath, and a decision not to tell Pear what to expect in case he'd broken it during his long flight back, he energized the blue wires.

"Oh!" was her first response. After what to Grey was an agonizing breath later, she looked at him and said "You're not yellow anymore." Then she stood up and whipped her head around to find Nogg, but stumbled a bit, breathing heavily for a second before opening "Okay, no quick movements I guess." Looking again, and finding Nuage Cadeau sitting at the edge opposite Grey, and then suggested "Something like colors are coming through. Your mane was purple, right?"

Somehow the blankflank had a nostalgic look on his face as he replied, not actually look at anything in the room and almost singing. "Tail is purple, mane is green. Eyes the bluest you've ever seen. Coat of yellow's gold, but never soiled or sold." But as soon as he said it he realized his state of reverie and snapped out of it, looking hopefully to Pear for confirmation.

"They taught you colors by nursery rhyme?" Pear had a big grin on her face for the poetry recital, but was also looking around the room, and found Low Sale and was cautiously walking over to give her a onceover.

Nogg helpfully continued his poetry, explaining "Somepony's grandmother on third, wrote us poems to remember what color we were. It was a lot of years ago, I'm sorry I don't remember her name. Or many of the others, but, hmm." His eyes darted in directions contradictory to his ears as he searched his memories. "Bunker Door was an earth pony colt, just a little younger than me."

"Eyes red like a burning coal
 coat cornflower blue and slick and sharp
 mane black as the deepest hole
 tail and forelock shiny silver like the strings of a harp."

Thinking that sounded vaguely like the unicorn trader he'd met, it certainly impressed Grey that some old mare would take the time to write poems for the foals of mistrusted parentage, and that it would be one of the things this particular colt would carry with him all the days of his life. Meanwhile Pear just nodded, saying "That's a pony I wouldn't mistake for a different pony, even using this contraption." But she was saying straight to Low Sale, who was starting to look nervous over and above her mandatory disinterested

disconnectedness. That discomfort wasn't helped when Pear pointed a forehoof at her and said "You know, you look exactly like the ponies that came in with you. What color is your coat, by the way?"

Low Sale swallowed, and looked around for assistance. She just pointed a hoof at Stormflight, saying "you'll want to ask my owner any technical questions."

Pear responded with by blowing her nose on her fetlock, but also backed off a few steps and looked at Stormflight Trees, asking "What color is her coat, then?"

Again looking defiant, angry, ready to spit out rivets like his displeasure of the process alone could build a wall against Temnyy's incursions into Low Sale's mind, he uttered through gritted teeth "Rust red coat and electric blue mane. Matches her eyes."

Low Sale blinked perhaps three times, looking over at Stormy before turning to Pear and nodding vigorously. Nogg was glancing back and forth between pet and owner, and piped up with a carefully intoned "You know she'll believe you if you tell her that, right?"

Stormflight finally exhaled his anger and let his face fall. Holding his muzzle in his left fetlock, eyes closed, he dejectedly responded "Ah know. Nogg could you kindly help Pear sort out those funky colors? What do you see when you look at my dejected, nameless pet?"

Nuage soundlessly flapped and straightened his wings several times as he reoriented his position to stand and examine the 'pet' and her odd color scheme. "Her mane is red. Hmm, that's I guess a pastel? But it's a deep dark red. And there are several strips of brilliant fire-red, and then a stripe of plain red, and then near her withers it's a sort of orange-red." Stopping to look at Pear, he declared the pegasus mare "Overall her mane is the color of a late sunset. And her coat, you remember the sky when you were above the clouds that trip? Well, her coat is exactly that shade of blue." Here he looked back at the pegasus mare, who were staring peacefully back, perhaps hoping to get her name back with her coat colors being declared by an actual pony. "And her eyes! That's the orange of an early sunset. Or a late sunrise, I guess. Her tail ... is red but."

Pear had taken a few steps to the side to see the tail and mane at the same time, and suggested "No stripes." Which got Nogg's agreement for. "I can see it's probably the same colors, just no specific stripes like the mane has." Pointing again at the damaged pegasus,

Pear asked "Does that mesh with your understanding of your tail's color pattern? Same as the mane but without specific stripes?"

Using a very small voice, Low Sale responded with "Yes, miss Pear."

Face still in his hooves, Stormy muttered "Ah'm sorry miss. Ah didn't mean nothing against you."

Which was accepted by Low Sale with a perfunctory "Sir." and nothing more.