

Slipped Through the Cracks

November 11, 2016

Chapter 1

Arriving

Coal Garnet brushed leaves off his rust orange coat, keeping his horn free for incoming letters. Normally he would levitate them but he wanted to be able to levitate a rock again, if the timberwolf reassembled, or if it had packmates crouching in the uneven ground at the very edge of the forest.

Woods, he corrected himself. *Whitetail doesn't normally have predators. I wonder why* but this thought was interrupted by his horn vibrating. Just as it began to smoke, the sticks that made the timberwolf's ribcage began sliding back together.

Coal opted to run, and focus on levitating his incoming letter. The smoke coalesced into a scroll, with the house of Pansies' wax seal. With barely a hundred and fifty hooves between himself and the now standing timberwolf, he just shoved it into his pack and eyed the ground for a good rock.

Not only was this predator in the wrong woods, but it continued to follow him as Coal Garnet left the woods entirely, green mane streaming in the wind of his run, gray highlights flickering in the afternoon light. *Would make a nice painting. Will have to remember to commission one from Watercolor. If I live.*

The rock missed, but Coal had been lost since running from the first two timberwolves, and he was not on any kind of road. Oddly the timberwolf chasing him now seemed unprepared for the soil as well, and broke it's front right leg off while dodging the mis-aimed rock. This was enough to break the animation spell entirely, though it would only give Coal a few extra seconds.

Panting for breath now, Coal galloped up a hill, into the open, and around a rock ... down the other side was a small ravine, with a burbling creek Coal absolutely didn't recognize. Had this been in the suburb of Fillydelphia where he took most of his commissions as a fire-writer, or his home village on the flanks of the mountain, he would have been deeply troubled to not know what creek he was catapulting himself over. But while his mental map hadn't warned him of a bridge or a crossing, he was, he reflected as he sat down panting behind a boulder on the other side of the ravine, mostly a homebody.

Coal could make out the snapping, snarling timberwolf at the water's edge. Whatever forces had driven it this far, it felt uncomfortable venturing further. While he waited for the apparition to decide the hunt was lost, Coal fished out the letter he had just received. Next to the wax seal, was a hastily inked attempt at the fire-writer's guild symbol, and his initials after it. *A personal note, then. Odd.*

Coal opened it and read:

I do hope this gets to you in time to be of use, Coal. We're so looking forward to showing you around Las Pegasus but as I expect you'll be coming in through the southern gate, you may want to divert and take the deer trails to the Eastern Gate. It won't add as much time as you might think, and that awful quake

yesterday topped two major skyscrapers (Not built to the Old Code, I can tell you!) And all the ponies seem to be stuck in that region, unsure how to proceed.

So I wanted to let you know: proceed around the outside of the town and we'll see you on the morrow when you safely arrive (barring any other quakes and Tia doesn't collapse of course).

Golden Pansy

Doubly odd. There had been no earthquakes that Coal Garnet had experienced since leaving his office in Fillydelphia three days prior. Coal rolled it back up and put it in his pack, intent right now on finding his way back to the road. Carefully walking quietly directly away from the boulder, so as not to give his pursuer as visual target, Coal mentally composed a reply.

Officially he should dock himself for it, of course. Premade sheets, that went to good friends — That meant fellow guild members to normal unicorns like himself — were five to a bit, and half-made sheets three to a bit. Those could be sent to established customers, whether they rented or commissioned a mechanism, such as a gem and a magically embued candle holder. But ms Pansy (he couldn't rember now if Golden was the matron & flower shop owner, or the middle filly) had just rushed in to send this, it was likely she would stick around to chat with Firescroll, who was a distant relative.

Coal Garnet saw the road in the distance, and just beyond a row of trees some miles distant, the tall, colorful towers of Las Pegasus. He stopped, closed his eyes, and breathed in the alien scents. Grasses, dry dust, and warm sunshine. It wasn't really alien except Coal had never traveled before, and the grasses were very different than what he was used to.

With a look behind him, he paid just enough attention to not trip as he fished out a short scroll already attuned to Firescroll Amber, and wrote:

Firescroll; noncomm ltr lowest pri; cust wait?

Just got a letter from Golden Pansy if she's still there please let her see this, or repeat it:

I hadn't noticed any quake, but the buildings are in sight. I'm sure the gate will be clear soon. Thanks for that warning. I got lost as I was chased off the path by three timber wolves in Whitetail. Maybe they feared the quake also? So that I have seen no pony on the road means only I haven't seen the road. Should be seeing you soon enough, though! //Coal Garnet

Coal Garnet looked around him, as the grasses had grown to chest height, and were ripe with grain. It wasn't a harvest grass, this was just planted to reduce erosion, but since he had grown up in the sticks, he thought little of grabbing several mouthfuls of wild grain and was contentedly munching its nutty, alien flavors as he ignited his letter, still some fifty hooves from what he hoped was a road of sorts.

The smoke seemed to disappate immediately, it's near instant trip to his fellow guildmate invisible to a normal pony's eyes. *This road is at best a backroad. I don't think a wagon would even fit in the gravel.* Coal thought to himself as he stepped over the small ditch between wilderness and proper road. *Even the gravel they used is the same light brown as the sandy soil.* Still, it was a road, and Coal walked smartly toward his destination.

He had managed about three steps when a letter came in. What coalesced was barely a ribbon. In order to save magical paper, intra-guild notes were often sent on these strips.

Coal Garnet; noncomm ltr lowest pri; cust repl / Pansy nodded, has left.//Firescroll Amber

Noncomm meant nobody paid anybody, per se, for this communication. Lowest priority meant if you've got a line of customers or something, read it later this isn't about to **EARN** a commision, either. Customer might be waiting in

your office for this word, or in this case, the customer replied to what you just sent to this office/unicorn/guild station. There were magical ways of discerning who actually sent a note, but normally that level of work was uncalled for, so a signature was customary, and normally believed except during times of war. Not, in other words, had those techniques been used in his lifetime.

Just about now Coal realized he couldn't yet hear the sounds of the city. It was scarce two miles to the first city block, but he couldn't make out any pegasi flitting from building to building. Of course the buildings they'd be flitting from were nearer the center and they would be like tiny ants, flying in a giant blue sky. *Still...*

This road led straight to a less used neighborhood. Or slum, or garbage heap, to guess by the sudden smell of forgotten things, like all the once fresh plants had been stuffed into every bright colored building and left to mildew. Yet as Coal approached to within sixty hooves, the slightest breeze seemed to blow away the smell before it could be called a stench, and when the breeze died down, so did every insect.

Walking between two faded one story buildings into some part of Las Pegasus, Coal looked for chipped or broken paint and saw none. The almost gray sides had been neon colors when first installed, but the anodizing (or however these metal walls had been colored) were just cold, hard and silent.

The street was devoid of ponies, or carts, or any other possessions. Maybe they fled because of the quake? But walking down the street carefully, Coal noticed that several buildings were missing doors and windows. Not looking like they had been torn away, there was no broken glass. Rather there were wounds in these metal boxes.

That's a lot of metal to throw to the slums. *I had to pay a shiny bit to get enough iron to make the buckles for my saddle, and this town uses it to house nothing...* At the next empty, faded, silent box, Coal Garnet went to the door frame and knocked. His hoof strikes echoed, a gigantic drum with the whole building as a doorbell.

Not only was there no answer, the interior was creepy. There was no furniture, but the walls had bright murals depicting furniture, with two ponies sitting on the couch, listening to a gramophone that was only drawn on one wall, where the couch was visible on two. At the back was a solid wall carefully and accurately depicting a stairwell. The building had two floors, it's true, but so far as Coal could see, there was no real stairwell, only a painted one.

And as soon as he stepped inside to see what the painted ponies were staring at, the folk songs from some vinyl LP started wafting out of invisible speakers. Voices that could conceivably have gone to the pictures of ponies was added when Coal walked across the empty room to tap on the painting of the stairs.

"So, we're having pizza tomorrow?" said a mare's voice.

"Meh. We had that last week. Do you not like cooking soup anymore?" Replied a husky stallion, perhaps a few mugs into his cider.

"Pizza goes well with your cider, and I'm not sure you care about my cooking."

There was a delay in their conversation, but the gramophone continued.

"Could you buy some oats, and potatoes, dear?" Said the the mare.

"Soup again? I mean, you're a great cook but it's been a month since I had a good pizza." The stallion responded, sounding chipper, and sober now.

"A good barrefull of cider, you mean." Her disappointed reply trying to match his enthusiasm.

"Just, like, a small barrel. So, I'll get some potatoes and oats on the way home tomorrow?"

There was a longer pause in the conversation, and Coal Garnet looked around for any magical triggers to cause any of this. The voices didn't seem to be coming 'from' anywhere but given the box was solid metal walls and a hollow interior, it didn't surprise him the accoustics were hard to follow. Finally he tried calling out, "Hello? Can somepony clue me in, here?"

The gramophone continued unabated, at least the sixth song by now, and Coal's only response was the couple, presumably the earth stallion and pegasus mare, depicted on the walls.

"Honey what would you like me to make for dinner tonight?"

The stallion sighed before dejectedly saying "Tonight I could just sink into this barrel of cider and call it good."

"So ... just cider, then?"

"Can I have you...?" The stallion replied, which was immediately followed by laughter from the mare, which faded as if Coal was hurrying away.

Coal waited for two whole more songs, during which no new conversations happened. He then carefully walked outside. The moment his head was past the doorframe, the music cut out like it had just held its breath, hoping not to wake the couple. Annoyed now, Coal stomped a back foot, and called out without moving body or neck. No reply. He took two steps backwards, and the music started again. It was the same tune he'd heard at the first, but the timing of which song was playing didn't match the couple's voices, although their words and cadence seemed unchanged this playthrough compared to the first time.

"So, we're having pizza tomorrow?"

The second exchange, about buying potatoes, didn't happen until Coal tapped on the wall where the couple were painted. But once started, it played through, with the stallion offering to buy oats with his cider. It was definitely at a different stage in the music, but the same songs were playing, and that remained unchanged even when Coal tapped, scraped, and finally kicked the painting of the gramophone.

Stepping outside into the stark silence, Coal stared in every direction, and heard nothing, and saw no pony, or bird, or anything living. By some gut wrenching premonition, he ran towards where he thought the south gate should be.

A quarter mile, over twenty six hundred hooves east of where he'd wandered in, and still there was only incredible silence. Now the building had ponies panted on the outside of the buildings, the crispness of the lines and brilliance of the colors matched in eeriness only by the lack of texture to the paint; his hoof felt only bare metal. At the south gate now, which was undamaged so far as he could see, stood a five story tower, surrounded by small lights that were going on, and off to emulate a swirling motion that would eventually reach one of two snaking lines of lights that climbed the tower to the gift shop and viewing area at the top. Only, the lights were tired, each one staying on for easily five seconds before 'moving' making the trip even to the halfway point of the climb a ten minute affair if one cared to watch.

And still th silence. Hastily Coal inscribed a note to Firescroll asking "What's with the creepy metal building? And I'm at the south gate it looks fine."

While waiting for a reply he approached the stairwell, actual this time not just painted, ascending the tower. Quite a few ponies were depicted as ascending it. Just then there was a hiss, and a blue earth pony stallion's painting separated from the tower, held by two telescoping arms. At first it came straight out, then adjusted itself so the face of the metal image faced Coal. Again, a mostly directionless voice, although without the echo chamber it was easier to determine the recording came from somewhere near the blue earth pony.

"I'll be collecting the ascension fee down here; three bits to get to the gift shop. Yes pegasi too unless you actually fly outside the rails but that's one bit. Looking is free but be sure to look at Las Pegasus' First Gift Shop, it's the first gift shop you'll see. No pressure it's hardly the last you'll see."

Coal tried to walk around behind the metal plate to see if there was a living operator, or if he could see the magical trigger device. But the plate kept itself oriented towards Coal, meaning it was impossible to see behind it. So, he tried asking the metal again. "Excuse me, what's going on? I heard there was an earthquake."

"Yes, three bits that's to use the tower as a sight-seeing stop."

The timing between Coal stopping, and the blue pony starting, might imply it was a conversation. So he tried again. “I’m talking to a metal wall. Where would I put the money?”

“If you just want to fly or, I suppose teleport miss, there’s a separate pony up top for non-walkers’ fees.”

Coal waited for a response. Getting nothing further, he walked around the tower. As he crossed the stairs right as they touched the earth, there was canned laughter, giggling, the sounds of a happy crowd. It didn’t seem to be on a tight repeat, but it was also just of the same five ponies, all mares, with the same giggling over & over. Finally he made it back to the blue earth stallion plate, which had followed him and was facing him now. It didn’t speak, even when Coal sat in front of it, and tapped the metal plate on the chest. “So, only voice triggers, then?”

Again, just enough gap to imply it was a response. “Hey kid don’t fall off. Your parents with you?”

“I have as many parents as bits in my bags.” Coal didn’t really think he could confuse the recording, but he was curious if he was having any effect at all. Again, just in time to respond Coal heard

“It’s 3 bits to climb this tower but naturally it’s a big town; you can climb other towers instead.”

Just then Firescroll wrote back. The note read “The South Gate is closed off; not sure where you actually are. Also: metal *buildings*? No.”

There didn’t seem to be any actual way of preventing Coal from just walking up the stairs, so he ignored the staring armor plate and began climbing. He heard the hissing again as his third foot clanged down onto the metal steps. Looking behind him, the blue earth pony had been satisfied and sank back into the wall. The giggling remained audible for two body lengths up before abruptly, like the gramophone, shutting off.

Four spirals, dozens of groups of ponies depicted against the wall of the tower, but no sound. At the top of the tower was a large dais, with one pony sitting patiently in the late afternoon sunshine. By the outline it was a unicorn mare, but with the sun in Coal’s eyes he couldn’t make out what was up with her fancy dress’ odd angles.

Chapter 2

Separating

Looking down, Coal Garnet could see he was walking above a depiction, life sized, of a small gift shop. Telescopes, snowglobes, about nine ponies crammed into the comparatively narrow shelves, including a couple making out, to judge by the tongue play shown, behind the aisle of saddlebags and sweaters.

The unicorn? Was a statue. Metal, the color halfway between pale yellow and a gentle pink. The 'dress' was separate parts of the statue. It might have been able to articulate but the only motion it showed was the head, which followed him as he walked around it. The range of motion seemed comparable to a normal pony. She had to turn back to the right to follow him as he went behind her, counter clockwise. The eyes blinked about every minute and a half. Her eyes were a sea blue. The dark yellow mane was depicted, but no attempt had been made beyond that odd painting technique.

Trying to stay sane, if it weren't indeed too late, Coal levitated out his thin strip of tuned parchment, ink & quill, and wrote to firescroll:

Firescroll; noncomm ltr lowest pri; scared // At the top of all-metal L.P. 1stGift. Metal. Greeter, clerk metal. Nothing living. Are you? //Coal Garnet

"So, your recordings are usually voice activated." Coal said to the statue, which resolutely followed him with her lifeless eyes as he roamed around the flat store. She didn't reply. He finally came over to watch her blink. Then tapped each eyeball between blinks. No response. But since his horn was vibrating he stepped back a little to give room for the smoke coming from his horn to coalesce into ... a very long, thin hunk of metal, which clanged and echoed as it fell to the ground. The statue changed to stare at it instead of Coal.

When Coal Garnet finally got his breathing under control enough to focus on levitating the bare metal, the statue went back to staring at him. Unnerved at its seeming near-cognizance he dropped the metal bar again, but she continued to stare mutely at Coal.

Trying again, heart thumping in his chest, he saw the metal bar was engraved on one surface.

Coal Garnet: That last arrived as a hunk of metal WHERE ARE YOU REALLY // Firescroll

Well. And so did this. Having read the inscription, the mare was now watching the bar of metal, not Coal. He proved this by floating the rather heavy bar left and right. But once he stopped his tests, she raised her head to watch him, again.

Unnerved but not currently hyperventilating, he put the message bar into his saddle's straps. The griffons had, possibly in the past tense usage of that phraseology, lots of metal in their mountain top kingdom, but ponies had very little. The scrap from this alone would pay a week's wages.

If it didn't catch on something and make him fall off the stairs going down. Coal was dizzy, and now deeply disturbed by the ponies seen ascending the stairs, flat against its center. By the time he had made it to the bottom, the giggling still the same without ever truly repeating, he was hyperventilating. When the blue ticket pony hissed out of the wall, Coal screamed, and whirled around to kick the plate, ignoring the meaningless voice over. When the blue pony stopped, so did Coal.

He looked and found he had scuffed the 'paint' a little. A hoof print could be seen exposing bare metal. In the same tone but with words in different order, the blue stallion asked "You're not gonna fall off if I let you up there, right? Your parents are around?"

Coal jumped over the slow moving light show, and galloped what he hoped was north. In the failing light he at least couldn't see how many metal buildings had no doors. The street lights were lighting up and the disparity of illumination meant he couldn't see the paintings of ponies in their front yard.

Eventually he had to walk. It was still deathly silent, but Coal Garnet was an office pony, and not well suited for wild runs through even empty streets.

Especially eerily empty streets.

He made himself find what street he was on, and how to get to miss Pansy's flower shop. It was only another three blocks. It had a door, and some dim indirect lighting that showed real, live plants through the window. Coal tried the door and found it unlocked. Stepping inside didn't start up any creepy, unrelated sound track. "Hello? Anyone here?"

His voice was answered by a door chime sounding from the other end of the building, and whatever door it was attached to latching shut after words.

The plants had a smell! There was sweet flowers, and coyingly sweet flowers over in that aisle, and the cacti she was growing had a sort of dusty smell. It was the first genuine pony related smell he had inhaled since the foul odor of decay at the edge of town. The contents of the store also pleasantly dulled the echo, though the walls were still metal, though it was just painted a dark sky blue everywhere.

Twice more he called out, each time answered by a door closing. *A disembodied door chime I can learn to put up with, after that gift shop affair.* Coal had packed some trail rations but expected to either buy dinner or just mooch off the Pansys. He was tempted to walk out and look for an undamaged convenience store, since the flowers in this one weren't hit with whatever bomb had gone off.

But he wasn't ready yet for that, so instead he reread his metal note from Firescroll, and tried to write a reply. *I'm at the Pansy Flowershop* it said. But he couldn't send it. His horn energized but would not ignite the scroll fragment. In general, that meant the specified recipient was invalid – the gemstone had been damaged, or was in a container that couldn't hold a scroll next to it. *Or the pony in question is dead.* Deceased ponies were never valid targets. *I wonder which one of us is dead?* Coal thought to himself as he nervously crawled under the front desk to pretend he could sleep there.

But he hadn't had any dinner. So with a rumbling stomach some time late in the night, or possibly early in the evening, Coal got up and looked through the rest of the florist's building. There was an office but he couldn't figure out how to activate the artificial lights. Of the spells Coal knew, 'light' wasn't one of the better ones. He could do the light glow like concert-goers would light up but it was hard to see much. But he found a half-eaten bag of oats & popped rice kernels. The next door had more paintings of what should have been the contents, and it made Coal a little sad to know he just missed a well frosted cake of unknown variety.

The water taps didn't run. Not even the one he could find to water the flowers. *Well, if they're going to die anyway* Coal Garnet had a dinner of roses and pansies. He'd need to find water somewhere but the rose leaves in particular felt very moist. With a sated belly he was better able to pretend he could sleep. *After all I can't see the tartarus escapees and they don't seem to move around much.*

Chapter 3

Friendship

At the crack of dawn, Coal Garnet reluctantly rolled upright and ate the rest of the oats & rice and the juiciest plant stalks that didn't taste like they might poison him. The water still didn't run.

But Coal about ran out the back door when a voice called out from the business entrance "Mom? Maregold? Hey you need to water the plants I can't."

With some unidentified plant stalks sticking out of his mouth Coal Garnet jumped onto one of the planter's edge to stare wild eyed over the remaining vegetation and declare "It's not my fault I didn't do any of this wow you're blue." Although to be fair it was the shock of almost self illuminating white mane that had actually caught Coal's attention.

Standing in the doorframe was a young earth pony stallion, his coat a deep sea blue, his coat short and his build slight. The door was in the way of seeing his cutie mark but he looked to be an adult from this angle. His eyes were approximately the orange of Coal Garnet's coat. The stallion seemed to be holding his breath as he took in the sight of the interloper eating his (non-food) stores.

The terrified look faded, and the stallion sighed, then smiled at Coal. "Hi. You're a pony. A living pony."

Coal hopped back down and finished his mouthful of plant matter before walking up to shake hooves with what was surely one of the Pansy ponies. "I've questioned that but yes I suppose I am. Coal Garnet I was..."

His introduction was interrupted when the blue stallion leapt past Coal's outstretched foreleg and desperately hugged Coal's neck. "I was so afraid I was going to starve to death all alone in this cold land of punishment." The stallion proceeded to grab Coal's still outstretched foreleg, and hold it tight against his chest while firmly planting his plot against Coal's other foreleg. The blue stallion's breath sped up and the whites of his eyes were showing again as he looked back out the now closed door's glass section. Slowly his grip on Coal's foreleg tightened as the stallion said "I really don't want to tackle this alone. Please let me come with you. Or at least die with you."

Coal looked at the stallion's rump to find a cutie mark of what appeared to a drum kit, with wheat growing through it and raindrops suspended in front of everything. "Sure kid. But once you get ahold of yourself it'd be nice if you gave me more personal space."

In response, the stallion raised his other foreleg to grip more Coal's, and also to shove his nose into Coal's coal-grey section of mane, that laid neatly against his neck, and inhale deeply and slowly Coal's scent. Then he carefully let go of Coal's leg and extracted himself in such as was as to never quite lose physical contact. With his right foreleg so far across Coal's shoulder it was gripping his spine behind his withers, the stallion said "I'm Platinum Pansy. I get roped into watering the plants you've been eating." Platinum looked over Coal's shoulder to assess the damage before adding "and you've eaten most of what won't make you sick. Now I wish I had thought of that."

In response to Coal's tight lipped smile, Platinum backed several steps away, lowering his leg and eventually breaking all contact. Coal took a deep breath and shimmy-shook his mane trying to release the tension of yesterday's creepiness. "Coal Garnet, as I said. I'm just sort of adventuring away from my desk and thought I'd visit the Pansy family. Your mom, I guess?" Platinum nodded. "I have no idea what happened but I received a note from her about some earthquakes toppling a couple buildings onto the south gate?" Platinum offered a silent look of confusion. *Maybe we both died when the quakes started and that's why we don't remember them.* "So, we're going to need water to drink. The taps here don't run right now." Platinum shuddered, then shimmy-shook his whole body. "Do you have any ideas where we could try next? How much of the town have you explored?"

Platinum lowered his head, and with ears drooping he looked outside. "There's water." he almost whispered. "I'll take you there." And with that they walked outside into the cold sunshine.

Chapter 4

Supplies

Platinum lead Coal west, into what have been a bustling, noisy suburb. The air was still, the smell was of something alien, a tang unlike anything Coal could describe, and every building had perfectly rounded right angles with paintings usually of plants, or of furniture.

There was the sound of clanging. Subtle, indistinct but it was not silent. Three blocks and it resolved into pony sized motions. These articulated statues were walking up and down the road, going to storefronts to stare blankly, silently at some innocuous thing just outside, before turning and walking back.

“Have you tried talking to any of them?” Coal asked. In answer, Platinum turned and laid his head on Coal’s withers, shoulders pressed tightly together. “How old are you, Platinum?”

Given his position, Coal could feel the stallion inhale several times trying to answer. Finally he drew in enough breath to say “Twenty two.” He seemed to collapse in on himself before adding “I suppose you’re older?”

“Twenty five.” Coal looked over his shoulder to see Platinum squint his eyes in consternation at Coal Garnet. “And I’m sure we’ll have time to examine why you’re so unfit for this kind of adventure, but right now we need to make it through. I’m thinking going east; we can eventually make it back to Canterlot.”

Platinum didn’t actually move, but he lifted his head off Coal’s withers, and reduced how tightly he was cuddling against Coal’s shoulder. “It must be nice for other grown ups to take you seriously. I wouldn’t know about that.” After another moment Platinum slid away and instead sat next to Coal, shoulders still touching but less coltishly. “You’re assuming anypony will be in Canterlot. See that one?” He pointed to a statue that was just standing in the middle of the road. Coal had seen it move each of it’s legs at different times, but had never managed to actually walk anywhere.

“You recognize it? There was a pony that looked like that?” Platinum looked down and nodded. “Does it talk?” He shook his head. “One of the first buildings I went into had that odd flat painting of a married couple, and the house played three of their ‘whats for dinner’ speeches while some music played. It was creepy, but it doesn’t seem to be spreading.”

At this, Platinum looked up across the road. “It is. There was only three ... automatons here when it first happened. And that painting? Eventually it grows out of the walls and starts walking around. But when that happens the water goes back to running. Not sure if we can trust it though.”

Coal Garnet levitated out his canteen and downed the last few drops in it. “These aren’t fairies, we won’t get turned to metal by drinking some water.” He offered a sincere smile Coal didn’t actually feel, and added “Trust me on magic – I’m the unicorn here.” *Although to be fair, as a unicorn with some general training in magic, I have no idea what I’m seeing.*

Platinum pointed out where the water taps were likely to be accessible without being in the way of an automaton, and Coal strode off at a trot across the road. None of the automatons responded, but his heart was still beating to a broken canter of off-rhythm beats. But it was easier here because no pony looked at him and gave bizarre responses. The couple at the gift tower had clearly been trying to talk to him, and that's really what disturbed him.

Platinum followed close on Coal's heels, chin on Coal's rump, never losing contact. But they didn't step on each other either so it was probably okay. The door was to an accessories store. Bow ties, hats, bell boots and other things that would modify your manner of dress without actually providing any mechanical benefit.

What was on the shelves now was purely mechanical, with gears slowly turning fed by an unseen power source everything intended to resemble wearable items was moving now. But the hallway to the staff area had no ponies blocking it, and the staff area was a few short strides away, where there was a normal looking sink, and whose water filled Coal's canteen and smelled wonderful, and wonderfully normal. He drank deep, refilled it and levitated it to Platinum Pansy.

Who sighed, and sipped carefully several times before squinting his eyes shut and gulping down several large mouthfuls. Coal laid a congratulatory hoof on Platinum's shoulder before refilling it a final time and putting it back into his pack.

Leaving was a little more complicated as, just at the door was a mare and her foal. Unicorns, both, looking unblinkingly at Coal. Platinum, chin on Coal's hips again, was already hyperventilating. Coal was sorely tempted to ask for pardon, but he remembered most of their speech patterns were voice triggered.

The mare's head followed Coal's as he shifted left, and right looking for enough space to slip by, but she was just far enough into the shop's door there was no going past. Forced to stare into those blue eyes, Coal realized she didn't even have eyelids. Looking down the cheery filly had a smile painted onto the rounded metal muzzle but no attempt at articulating a mouth.

Remembering the ticket taker's lack of response to being kicked, Coal told himself this was just a misbehaving statue and lowered his head to headbutt the mare. She didn't move her neck, only lowered her chin to watch as he futilely pressed against the incredibly massive hunk of metal. Not wanting to push Platinum over, he called out to his too-close friend "This isn't working. I'm backing up."

A mechanical buzzing emanated from the filly's form, which resolved into something like a voice (coming out of her ears, Coal thought) with "Mommy can we get ice cream?"

The mare's voice sounded almost completely natural, responding without moving her head away from Coal. "Not right now, little one."

Platinum choked back tears.

Creeped out himself now, Coal trotted over to a counter that was being used as a display area for the window just past it, and launched some nearby heavy object through the window before leaping out after it. He managed just enough presence of mind to levitate most of the glass shards away that he didn't get scratched, but Platinum still had his eyes closed so ran into several pieces still attached to the frame, drawing blood from right next to his brilliantly white mane, staining the last third of it brilliant crimson.

It wasn't life threatening, but the level of creepiness would drive them both mad soon. Coal pressed his right side against Platinum Pansy's left, and they trotted east for some distance. After they had crossed two streets, and there were no automatons left, Coal called for a halt.

"You know you scraped yourself, right?" Hopefully Pansy wouldn't be a pansy about a little blood.

Or a lot. As Platinum was opening his eyes, Coal was estimating the damage. It wasn't currently doing more than seeping, but his whole right shoulder and leg to the knee was covered in blood. When Platinum turned his tear streaked face to it, he asserted "We're going to die like this, aren't we?"

“Not with that wound.” Completely unsure of where the false bravado came from, Coal also noticed there were two other gouges in Platinum’s rump. Much smaller, but they’d need to be cleaned if the opportunity came up. “Let’s go out the East gate. It was supposed to be clear of whatever happened to the south gate.” Platinum just nodded meekly.

Chapter 5

Travel

Two stallions

There were no more fully moving automatons on the trip to the east gate. But where there were supposed to be 'green areas' so the earth bound could remember the smell of rolling hills of grains, the grass had been replaced with thousands of tiny metal spikes. The grain itself seemed to have been replaced by diamond, or possibly diamond dust glued to tiny elaborate structures. The yards of residences often had statues, but only one turned to look at the pair as they passed.

Hoping to find more foodstuffs, and maybe even running water, Coal stopped at a picket fence that had no statues at all in it, between two that did. The mares seemed to have been shouting across their neighbor's yard to converse, but it was a little hard to tell since neither was detailed enough yet to be completely sure of what they were supposed to be doing.

The door was not locked, and the interior had furniture. It was a mix of stylized metal representations of what pony furniture would look like, and soft comfy real furniture. As woozy as Platinum seemed to feel, it was the younger stallion that noticed "There's a line. A pool of soft inside the crazy-hard." The earth pony drew a line, slowly, with a hoof to show that, while wavy & irregularly shaped, there was indeed one, folded-back pool of "normal"

The kitchen sink was outside "normal" and it ran. It also had a short hose for complicated dish washing projects. "Platinum come over here I want to clean up those wounds."

Platinum marched into place and the complained "What about the mess? We'll get their floor wet."

"Don't care. Tarturus can bill me." Coal Garnet tried the 'hot' water but only a trickle came out. So, cold it was. The wound was gooey, but well into the process of healing. It would seep for some days yet but even running shouldn't tear it wide open again. Red fluid, syrup at first then finally watery, ran everywhere, actually making a 'ting' noise when it crossed out of normal back onto metal.

Having convinced himself Coal had properly cleaned the three breaks in Platinum's skin, Coal put the hose back but then took his own pack off. He had been running, heart pounding by the insanity of whatever was killing him, he felt his coat was sticky with dried sweat.

It was very cathartic to feel the uncomfortably cold water sluice down every hair, extending the water damage into the four-number range if this had been a place where ponies lived. Finally he shimmy shook the water off, flinging hair and dried-slimy sweat onto every surface for ten hooves. Coal was only a little mad when he started to put his pack on, and found it was splattered with bits of discarded dirt.

"So, um." Started Platinum, not sure how to respond to the display of utter apathy. "Some of the cushions are soft. What do you say about trying to look for a bed to sleep in?"

Coal eyeballed the floor that tinkled, the fridge looking normal as it sat in hard, sharp metal crevices. He decided the fatigue he felt was an excellent guard against full blown insanity, if indeed it wasn't far too late, as well as making deep depression too complicated and energy consuming. "Nah kid. We should get going soon. Ten minutes but that's not much of a..."

Platinum had already slapped Coal's shoulder in congratulations as was turning to trot off in search of the bedroom. *Well, I'll collect anything edible then.* Too, it was nice to have his breathing room back. Coal opened the fridge and was assaulted with the same smell of decaying plants he'd smelled first entering into Las Pegasus. Coal held his breath and examined the inside. Four metal bowls, each empty but flat-painted with colors and patterns that could have implied prepared food were sitting in them. Closing the door, the smell began disappearing, and once coal was able to smell again, he contemplated the meaning. If the smell is the after effect of whatever magic is doing this ... the inside of the fridge either resisted, or just got hit.

Platinum trotted back, with a laconic smile and deeply embarrassed blush on his face. "Looks like we're interrupting somepony." Coal motioned for Platinum to show him, and they walked back to the far end of the house where, instead of an angular, cold, potentially articulated statue of a pony's shape & size, there was a flowing bronze sculpture, bright, smooth, with many rounded sides. The statue was of two ponies, romantically combining into one, on a metal table low to the floor, painted with a plausible looking bedcover pattern.

Coal blew his nose at the whole display and ducked out. Then stopped at the living room again. Platinum bumped very slowly into Coal, laying his head on Coal's hips again. "Hey, you remember that pool of normality?"

Platinum "Mhm-hmm'd" and Coal looked again, just to make sure he was seeing it.

"It's shrinking."

Pansy yanked his head off Coal, which caused several drops of blood to spray against the metal floor. But it was unmistakable, the odd curving lines of linoleum had moved at least a couple inches since they'd entered minutes ago.

Coal didn't know what would happen if they stood here, but he didn't want to become a statue. He ran out, Platinum followed. Outside it was late morning, and both statues turned their heads towards the pair as they exited. Just as they crossed the gate onto the sidewalk, one of the mares raised a forehoof, clanking and squeaking as she waved at them.

A part of him wanted to stop and ask her if she could speak, offer advice, explain whether roboticization was painful. But the rest of him wanted to find green hills, flying pegasi and never see another hunk of metal again. But in addition to not getting much sleep, Platinum was injured and shouldn't be running if there were no immediate danger. Need to keep those reserves for when we need to run from something.

So they briskly walked past houses which fortunately for his heartrate had no statues at all. And past even the pastry store, but it didn't smell like there were edibles in there, stale or fresh and Coal didn't want to lose his momentum. Finally, the unilluminated east gate towered in the immediate distance.

The posts on the ground were far enough apart to allow for four lanes of wagons pulled by earth ponies; more than fifty hooves, and four hundred hooves tall to hold the maps and advertisements at pegasus height. There were spikes and bulges attached to the posts near the top, and while Coal stared, trying to understand their purpose, Platinum explained.

"There's supposed to be a rainbow pouring out from those edges, up there. Then it would hit the other edge, there." He raised a hoof to indicate a bulge a third of the way down from the top. "And be shunted to the outside edge, so ponies just entering would be impressed." When asked, Platinum said the spikes normally had magical conduits to drag the spectra back up to the top of the fountain. "I would assume the conduits aren't permanent, then. No pony here to maintain it, no spectra. I bet there's a pool of it at the bottom."

Coal sped up to see. Something of a normal magical nature would be invigorating, right about now. Platinum, still stiff and sore from diving through a window, was slower to accelerate. But since they'd left the odd statues behind, he'd become a little less clingy, so Coal didn't have to kick him off his rump to decide to move just a little bit faster.

In fact, Coal Garnet was trotting now, hoping to see at least one sight he'd left his office in Fillydelphia to see.

Chapter 6

Fire Writer

Coal almost ran into the burly earth pony pulling a cart with five or six whole trees, sans limbs. “Get outta the way scruffy!” the muscle bound stallion shouted. Coal dived to his left, then had to stop even before getting to the sidewalk to stop for his breath.

His nostrils filled with the smell of dust, sweat, smoke, and other things he might have been able to identify had his ears not exploded with the sounds of a healthy city.

This doesn’t count as healthy. The trees were probably building materials to begin repairing all the burned down structures. In the sky, the cloud structures were intact, but in the distance, to the south, several columns of dense smoke still rose. Down the street he had just traveled the fires had been put out, but the damage was plain to see, and quite extensive.

“Hay. You’re still in the street. We need to get by.” Coming in from the main entrance, two ponies, a pegasus stallion and an earth pony mare pulled a cart carefully and slowly, which mean they were out of the way of all the more harried ponies. Which in turn meant they needed the part of the road Coal was sitting in, panting.

Coal nodded, and looked around for Platinum. *Nowhere in sight.* But he was in the way, and he moved to the curb. Just as he was about to set hoof on the cartless part of the entranceway, his horn vibrated, and began to smoke. The scroll materialized, and Coal grabbed it with his levitation just as he set hoof off the road.

Dead silence. The gate was colorless again, the clouds gone. The scroll, missing.

“DONT DO THAT AGAIN!” Came a frantic shout from behind him. Coal looked over his shoulder to see Platinum Pansy galloping straight for him. He didn’t slow down, but leapt onto Coal’s back, landing hard and gripping Coal’s neck with enough force to make him see spots. “Every pony I know is missing and you just winked out of existence.” Coal tapped Platinum on the shoulder, with a wan smile and tears in his eyes Platinum slid off Coal’s back. “I don’t want to lose you, too.”

Coal wrapped a foreleg around Platinum, then pulled back. “I get that, but the scroll is missing. I’ll be right back.” Before Platinum’s look of confusion could turn to horror, Coal hopped sideways. All four hooves would land off the sidewalk.

Sights! Sounds! Smells! *Muddy scroll.* Coal grabbed the dropped scroll from the edge of the curb, shoving it into his mouth hoping it could be taken with him, and hopped back off the road before the (*wholesale foodstuffs delivery*) wagon’s rear wheels ran him over.

Coal tripped over Platinum’s rear hoof, and the earth pony had stepped halfway onto the road. When Platinum whipped his neck around to find Coal’s reappearance, the neck wound began seeping blood in earnest. Coal winced in sympathy.

Standing back up, Coal again wondered at what sort of magic he was seeing. Unrolling the scroll, he saw it was sent by Canterlot's fire-writer's guild headquarters. "While I read this, Platinum, can you try to cross the street while I watch? I want to see if you disappear."

Platinum very slowly, never turning away from Coal, began to walk across the wide street. *He's definitely crossing the spot where I just was.*

Coal Garnet: noncomm instr hi-pri

Firescroll informs us you have fallen into deceased category under extremely unusual circumstances. This message is on auto-retry, with an alarm to indicate when it goes through. Had it not, for three days, we would pull it and begin informing your next of kin.

Please write back when you are able, and indicate any assistance you need, or what null-zone your travels have taken you to if you expect to remain unavailable to the guild network.

//Polished Ember-Orange, in their majesties' service

Isn't her husband a royal bodyguard? A unicorn from a farming family had ascended to employment as a fedaykin, in addition to speaking about certain lofty magic spells that almost nopony could cast anyway. Also in there, Shadow Orange had married the head of the firewriter's guild.

Platinum Pansy was more than two thirds of the way across the street. Coal called out to him. "I'm going to write a reply, but why don't you trot to the sidewalk and back?" Platinum had not once looked where he was going, but to be fair there wasn't anything to run into. The earth pony did as asked, and definitely set hoof on the far sidewalk before circling around to eventually stand beside Coal.

Who was busy responding to the guild instructions even as he kept one eye on his non-disappearing traveling companion.

Guildpony: noncomm low pri

I write in response to Firescroll's plea, and while I cannot, as I write this, reply to him or any pony else, I may have found one small hole through which to send this letter.

I am now at the east gate of Las Pegasus, with intent to make it to Canterlot. Save one pony I am alone and terrified. Almost all living things have been replaced with etched paintings, unrelated voice recordings, or in some cases metal statues or automatons.

Platinum Pansy travels with me, but he does not fall into the hole / vision of a working city, through which I hope to send this response. If Canterlot is even partially unaffected, I intend to write to Celestia herself, for I know no contact points in the college, and this magic before me confounds all sensibility.

I have no idea what aid to request, aside from hope to see the living, in their natural habitat, once again. I have seven full, unmarked scrolls left, and fifteen ribbons. Also three scrolls attuned to Firescroll of L.P. offices, and three more attuned to the gemstone in the Fillydelphia offices.

A terrified, confused but uninjured Coal Garnet

Immediately Coal realized that this was one of the seven unattuned scrolls. He crossed it off, and considered how to mention Platinum's injury. After a few seconds, by which time Platinum was reading over Coal's shoulder, he just added "But Platinum P. has a still bleeding wound on his neck" below his own signature.

Coal rolled & sealed the scroll, attuning it to the Canterlot HQ offices. That was usually the third attunement spell taught all new guild members. The first was your home offices, which for some unicorns of course would be HQ itself. The second was a pony who the guild member was expect to work with a lot - attuning a letter to a pony was a very different spell that to a impersonal office-gem.

The third was the offices of the ponies that paid a firewriter's wages. Coal offered another hug to Platinum, and this time explained "I need to get this reply out, but I can't now; the magic of this place is blocking it." Coal took a moment to prove this by trying to 'send' the letter. His horn vibrated but did not ignite, as if the Canterlot offices had been ransacked, the main gem shattered. "When I stand in the road there, I'm in the normal city of Las Pegasus."

"There are two cities?" Platinum asked. Coal just shrugged, not sure how else to describe what happened.

Which, when he stepped off the sidewalk and all four hooves were in the street, was nothing. Frightened now, Coal took another step. Silence met his hooffall. Frantic, he leapt forward, aiming for where he had first almost been run over by the lumberbuck.

A siren sounded to the north-west. Ponies around him were ignoring it as there was no emergency in this stretch of road. As quick as his well trained horn could, Coal sent the reply. It's smoke melted and dissipated through the clouds above. As there was no oncoming wagon just now, Coal stood in the street a moment, and considered how hard it would be to get across without leaving wagons running him over.

As he stood there, the sounds of the city began echoing as through a lava tunnel or other hard tube, and the wagons and ponies themselves became blurry. Barely a second after it started, the sound and the smells faded, and Coal was alone again in an empty wasteland.

Behind him, Platinum started to say "That was different; you sorta faded in." But Coal took a step forward, and immediately was in the city again. He stood there for eight heart beats, probably ten or twelve seconds, before everything faded back out again. "Yeah, like that." Platinum added to his previous statement.

"Platinum? I'm going to head to that point over there." Coal indicated a mail dropbox; this path would take them through a slightly different section of road than had been tested before. "If I disappear, I'll probably reappear over there."

As expected, the sights and sounds of the city returned to his ears within a few steps. Some of the sounds were shouts of rage as carriage ponies had to divert or desist to avoid running over the pony. A packet, much heavier than a letter, arrived as he was making his way across the busy street. Knowing the next step might take him out of range he stopped long enough to shove it into his pack.

"There are crosswalks, you know." Came a call from one of two mares pulling a heavy wagon out of town. Delivery secured, Coal Garnet smiled and nodded at the team and stepped briskly towards the curb.

Two steps later, the traffic in the road was replaced with odd collections of gears held to each other by an unknown force. The buildings around him took up about the same volume but were completely homogeneous in color, texture and spacing. Half a step later there were bright flashes of light from somewhere and he was very sick to his stomach. Coal pressed on, and when he arrived Platinum Pansy was waiting. Coal couldn't say anything until his stomach cramps passed, though.

"Wow you look like a mess." the earth pony helpfully stated. "Why do you keep disappearing if I don't?" Coal didn't know, and he couldn't talk yet anyway. "If you could keep up, I think the guard's booth has running water. Or, at least there's a spigot and I want to try. But not if you're going to disappear and then die on me and not come back."

Coal raised his head, stomach finally easing up. "There's more than two cities." But in response to Platinum's pricked ears, Coal just waved the younger stallion on. Since the earth pony had no sense of personal space anyway, Coal rested his head on the other stallion's hips as they walked. Platinum didn't say anything.

The water wasn't from the city supply, but a cleverly redirected portion of a nearby stream, which existed in this bizarre tartarus-land. While Platinum again cleaned his neck wound, Coal examined his packet. Hopefully no pony was assigning him to deliver something to the Las Pegasus mayor.

Inside the package were three bundles of blank, pre-attuned scrolls. No name but the twine was color coded. There were also five ribbons for short intra-guild notes, and one letter.

Coal Garnet emergency

Thank Celestia you're still among the living. Those quakes are being investigated by Luna herself as being supermagical in origin. Contained within this bag, tied with purple twine, are scrolls to my husband, a death commando who is always near Celestia herself. The red string goes to the usually unponied offices of the Wonderbolts. In blue are scrolls tuned to Mi Amore Cadenza. My desire was to give you Twilight Sparkle's assistant Spike, but dragon-tuning can't be stored on the shelf the same way.

EVERY TIME you are in what you believe is the normal Equestria, write to somepony with your location. We will attempt to follow you and lock you to this plane when we find you.

// Ember-Orange

PS I was unable to send this blocked, no recipient. Will keep retrying. Will give instructions for communicating if you make it to Canterlot that isn't ours.

Platinum's mane, in addition to sticking to his neck, was pink. "I think it stopped bleeding. I should be okay now."

Platinum was smiling, again. *At least a little.* Coal nodded and pushed past him to get a healthy drink of water. If this place had grass, they could eat something that would sustain them. *A set of scrolls attuned to a death commando?*

Aloud, Coal said "I guess Luna thinks the quakes that damaged the south gate were supermagical."

Platinum shimmy shook his mane off his neck. "Serious? Like psionics? I thought ponies stopped researching the super- and para-magical decades ago."

Coal nodded "Luna wasn't around decades ago. Maybe a thousand years ago superstitions were held more deeply." Backing out of the very small guard's booth, Coal took a deep breath, and again smelled rotting, forgotten vegetation. No sounds of the city, and the smell was just a whiff. "Still, it means they know we're trapped and are looking at how to get us out."

As Coal walked out of the city, Platinum walked beside and slightly behind him, with the comment, or possibly question of "Canterlot, huh?"

The midday sun combined with cooler air was making visible steam rise off Platinum's wet mane. "You've tried exploring this city, right?" *Too soon, I guess.* Platinum's face fell, and he lowered his head as his ears flopped in defeat. "I need to write a letter in case we're able to send it." Coal had never been good at social situations. He didn't know how to offer support to Platinum. As the pair crossed the low bridge over the creek that had enabled the guard to drink at her duty station, Coal looked up to the rising hill. No grass yet, only stubby trees that looked to be metallic. Hoping to distract Platinum he asked "Pansy. Is that name related to the pegasus assistant at the time of the first Hearthswarming?"

Without raising his head Platinum said flatly "No." before taking a breath, and raising his head at least a little. He still had something of a thousand hoof stare, but added "The pegasus Pansies and earth Pansies were never related except for two marriages, and neither couple decided to have foals."

Coal was listening like he listened to clients. That is to say, mostly he was forming a letter in his head and listening for keywords that would change what he planned on writing anyway. Given the topic wasn't related to his letter, nothing changed the word collection he formed. Coal begged Platinum's pardon he levitated one of the scrolls to Celestia, or rather one of her bodyguards, and began writing. *Hope I have enough ink for this trip. Only brought one bottle.*

Ember-Orange says Luna thinks my nightmare trip through a dead Las Pegasus are paramagical.

I think I've just exited the east gate at about noon, and the scrub brush is made of a mixture of shiny

and dull metals. I'd pocket some but am afraid holding it would tie me to this place. Saw normal-L.P. but only in the middle of the street; walking away brought me here immediately, and standing in the middle of traffic eventually shunted me as the hole shrunk away.

There is a smell of forgotten, slowly rotting vegetation at major transition lines. I think. Maybe it's just pollution.

I will add to this, but if delivery isn't refused (we're not dead to each other) I'll just send it as-is; I feel the holes to normality will be increasingly rare.

Nothing here is edible, and there are two ponies splitting a half a day's grain to walk to Canterlot.

Coal tried sending it, but no heat formed. He could have tried harder, but he didn't want to wear himself out too soon, and already knew he was effectively dead.

Chapter 7

Grazing

There were pockets where the metal avant-garde sculptures gave way to grasses. At Coal's insistence, Platinum and he ate the grass, raw, stalks and all. At each pocket of grass Coal tried again to send his letter, and was unable. They had gone through his canteen an hour before the next stream, and Platinum was worrying himself into a colic session.

"You know what the doctors recommend about eating raw foods." His eyes were squinting in pain, and sweat dampened his sides.

Coal had eaten and drunk exactly half of what they had, and he was less than an inch taller than the earth pony, although in what just now struck Coal as an odd reversal, Platinum was much more slender of build. "Don't eat unless you have water to digest it." Coal quoted. "And I've no doubt colic is still the number one killer" Platinum grimaced, eyes closed before Coal could rush past the word. "but a major cause of colic is emotional upset."

Platinum managed to un-grimace his face as responded as flatly as could be. "I'm emotionally upset."

Coal sighed. "Yes, but I mean about the food. Don't make it worse by thinking its worse."

Platinum slowed his walk, and brought his chin towards his chest to grimace again before replying "So I'm supposed to feel good about how my gut is tightening?"

Coal gazed down the long, wide road ahead of them. It had not yet started climbing into the foothills, so the trail was fairly straight, although it wound back and forth enough that sight of the road's surface only extended perhaps two hundred hooves. Coal looked over at the sweating, occasionally stumbling form of Platinum Pansy and considered how he would have to respond if the earth stallion was in serious trouble after all. *A unicorn shouldn't be more durable than an earth pony, and he can't possibly be more of an office-working homebody than me.*

Platinum's labored breathing was uneven, keeping pace with the waves of pain rather than the swing of his legs. Coal felt no discomfort at all, so clearly there were important metabolic differences between the two stallions. But to Platinum's credit, he didn't slow any further, and eventually they crossed one of the great many small creeks that dotted the landscape.

It was scarcely three hooves across, not even warranting a pretend bridge as the road dipped to make room for the clear burbling stream. But hoping to relieve his digestive state, Platinum leapt into a stiff, short strided trot to shove his nose into the water.

Then disappeared just as he was about to reach it. *So I can send my letter while I drink?*

But Platinum reappeared, backing up slowly and his eyes as large as dinner plates. Seeing that his nightmare apparation had disappeared, he stopped. *Great, just what he needs on the edge of gastrointestinal failure.*

Platinum turned his head to face Coal without moving his legs any further. “You try that.” Coal nodded and began to step forward, and Platinum added “Fill that canteen for me, if there’s water over there.”

Coal would have turned and said to his companion something encouraging, like “of course” but he wasn’t there. Instead, just past the stream, there were two quadrepedal automaton pony-like apparitions. They took up as much space as he did but looked nothing, really, like a pony. The head was round on one, with what might have been antennae sticking out at odd places, and too many knees, filled with too many whirring gears to be any kind of ‘natural’ Coal could envision. The other one had a hexagonal tube where the head should be, and the neck was twenty or more pipes too far apart to be considered a single coil. Both were whirring and clicking as nearly every part seemed to be made of gears and levers in constant motion, often to no obvious purpose.

The hexagon headed one, to Coal’s left, folded in the ends of his hexagon, where the mouth would be if it were a head, and a concave surface extended. The ‘tongue’ vibrated, sounding like a cross between a landslide and dueling cellos. “You are not intentional.”

The one to Coal’s right, speaking somehow from its head with no mouth, and a voice that sounded like angry bees, added “We did not expect this.”

Coal tried to levitate his canteen out, and found magic worked just fine here. “I didn’t plan on being here, but since I find that I am ... is that water here, too?” He pointed to the stream, but in this place everything smelled of an old fire and fresh lightening. His smell was dampened by it and the sound of burbling didn’t carry over.

The one to Coal’s left replied “That fluid is not intentional.”

The antennae pony said “We do not know how that fluid came to be, nor its purpose here.”

So Coal Garnet stepped up to the stream, and held his nose very close to the surface, until he could again smell water. He stuck his lips in, and lamented that his peripheral vision barely allowed him to see the ... metal ponies, for lack of another word. But he was worried about Platinum, so he swalled carefully, and felt it was not only water, but the most pure tasting water he could remember in recent years.

When he raised his head, he found the automatons had not moved. The antennae’d one asked “What do you need that fluid for?”

Coal blinked, not sure how to answer that if these things didn’t drink. *Nearly everything inside me is either separated by flesh, or in suspension or solution.* He answered them “Lubrication, I guess?”

Which garnered an immediate reply from hexhead of “We can get a drone to oil you; our schedule has room for this excursion.”

Coal blinked for a moment and made sure he had a decent image of what they were saying. “No, thank you it needs to be water. Also you may have seen another pony with a different color coat, just now. He’s damaged and needs water to repair himself.” At least I think that sentence makes sense if one were talking to a music box that suddenly got up and walked to the store for maintenance needs.

The hexagonal headed one put away the concave surface, while the antennae one did nothing visible as Coal filled his canteen as best he could. He stepped back until the apparitions disappeared, and turned to find Platinum sitting down a couple strides behind where Coal thought he had been before.

Coal levitated the canteen to him, and noticed tears soaking into the hairs on Platinum’s face. Taking the canteen from the unicorn’s magical grasp, he said softly “Every time you disappear I worry I’ll never see you again either.”

Coal pointed at the canteen, his only reply to explain “Go ahead and finish that. I’ll refill it now. More than once, if you need.” Platinum said nothing, but greedily poured the first half of the canteen down his throat, then slowed, taking time to swallow individual mouthfuls until it was empty.

Giving the empty canteen back, the earth pony asked “How will we get past it?”

“It’s probably a small disturbance. We just walk, like we did at the east gate.” Coal started to take the canteen back, then thought of Platinum’s plight. “Come on. We’ll walk past them together.” He didn’t even flinch when the younger stallion pressed his shoulder into Coal’s ribs, his own ribs held tight to Coal’s back leg.

The transition was definitely six inches closer to the stream. Coal smiled and nodded at the two automatons, which had stepped closer to the stream by two strides at most. They looked up at the pair, giving the impression of being startled despite any facial features to convey emotion. “There are two of you.” said a horde of angry bees.

“That must be the damaged unit.” The cone was back out, the hexagonal head pointing it at Platinum Pansy’s head. The earth pony looked back and forth between Coal, who was busy trying to hold the canteen all the way under water, and the talking music box. Coal saw after a moment the other stallion nodded before stepping forward to plunge his lips into the small creek.

Then he jerked his head back and stared at the water. Not wanting to miss something important, Coal levitated the canteen out and looked over his shoulder. Platinum explained “The water comes from nowhere, and goes nowhere.”

Of course. Coal had been so focused on what the automatons were doing, he hadn’t looked up or down stream. It flowed into this universe from ten hooves to his left, and very clearly disappeared before getting the dirt wet five hooves past the southern edge of the road to his right. Coal snorted in derision before continuing to refill his canteen.”

The antennae one replied with “Where does this fluid come from? What does this” There was a pause as it tried to emulate the unknown word. “Water do?”

Canteen filled, he tried to answer. “Water is very common in the place where my friend and I are from. Metal, on the other hand, is extremely rare.” The two automatons shook noisily as they shrank a little from this assertion. “As to what water does...well, it’s a lubricant but for different materials than where you would use oil. And it conducts electricity, and I think it encourages metal to corrode.” At that last work, both automaton stepped back quickly from the stream.

“We should consult with the Celestial Offices about this phenomenon.” Said hexhead.

The other one replied “We shall return, then. Our mission is lost to us by this break in the plan.”

Coal, again blinked, trying to make sure he had heard right. “You have a Celestia? In Canterlot?”

The firewriter was already whipping out quill, and a celestia-tuned scroll, ink, and a knife so he could cut the scroll in half. Aloud, he asked the automatons “Excuse me, but I’m going to try contacting someone who might be able to adjust this ... break in the plan.” He waved a hoof at the stream of water blocking the metal paved road. “If you were, as an example, describe me briefly to a fellow of yours, what words would you reach for?”

“Smooth.” “Bendy.” “Squishy.” “A lump of softness.” Coal nodded as he wrote:

Dear princess Celestia

I assume this will reach the metal celestia; Somehow I, Coal Garnet, a unicorn of flesh, find myself in your world. As I am soft, not made of metal, and fairly squishy, I search for a way to get my smooth hide out of the way of your carefully ordered lands.

I search for a path to the fire-writer’s guild offices in Canterlot, atop the tall mountain I can see far in the distance from Las Pegasus. But if, when I arrive, I am solely in the land of metal, I shall search you out, in hopes you can provide some aid.

Coal didn't even roll or wrap it; the smell of decaying vegetation had entered his nose, and that seemed to signal the arrival of mute murals and unlistening recordings.

As the scroll's smoke drifted purposefully away, the antennae pony said with its angry bees voice, "That was cyclotronic thaumaturgy." Since it didn't have eyes, so far as Coal could tell, the flat delivery of that line left him confused as to which particular negative emotion was being conveyed.

Coal replied in as naïve a voice as he could manage, "Are there laws discussing ... that type of thaumaturgy?"

Meanwhile, Platinum whispered behind Coal "They've turned into automatons..." although Coal hadn't seen any change, but a quick glance at the water, and he noticed it disappeared before the downstream end left the road.

The hexagonal headed unit responded to Coal with "With no practitioners, there are no laws. Not at our level of complexity."

Coal would have asked for clarification, but all at once the stream disappeared completely, and the two talking units in front of him were replaced by easily identified moving statues. The one on the left was a pegasus, and on the right was probably supposed to be a bat pony. Their heads would transfer between looking at Coal, and at Platinum. But whatever mechanism initiated the motion, it couldn't control it very well, so every few seconds both heads would be wiggling, trying to center on their intended target. The legs of the bat pony looked un-articulated, made of a smooth, flowing metal that shone darkly, with purple and green highlights. But the pegasus moved his forelegs every other time he looked at Platinum.

"Yeah that's creepy. Let's step forward, see if they disappear." Coal suggested, then stepped. Nothing.

At the second step, the statues were again the bizarre automatons he'd been conversing with, and they were uncomfortable with this turn events, as evidenced by their sudden backpeddling to regain lost personal space. That Platinum splashed through the stream as he caught up to stand right beside Coal might have been part of their concern.

"You briefly ceased to exist, then regained existence at a new location." Said the hexagonal one.

"Yes," Coal replied. "we think there are several worlds stacked together, and we can't see the stairs to climb up or down by our own initiative." Just as he finished trying to come up with clockwork like words for what he thought was happening, his horn started smoking.

Meanwhile Platinum gathered the nerve to ask them (without looking at them, Coal saw) "Yeah do you know a place, or a way, to do that deliberately? Maybe we can find the place we're actually from, and just stay there."

The one to the right answered him. "That is **far** above our complexity level."

Coal's reply letter was actually spelllight cut through a thin sheaf of what he guessed to be copper. Annoyingly, it was rolled with the letters outside, but that was not immediately obvious because the writing was cut all the way through. When Coal finally rotated the scroll to read the outside edge first, he found the letters were upside down, too.

Fully unfurled, and fighting his levitation spell mightily, Coal read from the bottom, back edge of the letter. The sheaf of copper warbled in his spell like a badly tuned musical instrument.

Dear squishy pony-level unit,

I am aware of the many small breaks in the grand plan, but was unaware any had been large enough to allow a whole unit through. As you proceed with your programming as best you are able, be assured your plight has been put into calculations at a level or two above your complexity.

Considered, Mechalestia