

# Chapter 1

## Under a pile of glowing metal

Grey Horn levitated his wrench again, the resistant nut held in place by dust as much as by corrosion. At the top of the crater made of bomb-crushed cars, his sister Pear Rump watched the gray skies for sign of the return of the alicorn monsters. It had been three years since anypony had seen one, but they had left a very deep scar on the psyche of his otherwise very strong earth pony sister.

Her light blue coat was blowing in the slight breeze, looking more washed out for its length. Pear's body had decided this was winter despite the lack of cold weather. Truth be told Pear seldom had a sleek summer coat. But Grey's faded yellow coat **was**, which made fighting with ancient tech much easier since it was so often buried beneath mounds of once-working metal, now fused together.

"Hey you need to decide what you're packing. Movement two miles out." Pear's eyesight was no competition for a griffon's, but raiders tended to sport high contrasts compared to the browns of the blasted landscape.

"Nah sis." The wrench turned slowly, then stopped, still glowing gently as Grey concentrated on it. "They might not even see us." He'd gotten two pieces already from a wagon nearby. No spark battery but some control boards. And under this panel should be the power to run...

"I'm tellin ya they're making a bee line like they can smell us. No, wait up." The interruption was upsetting enough Grey looked up. Pear was facing the clouds now, squinting into the who knows what time sky, her back legs automatically bending to raise the improvised battle saddle's veritable cannon skyward. "Hiding here might be better."

Since she didn't sound terrified, that meant sky rats. The alicorn ... things were intelligent and not exactly war-like but very dangerous nonetheless. Dragging off unicorns, separating families. Pear Rump was an earth pony so they wouldn't care about her, but that

would just mean hers was a family that would be split by the things. Again.

Sky rats, though. "Pegasi?" They had never approached the town, but were known for killing lone scavengers. The two traders that had wandered through said they'd never met a pegasus pony ... but Grey and his sister saw them almost weekly.

Pear grunted assent. "Making their own bee line for trouble. Don't know why they do it they never talk to anybody down here." The pegasus tribe didn't participate in Equestrian politics, just shot things full of holes. Of course, there were a lot of things down here that needed holes added. Preferably to their head but right now he would more nearly wish for a hole through a certain steel panel. Grey's wrench slipped out of his spell's hold, pinging as it fell deeper into the pit. "Geez Grey." She switched to a near-whisper. "Don't make so much noise; the rats might hear us with their fancy tech."

Of course, the pinging had been no louder than the conversation but now his best tool was down that crevice. Still, it was wise to avoid attracting attention. This was the wasteland, after all. He covered the backside of his horn and called a light spell to mind, which made the tip of his horn glow. *Yep, down the crevice.* Canceling the light and putting his hoof back down, he concentrated on lifting whatever was just about ... *there.* Lifting carefully, he got his wrench back ... and a pamphlet with it. *Still legible.* He quickly jammed it into his pack without even a second glance. Everything pre-war was valuable somewhere, and Grey considered himself well read.

"Yikes they're just playing with 'em." Pear wasn't easily upset. No one who scavenged was. You saw too many things your first few weeks, and Pear had been amongst the first from the village to leave the walls. "Just tearing up their back legs from way up in the air. Luna's full moon." Grey was just as glad not to be seeing this. She didn't curse very often. "That's a mean thing to do. Yep, and there they go." Her tone was calm, matter of fact as the bane of the lonely disappeared whence they came.

The next pile of debris over from his shifted audibly. The noise was nearly behind Pear Rump, who whipped around as fast as she could. Eyes darting, looking for the source. "Grey?"

Too close, and no idea what made it. No barding and just his .25 revolver. Only seven rounds after the last meeting of local wildlife. Pear's saddle cannon would punch holes in everything but was very slow to reload. Time to hoof it out of here. As Grey turned back to the ramp formed of several wagons laying at odd angles, he saw a map, and more scraps of text. Levitating them too, he scrambled out ... just in time to hear an

un-pony scream from his right.

The air was split then silenced as Pear clamped down on her firing bit, the round flying through the air at what seemed to him, inches away from Grey's nose. Both his left eye was now blind because of the muzzle flash, and his right was blind because of the green flare as the slug tore the glowing one's shoulder apart, atomizing the overexposed once-flesh into a brief candescence of arcane energy.

Dead things walking didn't stop so easily. Grey started running, the world slowly returning from a black and white haze. He looked back only after he reached the top of the cliff that had stopped all these wagons, back when the world ended. It wasn't just a glowing-one, it was a zebra stallion of fairly impressive muscle and bone. From this angle he couldn't guess which holes were there before Pear shot it, but there was no way the two of them could kill it with their meager supplies. Grey shouted to his sister "Never mind reloading just run!"

She had already shoved the next round into the breach and closed it but had clearly come to the same conclusion and was running instead of fighting. The zebra stallion stopped but roared his defiance, which coincided with a wave of dizziness and nausea as well as a green flash of light. Grey could hear Pear saying something but it was lost to the ringing in his ears. Grey picked a wall just two hundred hooves further, and told himself he wouldn't look back or slow down until he was hiding behind it.

The once-zebra didn't follow them, and the sky rats had left after they had their fun. The crippled raiders still tried to walk this way, now only able to pull themselves with their forelegs. Five of them still moving, two dead. The siblings hid behind the wall as zebra zombie, his right ribcage and several formerly important organs missing, went back to shoving piles of rusting garbage around for who knew what reason. His ears ringing, Grey saw the current problem.

Pear's forelegs were covered in a distasteful mix of today's meal, now half digested, and bile. "Way over my limit." she managed to say once her sides agreed to let her be. Grey fished through his pack, finding the one bag of Radaway he'd brought. He levitated a precise beam of angry force into the straw hole, and floated it to his earth pony sister, who took it in her hooves.

She drank half, and offered the rest to him. It's true he was feeling ill too but he'd been tested last month and was below 25 rads then. Nearly clean. He shook his head. "No sis, we've got more at home. We'll split a second one, alright? But you need some real water to pee that back out with now."

"You like watching me pee in the bushes, don't you?" Grey's brow furrowed. His sister only made lewd

comments when she actually thought she might die. "Has that night-light found us yet?"

After making sure she was trying to down the last of the citrus flavored drug, Grey peeked around the wall. The glowing one had climbed out, and was attempting to dislodge one of the commercial wagons from the cliff face it was embedded into. "No sis. Let's start walking."

## Chapter 2

# Meet the family

There were no further interruptions thankfully, but Pear Rump was not well yet. Inside the walls of their city, only the airborne could threaten. The ground had even been dug out and replaced with steel plating so giant ants and the like couldn't burrow up from below. It made shopping and social calls loud because of the constant echo but at least it was a place to fall deeply asleep.

Pear collapsed on the couch, breathing heavily. Their mom was out on one of those aforementioned social calls apparently. Probably trading some of Grey's hoof-work, all of which was pre-war tech baubles, for food the Carrot family grew. Oddly, the Oranges grew most of the carrots, but radishes, an expensive luxury, had only ever been grown by the Carrots. The apple tree had long ago been declared communal property, tended by three families in turn and its fruit overseen by the council, which rarely had any of those farmers' family directly on it.

Grey filled a glass with water. That meant he was giving Pear his daily ration with her own, but she needed this right now. That didn't keep her from complaining however. "What are you going to rely on a half a rotted apple and two carrots for your -"

"Hush. And here's a Rad-away. When was the last time Doc Canonbone measured you for toxins?" He levitated the glass into her fetlocks, and set the chemical pouch on the table nearby.

"He only wants one kind of payment the creep." His sister scowled at him but greedily gulped down the whole glass of water. Setting the empty glass next to the chem pouch, she took it next, tearing it open with her teeth before apologizing. "Sorry, okay? About the peeing comment too, out there. I know that makes you uncomfortable but you live here and the three of you are like the only stallions and I'd honesty rather get knocked up by you not either..."

Grey shook his head. "We don't have to stay here I bet there are lots of other villages. We just need to follow the next trader band out and they'll take us to a town with an even mix of stallions and mares. So no

chance of it becoming inbred as fast as this place will be.”

Pear rolled her amber colored eyes, and focused on finished the last drops of the precious radiation remover. The sound of hooves at the door frame signaled a visitor, but both siblings knew by the cadence of foot-falls it was their mother, Vine Weeds-Horn.

”Hey mom. So we’re back a bit early” But Weeds hadn’t heard the greeting apparently because she was handing her son a plastic sack, of all things.

As he levitated it closer, he saw it was filled with a dozen carrots, an one lonely radish. ”Honey that glowy thing at the base of your bed fetched about four cartons of sweet & sour sauce so I traded three of them away for a proper meal;” their mother believed Rad-X was sweet and sour sauce. Rad-away got called orange sports drink. Despite being born to it, Vine Weeds was not ready to accept the apocalypse. ”you’ve been so busy. **Oh!**”

The larger earth pony stopped and stared at her daughter. Pear turned her pale blue head to her mom and said ”Yeah well we ran into a glowy thing out hunting around so I guess Doc Brother here thinks I should suck all that down.”

The older mare tsk’d and carried the rest of her things in a normal burlap sack into the kitchen area. Grey followed, trying to say ”Doc Cannon’s kit isn’t broken again is it? I think Pear’s pills are about out and she needs a checkup anyway”

Setting the tiny basket of salt, and a satin bag of what smelled like pepper into the cupboard, Vine corrected her wayward son ”Now that we’ve almost no stallions we need to make sure we don’t get all .. whatever that thing is. So she should stop taking birth control pills anyway. Next time she’s in season we might finagle something from him for it, or maybe–”

”You’re going to turn me into a commodity, aren’t you?” Grey managed to set the set the vegetables down without tearing the very fragile plastic bag, and did so without ever looking away from his mother’s eyes - the very same color as Pear’s, though none of the rest of her looked the same.

Vine Weeds stopped in her routine, and harrumphed, brow furrowed. ”Oh, honey. You should be proud of your assets.”

Grey sat down, and tried to clear his thoughts for what would be a losing argument. ”It’s a false economy. There are always more raiders showing up, which means there are breeding colonies of ponies somewhere. Someday the Equestrian army or heck just an all-male band of traders is going to show up and baby juice won’t be worth anything anymore.”

"Right now this is how we're paying our mortgage. Not to mention upkeep on my garden." Their mother also went through the motions of watering the rocks out front, insisting there were flowers growing there. Also . . . there wasn't a mortgage. Hadn't been a currency system in use since the zebras destroyed all the rest of the trappings of a complete civilization.

Fortunately for the family, Mr Horn had convinced her to use an empty coffee can years ago. So every few days she watered her imaginary flowers with imaginary water and overlooked her references to pre-war banking principles.

Vine threw a front leg around her son's neck. "Oh please tell me you're not thinking of moving out now? After we lost the priest you're the third best educated in the village." She stepped back to tousle Grey's forelock. "And a full stallion, and fairly healthy. It's not a commodity, it's a doggone rarity."

"Also the youngest stallion, and I still believe in -"

"Third oldest stallion if you'll recall. Also if you recall this stuff makes you pee. Be right back." Came from the main room where Pear, feeling much better already, was hoisting herself to her hooves to make her way to the public privy, her winter coat blowing in the evening breeze as she left.

Grey's mom followed Pear's exit with her nose before commenting "She's still on the pill, isn't she?"

"Mom the council is a bunch of horny old mares we don't even have the *resources* for"

Vine gently shook her son's shoulders "Now hear me young colt I won't stand for you bad-mouthing our council. They foresaw the incident ahead of time, and since more than half the village is still here they have kept our long term survival in mind when they made their recommendations." She went back to putting food-stuffs away, finishing with "and we need the leverage you bring to buy common vegetables if you're finding you can't even be outside a full day without getting attacked by gangs any longer."

Flinging his ears in frustration, Grey Horn took his not-even-slightly gray hide to bed, hoping to sleep off his frustration.

He was asleep when his sister came in after dinner, and still asleep when the village farrier / blacksmith came to get him.

Hooves pounding, a heavy, wide and tall bundle of muscle and bone ran up the short ramp and into the doorless entry. "Caem kweek fer ther a pone wha ah ner done see. Kin tok bu all melta and kin flae; she ha sma wagn wha flae wi her and ah thi she wan tra bu she say ma tung too thick fer er." The yellow pony with green eyes was almost shouting for joy.

In his state of stupor her words hadn't formed meaning yet. Mjoelnir's accent, which Grey thought of as a 'country bumpkin' accent for lack of any better frame of reference, had always required concentration for him to follow. Pear, more the socialite in her youth and less the bookworm, had learned it better and was already conversing as she jumped up from her sleep.

It was still dark out, he noted finally opening his eyes.

"So, he's, what? A sky-rat?" Upright, but not used to being woken this way. Pear was rubbing sleepy dirt out of her eyes now.

"Nae."

Grey rolled upright more slowly. This was no invasion; just a single pony-like thing. But, flying and not a pegasus? "So, one of those bird-things? With claws instead of hooves." He was upright now. Why was Mjoelnir bursting in here, again?

"Greeon; nae. Lak skyra bu all melta." The sizable pony danced a bit in anticipation, before stopping mid-dance, a foreleg poised high. She called again for the aid of young Grey, and his tradables, in process explaining the trader was a 'she.'

Of course the first trader in months would be yet another mare. "Best shiny bits. Right. Let her know the resident egghead is interested in trading maybe?" The sibling came out of their bedroom to see Vine standing bewildered in her living room.

"Ah-oud bu shae cannae unnerst meh. Sae mah tung be t'thick." Turning to Vine she nodded politely. "Tahppa th morn tya Vahn Wee"

Blinking her surprise back, Vine just suggested "I'm not sure we've climbed far enough up the clock to call it that, but yes Mjoelnir. What's gotten you up in the middle of the night?"

"A trader. And a strange looking one by the sound of it." Pear explained, her voice sounding sleepier than her face implied. "Not a griffon, not precisely a – oh, wait. Melted, Mjoelnir? Like, too long out in the sun?"

"Aye."

"What." Vine's ears were pinned, her weight unconsciously shifting backward. "Why would one of those things pretend to be a trader."

His pack over his shoulders, Grey started levitating some of his assembled items into the bags. "Apparently this one can talk. Just can't understand Mjoelnir but her cave accent is thicker than many others'." bags filled with the most expensive of local items, albeit also the most narrowly interesting, he waved their visitor on. "I'm sure it's fine, Mom."

The blacksmith rared in excitement, and ran off, her hooffalls echoing loudly as she turned left, probably to get the alchemist who made gunpowder for the



village. It was still dark and hers were the only steps being heard. Grey was walking more carefully, although most of that could be attributed to fatigue.

The walls were actually very thin; also only about forty hooves tall. But the . . . thing waited politely outside, still in the traces of her wagon which was barely visible in the little bits of artificial light that spilled out through the gate. A unicorn and an earth pony sat to either side, a respectful distance but leaning on their spears should something less well intentioned arrive to investigate the open doorway.

It did indeed look melted. Grayish brown, hairless except in a few patches, and raw bones sticking out from her sides. The poor lighting and the odd damage to the visitor's eyes made it hard to tell for sure, but Grey thought the eyes weren't lining up very often. But it had lips, and was smiling broadly as he approached.

"Hello!" Its voice sounded like a grinding machine getting stuck on the pile of steel wool just dumped in. "My name is Ditzzy Doo and I'm a wasteland trader looking for new routes and new friends and great cooks because I love a good muffin or even parasprite pancakes because nothing cements friendship like food! How are you!"

Despite looking like it was dead, the visitor conveyed incredibly vibrancy, straining against the traces as it was, ears (what was left of them) quivering in delight to track Grey's approach. "Good morning pony. My name is Grey Horn and I'm the village technician - I work on pre-war stuff and make shiny stuff into useful stuff." Grey stopped to wipe any sleepy dirt from his eyes. Yesterday hadn't been half as harrowing as his goodnight speech had made it seem, but he'd barely gotten five hours of sleep and he never did well first thing in the morning. Finally reaching the gate, he stepped outside, and extended a hoof to the trader. "I understand you had a bit of difficulty understanding our guard whom you first met. Can you understand me?" he moved his hoof to indicate his chest.

The visitor nodded faster than a paint shaker, and proceeded to unlatch itself then run to the back of the small wagon and began unloading wares. There was very little edible in the mix and what she had, looked like pre-war sealed packages. But there were undamaged rifle barrels, and a few piles of ammunition, and coffee cups both chipped and unchipped. Everything was separated accordingly. In fact the whole affair looked like a small storefront, set up within a minute while he watched. The placement of the things made it clear their approximate value - the expensive things, like the five pieces of steel barding from an unlucky ranger's suit, were set out at one end, and stuff you find in every still-standing building were at the opposite corner. This was a trader who wanted to extend a sense of fairness.

It nearly made Grey break down into tears seeing the sheer honesty on display in front of him.

The ghoul set a large burlap bag down last, against her wagon. "Uhm, not to be nosy but what's in there?" He pointed with his hoof, then realized it was a little dark out, so he lit up his horn. It made keeping eye contact with the trader a little difficult but he'd been having difficulties anyway so he wasn't that worried about it.

"Caps." The trader looked surprised to be asked.

"Can I see?" The trader flicked her ears in confusion, listening to nothing for better answers, but politely stuffed its face into the bag, and brought out four bottle caps, used but without corrosion. "So, those have value elsewhere? They don't, exactly, here in this town."

"It's money. Like pre-war bits." the trader explained. Well, they were about the size of bits, and now a days were much harder to find than they would have been a hundred and twenty-plus years before.

A light bulb went on in Grey's head. Turning back to the gateway, he saw his sister. "Pear can you see if old nag Runners wants in on this? His prewar bottle cap collection will have real buying power for the town." Of course, he didn't have any idea what the buying power of a single cap was, but it was always better have good things you didn't absolutely need when you stopped a trader on her route.

Pear touched a hoof to her ear, and turned to trot off. *I need barding, if I can get it.* But any fresh herbs will mean more for the village - either to the alchemist for her drugs and gunpowder making, or for doc Canonbone to make medicines with. Since no council members were up yet, he decided to barter on behalf of the town, and started setting aside things he wanted. Also a revolver that was of a bigger caliber than his .25 along with the four rounds the trader had for it. .32ACP they said on the back. Not much bigger but there was no .25 ammo available this run. All told, the trader said the pile of stuff would be valued at six hundred and twenty caps.

By this time Runs The Ridges had arrived, his own burlap sack jangling with his precious collection. There were only about four hundred there, he knew but he hadn't tried to sell any of his own stuff yet, so after explaining it to old man Runners ... "Aye I'm wantin' some of the things here. Have ye paid yet lad? No? Then I'll be askin' ye, mister ... err, miss? About that pile of fresh greens." There was a small pile of what could loosely be called fresh herbal content with the rest of the things Grey had set aside. "And I see oranges and all these colors, aye. They're for the city, they are. Sixty? Aye, let me count 'em out, young ... err, just what are you?"

The trader giggled, and Grey was again put in mind of an industrial grinding appliance getting stuck; the operator toggling the directional switch trying to regurgitate the offending piece of sheet metal. Then the trader whipped around, her tailbone lacking more than three hairs, all of which were held off to the side so they could see in Grey's light the misshapen mound of what were supposed to be girl bits. Then she whipped back to face her customers, and the bones on her side that Grey had noticed early on, shot out away from the trader's rib cage. There was still some meat on the bones in many places, and perhaps three or four feathers handing onto that meat with grim determination.

And then the trader flapped the bones. Surprisingly, no rotten meat fell off, and even more astoundingly, the mare floated gently into the air and hovered two or three hooves above everyone's head. Then she landed just as gently, and her wide smile was back, fortunately not really ear to ear just wide enough to describe it that way. "I'm a pegasus mare ghoul. Also the only native of Cloudsdale left, I think. Hello! My name it Ditzzy Doo." The smile was gone as her eyes rolled and her ears thrashed in consternation. "Or did I tell you that already? Hmm. Oh well!" The smile was back, and the trader lunged first at Grey, forelegs wrapped around his neck, her mane smelling approximately like a campfire of burning tires and bloatsprites.

Then just as fast, she was hugging Runs the Ridges, and then she was done, a satisfied smile adorning her face, head held at a jaunty angle.

The scavenged - and - cleaned electronics didn't fetch much from her; about two caps each for several. But the assembled arcanomotor, once demonstrated to Ditzzy by attaching his one spark battery, thrilled and delighted her and was valued at fifty three caps. Another hundred for letting go of his tiny revolver and all its remaining ammunition.

By this time Steel Padlock and arrived, and accepted the donation bought on behalf of the whole village from old man Runners. Padlock lit up her own horn, thought it was starting to get light out naturally, and she said as she set the plants down behind her "You know I can't pay you directly; I'm already carrying Canonbone's foal. My daughter won't be old enough to have her first season for a year or more but I'll promise she can have your foal if we're not square by then." Runners raised an eyebrow and harrumphed dejectedly. "You know you should get out more old man. We need that kind of diversity."

Cue awkwardness. Grey would be expected to have a marefriend soon. Several, in fact. Probably all the mares that weren't Pear Rump nor already knocked up. He'd mentally add Vine Weeds-Horn but was pretty sure she was already excluded from that list as part of

the 'knocked up' crowd. In two years the village would be more foals than adult ponies.

"Hey Ditzzy are there other towns around here? Not that I'm trying to cut you out but it would be nice to know who we're trading with...." The pegasus ghouled considered, tapping a hoof that managed to look squishy against her chin.

"I haven't seen all of them, but I know there's one to the north west I was just at. Their overmare was a creepy stallion but no one was upset to live there and they were almost growing their own food. OH!" At this, the pegasus disappeared into her wagon, and came back with a wooden box with a mixture of unreadable text, and arcane symbols written, burned, and formed with stacks of glue, covering the whole of it. "Can you take this there? I won't get back I don't think for a month or more and I agreed to see it get to that stallion that I didn't like talking to that lives there, but I didn't catch his name."

Grey levitated the box closer. It wasn't heavy, and whatever was in it was packed well enough there was no weight shift when he rotated the box. His education on formal arcanology was sparse but it seemed to have a bizarre collection of symbols - a boost to muscle strength, a curse against vision, a raw-output form commonly used in bomb making. "I assume its booby trapped against the wrong pony opening it?"

The trader made a duck face with her lips. "I didn't ask. Were you going to open it?" She looked at the box with a furrowed brow, deep in thought.

"Wouldn't try it for a thousand caps. Where did you say it was going?" It was a hoof long on two sides, maybe two thirds that in height if the hinge was where he thought it was. He placed it in his pack, and saw the trader was staring intently over her shoulder, back where she had come from.

She stood up on her hind legs, balancing with her wing bones, and stared some more. Finally dropping to her hooves she said "I don't know. I mean I know I could fly there but it's back that way and I don't think there's any trail I just flew here. But the city is that way" She pointed with her left foreleg. "Probably three days flight if you don't run into anything nasty. So, uhm, that's probably two weeks if you walk, is the way I hear that works out." She rocked back a ways, and pinned her ears briefly, before letting them point at Grey again. "Do you want me to take it back?"

"No Ditzzy Doo I'll deliver it. That way, then?" He pointed, and tried to orient himself by the terrain, of which his village had none. He'd just have to set markers every half mile and make sure he was something close to straight. "Does their city have walls like this one?"

"Uhm, no. Well, yes. Great big thick walls." She winked. "It's in a hole, so you'll have to trip over it to find it. Sometimes they have a steel foundry going though, so you can see the smoke. Hey if you have scrap steel I bet they'd buy it! And sell you ingots you could sell to your town farrier."

That last, was overheard by Mjoelnir, who piped up from some distance away "Stee lingo snao? Twuh be wundrss ta forj ree me'l." ... *So, bring a cart then.* No way a few dozen ingots, and nothing less would please the avid blacksmith, would fit neatly in his saddlebags.

"Maybe the second trip, okay Mjoelnir?" He called out "I need to travel light so I can be sure to find it and get back okay. Okay?" The yellow earth pony granted a defeated *aye*, and was silenced.

The trader squinted at Grey. "What did she say?"

Steel Padlock, looking over the collection and laying down a blanket with some of her things of medium value on a blanket an assistant had brought, explained "That's our town blacksmith. She wants the ingots pretty badly."

This elicited an *oh!* of surprise, followed by one of those I LOVE THE WORLD grins, followed by her racing madly about her wagon and her display, before she stopped suddenly in front of council mare Padlock and stated very dejectedly "I don't have any." Her facial expression became neutral, than happy again as she explained "I can bring some next trip!" which garnered the response of a much happier *aye!* from Mjoelnir, still inside the village walls.

Grey wanted to leave the others to their trading – the visitor had packed an impressive lot of things into her wagon, but he needed a little more before venturing out to find this hole in the ground village. "Who is getting this package, Ditzzy Doo?"

She looked up from her appraisals of proffered artifacts of their heritage from the caves, to ask "hmm?" Then "Oh the package! Right. I don't know." Grey resisted facehoofing. "Not exactly. But it's the overmare stallion of the town that you can't find. I mean, you probably will but it'll be a bit hard from the ground. Also, he's creepy. ... "

Grey pointed in the direction the trader had indicated before.

"That's right! The town is that way but don't fall into the canyon in the way. There might be a bridge. Unless that was somewhere else." Grey resisted facehoofing. Barely. "Anyway I didn't catch his name but he's the creepy stallion in charge. All the rest of the townsfolk are pretty nice; give it to him. No wait make him give you ten caps. You're not going alone are you?"

"No Ditzzy I'll take some friends." This apparently was the right answer, because she leapt over the aisles

of goods to engulf him in a vigorous hug again. Grey patted her sides a few times with his hoof, not knowing what else to do.

And with that he was forgotten, the pegasus ghouled back to appraising goods being sold to her. So Grey wandered inside, wondering how many apples he could get for one of the newfound bottle caps.

## Chapter 3

# Longest Journey Starts with

(it's still really long though)

His mom didn't want Grey traveling so far afield when several hours distant had almost killed him. The blacksmith begged off because there were customers here in the village. "Ah cannae, fer alletta bakorded bardn; nn thdo wha say ah minna delik condnta be go un farafld."

"He says that to everyone that isn't old man Runners or myself, Mjoelnir."

Steel Padlock tried to officially dissuade him on account of his being one of three viable stallions and Runs The Ridges was getting up there in years with only seven confirmed foals by him. "You don't want the whole village having to revere our town doctor as a god just because they're his immediate offspring, right? And you're the unicorn in the crowd that has to make you feel special."

Grey didn't reply directly, such as with a list of things that would make him feel special, since he wanted to have a home to come back to. He replied with "I'm not jumping ship I'm trying to establish trade relations. And too, I need to know about more areas to scavenge because none of us can build this stuff anew we have to save it from the past."

The council mare was mollified, barely. Moldy Walls, their neighbor, was against it and never slowed down long enough to be mollified by any sensible answer. "I cannae believe you're leaving on some vain hope of, what now? Used bottle caps from a villain so inconceivable a *talking ghoul* of all things was disturbed and chose against going back." Her green and blue tail swished in obvious agitation.

Vine Weeds couldn't decide whether to ground him for having ideas, or demand that he carry the kitchen sink on his back in case it turned out to be needed. "I've already lost track of Mister Horn; but to lose Master Horn so soon after! And I will **never know** if I've actually lost you because you're going away and *young man*! You're not leaving without a proper pack here this

is prewar wool it won't rot in our humidity it was ensorcelled by one of the few unicorns that lived in the caves during the darkness. Honey I'd give you my H-and-H vault barding outfit if I still had it but we sold it when we got married fat lot of good that did I guess the Horn line of unicorns is over now I would never have gotten married if I had known two decades ago it would turn out like this now."

"Thanks, mom."

Grey was seriously concerned he'd have to venture out alone after all but Pear Rump, pale blue winter coat and amber eyes both looking especially soft today, replied "Of course I'm going you dweeb you think I'm sticking around with Mom? While she's depressed over something?" Vine Weeds-Horn would be spending a lot of time soon, tipping an empty tin can over the rocks carefully placed around their walkway. And cooing at birds no one else could see, if three years ago was any indication.

It turned out one of the other scavengers, a unicorn with a deep orange coat and almost white mane, had more rounds for his .32; of course she wanted his foal in exchange. "I want to be pregnant when I talk to that creepy doctor is that so bad?" But she only had eleven rounds and he thought, incident or no, losing his virginity should be worth more. When she started offering to throw in all her food supplies he nearly caved in but she wasn't in season properly speaking so it wouldn't work anyway. "Okay so just take the ammo but I want to bring this up again, alright? That means you have to get back so we can even up."

Pear was doing all she could convince herself to do, which was next to nothing, to keep from falling over laughing at the exchange. "Why does the wasteland have a chivalrous savior, hmm? Explain that to me."

But it was the case, that the morning after their first trader to visit in six months left them, the pair was ready at first light. Or at least the time when it was less pronouncedly dark. The heavy clouds made day/night cycles unclear but the priest had said the spirit of the princesses still operated the heavenly bodies in their times, so it was probably true.

Several earth ponies, who were wont to getting up early anyway, saw them out the door. Then closed it behind them. "Gee you'd think they weren't expecting us back." It was true; the pair's normal scavenging trips didn't often have the door shut so soon behind them. It wasn't like there was often much alive out here to lock out – the walls were mostly needed to block wind storms that could knock over the village housing.

Right outside the village was was a rolling set of hills, and something akin to a grass had set up shop and was waving in the gentle breeze. It made the brown less frightening than the blasted plains he expecting to



cross by mid afternoon. Looking at the walls, Grey pictured the particular rivets he was standing near when he pointed at the distant city. Then he looked at the featureless sky, and the broken and forgotten trees in various places in the distance. With that, he left the worn trail to make as straight a line as possible.

"Whoa, there. Why we leaving the road so soon?" Pear trotted after him, then was forced to a walk, as that's all the faster Grey was going.

"Since we can't see any landmarks of any value, we're going to have to concentrate on going in a straight line. Which is this way." Just to the right of the imaginary point, there was a rock outcropping that stuck into his line of sight. Almost directly to his left, was the skeleton of a skyscraper. A building, but a city building. At least according to the priest, who had grown up in a different city. *Not that one*, he'd explained. *That city is, no more*. But since it was very distant, it would stay in his peripheral vision longer, so those were the two markers he noted as he walked.

"It'll take forever at a walk, though. Lets at least step it up a notch." With that, Grey's sister trotted away from him, mostly keeping a straight line. Grumbling, Grey trotted too, trying to keep absolute concentration locked onto his two distant markers.

There was a reason, though, that the road curved in the places it did. A swarm of four hoof long scorpions emerged out from a hole in the ground just as Pear crossed. "Scorpions; run!" Grey would just have to hope she maintained a straight enough line. There wasn't enough ammunition to rid the world of these things and they never attacked at range, lacking tail mounted lasers.

They gave up after a while, too. Eventually.

It was a good five minutes of an all out gallop on Grey's part, who had to go twice as long to not cross paths with any of the angry insects. But once he was caught up, and there were no further sounds of the scorpion's clicking, he called for a halt, and Pear obligingly slowed to a stop.

He was dripping with sweat. Pear's heavier coat wouldn't show it for another ten or twenty minutes, but she was wider, heavier than he was so likely to have used more precious water than he did. *'if you make it'* the trader had said. An hour out and he was having second thoughts.

Pear pulled a bottle of water out of her pack. They had explained to the council member and water master last night they expected to be away many days, and had stored up four days ration for each of them from their failing water talisman. But the trip would obviously take longer. Grey wanted to be sparing in the extreme. Open water out here was a thing to be feared, not tested and certainly not consumed.

But Pear had finished half a bottle already. Half a day's ration. She held the bottle out to him. He finished it off. The best place to store your water is in your tissues, he remembered reading once. So be it, they'd consumed half their water then.

Grey looked around for his markers, tried to guess how far back the skyscraper skeleton should have slid, and reoriented himself. In front of them, then, was a gentle downslope with a combination of bare rock and loose dirt. Not even a poor excuse for vegetation; just dirt. A mile distant and the slope flattened, and there were green things grew there. Poisonous all of them, but growing. He knew where he was, having scavenged in the dirt there once. The road would have been three times longer taking it, and he hadn't known exactly how the land met up since the road took all precedence.

Pear knew it, too. "That's where you found the spark batteries last year, isn't it? And got sick trying to eat the green berries."

Walking, now. Head high, never losing sight of their destination. "They were mushrooms not berries. The berries smelled like a bad day but the mushrooms at least didn't smell of anything."

She tossed her mane several times, trying to dissipate her body heat from the run. "Doc Meadow said you probably absorbed taint and would grow a second horn."

"I wonder if the incident gave her a second horn." It shouldn't have been said. It was callous to berate the dead. But it had been said, and he regretted his words.

Pear followed, head held low as she remembered friends and neighbors lost. "I wonder what really happened to them. The ones they took, I mean." The ones they didn't take were either very far afield hunting, or locked in very well reinforced cellars. Except for the ones who could fight, and could not run. Those, the village brought all the biggest of the pieces, and threw them in together for a mass funeral pyre. It was all they could do: there would have been no way to tell which piece went to which pony.

Something distant chattered. Probably a lizard; it sounded cold and heartless enough. Pear sighed. "You know they're right to have issued that decree. There were only two colts at that time and already one has died from pneumonia. Heck I doubt anyone would care if you got me pregnant. Inbred is still better than extinct."

Grey's sister had always been fairly verbally strong in her resistance to 'the decree.' That since there were no towns nearby they knew of since the cave ponies and the stable ponies had merged to form the village, all the mares needed to try and produce heirs. Hopefully enough colts would be made that the edict, and

the resulting economic shift, could be nullified in a few more years. Grey looked over his shoulder at his older sister. "We're going to a town. I bet they have stallions there. Heck you might not even have to pay him to mount you."

Pear poked Grey in the shoulder fairly hard. "I for sure wouldn't have to pay you anything."

"You're still on the pill, though, right?" Pear nodded. "Singing Bird must mix it so you wouldn't have to see Canonbone about it?" Again, she nodded.

"I didn't bring any with me, though. Not sure how long it'll be before I have a normal season but I'm serious. If you want your first time with your sister"

Grey rolled his eyes. It's not like he'd never thought about it. Since he knew her, she was much more approachable. "Hey can I have those apples? Look I sold all my shiny stuff for a roll of solder wire are you pregnant yet? How about a foal for this basket of " Grey's heart was pounding; his vision red from the very raw reality of his parody of a shopping trip. He struck outward with his left forehoof, catching a loose rock and sent it went flying. Grey snorted, precious water droplets mixed with his breath and were sprayed everywhere in front of him.

Pear fell silent for a moment, then said "I know it's not fair. But it's natural to want to keep living, and foals are how most ponies do that."

They were nearly to the bottom of the hill now, and Grey slowed a bit, to make sure he was keeping a straight line. The road was just there, and they could walk along it for a ways. "I'm all in favor of staying alive, but when did it take precedence over being good? Or choosing fairness. Why is it wrong to die? Or to die out in this case."

"I want to raise a foal. I want to see my foal grow strong, and to play with friends, and to be proud of their cutie mark."

"By your husband, you mean. Not some stranger, and not some creepy unicorn."

"Mucky is gone, though." She said it with a straight face. Long, sad face even. But Swims In Muck?

"You were sweet on him? Did he even know? Also, sis, he had an even worse coat color than Moldy Walls."

They were at the bottom of the hill, and had to watch the ground for plants so toxic even walking across them would kill. As well as keep their head high enough they could, without a compass, walk a straight line. Pear Rump smirked, and sighed with resignation. Grey had to stop, as there was a damaged screw driver and four wood screws that had been exposed since last he'd been through here. As he levitated them into his pack, Pear shook her head. "Loose pile of crap." Grey nodded.

”Just like my cutie mark says. I like collecting stuff. And then I use it later and everyone is amazed. But it’s all useful.” Fortunately none of the plants here could move. The priest had said there was a blue plant that could grow suddenly. It would lie in wait, then engulf a poor pony in its vines, and cast a spell of the pony’s own speaking upon it, the resultant bizarrely chosen and badly timed spell usually causing eventual death for the unwary traveler.

As before, Grey Horn wended carefully, mindfully of their route’s end. Pear Rump walked through the plants without a 2nd glance. Truthfully she’d probably get there just fine but he needed to use his system for him, and she needed hers for her. They’d been on more than a few hunting trips before. Pear started skipping, talking about what her cutie mark said. Of course he’d heard it before, but there was no reason to slow her down. Everypony liked to talk about themselves.

”Ponies think my mark says I shoot things.” It was a barrel, smoke emanating from it, pointing at very small, indecipherable almost, crossed bones and skull. ”But that filly was being chased down by a scorpion twice her size the poor thing. And the mother was running around screaming. Our mother, well. ...”

Grey nodded, not looking away from the tip of the rock outcropping that was scratching the surface of the next hill.

”All I could find was Rocky’s anti materiel rifle. By the time I could see straight again I found I had a broken shoulder and a cutie mark. But it’s about protecting what’s right.” Out of the corner of his eye, Grey saw Pear’s lip tremble; her legs stumble as she looked at her baby brother. ”Protecting those I love.”

Grey stopped so he could lift his front left leg, inviting Pear into a hug. He never got emotional about his own cutie mark story, but he knew Pear Rump still felt awful about the Great Incident. Losing so many went against her destiny, after all. But this was the wasteland. She sniffled back a tear, wiped her nose on Grey’s chest, and went back to walking as merrily as she could.

There was a rattle behind them. ”Speaking of protecting, is the firing bit in your mouth?” His own pistol was in his pack. Stupid. This area had ants as well as the occasional lost scorpion; you should never let your guard down.

Grey whirled around, and threw magic in the direction of the sound. He couldn’t fire a forceful point of pushing, like a bullet, nor did he know any real shield spells, but he had created a sort of halfway point, that was like making his target hold a plank of wood, then getting his sister to buck it plum into their face.

A scorpion slid back, it’s stinger glowing orange. It hit a giant ant, who was apparently trying to grab it.

Convenient, but there was more rattling behind them again. Whirl, strike, observe. Two more giant ants, no scorpions. The ants were the ones making the clattering noise. One of the new ones had mandibles that reached halfway to the ground. That meant he was also angrier than the other two. And there was a nest somewhere because he saw two more of the angry ants crawl straight up out of the dirt some ways off.

Just as Pear's cannon went off, he started running. It was at a random angle to their left, but it would avoid the critters they were not prepared to take down. Ants were much more territorial than the scorpions, though. Two hundred hooves of brisk trotting and they had stopped. Disappeared even. The scorpion with the glowing stinger was badly disabled, missing two right legs and leaking ichor from the middle of its tail. But it was still coming after them so they had to keep going.

The jaunt had put them on the road. It wasn't like critters avoided it per se, but since it had been beaten down into almost rock, there were fewer plants just along this path, and it was harder to burrow under. But it was curving back. The place where he had mentally marked it as overlapping his path would take them dangerously close to the newly erupted anthill.



## Chapter 4

# Is that why no one saw it before?

*Ever straight as the light, my brothers!* Or so one of the fiction books he'd read had said. That was a lot of years ago, and also shortly after the priest of the princesses had taught him to read. He wasn't sure what was going on, but it seemed to be about talking rocks that couldn't steer so they had to hope they didn't float past anything big enough to pull them off their course.

Grey and Pear had been pushed and pulled off course. Shiny buried power tools that could be cleaned and either made to work or stripped for parts that would make other almost functioning tools work. The relics of the past would be made to rebuild the future! Or so Grey told himself when he went to sleep some nights, when he felt especially fanciful.

They had been walking for a whole day and were almost to the bare rocks that had no soil covering them anymore. He'd seen it from a distance once before and been scared off, but that was years ago. Or so he told himself.

"It was about six months before we were this far, right?" Pear looked around, head high but not trotting any more. Neither had gotten into the water again, and they both were feeling the fatigue of prolonged travel. "You were worried about sleeping out here so we ran home ears flat."

"You've heard the noises haven't you? There are things that are nocturnal. We won't be able to see them and if they're big enough to make noise they probably eat ponies." It was a commonly made, well educated guess: the wasteland liked eating ponies.

Grey's sweat turned cold, his ears pinned flat to his neck as he suddenly realized the obvious. This was to be a multi day trip. Camping, as it were; roughing it; outside at night, and more than once. They had brought a blanket each to keep the cold out but not so much as a tent much less a steel shed.

Pear saw his reaction and shook her head. "You're a little slow on the uptake. We'll have to cross the rocks. The griffon that came to visit when I was a filly said

there was a windstorm every couple of days, but it was only a few hooves wide. Once we cross the rocks, we'll be back on real soil."

"No sis, I've never slept outside before. Nocturnal pony eating beasts and all." It sounded like he was afraid of the dark. He wasn't, not in the foalhood way. Just the very real fear something would eat him and he wouldn't see it coming.

But then they were to the rocks. Loose, large, some jagged some looking like a wet sponge long forgotten. Some perfectly square, but all of them moved a little bit when you stepped on them. It was worse than walking on sand. Tiring, frightening, and distracting just as the light was beginning the first parts of lessening.

Then the wind picked up. A strong breeze at first, within minutes it was pushing them to the left. Pushing hard enough and never letting up that Grey's heart was beating double time as much with exertion to be the chooser of where his next step put his hoof, as for the fear he would be blown away.

Silly, that. He weighed nearly a hundred pounds. But the wind was whistling across the rocks. Every loose grain of sand whipped up and smashed against his right side. He had to keep his right eye shut for all the sand in the air now. Even his larger sister, an earth pony and hard to move around for her internal magic, was panting now. Sweating surely but he couldn't see it, as the wind whipped the moisture away. His own right side getting cold, his left uncomfortably damp. Then he saw movement to his right.

No, just a bit of sand. There was a sudden cliff. Deep enough the sand was accumulating in the eddies of the wind. "Pear look! I think we can camp there!" He hoped the wind took his words to her, for it took them clean away from himself. His sister replied but he couldn't make it out.

The change in course required walking almost straight into the wind. Forcing treacherous step after treacherous step. But there was not just a cliff, but a veritable ramp. Artificial; of pony construction. A hill going straight down in the middle of the barren rocks.

And as soon as they were far enough down that the cliff was above their backs, the wind wasn't whipping them even slightly. It still howled above them. Below, darkness. Darkness was descending above, and Grey trusted caves above plains any day.

Pear was less convinced. "Creepy. What happened here?" Grey rolled his eyes.

He found in his pack the miniature battery and the light it powered. Clicking the on switch, he levitated the headlamp to his sister's ears. "Canst ask that, miss?" Grey tried to emulate the cave accent, but he'd grown up on the other side of the village. So had Pear. This should be obvious to her.



"That's what I'm saying, this isn't a cave." She'd recognized the forced accent, but not the full implication.

He'd get in trouble for being smug, but it also fueled his courage, which fought off the fears of the falling night. "So, what is it? Why don't you speak in a cave accent?" Grey poured magic through the tip of his horn. A very carefully wasteful spell, it lost all its power creating light. It barely generated any heat at all.

"You and I grew up on the other side. Heck Grey you're a unicorn." Her eyes never leaving the tunnel's invisible end. For as they descended the straight sides, the darkening non-roof made it clearly a tunnel.

"Where did the unicorns come from?"

"The stable you silly filly. But we moved away and took all the steel with us. Well what we could detach." Grey watched, but there was no flicker of recognition yet. Not for the meaning of where they were going. The skeleton they were about to trip over however ... "That's a griffon."

Grey looked down. Every bone had been separated from the next; every scrap of flesh burnt away in the bale fires of hatred from a century ago and more. But he counted, and it did look like it would have to have been a griffon. Grey nodded at Pear.

"Not Stable Tec so they say that's why it collapsed when we started dismantling it. Crushing Graywing and Cloud Flare of course. Or so they say." Grey had never seen whole skeletons left by the war. The places were too stripped clean. The scavenging he did was in places that apparently had gotten notice; had been evacuated. But he couldn't get creeped out now, because Pear was not seeing what he'd already figured out. Maybe later it would sneak up on him and wake him from slumber. *'that was a griffon.'* But not yet.

"I was never sure if it was a tale to remind us what the other tribes looked like, or if there was actually a mated pair living in the stable." She delicately stepped over the remains, managing to not dislodge any of them.

"The convenience is in that there were three generations in the stable but at the end only one pegasus and one griffon. Anyway did you just not go back? The front room was still open." The wind, he barely deigned to notice, was only sounding *behind* them, not above. Looking up, he saw his light catch on a ceiling of some sort. It looked like dirt but was easily forty hooves above him so it was unclear. The end of the tunnel was still not within sight but he would have been okay about sleeping right here. Well, just above or below the skeleton; it hadn't been disturbed by anything in this decade, probably, so visitors were unlikely.

Pear's eyes shot wide open, her pupils at maximum, her stare pointed into the darkness ahead. "You

think *THIS* is a stable. But they don't put them this close together do they?"

The surface was hardening; their footsteps echoing now. "Either the bombs burned the bodies, even the bones, but left the buildings, or everypony got out. There were a lot of ponies and our stable only held two hundred and fifty at its height. Plus the caves of course but they didn't really keep an accurate count, the way they tell it."

Something in the distance was reflecting their combined lights. The door, or dead end, would be nearby. "I suppose. Why don't we ca ... oh. You want to find more shiny bits don't you?"

Grey managed a deep breath, and said with his head held high "I don't know. Do you suppose we could find any scrap to put into a pile in there?"

This time it was Pear's turn to roll her eyes.

Grey didn't know anything about Stable Tec aside from the lore that tickets were much more expensive. So when he saw a small, square, hunk of metal ahead it didn't tell him anything aside from 'boy thats different.' It had a simple hinge rather than the double hinge he remembered that would allow a stable door to swing inward a hoof's thickness before rotating out of the way. But when Grey pulled on the lever and three prongs slid out of the door frame to allow it to swing towards him, he got the inkling it might not be a stable at all.

"That's like, half the thickness of our stable's door?" Pear clearly thought less of Stable Tec, if this was their hoofwork. The door frame was concrete, and the door was some sort of metal, more than two inches thick, but it was only twice the height of an average pony, and one and a half ponies wide, for lack of better measurements. "Do you still think this is a stable?"

"No, but we should investigate anyway." On the inside, there were two strips embedded into the walls, emitting a soft white light. They were at the bottom of the arch, which would be the transition from wall to ceiling if it had been constructed with right angles. The hallway went straight in from the front door for a distance of fifty hooves, and there was a metal reinforced wooden door with a similar latch. Once Grey looked behind him to make sure the latch somehow transmitted force from either side, he suggested to Pear she close it. "Its not a stable but it's still able to keep radiation out by distance, rather than material. That's why it was dug so deep."

The metal/wood door hybrid opened as easily, but it creaked on its hinges as it was swung wide to accept the visitors. Behind it was another concrete hallway, still angling gently downward, and about fifty hooves in, was a wooden door with a similar but smaller latch, operating only two bolts.

Pear snorted. "I suppose the fourth door is a screen to keep bugs out?" She pawed angrily at the concrete floor. "Look why don't we camp here this is silly."

If there was a fourth door, he would agree. But each door was lighter and flimsier than the last. He expected they were nearly inside the psuedostable. Opening the last door, he found he was right; the room opened before them and it was lit by more of the glow sticks embedded into the walls. But as much as he wanted to explore the tables filled with tubes & bunsen burners, and the shelves filled with nick-knacks, he needed to make sure that would be okay. Since everything seemed to still be on, there might be someone home. "Hello?"

Pear poked him in the shoulder, having held back a pace as he stepped one hoof into the living space. No sight of food here, nor of sleeping mats so it was indeed bigger than a single cave. The floor was natural stone, inside. Very uneven after the long trek on smooth concrete. The walls looked by their shape to be natural cave wall but were smooth concrete with those glowing strips, each one about fifteen hooves long with no visible wires going to a spark battery, nor was there a sound of a generator to be heard. In fact, having finished stepping inside the cave building, "Pear, stop. Listen."

She stood beside him, and her ears twitched. "Drop of water." Mentally Grey nodded. He'd heard it for sure that time, and it was the second since they stepped in. "Wind?" Grey shook his head, no. "Echo then? Of what?"

"Of our breathing." The echo died so quickly he didn't catch his voice's echo, but it did sound out loudly. Louder and just a little less clear than it should have, for the effort he put into it. "I bet there's a door, just around that wall." He pointed with a hoof to a row of shelves with various papers, mostly sitting loose with no apparent order or reason to their stacking.

Grey strode into the middle of the room now, fairly certain there was no one home. The tables had chemical related equipment, all of it delicate glass that he dared not move but it looked like any of a number of distillation techniques could be employed. Arcano technological refinements had clearly been made, as one area had four healing potions, sealed in fresh looking tops but the bottles looked scratched and old. "I thought we lost the ability to make those when the bombs dropped?" Pear said looking at the healing still.

"Well you'd need more equipment than is here. This just ... I think these palladium tubes here condense raw magic into a liquid form but you'd need something to redirect and refine the magic since a single unicorn can't spew spectra or any other form fast enough for palladium to work. Too you need to add a spell just ..."

Grey watched the workflow, saw a gap in the glass not far past the palladium coil. "Here. You'd need a thing that was taken, to add the spell just as the magic turns physical."

"Do you suppose the old goat still has the rest of it, then?" She said this, staring blankly, almost perfunctorially at the indicated gap.

Grey cocked his head to one side. "Why would you assume there was just one? Or that it was hircine and male in shape?"

Pear rolled her eyes, her head sweeping the room now. Grey had learned it was unsafe to his health to ask if she got dizzy when she did that. "Goat in the pejorative. This is definitely a lonely stallion's workroom."

But Grey didn't always do what was safe. Not when he could pick on his sister. "That's a very large word. Do you know what it means?"

Pear's head snapped back onto Grey's, ears and eyes focused on him. "It ... means I'm making fun of him?" Her expression a soft mix of fear and confusion. "Like if I called him an old geezer, instead."

Grey nodded. "Yes, that's the correct way to use that word."

Pear's vocal cords exploded loudly in a snort of irritation as she whipped around to let fly with a mock kick to his sides. It was a full kick that would break bones if it made contact but was thrown very high, and Grey obligingly dropped to the ground, ducking under even the chance at a missed miss. Rolling away and righting himself, Grey was laughing loudly, and Pear was squinting at her smart-alec brother. Pointing a front hoof menacingly, she just said "You..." and went about the process of walking to the other tables.

Deciding he'd pushed his luck far enough, Grey walked to a nearby stack of papers. He glanced at several points, in several papers, and said aloud of them "I can read the words ... but I have no idea what it says." He followed a single paragraph, chosen at random, then, trying to get a firmer grasp of what this 'old goat' was reading about.

The nature of palladium <-> spectra interaction facilitates further motions derived exclusively from a single output source, or can be combined from multiple sources (or diverted to multiple actuations, as desired) in ways known to unicornia for years but seldom exploited. We may perhaps assume this limitation exists because of contractual obligations implied through the use of earth's constructive methodologies vis-à-vis those agents' inherent mistrust of unicornia itself. The benefits however have herein been empirically

shown in points 2 through 6 of appendix B where a small cart carried test subjects with no hooves to the ground. It is the purpose of this paper as stated at the outset to show that there must be another material, or *perhaps* a palladial alloy, that will vastly forwardize the increase in attendant physical output while decreasing arcane boilloff concerns.

Grey was tempted to try and recreate the document just so he could add it to his library, but he wasn't yet confident no one lived here – and no one liked a thief. Finding a door around a corner (the same wooden style with two-bolt latch) he called over his shoulder "Pear, why *did* you think there was a single male living here?"

Hoof steps filling the quiet as she approached she said "Cant you smell it?"

He inhaled. Carefully, fully. Slowly. Again, a breath across his sinuses. Acrid smells from the scorched glass, and chemical smells from the brewing. A natural smell – just a hint. It made him think of the grass rug in the kitchen back home; it was made from the vegetation that tried to grow outside the walls. It wasn't any good to eat, and wasn't real good at making into rope either, but you could cure and weave it into a fiber mat. When it got wet, it had a smell, and that smell was here, too. "No. Just technology."

Pear snorted again. "Bucks. Look, between the lack of cleaning that's gone on here," Which bewildered Grey since none of the equipment had so much as a speck of dust. "and the used smell this place has, I can tell you it's a single buck that does his work here."

Mentally shrugging, Grey pointed to the door. "Well, maybe he has a guest bed we can borrow." Pear made a point of blowing her nose on Grey's cutie mark.



## Chapter 5

# Wings. I don't have wings.

On the other side of the door was a series of shelves. Like a library but the shelves were much bigger, and far enough apart for three ponies to walk abreast without much care. Four could have squeezed in if their intent was to prevent further travel by the first three.

"None of those shinies will fit in your bag, Grey."

It was true. Lost arcano technology found again, and all of it was stored and filed for retrieval. Unfortunately his skin was tingling, and that usually meant a specific kind of trouble. Grey called up a shield spell; as delicate as he could manage, spread thin across a hemisphere twenty hooves across. And on its surface patterns and colors danced, a miniature aurora borealis.

"So, that means we should leave?"

Grey had never gotten his hooves onto either of the village's geiger counters. He was never able to empirically test whether his detection spell offered any measure of resistance, but he had always assumed it did not, since it was constructed from magic, and the radiation was a byproduct of that same arcane energy. Also it was difficult to maintain when it was so thin, so he just dropped the shield in favor of light, as this room had only a few still working glow tubes, and they were on the very high ceiling.

"Nah lets just find something I can pack out, and that should be good enough." Grey trotted out in front of him, finding the first shelves lined with gears as tall as his own back, a chain wider than his shoulders, and two cannon shells, each as big as his head.

At the other end of the first aisle, was a skeleton, which was providing its own light. It was of a unicorn, and tatters of a uniform implied he had worked for one of the pre-war ministries, although he was unfamiliar with the nuances that might tell him which one specifically. There was a puddle at the unicorn's back hooves, and it was in places pink, and in places orange. The source appeared to be three large spark batteries

whose nuances implied to Grey, who was somewhat familiar with the run of the mill design, that these were different somehow.

He re-cast his shield / detection spell, and saw the colors violently spinning, their breadth from light to dark much broader. He would get sick if he stood here even a minute. "I think place is empty now. Found the researcher, Pear."

From two aisles over, Pear called back "And I found something unwieldy but carryable. Do you know what leather is?"

Trotting to the aisle she was standing in, he explained "I know it comes from skin. You don't suppose it's a pony?"

She was standing at an S&M looking harness. One of the odd batteries, unruptured, was near it and indeed attached to the horn cover. Wires ran back to the pale white leather straps. Sitting on a stand, attached to the leather, was a rod of pale metal perhaps twenty five hooves long. It appeared to have a joint to allow the rod to sit crosswise on the pony's back, or be unscrewed and unclipped (which is how it was now) and folded back across the sub's back. At the tips of the rod, though, were cutouts, and they were filled with a black shiny substance.

Filled with a sudden understanding, he cast a spell at the rod. It was his push shield spell, and should have shoved the whole contraption bodily into the next aisle but when his magic reached it, it coalesced into a white semi-liquid, which ran along the rod before dripping down, and making a very loud 'pop' when it dissipated on the floor. "I bet that's the palladium alloy the papers out front talked about."

But why would you power a magic rod with arcane energy that it ...? No matter, it could be carried by that very unfortunate looking harness and he wanted out as soon as possible. "Great I'll take it but let me look for anything smaller." Pear started unhooking the innocuous looking straps – and Grey had no intention of letting her live this one down if she actually wore the thing out of here, but thought to call back "We'll need that battery too it's different than the other ones." as he found his way to another burst spark superbattery. Whelp, enough of that.

He found one small thing though. A box maybe four inches on a side, and two inches tall, and something was rolling around inside. He levitated the top, and found a white, very gently glowing orb. Casting his detection spell again, he thought it was not emitting itself, although it was hard to say since it was right across the aisle from the damaged battery and he wasn't getting any closer to that. Mentally shrugging he levitated the into his bag.



"This is the memory orb of head researcher Ruby Cloud, primarily of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences" The aisles were well lit now; clean and filled with two ponies Grey didn't recognize. They were moving something around at the far end of the room just as the voice spoke again. Grey was startled to find it was coming from his own chest, which was broader than he was used to being. Also the speaker carried himself away, and Grey was forced to walk with this unfamiliar chest, unable to move or to speak his questions. "I point out that I consider myself a unicorn of distinction within that ministry but Rocksalt Brushy, an earth pony no less, has asked me to weaponize my findings. Which of course is easy; everything is a weapon in the hooves of angry brutes. But I want to document my initial thoughts before they're completely overridden by the abominable roman nosed draft equids of that ministry."

A slim, pale yellow unicorn with magenta eyes and a cutie mark of an emitting horn surrounded by a gear with fourteen teeth was levitating a clipboard when she looked worriedly up at the speaker "Who are you speaking to, sir?"

Ruby waved a hoof dismissively without making eye contact. "I'm going to get three ministries involved and hire Pinkie Pie to extract this memory; this time of me speaking."

"But then you won't know you said it ...?" If forced to guess, Grey would have said she feared for Ruby Cloud's sanity. But Ruby seemed not to notice. Grey could tell the degree to which he was dismissing her because he could feel every muscle twitch – and they weren't responding to the interruption in the slightest.

"Well, my dear there are two solutions. One of course it I could watch it, then I would know what I had said. But more importantly I'm led to believe it can be copied. Like completing your test scores by copying someone else's answers." At this, the slender unicorn blushed deeply, and went back to examining the shelf and its twenty super batteries against her clipboard's list.

Ruby walked through what Grey knew as a death trap, and through another two-latch door which led to a long, concrete hallway. There was a three latch door on the other side – this one with a lock, but Grey felt Ruby cast a very specific form of levitation against it. The lock undid itself, and was subsequently levitated open.

There was the grandest of caves on the other side. Crystals had been grown in very even precision, the colors spiraling down like the narrow stairway Ruby trotted confidently down. Interspersed between the large artificial gems, were arcane emitters of a type Grey had never seen. Of course, being a young scavenger and all

too aware of how little of the world he had seen, even being the bravest of all the village unicorns, he didn't worry himself too much to learn he knew so little.

"Alicorns are the sole, dare I say *unhealthy* focus of the ministry mare Twilight Sparkle. But there are other ways, easier ways to facilitate airborne magic." Ruby had reached a landing, and turned inward, ignoring the precipitous drop for the several trotting steps it took to reach solid, polished rock. In the center of the cave, under a bright spotlight, was the the rod he had just seen above!

No, Grey realized. This was a two-rod harness, and these straps were of normal textiles; cloth. But the stand held the superbattery on a shelf, and the horn cover was held aloft so you couldn't help but imagine some poor unicorn being denied the use of his magic.

Ruby was walking slowly around the edges of the spotlight, his eyes focused intently on this creation. "Palladium bonded to a pair of gem veins: Ruby and Jade spiraling through both cores at precisely one twist in forty hooves. This of course would make assumptions about the arcane wavelengths employed by the psuedoalicorn but that resonance is close enough for the average height of today's elite and honestly with training any unicorn can reach into that range unless they're crippled or have simply no personal experience with even the narrow breadth of magic training offered at rudimentary community colleges in most any town." Ruby stopped to point a hoof at the black strips on the underside of the rods. "An arcanely blended bonding of obsidian and onyx acts as the final emitter. As you will see I intended for maximum range of motion; the particular wavelength poured into the converter can emit physical repulsion across any fifteen degree arc within a one hundred seventy degree range. While I personally do not have the acuity needed to perform mid air rolls, I have no doubt a young buck trained early in adjusting his wavelength output will be able to funnel energy down just one side, at his choosing."

Having completed his diatribe, he began strapping the rods to his back, carefully levitating everything into place and sliding himself into the center, where the stand was a moment ago. He tightened all the straps and opened the horn cover with magic but then rared up to grip it with his front hooves. Placing it awkwardly over his horn, unclasped, he explained "Onyx palladium inside. That's the real secret. But it means you can't use magic on it directly."

Back down on four hooves, he cast a levitation spell to something very far away. It felt to Grey like a switch being thrown, and suddenly the emitters on the walls were creating a stiff breeze. "No, I have no doubt Brushy and Brushy will have this construction technique made into a rocket or gun or something equally silly and utterly devoid of nuance and subtlety. So I am recording

this for whomever shall see it, to see the particulars of how it is that one directs their horn into the 'wrong octave,' as it were."

With that he reached up with one hoof, and slapped the horn cover closed. Immediately, even through the distance of time and whatever mechanism cast this memory upon him, Grey could feel his horn was now shut off from the world.. Not just slightly either, like when he wrapped it in a hot wet towel for a dare once. Magic was gone to him. Or, rather to Ruby Cloud, who seemingly chose this.

"I also do this to show unicorns how to fly. Now, pay attention. You don't want to crash." With that, Grey felt Ruby's horn cast outwards with raw power. It had no form, it asked no questions and presented no solutions. It should have been immensely painful, having his magic quietly absorbed and forgotten.

But forgotten, it was not. There was a humming that rose quickly in intensity from the tips of the four emitters, and the harness was pulled tight ... and the rods floated away, straight up! They took Grey / Ruby with it, carried by the cloth harness. Ruby looked down, and Grey felt a very slight tinge of concern; of vertigo as he saw the hundred-hoof drop to the polished stone below. Grey himself wanted to scream in terror but he still could not.

Then Ruby did something. He was still pouring out raw magic but it was ... the wrong note. For lack of a better term, magic was made with a certain kind of thought, and those thoughts came naturally to the unicorn who thought them. Mare magic and stallions' could be discerned as it dissipated by a very skilled observer. Even the two major family groups in the village, those who survived the great war by living in a cave, and those who grew up in an off-brand stable, looked at life so differently their magic *felt* different to an outsider.

If Grey had to make a guess, Ruby Cloud was magicking like a short mare. And he was rotating to the left, staying at his dizzying height. He was also drifting now, because of that strong wind. Ruby corrected by very quickly, and without interruption, pouring out notes that were like a cave dweller. They caused the rods to pull into the wind and he corrected his position that way. When Ruby switched entirely, to using magic like a big, slow stallion; more muscle than sense, the rods pulled clockwise, rotating to the right. Now corrections had to be performed by reaching for notes that would only be comfortable to the elite of the stableponies.

Again, with the stallion notes but he was somehow – and this took several seconds for Grey to realize it – using only the back of his horn. He was deliberately emitting magical energy only from a small part of his horn, and it caused the rods to pull unevenly, lifting his

rump high, and the whole pony slid forward, directly into the wind. Ruby tried to use just the base, and just the tip, which cause the left / right tipping he had spoken of. He would lose his concentration though, as the rods pulled on just one side. The rods wanted to roll but the harness was too soft, and didn't drag the pony with it. When Ruby stuttered in his casting, the rods would go silent, and the pony would fall. And so he would straighten, and try again.

Masculine style magic to slide forward, feminine to slide backwards. Refined after the manner of the educated to rotate one way, brutish and coarse to rotate the other. The part of the horn used had strong implications too, and were used in dodging obstacles, among other things. But that cloth harness was just not good enough.

Ruby tried to spiral from the walls, quickly inward, and brake suddenly. But the cloth tore free of the rods, and the pony fell away, horn still latched inside its box, unable to scream a levitation spell. The instinct to try it backfired, causing the two rods to rotate away from each other, further tearing the harness. He landed in the center, where he had started, but with too much speed and a steep enough angle that there was no avoiding the undesired but obvious ending to this memory.

A loud crack signaled both his front legs to have failed their integrity check. Useless legs folded under the stallion as he slid several body lengths along the slick stone. Barely stopping before that precipitous drop off, he lay there panting, legs going numb from shock but very much not feeling like legs so much as a jumble of loose scrap. Ruby / Grey could see a glowing ... something, at the bottom of the drop. It was too distant to identify as lava, or radioactive waste, or something else entirely.

Grunting with the pain, panting for breath, Ruby Cloud said "Marker two one five, Mark now. That." More panting. "That should be the end of this memory, Pinkie." Again, Ruby tried to cast a spell – perhaps throwing the wind switch back off, and it was grabbed, and sent via wires to the narrower of the two rods, which lifted and spun, then fell and clattered, finally falling over the edge. As it ripped free of the wires going to Ruby's head, he said "Celly's fresh milk." as he watched it disappear from sight.

Grey blinked. He was a little startled to find he could, after all that time. He was laying down though, so perhaps? He almost didn't want to wiggle his front legs, afraid he was going to find he was the ill fated elderly pre war unicorn after all. Grey took a shuddering breath, and tried to gauge where his legs were, and how much of them he could feel.

"Hey that breath was different. You still with us,

bro?" Pear's voice came from behind him. He was laying on his right side, legs tucked inexpertly under him but not broken. The walls were illuminated again but nothing like during the flight memory. Carefully Grey unfolded his legs, and found they were properly attached and still whole. He was in the study room again, and Pear had found a throw rug from somewhere to use as a blanket while Grey 'slept.'

Between himself and Pear, who had been trying to sleep by her current posture, was the rod. Disassembled and folded, but definitely the bigger of the two rods in his vision. The cloth harness had been replaced with something much, *much* stiffer. Also the latches holding the rod to the harness had been strengthened since his vision.

While part of him ached to know if he really could fly, Pear's distressed look said he'd worried her. His first question was, did the vision ball have a time dilation involved? "Yeah sis." His voice croaked, his heart still in turmoil over the feeling of his legs shattering. "How long was I out?"

Now, about how long did he think the vision was ...? "I'd say two hours. You weren't stiff like you'd been poisoned, but you didn't respond to anything. I poked and pushed and everything. You were just focused on that little ball. Except once I grabbed it and stuffed it in your pack you were still staring, like it was still there."

So, she'd folded him up like he was a large dolly attending tea time. No time dilation in either direction as near as he could tell. "It was a vision. A memory. Played out in real time. I'd say I wish I could share it with you but his legs get broken right at the end." What of the flight cave? It wouldn't be safe, just now, to look. Right now, he should probably go back to sleeping. "Hey do you want the throw rug back? It's not like it's cold in here or anything."

"No I'm fine but here." She reached behind her shoulder, to retrieve a bottle of water. It was cloudy, but Grey thought that was the scratches on the bottle not the contents. "I found some bites of food, and two bottles of water. It'll make you sick eventually but you know how it is."

Grey cast his detection spell, and while nothing was being emitted, when his spell crossed into the space of the bottle itself, the spell went wonky, throwing colors everywhere. Dropping the spell, Grey sighed. "Yeah I know." He levitated the proffered drink, and opened it to sip. It tasted like a lead acid battery watered down just enough to not give you heartburn on the first mouthful.

Pear slid across a piece of paper, upon which was a dried and forgotten slab of uncorrupted, but long forgotten plant matter. Probably a hayburger in its day. Grey set the bottle down, and laid on his belly to sniff

at the proffered "bite of food" before nibbling at it. It tasted like dust and time, but it had been alfalfa, in its day. Stopping at the halfway point he asked his traveling companion "You got one? Or are we splitting this?"

Pear rolled her eyes as she laid flat again. "There were four, but that's the last one. Also the most dried out I think because it was on top." *Oh, that everyone could have a loving older sister* Grey thought as he went back to his dinner.

In the morning, Grey contemplated looking for the cavern. He didn't feel sick for his trip last night, but he had also only packed two Rad Away pouches. He explained what he thought happened with the memory, and convinced Pear Rump to carry it since she had no horn and thus couldn't accidentally trigger it as he had.

Using his knowledge of the precise levitation spell he learned during the memory, Grey was able to relock the inner most door. The outer doors were just heavy. Whatever else had been in this place, there was no further security measures left now. The sky was still dark, but walking uphill it was visible against the cavern walls. Pear had found two couch cushions, and stripped their cloth covers, complete with still working zippers, to sell as bags but would probably be used as pillows between then and now.

And Grey had strapped himself in. The leather gripped in places he'd really rather not be gripped, and with all those buckles he was sure to look like some kind of sex crazed fiend but he'd felt first hoof why you needed the emitter to not move relative to the pony.

The magic converter was clipped to his mane; the superbattery was hanging at his right side and had been clipped to his bags, which was still in place as the rod sat farther back than the saddle bags. He had practiced closing and opening the horn cover a half a dozen times, so that if he needed to cast any sort of spell, he could unclip, and re-clip while still in the air. Of course he'd be falling while that happened but he had the confidence of youth and ignorance buoying his optimism. Leg breaking was for failing fuddy duddies not smart young scavengers.

At the top of the tunnel / canyon / cutout, the pair carefully reoriented themselves, having no compass and only a memory of a ghoulish mare pointing "over there somewhere" to go by. Once underway the first three hours were uneventful; no radscorpions, no bear ghouls. A griffon could be seen flying from the east by north east, with two Enclave pegasi in pursuit but they were just under the clouds, and none of them looked down or changed their flight path aside from what was needful for trading death ray energies, and avoiding being struck by same.

It was a sobering reminder of the power he was planning on wielding. The sky rats were probably highly

territorial and would vaporize him regardless of the fact he didn't know the spell to interact with the clouds the way the fliers did. Nor would he get a chance to explain that he needed to unclip his 'motor' before any spell at all could be cast – and would have to be done in free fall. No, the sky rats would vaporize him if they saw his hooves off the ground, so he would just have to be careful.

It turned out that just lifting you hooves though, was very easy. After aligning and attaching the two halves, he placed the converter over his horn – and clipped it shut. It was frightening, in a way, feeling one of his senses just shut off like he was wearing a blind-fold. But pouring just a little energy in, just enough to levitate about four coffee mugs, was enough to lift him up.

It had startled the heck out of him, memory orb notwithstanding. "That was an unimpressive first flight." Laughed his sister, who had continued to giggle as he got back up and tried again.

Steering was proving elusive but speed was easier. He could gallop along for all he was worth, then simply pick his hooves up and not change speeds; he was flying. And from there he could slow to a walk again, and just shut the engine off and not miss a step. He also practiced slowing and stopping his descent as if he had removed the cover. Just dropping straight down, then landing normally.

Now his heart was pounding. "I'm going to do it." He had asked Pear to stop, and she had politely sat on her rump and watched while Grey slapped open the latch, and slapped it closed. He had survived as a scavenger because he practice how quickly he could run, jump and slide. He needed to know how quickly he could re-energize his wings.

Pear had finally put together what his younger brother was planning. "Don't break your legs; I understand that's painful." Grey glowered at her.

Then he went straight up as fast and as hard as he could. It was breath taking. Grey could see the whole world, or so it seemed, within a few seconds. The harness barely flexed as he rocketed towards the clouds. By his third breath he figured himself to be high enough that he would not break his legs; he would die. So, he gave himself as much breathing room as he could and kept going. The breeze was cold up here. The moisture very real, and a fairly novel experience feeling condensation form as he flew upwards.

The break in concentration as the air became different, slowed his ascent. He could feel it at times, that he wasn't pulling away so quickly. So he redoubled his concentration. A neutral note, pushing magic as hard as he could. He dared to look straight down. In a moment of panic he started to fall, unable to find his

sister. When he did find her, he realized several things. Not only could he cover her up with a hoof; at this distance he could cover a dozen ponies grouped tightly with his hoof. Also, the breeze had, over the course of these many uncounted seconds, pushed him hundreds of hooves away from "straight up."

Using the clouds as a reference, he slowed, and within fifty hooves of that mysterious gray curtain, he found the output needed to hover. He was almost surprised he couldn't see his breath; some of the pre-war stories talked about that happening when it was painfully cold, and this was the coldest Grey Horn had ever been in his life.

One breath. Another, followed by gulping down the spit threatening to choke him. Pear Rump was a very small speck. *Either climb down, or jump.* There were no alternatives. Was he a flying unicorn? Then he needed to *know*. A deep breath again, and he closed his eyes. With only the feel of the cold, wet air on his coat to remind him that things were different, he reached up and slapped the converter open.

The harness had been pulling on him. He knew that because it was not now. Instead, there was a hurricane of wind pushing everything away. Up, and so his converter flew away, tethered only by the power cord going to his wings. Eyes wide with panic he levitated at it, but grabbed the wrong sections and it did nothing. Again, grabbing just the rubber casing, he levitated it down.

He looked down as he used both his front hooves to position the converter. He almost dropped the converter again. Pear was much larger now. Grey could make out the difference between her orange coat and her short cropped, pink mane. In another couple of seconds he would be able to make out her eyes. They would probably be as large as dinner plates as she watched him die by his own stupidity and fear.

The converter had not slipped out of his hooves. The wind seemed to have reached its peak but that was a very strong wind nonetheless. Down, forward, left. *snick* went the clasp, and his magic was closed to him again. Pouring out for all that he was worth, he felt the harness tighten again and he feared for his life. This was exactly the feeling as Ruby Cloud started to fall.

But when Grey looked over his shoulder, he saw this harness was holding. He would have to remember to check it for cracks every flight, but for today, it was holding. He looked down again, and saw the ground was still approaching, but he also felt the wind was quickly diminishing.

Then there was no wind, and Grey tried to be as deft as he could at adjusting. No wind. Hover. Just enough output.



He had no altimeter so just as he had to guess about the direction they were traveling in, he had to guess if it was working. But it felt like he was standing there, not falling and not climbing anymore. He looked at the ground again, and realized there was a lot more wind up here, some four hundred hooves high, than there was while standing on the ground. He flew forward, trying to gauge whether he was keeping his altitude or not. But now that he had some notion of how quickly he could break a fall, he concentrated on going as fast forward as he could.

This was his first flight. He knew already he could do better, and he didn't yet know how much of the nuances he was missing completely. But the wind in his mane was incredible, and the ground was staying down there, where it belonged. He had long since passed where Pear was, and was practicing now with steering. Rather than simply rotate in place and power forward, he found it seemed to work better to tip over, and press upwards as he had at the start of his flight. Then straight again and concentrate on keeping altitude while regaining lost momentum.

Finally he had to slow down. Grey Horn was of the Horn family of unicorns and they prided themselves, rightfully (at least within the confines of the village) as being powerful magicians. But no unicorn would under normal circumstances pour out energy for ten straight minutes without ceasing, and his horn was starting to ache, and he was sweating, which in the cold wind even at this height, he felt was a very bad thing.

So he slowed, and dropped, and slowed and dropped. Landing, he realized, was going to be complicated. When he finally did set his hooves down, he was overwhelmed with emotion. He wanted to fall down and kiss the ground, he wanted to cry at the wonder that was flight, he wanted scream his own name at the triumph he had just had.

Where was Pear Rump? How far, exactly, had he left her behind? Grey lifted up, and rotated until he faced the direction they had been coming from. She was not as small a speck as to cover a dozen of her with his hoof, but if he held up his leg right now, half his hoof would cover her up. Oops; Grey started a low, slow, well controlled flight toward the galloping figure.

They were both panting, sweating by the time they met. At least it was a desert down here; their coats would dry. "So, hey sis. I guess this thing works alright?"

Pear nodded while she tried to catch her breath. "Thought you." Breath. "Were going all." Swallow, breath. "The way. Without me." She wiped her brow with a fetlock, then shook her mane, sweat flinging from the hairs.

Grey looked around. How far had he come? "Nah

sis. Just getting the hang of the controls.” He was definitely sure he was slightly lost. “Where are we, anyway?” The skyscraper, the mountain plateau, they all seemed to be in the wrong place.

Pear blinked several times, then her smile faded as she looked past Grey. “Well, in somepony’s iron sights, for one.”

Grey assumed raiders would have fired already. So, maybe the pony was sane and could be parlayed with. Of course, he really didn’t want to give up his wings ... but he couldn’t lose either his life, or Pears, over something he never knew he wanted a few short hours ago.

Grey turned around slowly, and saw indeed at the crest of a very flat hill, there was a light blue pony, holding a simple hunting rifle pointed at them. “Y’all hold still, while I get a closer look at ya.” The stallion called out. He dropped his rifle, and Grey saw that while it was not attached via a battle saddle, the harness would allow quick retrieval if he should find a need to fire on them.

Only the one stallion came walking warily towards the pair. Pear had her makeshift battle saddle, Grey knew a shield spell that might deflect a hunting rifle enough to matter, and none of the three had barding more useful than a tissue paper over their cutie mark. Grey whispered over his shoulder, now that he had turned to face the newcomer, to tell Pear “Move away a step or two. Make him decide who he’s killing.”

“Not losing you Grey. Not leaving you either.” But she stood up again, and took a small step to her right. Grey slid a couple very small, slow steps to his left. The newcomer stopped, now about a hundred hooves away.

His wings were folded neatly against his sides, their feathers the same pale blue as his coat. His mane was a light muddy brown, but his tail was, at first glance, a complete mess. On second glance, it was an even interspersing of shocked white hairs and the darkest brown Grey had ever seen. The sky rat looked back and forth between the siblings. “Now, miss, since you’re an earth pony and all, I’m going to assume y’all aren’t with the Enclave.” He took a few steps closer, asking “But, can y’all offer any proof of that? So as I can stop trying to shoot anypony in their sleep. Or waking for that matter.” He stopped again, less than seventy hooves distant.

Pear probably hadn’t seen the wings yet, so Grey spoke first. “Don’t sky rats normally get heavy barding? We’re as naked as you.” Of course, Grey was wearing an S & M getup. Made of leather no less, making it a double taboo. But Grey obligingly turned to one side, showing of his pile of scrap cutie mark, saddle bags, and lack of barding. He also levitated out his .32 and set it carefully behind his hoof. He should still be able

to get a shot of before the sky rat – or whatever he was – knew Grey was armed.

The stallion winced in pain when he saw the siblings' cutie marks. He turned to one side, and Grey saw he had a very small pack hanging off his rifle harness, and no cutie mark whatsoever. "Mister, do I get to ask you how old you are?" Pear tentatively put out.

"Or if that's too delicate, can I ask about your accent? My village has two accents because we're a blend of two smaller villages but I've never heard yours before." It wasn't really like he was excited at the linguistic possibilities, but the new accent did pique a little curiosity. Plus, since he'd never spoken to a sky rat before, nor knew anyone that had, he really didn't know what was fightin' words level impolite, and giving this blank flank buck sky rat a way out seemed the best way to avoid hot lead interchanges.

The buck looked down, ears flat, and sighed quietly. Perking up enough to point his ears at Pear Rump, he said "its not the age, miss. My cutie mark was magically removed in preparation to be branded a Dashite. Excepting how I talked them out of it, as no one knows I survived my last sortie against the evils of the ground. And since I don't know where or how to find food down here, and my ex-squad didn't leave me none, I'll be dead soon enough anyhow as makes no difference how thoroughly I was branded.

"And as to what you're calling an accent," He turned his face to Grey, and Grey saw what looked like the weight of the world pressing the young buck's eyes into their sockets. "I hear that you form your words different than I do, and I guess that's what you're calling an accent. It's more than I've ever heard, but honestly I'm plum surprised you speak at all. What with all the horrific things I see the ponies down here do, I'd assumed they'd lost all pretense to civilization." At that last, his eyes locked onto Grey's flight harness.

Grey felt the need to defend his civility, and didn't stop to consider the implication of such a mental stance. "The harness can't be normal cloth; it will tear. And the leather, yes its from a critter but I don't know what because it was done before the megaspells went off. I just found it under an off brand stable."

The pegasus was unconvinced. "I've seen ponies make saddle bags out of other ponies. My squad tried to ask them what happened but they just started shooting at us, which was pretty sad considering they were out of ammunition and didn't realize it until about the forth reload."

Pear snorted in derision. "Those? That? Raiders. Those weren't ponies." The stallion offered Pear a look of incredulity.

"What my sister is trying to say, is that raiders have long since forgotten they're ponies. We just shoot them

too. Or run away they're a horrible waste of ammunition, seeing as we don't plan on eating them, and they never carry anything worth having, let alone stealing."

The buck's eyes darted back to Grey. "And you two are ponies? There are groups of ponies living civilized lives down here?"

Grey nodded. "I only know first hoof of one village of two hund ... oh." Grey's face fell as he remembered there weren't two hundred bucks and nags anymore. "About sixty five-ish mares, and three stallions."

The pegasi's eyebrows rose, a little. "Just three, huh? Must be busy."

Pear groaned loudly, and turned away. Grey bit his lip. The pegasus buck looked the pair over with a little confusion. "Per councilmare decree, all the mares that are of breeding age ... " Grey didn't know the wording of the decision, actually. It had been a little informal, and passed along only via tea time chats as the council went door to door, day by day.

Pear finished the sentence, still staring off into the wastes. "We have to choose one of the three stallions and convince him to be with us. We're all johns now, hiring bucks of the evening."

The newcomer had the good grace to blush, and drop his nose at Pear's distress. "I'd offer to help, assuming you're not yet in deli" The phrase triggered a look of death from Pear, and the sky rat skipped over it. "But I'm on the pill, per Enclave ... well, my squad's decision. They don't want to have to explain why a bunch of mud ponies can fly.

Grey blushed. Pear stared, mouth agape. "How ...? You're on the pill? How."

Grey swallowed his pride. This was, after a small part of why he insisted on the trip ... to speak to strange and new ponies. Although speaking to sky rats was a big surprise. "How, medically, does that work? The pill developed by the stableside unicorns hurries the mare along in her season. So, three pills before the season, and two to hurry her out. It doesn't really make sense to hear a buck say he's 'on the pill.'"

Now his eyebrow, just the left one, rose as high as it would normally go. "So you." He turned to Pear, since she was the respective mare of the group. "You take five separate pills?"

"Seven." Pear spat out. "Pills two and four you take twice. So I cycle every week but it's better than getting so much as a bottle of bute from Doc Canonbone."

"He's really gotten into the spirit of the new decree. Plus he's the best educated medical unicorn. Although he's always been creepy. That's, we think, why he survived. Was doing something in a back room with a filly."

"Huh." Was the buck's response. Pear was back to staring off into the wastes though now her chest was

facing their visitor. "And that's who you've got to let knock up sixty some gals." He worked his tongue, and his lips. He looked at the pair's saddle bags before continuing. "The contraceptive pill. Works on bucks. Disables something to do with gene sequencing so the ... pieces? Medical knowledge always escapes me. Anyway little things don't get formed right so there's no need to rely on physical separation."

Grey mentally counted their food supply. "So, you haven't seen any sign of a village near here? I'm afraid we didn't pack enough to feed three. My name's Grey Horn, by the way. That's my sister Pear Rump."

The sky rat looked Grey's sister over. "You're not the color of any pear we grow in the clouds, and you're far too svelte as mud ponies go to be called pear shaped." Pear rolled her eyes. "I'm Stormflight Trees. Guess I don't look much like a tree either." Pear snorted in derision.

Well, if a sky-rat was going to travel with them ... he might as well start learning to fly. "Pear can you just start meandering in that direction?" Grey pointed, then looked, looked again at his markers, and decided to adjust. Then he adjusted some more. "I think Stormy & I need to talk about flying." Pear rared up and dropped her front hooves into Grey's shoulder while snorting. "Bucks." And off she moved at a trot. Turning to Stormflight Trees, he asked "So, first of all what name do you actually go by? I'm Grey ... its less related to my coat than you'd like to think. And this contraption lets me fly. So I guess that makes me a mechanical alicorn."

Stormflight flapped his wings, gently – almost nonchalantly, and floated into the air. "You know alicorns get shot, round these parts."

Grey slapped the converter closed, and rose to meet Stormflight. "Does that work? I was out of town that day but I understand there was a lot of ammo used up on the alicorns that visited us."

"Nope. But ponies still shoot." With that, Grey pointed in the direction he planned to travel, and engaged the rod's diverter. "Do you suppose there's food this way?"

The wind, or at least relative wind, meant they had to shout, but it was less bad than Grey had feared. "Nothing grows in this part of Equestria. Well, assuming we're still in Equestria some of our historians say we're in the next country south but they all argue what it was called." Grey gained a little altitude, and began scanning the ground in earnest. "But there's two ways around that problem. One is old buildings. Some haven't been scavenged for serious, so you can get food there. It tastes like dirt and forgotten time, but it keeps you healthy. The other way is raiders."

"I thought you said you didn't expect to trade with raiding types?" Stormflight was barely strolling. Clearly Grey's idea of a brisk flight was different than a natural flier who was born in the clouds.

"Nobody trades with them. I would if it were possible, but like I said they're not ponies. So if you're okay with the harsh nature of life in the wastes, you can find a raider's den, clear them out, and take whatever's left that you can carry. Or if you find a pile of bones with a little flesh left that means they weren't there when the megaspells triggered so you're looking at a previous raider den cleared out. Maybe the ponies then weren't desperate for what you're desperate for now and you can just take things without killing."

"Nice place you got down here."

"Well, if you sky rats would stop hoarding the sunlight we could maybe farm for you, like before the princess. But as it is ..." Grey pointed vaguely upwards, and managed to indicate the clouds without trying very hard. Stormflight said nothing, and he eased away a little from Grey, his head drooping just a little. "There. That'll work." To his left was a building. Three walls, and maybe a tenth of its roof. It had been a two story building, by the look of it. But there was nothing but desolation for miles around; it had probably been picked clean in the last century. Still, his new friend had no food with him and since the siblings had no idea how far it really was, they'd been assuming they'd be scavenging for food as well as working items.

If asked later if Grey was trying to impress the pegasus, or test out his newfound powers, or just being pragmatic, he would have been unable to answer but at least understood why the question arose. Right now, all he knew is Grey aimed his nose at the second floor's floor, and poured on the speed. Stormflight was taken by surprise, but did not respond aside from keeping up.

But the building approached *so fast* ... Grey kept easing back on the speed. Until he was just about drifting, like he was a dandelion seed blown by the wind, for the last ten hooves until he set foot upon the crumbling surface. He was sweating, just a little, and couldn't have said if it was from the exertion, or the fear of cracking his legs like Ruby Cloud, or just of the oddity and unnatural aspect of being airborne.

"Hey, kid? How long you been flying?" Stormflight set down gently next to Grey.

Grey was already eyeing the remains. "Today." This was an office building, and the desks that were still up here looked untouched, but nothing in the first one suggested there would be food on this floor. "Oh? I mean. Yes that thing falling from the clouds that you thought was a death threat from the sky? That was just me. Virgin flight, wanted to know if I could snap

my converter closed if I had needed to cast a spell mid air.”

Stormflight casually opened a drawer on another desk. “So you flew all the way to the cloud’s edge? Also, why do office ponies need ammunition.” He reached in and scooped out something, shoving it into his small pack.

“Pre war ponies were crazy paranoid. Ammo, guns, schematics on building guns from random scrap. I can’t imagine living there. And I figured if I was going to risk injuring myself, and failed, I’d die anyway, this being the wasteland. So sure, give myself plenty of time to figure out how to stop.” The third desk had snacks in it. For a griffon. “Hey Stormy? How picky are you about the pony diet?”

“Grey I haven’t eaten for two days. I was planning on sneaking back to the clouds except they’ve got cameras and would chase me down for sure.” Grey levitated out the fish jerky. “Meat. Yeah we can digest that.” Stormflight gratefully accepted the packing, and managed to choke it down. “You ain’t kidding about the taste.”

Grey shrugged. There was, in the final desk on this floor, a .32ACP round for his pistol, and two .44 rounds. He estimated they’d fetch two or three caps each, assuming this town they used caps. Pear always found more than he did in an empty room covered in dust. “So, my sister finds stuff I overlook because my specialty is shiny stuff, and she finds stuff covered with so much dust or I don’t know what.” He looked again for an important pile of things.

Stormflight found a chair, that had a blanket artfully thrown over it. Underneath was a crate sealed with a lock. “How about made to look like it’s already been picked over? This here paint has been deliberately scratched, and by the dust I’d say it was the pony what set it here that did it.”

Grey nodded, and started fishing in his bags for scrap metal suitable for an improvised lockpick. “Yeah there’ll be something in there. Do you know how to pick pre-war locks?”

“I’ve read the theory. We use cardlocks up in the clouds so they open themselves; nothing exposed a pony could shove a screwdriver into.” He dropped down to his belly beside where he assumed Grey would sit to pick at it. But Grey didn’t need to use hoof or tongue. He sent the scrap in, and gauged it carefully. He didn’t get as much feedback through his horn as he’d get with his tongue, or even his hooves. But he could, if he was slow, feel how hard it was fighting back.

The lock snapped open, and Grey opened it. Two bottles, partially full, two flat block containers sealed in darkened cellophane. “If that’s what I think it is. Oh!

Stormy wait.” Grey cast his detection spell, and it flared a little bit as it crossed the bottles. But the cellophane was clean.

”Radiation gauge?” Asked Stormflight. ”Like a geiger counter?” Grey nodded. Stormflight reached into his pack, and pulled out the thinnest pipbuck he’d ever seen. ”This isn’t a real pipbuck, mind, but it has one of those. And yes, water is a two-rad consumption choice.”

”If you get up into dangerous levels I’ve got spare radaway. Tastes like a citrus buck to the face. Also makes you pee.”

”Like sparkle cola radishes?” Grey had the biggest smile he’d ever had in recent days. It had been years, and he had only seen one poster, but some ... *oh*, he thought. *it was a pegasus selling it. Of course a sky rat would know the phrase.* But Stormflight opened the bottle and downed the contents without further comment until ”I can honestly say I’ve never tasted sweeter water.”

What did taint taste like? It was pretty uncommon but strange tastes ... but that of course wasn’t what Stormflight meant. Levitating the packages out, he counted four. And they were the right size and weight ... normally military issue food; except as he’d told Stormy ponies did crazy things back then. ”So, I think, but am not sure, these are MREs. If they’re not opened they’ll be good still, and they won’t fit in your pack. So, I’d like to take one for myself and Pear, and you can own the other two, alright?”

Stormy nodded and Grey put them away. The stairwell on the part of the building that was still standing, but a lot of the downstairs floor had been turned into debris, and blown up the stairwell until it was not longer possible. Grey slapped the converter closed and prepared to fly down, just as Stormy managed to jimmy open a drawer on a filing cabinet. ”Hey! Will you look at that.” It took three tries but he managed to fish out a very beat up looking revolver.

”Uh, let me guess. .44 caliber?”

Stormy opened the cylinder and looked. ”Yup. I think so.”

Grey levitated his two rounds over to him. ”Here’s the ammo for it, I guess.” From what Grey could see of the positioning of the large mouthgun in the small pack allowed to Stormflight, it was over half full now that he was wearing his not quite a pipbuck band.

They flew to the first floor and found the welcome desk still welcoming. There was a coffee machine, the carafe coated with what a century and change ago would have been fresh coffee. The chair was an executive style bench that would allow the receptionist to lay on her side; easing pressure from her belly and still allowing full motion of at least one hoof.



As Grey slapped open the converter, Stormflight eased over the top of the welcome desk, and landed on the bench. Grey couldn't see what he was looking at, but the pegasus said "Huh. Wonder what they were hiding behind here." as he reached down to move something. Just as Grey saw Stormflight's eyes bulge, he heard two gunshots - one from under the desk, another from behind a pile of once furniture that was now just a morass of wood fibers. Hollowed out fibers, it would seem as a red, almost orange earth pony stallion crawled out of a hole to fire a second round from his makeshift rifle, this time definitely aimed at Grey.

Grey threw his best shield up, and surprisingly he saw the bullet mid-air come to a stop, and fall. That might have been why he didn't see the zebra mare jump out from behind the brochure stand and lunge, back hooves first, at him. Zebras never used ranged weapons, according to teachings given in the village. Grey thought it strange, but this one had nothing but her glyph mark to use as a weapon.

Grey barely jumped back in time. Even given the two body-length jump she was almost making contact before he could react. He hadn't drawn his weapon and it would take too long to think about where it was. He tried to deflect what was left of the kick with a foreleg, and automatically cast a 'push' shield. But in his haste it was a very small area, and thus a lot of pressure per square inch albeit not fast moving like a bullet.

It hit her in the privates, and she screamed in pain. *That's what you get for leaping plot first.* Grey levitated out his pistol and began scanning the room in earnest again. Stormflight was bleeding, and holding his right wing crooked, away from his body. The rust colored buck was having troubles closing the action on his rifle but would get another shot off within a second or two. Off to the left, where a desk was holding up a filing cabinet, there was what appeared to be a wingless griffon hiding, his eyes glowing with delight.

While Stormflight dodged the spring loaded switch-blades tied to the first stallion's rear fetlock joints, Grey fired at the riflepony. No armor, no shield, no chance. It was a quick shot badly aimed, but Grey got it right nonetheless. The griffon was righting the filing cabinet, but he was doing it slowly. Second round went into the ... what did zebra females call themselves? Were they mares, like ponies, or jennets like the donkeys?

More screaming. It wasn't the first time Grey had heard it but it nearly dislodged his concentration. The zebra would live but probably never use her back legs again, magic notwithstanding. The griffon, her wings just half a hoof long stubs, leapt from the filing cabinet but had to land with an extra hole in her chest.

Three rounds left, and the griffon was digging her claws into Stormflight's shoulders, gripping for all she

was worth while the dark blue earth pony dropped out of sight to swipe repeatedly, like he was an angry cat, flaying Stormflight's chest open. The small bullet Grey had let fly would kill the griffon ... in a day or two. He wasn't sure in the heat of the moment, if he could hit her in the head. If she fell dead just now it wouldn't be any better for Stormflight anyway, sky rat though he be and barely deserving of compassion.

Grey jumped up onto the welcome desk, and dropped his pistol to point another push spell, small like the last, at the griffon's wing scars. She winced, but did not let go. Levitating the pistol, he dropped all three rounds into the earth pony's chest. He had no ears, Grey saw.

The shot buck coughed, but kept swiping, although now each swipe was visibly weaker than the last. The griffon was determined, even though she clearly knew death had come for her. Grey had two rounds left, at this point, and put them into his revolver. Then he calmly walked beside the intertwined pair, and reached up to pull with his right foreleg, which he'd placed under the griffon's chin. His left foreleg braced against her withers – or whatever they called that part.

Grey was not strong as ponies went, but griffon necks were not meant to bend backwards until their beak touched their spine. She wasn't breathing, but neither was she dead. Leaning for all he was worth on that beak, he raised his right hind, and kicked the middle of the bend as quick and as hard as his lack of leverage allowed.

The pair fell straight down, burying one of the switchblades hilt deep into Stormflight's chest. The blade was short enough it wouldn't reach any organs, but he was missing enough flesh at this point, and losing blood fast enough, Grey knew the sky rat would die soon.

*It's just a sky rat. They don't want to be ponies. That's why they live up there and don't come here.*

Grey inhaled, looking the situation over. The pool of blood beneath him was large, and distinguishing which puddle was from which shade of blue buck was no longer possible.

*It's a sky rat.*

He had potions. He had bought some, and Stormflight (*the sky rat, recall*) was still breathing. Still able to bleed. Grey Horn closed his eyes, looking away as he gasped, as if in pain.

IT'S JUST A SKY RAT!

Grey brought out a healing potion and ripped the cap off. Levitating Stormflight's muzzle up, he worried for a split second about the buck's ability to swallow. So he poured it into the buck's nose, although that would mean the red healing potion would mix with the

blood from a cut to that nostril. "Lungs or stomach doesn't matter inhale hard!" Grey shouted.

Stormflight snorted the potion in, and winced against coughing. As his chest started to reform Grey kicked the dead pony's leg away, tearing the wound anew but only a small spurt of blood came out as the knife fell away; the hole now closed. The scars where the griffons claws were would be permanent, though.

Grey levitated the surprisingly heavy griffon off the pegasus, whose wing was still held crooked. It had probably healed like that too, although right now wasn't the time to investigate. "I only have two more Stormy; don't do that again."

The sky rat was crying. A tear rolled down his nose, his eyes clenched tight. He hadn't folded his wings yet. "Thank you for saving my life. Again."

The zebra female was still alive, and had come to terms with her newfound pain. "Flying and whole is cursed; ground ponies remain aversed."

Grey climbed back onto the desk to keep a better eye on the survivor. "Why do you not have a tail? What nutcase religion do you all follow that you cut your own limbs off?" The rust colored buck was only half visible, but it seemed all of him was till attac...no, Grey realized. It was a unicorn. The horn had been sawn off, then filed flat. His forehead had no bump but for a discolored whorl between his eyes.

The zebra stood on her still working front legs and failed at trying to pull herself around to face the flying menaces. "Every buck takes what he may; limbs eaten during a night's stay."

Nutcase. All of them, nutcases. "Scuz me Stormy." Grey levitated Stormflight's .44 magnum, loaded a round, and let it fly into the zebra's face. She watched him approach, eyes fierce with hate, and no fear. Too far gone for fear. Then he was deaf by the gun's report, and she was convulsing as the blood pressure rapidly dissipated from her tortured body.

After several long breaths, Grey's ears were ringing, which meant he'd hear again some day. He wasn't sure for a moment. But he turned to give Stormflight's pistol back, and found the buck had worked his way free of the deceased flightless griffon. He still held his wings aloft awkwardly, and was giving Grey a very defeated looking raised eyebrow. He was saying something, but Grey couldn't make it out yet.



## Chapter 6

# Wings. You don't have wings.

They found five more rounds for Stormflight's pistol, some very small centerfire ammo that Grey didn't recognize, and one round for his pistol. Also a bottle of water, two packages of instant potatoes, and three empty med-x syringes. Plus one full one that went into Stormflight's small bag. The pegasus rounded up some loose wiring and a piece of a desk's top. "Since I can't fly, I want you to carry me. I still have pegasus magic so I should be able to make a very small sky wagon that will hold me up so you just worry about your own flight."

Grey wasn't sure if he should feel horrible the first sky rat ... *err, pegasus. Guess I should start calling them that, for Stormy's sake.* First pegasus he'd ever spoken to had lost his ability to fly, and had to rely on a unicorn's flight ... or if he should feel smug that someday this flying friend would feel obligated to save Grey's life. *Planning on falling out any seventh story windows? No?* Too, this was the wasteland down here. Stormflight could choose to ignore his life debt. It had happened before.

But Stormflight crouched down on the relatively tiny strip of wood, and gripped the thinner wires with his fetlocks, and spread his wings as best he could. Straps and heavy wires had been added to the edges, and formed a makeshift harness. Stormflight had to explain how best to attach those; some wrapped around Grey's chest, some pulled on his back legs, some attached to his wings' harness.

Then they were off to look for Pear Rump. Just like Stormflight promised, the platform put up no weight drag, and very little wind drag so far as Grey could tell. But the groaning and wheezing Grey heard implied it was very uncomfortable for the injured pegasus. Still, Grey was able to appreciate the landscape in a way he never could before. Averaging four hundred hooves above the ground, and about five times his gallop speed he could see the ebb & flow of the landscape. He started seeing where old foundations probably were, though the buildings had long since been covered by blowing sand.

About the time he realized in the distance he could see a canyon that was probably the one Ditzzy Doo was referring to, he also realized he could see a moving critter. "Ah think that's yer sister, just there." Stormflight's pronunciation had gone downhill after the hours long flight.

The color was right, but were pegasi eyes that much better than the mud ponies' ? "How can you tell?"

Stormflight wheezed, inhaling for his reply. "Coat color, o' course. I can make out that the pony has an unmarred cutie mark. Raiders, about half o' them, have mangled theirs for whatever." Another wheeze. "She's walking straight, and now at this distance I'm pretty sure its a mare, and she's facing the way you two started out." Two wheezes this time. "Lastly, that lopsided battle saddle." So, Grey thought to himself. A combination of experience interpreting, and logic at what it meant, the things he could see.

"Nearly there, then. Hang on I'm going to speed up as I drop." Grey Horn's horn went from cruising trot output to last-mile gallop.

Wind whipping both buck's manes, Stormflight commented "Just s'long as y' remember to slow down before the actual landing."

Grey looked over his shoulder at his passenger, whose eyes were closed, head tucked against his shoulder but not all the way back under his wing. Naturally a pegasus wouldn't trust a unicorn's judgments about flight, but the content of the comment isn't what concerned Grey. Their new friend was still deeply injured and would need a lot of rest. The siblings would need to either jury rig some wheels for the wagon, or find some safe (-ish) place to stash him with some food and water, and hope he recovered enough to justify those costs. Lost water could kill the rest of the party, and lost food wouldn't be easy to replace. Not out here on barren rock with varying depths of sand covering it.

It was indeed Pear Rump, and she didn't hear the humming of the flight rod. Grey thought about sneaking up, waiting until she was a scant half dozen hooves ahead, and shouting a greeting. But she could spin around pretty fast, and would probably let loose a cannon shot before she realized it was just her stupid brother. So, when he was pretty sure he was close enough that all the words would get heard and parsed, he shouted "Hey there filly! Are YOU in keeping the the decree?"

She clamped her tail as she spun, eyes wide with shock, then a second later, now facing the approaching bucks, she clamped her gaping mouth shut and glowered at Grey until he landed. "Yeah you'd like that, wouldn't you? Hopefully you have more water than when you started since I'm out, lover boy."

Grey scowled as he started unhooking himself from the harness. Looking up at the eternal cloud, he real-

ized what was different. Cloud cover but still uncomfortably warm ... and dry, and no shelter, and Pear had an eternal winter's coat. Grey levitated a water bottle from his pack to her. "Dirty water, but yes. Also we ran into trouble."

Pear took a look at the permanent claw marks on Stormflight's shoulders. "Artfully placed. Griffon?" Stormy nodded. "and you're not folding your wing. May I?" Pear would get more feedback from her preferred form of dexterity. Grey could have palpated the buck's wings but would only barely know how bad it was. So as a result, his sister had all the field medical experience getting an injured buck to be able to limp back home.

Grey mentally winced. If they took him home, the council would all but demand he come off "the pill" thus pitting them inadvertently against the whole of the Enclave. Or at least the members of the squad that knew he was still technically alive, albeit rogue.

"I can fix this" Pear said, a definite wavering tone suggesting against agreeing with her.

"You don't sound too happy about that, miss." Stormflight wheezed as he eyed the mare suspiciously.

"Well, see, the break was healed in-place as a permanent fix by the first potion." Pear looked away from the injured limb to make eye contact with its owner. "You sucked down a healing potion mid-battle I assume?" Stormflight nodded. "So, the correct fix, and I've done this once before" And then Grey remembered, and groaned at the memory. "What we do, is take a hard, sharp piece of scrap metal that I'm sure the fantastic flying filly has," Grey stuck his tongue out at his sister but did not otherwise interrupt. "and re-break the joint. That's not the hard part. The hard part is you have to hold still while I mostly jam your wing into a semblance of its normal posture ... probably with more jabbing with the sharp stick, and then I give you one of my three potions. You're in bad shape still anyway so I think it's called for we just want to fix your wings when we fix your lungs."

Stormflight seemed to have developed a permanent wince, right eye about half shut during that whole diatribe and still closed against the images presented to it. "I've seen it done."

Pear Rump reached into her pack, and set a healing potion down, looked at it's placement at the buck's mid-line, placing her own bulk between the buck's mouth and the potion, and she nodded in acceptance. One glance at the pegasus, then she stared hopefully at Grey, who had already taken a quick inquiry of his pack's raw materials. He found a veritable railroad spike, lopsided but definitely sharp, and floated it over to Pear's mouth. Stormflight gripped the wooden desk with his teeth, and closed his eyes; his ears were lightly pinned down. Pear asked if he was ready, and he grunted

in assent. Or pain, but Pear took it as the go-ahead, and she went ahead.

As soon as the spike was halfway into Stormflight's wingjoint, and halfway between the buck's scream making its way into a physical motion, she ripped rearward on the wing, and the snap of several bones in the joint was unmistakable. More wrenching, forward and back, Pear trying desperately to fold the wing against Stormflight's natural tensions given the circumstance. Finally, blood all over Pear and Stormflight both, with the wing pinned by Pear's chest, she reached over and grabbed the healing potion by its cork, and used a fetlock to rip the bottle free. "Drink!" she shouted.

Stormflight let go of the desk, his eyes blurry with pain, but he managed to find and grab the bottle with his lips. Tipping his head back he swallowed the potion greedily. The fountain of blood slowed, then ceased. Everypony was still a mess, but when Pear Rump climbed off the formerly injured buck, he flapped both wings, in sync and through a full range of motion.

Then Stormflight started coughing. In fact he was coughing so fast he could barely inhale for the next cough. Then as he stood up to give himself more room to get the air to cough a thick pink sludge started oozing out his nostrils. Ponies didn't breathe too well through their mouth so clearing his nose was a chore but it was over in a few seconds. Pear stared at the pile of pink phlegm at the buck's hooves, and turned to scowl at Grey. "No wonder he couldn't breathe you dumb colt. Inhaling healing potions always obstructs ... passage thingies. You've heard Canonbone..."

Head lowered, ears back, Grey interrupted her. "His throat was injured and I was afraid he wouldn't be able to swallow."

Pear was about to continue her lecture but, finally able to breathe, Stormflight added "My throat was cut to ribbons and I might not have swallowed successfully." Stormflight blew his nose again, and this time wiped his nose on his knees. "He saved my life miss. And don't feel bad I've had the same lecture and I forgot about it too." Stormflight rared up, and then hovered there, his wing beats flinging drops of blood all over Pear's orange coat. Noticing this, Stormflight said "Sweet Celestia I look like a Nightmare Night decoration."

"You're not exactly augmenting my natural beauty, either." Pear said, a slight grin on her face. She wasn't backing up in disgust, though. Upon seeing the tiny flecks all over her face, Stormflight Trees set hoof back to sandy soil.

It was two more days, as it turned out, of walking through desolate and forgotten lands. Three times chased by a radscorpion, twice impeded by a giant venus fly trap thing that spit fountains of poison when they



were within forty hooves. Stormflight was aghast that the ground was so specific in the ways it killed.

"Well, that's not precisely poison. They're seeds, and they'll grow in rotting meat just fine. So you get sick from some sort of side effect of being a plant-pony cross, then wherever you fall one of those things springs up." One of his first forays into the wasteland, Grey had been confronted by a small forest of these plants. He meticulously firebombed them all "After they were flat I figured, since nobody in the village knew what they were, I'd wait 'til they were good and wilted. Didn't take any longer than you'd think."

Stormy was walking sideways, his eyes like saucers and he followed the tale. "And under each stalk, was a pony?"

Pear nodded and filled in the part she knew about. "My dad helped levitate the corpses – half just skeletons by that point – to our community graveyard. They're all together in a mass grave since we don't know who they were."

This had often been a sticking point with Grey Horn, however. "You know sis our history doesn't properly go back to when we merged. They might be from our village, or from one of the two villages before."

Pear rolled her eyes and didn't turn her head from their path. "I heard that logic laid out the first seven times you said it."

Stormflight turned completely to walk backwards, keeping eye contact while talking with the pair. "Now I've heard you mention that afore, but never felt like prying. What two villages? Do you mind if I ask what in the hay you mean?"

The siblings looked at each other. Grey was more passionate about his speaking, but also a little less precise on a few points that didn't seem to stick in his memory. Pear knew more details but to her, that's what they were: details from history lessons. So Grey launched into the parts he knew were worth speaking. "When the war with the zebras were happening"

"We still have battles, you know."

"When the **war** was about to *actually happen*" Grey repeated, emphasizing the difference between the level of organization between the conflict then, and the conflict now. "The younger sister of the ministry of image's mare"

"Wartime Technology."

Grey nodded, too caught up with the retelling. "The ministry mares were preparing to win the war, and the younger sister was preparing to survive the war. So Stable Tec was born, and a bunch of expensive to get into tin cans were dug into Equestrian soil everywhere."

"It was by lottery, actually." That correction, issued meekly and in a level tone, came from Stormflight Trees. It nearly undid Grey's train of thought entirely.

"Well, anyway we're off the part of the map that Stable Tec cared about so another company sprang up and I don't know how it was funded"

Pear Rump explained. "By group purchasing power of the community that banded together"

"But the more limited funds meant thinner walls, smaller reactors to keep the lights on – and also smaller food stores."

"To be fair," Pear injected, eyes still ahead on the blank landscape in front of them "Most of the theoretical research available at the time said the world could be repopulated within eight to twelve years. That we lasted forty inside is a testament to unicorn dedication."

"Miss?"

Pear Rump stopped, and patted her forehead with a hoof. "Yes, I know. But look my stupid brother and my dad were both Unicorns"

"One of them still is." Grey mumbled, possibly loud enough to be heard.

"And besides that, do you hear a cave accent?"

"He doesn't know about cave accents. That in fact was his question, if you'll recall sis." With all members walking again, Grey continued "When we came out of the stable, we found what had been arable land before was ... well, " Grey indicated their surroundings. "But we also found a small, almost feral tribe of earth ponies that were physically thriving but had been forced out of their own makeshift shelter ten years earlier. Almost exclusively earth ponies, they had been living in a cave system farther south."

Stormflight's eyes glazed over as he glanced to the south. "Those foothills. I bet I've seen 'em. The outside if not the specific opening."

"So, right. Cave ponies. We pooled our meager resources, and built massive metallic walls at the best valley. At the time there were two creeks"

"Three. There was one where the forge is now, but it dried up within five years."

"Right, within forty years the village was down to one stream from the mountains, and then we had an earthquake and it was rerouted. We haven't built up the nerve to go looking for where it went. Anyway, we still had a slightly cracked water talisman from the stable, but it only put out four or five gallons per hour, and that was for a village of roughly two hundred and fifty ponies."

Stormflight politely winced. "You'd said two hundred, when I met you first."

Pear nodded, taking her turn at the narrative. "The water thing meant crops were meager too. So sick died, not so many foals grew all the way up, things like that. The stable born unicorns were able to cram enough magic into the talisman that it went up to eleven and a half gallons per hour. So two hundred or so seemed a stable number for healthy ponies until three years ag"

Pear choked up, tears welling in her eyes. She stopped, the others stopped too. Grey stood shoulder against her shoulder, mutely offering his support.

"Now my daddy isn't a unicorn anymore." Pear sniffled a few times, then buried her head into Grey's more diminutive chest. Grey held her head there, and tried not to glare at the pegasus outsider.

At his tipped head, and quizzical expression, Grey explained. "Alicorn monsters."

This didn't exactly clear everything up for the pegasus. "So, did they eat the ponies, or ...?"

"We don't know what happened to them. A flock of six of them descended and grabbed every male they could find, and every unicorn mare they could still levitate, and flew off to the north. Above the clouds after a few miles. Did your people have any report of that?"

Stormflight shook his head. "We'd have a record they passed through our airspace, but everypony lives longer if we don't get involved in their business. Especially when there's more than one, since they can see through each others eyes. Near as we can tell."

After several deep breaths, Pear straightened up again, and hugged Grey, once. Then addressed the pegasus. "We fought back. Lost half a dozen ponies, two whole buildings – their metal sides reduced to slag – and the water talisman was cracked worse than it was before." Pear pushed her brother away, then explained "The council made a few decisions. One was to encourage scavenging outside the walls, since history showed we wouldn't be able to grow enough food to stay inside forever." Her eyes lowered, and her ears twitched.

"The other was to make more stallions. There were three left, they were all of breeding age, the mares were asked to inquire about their services."

Stormflight raised an eyebrow hesitantly; one ear cocked backwards, the other ear trained on Grey. "That ... sounds like a great deal for a young teen buck."

"Call me old fashioned."

Pear giggled, then appended "The lead councilmare is a cave pony. Dedicated to long term survival no matter what it does to us or our culture over the decades." Pear looked up, made eye contact, her ears neutral. "The stable ponies have a culture; a history. A moral code even. If we're supposed to die out because of what we believe, then so be it." Pear looked over at

her younger brother. "Plus our dad raised us right. No wanton sex with strangers."

"Right. Well, that does answer a lot of questions."

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The river rapids would probably have been uncrossable. It was a little hard to tell at this distance but the sharp rocks combined with white water frothing rapidly around said rocks would be difficult to navigate, depending on depth. The river was roughly thirty hooves across. Standing at the very edge of the water, it did not look crossable.

"I wonder if it's drinkable." Was Grey's comment, staring at the distant, still clear water.

"Fly down there and find out egghead." Pear didn't have a fear of heights, but was staying well away from the cliff edge just the same.

When asked if he would consider dropping into the canyon to check, Stormflight responded "Nu uh." Then pointed to the large holes sporadically placed across both sides of the canyon. "See those, there? Quarry eels. Giant pony eating worm thing that digs through solid rock like it was nothing. Then there's the mechanics of the trip." Grey leaned forward to look again at the drop. Very straight sides, four to five hundred hooves deep, and never more than fifty hooves across. "Gaining altitude is hard. Real hard. I'd be within striking distance for the whole trip down and back up, and not able to do anything but flap to go straight up. No thank you, sir and miss."

So, on to going across then. "Pear can you jump it? Only about 30 hooves" Of course, that was three to four times her body length, but earth ponies were good for feats of strength.

"Nu uh." She deliberately parodied Stormflight's diction, then added "If there was a pack of hell hounds nipping at my heels, sure, dead if you do dead if you don't. But at this narrow spot that looks about to crumble over there so I'd need to clear it be several extra hooves. Thirty five hoof jump? Even with a good running start I'm only guessing fifty fifty."

Stormflight raised a hoof and looked askance at the unicorn. "Grey? We can both fly."

Grey nodded, then shot his eyebrows up in realization. "You think you can carry her? I might have the sheer power but I'm not sure my legs are good for that."

Stormflight looked to Pear Rump for permission, asking "Miss?" When she nodded, he hovered over her, and wrapped his forelegs under her elbows and gripped her by the barrel, then started flapping like mad. Slowly, very slowly it seemed, the pair went airborne. Straining with the effort, Stormflight commented "All bone and muscle."

While the pegasus buck flew the earth pony across, Grey moved his 'wings' into flight position, then closed the energy converter around his horn. It was a simple matter at this point to ease himself across. And his sister had been right; a segment of rock half the volume of a pony broke free as he put his weight on it. The pegasus had been right too; as the rock fell, about a third of the way down it was bitten into two separate pieces by some . . . *thing* easily ten hooves across that leapt out of a hole, then retreated before Grey could get a good look at it.

Pear didn't say I told you so and Grey didn't offer any apologies. They were all across, and could continue.

[insert tales of more radscorpions, two raider camps and one night of rest across three days travel.]

Stormflight Trees disappeared. Not, flew away and didn't tell anyone. Grey was watching; one minute he was there in the featureless terrain, the next he was gone.

Then he was back again, airborne and looking terrified.

It took him a moment to catch his breath, wave the siblings back a few steps, and regain enough composure to explain where he was for those several seconds. "I think we found it."

"Where?" Pear looked around the buck, and slowly started walking past him.

"Don't put any weight on your hooves until you're sure there's ground under them." Stormflight advised. Pear got to nearly where the pegasus disappeared, and she herself was no longer visible for a very short moment. Then she was backing up quickly.

"The ghoulish trader was right about it being a hole in the ground you can't find."



## Chapter 7

# Creepy Overmare Stallion of the Town You Can't Find

Seconds later, a griffon wearing a vest of some heavy cloth laced with a woven latticework of blue threads going down the shoulders, appeared above them. "Ah, hello. There are no stairs here." He flew past the traveling ponies to land just behind them, then stared at Stormflight Trees' wings. "You're a sky rat."

"So I'm told. Names Stormflight." He held his right forehoof up in greeting, which garnered a look of fear and confusion from the male griffon, as if he didn't know why a hoof would be floating mid-air just a few hooves from his chest.

Then, with grim determination the griffon briefly grasped the fetlock joint, then let go again. "You should know that sky rats are" The catbird visibly looked around him for a word to use before settling on "*disdained* in this city."

Feeling a little unsure why he was, again, saving a pegasus who had never to his knowledge saved *him*, Grey strode up to stand beside Stormflight. "He was kicked out of the clouds permanently. That makes him an honorary earth pony."

The griffon perked up a bit at this, and extended his head both forward, and well to the side, then tipped his head so it was level again even at the odd location. His eyes darted between the pegasus' eyes and his side several times. Somewhat reluctantly Stormflight turned to show off his lack of a cutie mark. The griffon yanked his head back in surprise Eyes still on the blank hip, asked "Why didn't they finish the process?"

Stormflight gritted his teeth. "Squadmates didn't bring any brands with them, and my CO didn't stick around to have it formally done. Something about approaching raiders; they just reported me dead and now nopony cares that I'm actually not.

The griffon nodded, then made eye contact with the two siblings. "Then I suppose it's safe to welcome you to the Republic of Dave. Be careful stepping into the

illusion as there are only two stairways for your kind. And mind the rules, I guess.”

”What are the rules of your town, sir? We’ve never been outside our own.” Pear looked eager to learn the native culture. Grey was reserving his eagerness when he saw the bazaar, or it’s equivalent.

The griffon started walking, and looked at the ground, troubled, as he went. ”Technically there are none. The glorious leader reserves the right to kill or torture any-pony however, and he’s very good at finding ponies that are making trouble for their neighbors. So, hmm.” He looked up again, appraising the trio. ”For a start, let me say that in this town, all are ponies. Zebra is the forth tribe of pony, and griffon is a fifth. The unicorns can’t decide on dragons but since there aren’t any in this town that remains moot.”

Grey had never met a healthy zebra before; only a couple of zombies here and there. ”Are there many zebra living here, then?”

Another question that made their guide uncomfortable. ”They tend to ... leave.”

Stormflight said ”What does your glorious leader look like, if I may ask?” but was rewarded with the guide squawking, and jumping aside ten hooves courtesy a healthy if unplanned flapping of his beige wings.

He regained his composure, and said cryptically ”That’s a question we’re officially not allowed to answer. As one of the guards I know part of the answer but we don’t normally give that out for a few reasons.”

Grey couldn’t pin down the logic hole just yet, but it was bugging him until Stormflight said ”So, what’s to keep random ponies from torturing each other in the middle of the night?”

That question did not disturb their guide at all. ”Our leader would find out quickly. It’s why there is so little crime in this town ... and why all the guards are a bit jumpy.” The griffon stopped walking so he could turn and say ”Perhaps if you meet him it will become clearer. But the stairwell is here. Mind, it isn’t very wide for the first leg so walk carefully.” He pointed with his claws to the bare desert.

One at a time, Stormflight then Grey then Pear Rump walked in the indicated direction, and disappeared. On the other side was a steep stairwell about one and a half pony widths from the sheer stone wall to Grey’s right, and the utterly bottomless pit to his left. When Pear Rump stepped through, she ’eep’d and quickly stepped up to Grey’s rump to hide her face between the wall and his backside.

The griffon was hovering beside them, pointing out which levels focused on which activity. ”Traders, the few we get, needed go no farther than the first level as



all the finished goods make their way up here. Second level has lodgings and what manufacturing tools we possess. Third is more opulent housing for the city's elite. Well and a few dens for the nearly homeless, I admit. They sleep in the parks; always free and never nice. Fourth, about fifty hooves straight down is where our orchards are. They're policed so no sleeping as it reduces output. Lodgings for, well I'll use the word earth ponies but I mean that by trade not body shape, is on that level. Fifth is arcane research, with a sixth being excavated still despite the university level being far from finished."

Grey's folded wings barely fit, and the stone steps had almost no texture. If this place ever saw a winter, or even a serious rainstorm, it would likely claim lives. "Do all the levels have exposed stairs like this?" Looking across to make eye contact with their guide meant looking across the cylinder of ground that was missing. Easily three hundred hooves across, there were ponies visible at every opening to the abyss.

As Stormflight reached the first landing and turned inward, their guide, who had not given a name yet, said "Every level that isn't going from the surface in, has at least one interior stairwell. But not all are public, so yes, all the local ponies are used to walking this path. Please introduce yourself to the trader's secretary, and she'll make the needed arrangements."

Stepping into the platform meant stepping into reduced light, although he would not have called it darkness. The reduction in sound surprised Grey however. There was a generic roar, of water or more likely wind, absorbing conversation on the stairwell, that silenced within a few hooves of the inner walls.

Inside was a middle aged unicorn mare, dingy yellow of coat and dingier of mane, sitting at a small desk. Erected of sheer stone, not separate from the floor, Grey noticed. The desk had a sloped surface that held a book like a motel, or reception might have listing names, and time in and time out. "Firelight Coins, nice to meet you. Who's the head trader, then? I hope our guard has given you the run down on city laws along with the layout of where you don't want to go?"

"I'm Grey Horn. I don't think we've named our village because we didn't know there were other survivors, but we're to the south by southeast of you some days journey." He thought about introducing the rest of his party ... namely, how to describe the 'sky rat.' The griffon guard had as negative a reaction as Grey would have expected but Firelight Coins hadn't even glanced a second time at any of them.

Her quill levitated, and she wrote in her ledger. "Grey Horn, of the south." The pen set itself back. "Do you have coins? We use pre war bottle caps, as I'm told the other town to the north of us do also."

Stormflight looked quickly between Grey and Pear, but Pear spoke up "Yes we've brought a supply of bottle caps in addition to our wares." The pegasus was still confused, to judge by the ear flicking, but he said nothing.

Coins nodded politely, her deep magenta eyes revealing nothing about her stake in the matter. "Very well. To your left, a fifth of the way around, is the area set aside for trader's staging. That means if there's room and you want to save money you can just sleep there as there are restroom cutouts into the stone, marked for mare and stallion use. Further along, a third of the way from here, is the bazaar. If there's no qualms that day about space just set up anywhere, signs are always useful but we don't provide any of that free, to sell the kind of thing you've brought. If a lot of the locals are trying to sell to you they'll have set up too and a guard will have to be assigned to shuffle stalls by whatever their notion of fair is, that day."

"So, in addition to not taking Equestrian bits, you let the police shove all the citizens around however they want?" Stormflight drawled in his cloud accent.

Those dark magenta eyes got darker, as Coins zeroed in on the speaker, then his wings. Then she blinked deliberately several times. Grey could see her eyes unfocus. Grey wasn't really sure if she was watching the siblings or blinking back tears, but she thought the buck's out burst, quiet as it was, to be inappropriate. "I do hope we'll not be having troubles with the Enclave today?"

"I'm not with them anymore, ma'am." Which seemed to satisfy. Coins snorted once, then pointed to her right.

There were other sky rats that lived there. *Except I think that makes them plain pegasi.* The trio passed two who came out of a stairwell inset into the hallway and went clockwise while the traders went counter clockwise. The first was a very dejected looking stallion whom Grey would have assumed was a brilliant green except the muted colors of walking by the dark stone walls same fifty hooves from the window to the abyss made it less clear what his color was. Moments later an older mare, who was deep pink and missing half the feathers from her wings, trotted past them without so much as a glance at the traders.

"I think I'm related to that stallion. Would need a closer look to be sure." Stormflight wasn't looking like he wanted to go back and find out. *So, his family have a history of getting kicked out?*

"Stormy, can I ask something just a little bit personal?" Grey wasn't sure that traveling less than a week was enough to qualify for something that upset him enough that he made a point of never bringing it

up. But that did seem an odd reaction, just a moment ago.

The stone hallway widened to about eight hooves into the rock, and there were several lights hanging inches below the ceiling providing a wan light. Two of the five lines had wires connecting them, and they flickered but were brighter than the steady but dying globes with no apparent power source. "Yeah he was declared dead too. But so was his whole squad so he wasn't quietly kicked out, like me."

Grey shook his head. "No I mean, why did they kick you out? What un-pony thing did you do?"

While Stormflight stopped and stared at his hooves, Grey gave his friend time to collect his thoughts while looking around for any clues about how this city did things. The opening was an arc eighty hooves deep, extending for more than a hundred and twenty hooves long in which the stone was inconsistent. Carved fish-bone patterns in places, worn divots shaped like favorite rolling spots in soft dirt, also a few threadbare and faded blankets. Overall it implied sleeping stalls about roughly 10 hooves on a side with four-hoof thick walkways separating them all.

Stormflight finally spoke up. "I knocked a girl up."

Pear immediately whipped her head to the sky rat. "I thought you were on the pill for bucks." she interjected almost angrily.

"I am now. Wasn't then. Didn't have a marefriend so figured applying for a supply would get me in a different kind of trouble." He looked up now, at the confused looks his traveling companions were giving him. "You know, making like I had lots of action and had to have up to date protection. When all my squadmates knew I was so awkward about anything that smacked of courtship that I probably wouldn't know ... you know, how to do it if a cute filly offered to dally with me."

Grey blinked repeatedly. "And they killed you for that?"

"You have to understand Grey, that growing crops on the cloud curtain is hard. And since we don't want nothing do to with the irradiated and poisonous ground we have to limit our numbers something serious. Getting into the military raises your chances of winning the lottery but you don't get entered until you're married so we have shotgun weddings sometimes. Then the council bay decide the happily forced couple still lost the lottery and abort the foal."

Pear, her voice slightly muffled as she was holding her forehead up by her hoof and talking at the floor, said "So did they kill you both or did your marefriend get to keep her memento of her one night of indiscretion?"

Stormflight looked over his shoulder, a pained expression on his face. "They didn't tell me, and honest to the princesses I don't know." He blinked, and Grey saw a tear drop down. "Ah wish like I cain't say, that I knew. But I think my CO killed me to make room. Ah hope" Another tear before he finished. "I hope she gets to keep the foal on account of it being from a dead soldier."

Grey didn't have to look over his shoulder to hear the blazing anger lighting up Pear's face. Trying to keep things civil, Grey picked three consecutive stalls at random and said "Well, and not to belittle your trials Stormy, but if Pear here isn't knocked up by some random stranger the council will just tell her to sleep with the town doctor until the deed is done." He unhooked his wings and dropped them in his 'stall' "So as much as I want to hear more, lets change subjects and see about food."

"Fine. Why don't I stay here and watch our stuff and stew in unfairness while the boys go fetch me something with chocolate in it." Pear seated herself with finality next to Grey's wings.

"Chocolate, ma'am. Will do." Stormflight took a deep breath, and pantomimed tipping a stetson hat before looking ahead. And with that the boys started towards the bazaar section, where food stalls could be detected even at this range by their smell alone.

"The griffons eat meat, don't they? I can smell animal fats burning." Grey was a little disturbed by the smell. There were spices added, and the woodsmoke clearly would have added to the appeal. But it smelled like burning animals.

"We can digest it too, by the way." Stormflight responded. "Won't be cheap so I wouldn't recommend it, but if you're stuck and raid a raider's fridge, so I hear, you can eat the bloatsprite sandwiches or whatever else you find."

Good to know, but ... "The two fridges I raided, had pony meat. Labeled as such. 'Unicorn, 118y8mo since fall' which at the time made it four months old if I understood the label right." There were more ponies here, near the business section. Mostly an even mix of earth and unicorn ponies, slightly more stallions than mares but one in twenty was a griffon, who had their own color scheme and Grey was surprised to find such a variety, narrow though it was, in catbirds.

"Don't eat those ... in addition to moral concerns you'll develop the shakes and literally shake yourself to death." Stormflight looked the crowd over, concerned about something. Grey thought maybe it was the lack of tables. The groups that stopped to eat their hot food had to levitate it, hold it, or eat it off the (fairly clean) black stone floor. "There are a few pegasi in this crowd, but there's something wrong with them."

Grey hadn't seen any wings so when he saw a shoulder or a rump that looked exotic, he assumed that's all it was: a narrowly built earth pony. But looking specifically for feathers, he did see two sets. But those disappeared just as quick into the shuffle of bodies. The first stall they encountered sold fresh vegetables. All fairly wilted looking to Grey's eyes, but none of them so far gone they couldn't be cooked into a stew.

As they passed it, Grey whispered to Stormflight, so as not to offend the yellow unicorn selling them "Did those seem a bit overripe to you?"

"Huh? Oh." Stormflight glanced back, rather oblivious to how hard he was staring at the passed up merchandise. "Yeah but when I was stationed in an outpost that's about the way the provided food would look. Just been a few days since it was yanked out of its soil."

Another was selling candies, but nothing Grey thought Pear would actually like. In addition to being hard candy, they were sweetened with beet sugar, so the seller proclaimed. Unless their method of separating sugar was vastly superior to what his village did, it would taste as much like dirt as like sugar. Stormflight asked if stuff sweetened by pear extracts would go over well or be considered a bad joke. "You have to understand our mother is insane about one day in three. There's nothing pear-like about Pear Rump, and I have no idea why she thought my sister would grow to be pear shaped."

"No she's built like an APC." A vendor had noodles in broth, cooked and not seasoned. The bowl had a handle glued to the base so Stormflight could carry it away without burning his lips or limping on three hooves. He paid for it with two rounds from his revolver, and received three caps in change. "A fork would have been nice. Even a one-cap rental long enough to eat. But beggars can't really choose, can they Grey?"

"What's an APC? And some of the pre-war fiction we have, depicts griffons preferring noodles, but eating them with two tiny sticks. Just so earth ponies would feel frustrated. I don't see the guards doing that, though." Grey looked over the food vendors to find the technology, and junk vendors. He thought he spied a few while he sat by Stormy, who was slurping his soup somewhat loudly.

"Armored Personnel Carrier. Like a tank but no gun. You're talking about chop sticks and they're not a griffon thing. I've used them once. Needed both front hooves and about got the back legs involved just to grip the silly carrots."

"She's got her saddle cannon, you know. So she's a tank with winter colors, what with that coat of hers. Wonder if we could get a one-cap deposit back if we take the bowl back?"

Stormflight said he had not thought of that, and gave the bowl to the unicorn while asking "That's an anti materiel rifle ain't it?"

When asked how much of the cost was for the use of the bowl, the off-white earth pony vendor explained "we all get them from the same source so it doesn't really save me much. But noodles have been the thing today so I tell you what. I'll let you have a tiny bullet back, alright? Pick one of these." And laid out one each of .22lr, .32ACP, and a 5mm rifle cartridge.

As Grey took the round for his revolver Stormflight laughed. "You owe me one now."

"Oh, speaking of ammo. I have an empty for her cannon." He levitated out the spent brass. "I know it's a break action single shot rifle, but I also know its hoof built less than thirty years ago."

The ex-soldier looked over the levitating brass, reading the tiny writing around the primer. "Fifty Bee Em Gee? No. Oh luna; Grey that's a fourteen millimeter it's even bigger than our squad's sniper rifle."

Since there didn't seem to be a chocolate vendor, Grey decided he'd just pick up *something* on the way back through. But still heading out, he met a junk vendor. Although a dark gray and middle aged earth pony, Grey immediately recognized a kindred spirit. This stallion in front of him lived in a world a century before, at least inside his head. He just sold pieces of it because ponies paid him to. "Where did I come from? Oh, there's a town, colt. Five days north, but you have to look out for the crazies. Too the ones that didn't make it through the dark times but still walk. They often don't make any noise. Yes, zombies sure. They don't wheeze or moan they just start hugging you but its the hug of the dead I tell you. Never let go until their legs fall off; I lost a sister that way. Poor pony was nearly glowing, and my sister died of exposure because she couldn't out maneuver the century old buck."

He was able to trade some of his mangled scrap metal for a run down spark battery and some wire. There was a bit of a gap to the next vendor he wanted to peruse but between there and here, was an earth pony.

It's not like there weren't plenty of them, but this one had a vest, plain undyed cloth except the bright blue lattice work like the guard that met them first, had worn. Also she had a necklace tucked into the vest, but it was bulky enough to still draw attention to itself partly because it was emitting a subtle red glow.

She was dusky rose color, with black hairs in her tail but mostly a mix of red and dark yellow. Her mane started at dark yellow for the forelock and down, descending into a faded brick red at the withers. She had been watching Grey for as many seconds as he had been aware of her, and her dead stare drew attention to

her face. She looked like she was hired to tell next of kin that the surgery was unsuccessful. Like that was her career, giving bad news.

"You're new here." Grey briefly wondered if she worked closely with their overstallion, since everyone else so far had been emotionally healthy except perhaps for that first guard. But this mare was downright creepy.

"Yes ma'am, just flew in, and boy are their legs tired." Stormflight pantomimed tipping a hat to her, but she hadn't moved except to look at him briefly, follow the hoof go through its motion, then as Stormy went back to standing awkwardly, she stared at Grey.

"You let your pet do the talking?" Just a hint of disdain and disbelief. Just a hint of an eyebrow going up.

Grey racked his brain for clues. Stormflight had said he had seen pegasi 'but there was something wrong' He leaned back in deference, one leg raised to cover his chest a little. "I'm sorry. Is it illegal to be a pegasus? I meant no harm by inviting him."

Stormflight squinted, but said nothing. The mare looked back at the half-dashite stallion, her teeth gritted for a moment before commenting "No. Only the Enclave is illegal."

Stormflight Trees turned sideways, exposing his lack of a cutie mark. "Guess we about have that covered, then, miss?"

This time she made eye contact with him. "No brand. Short version?"

"They didn't bother branding me since they didn't expect me to survive the night. No armor, pipbuck or guns. But only officially am I dead. Don't tell my CO." The dead stare wanted more, and after a half a breath, Stormflight said "But I'm still a dashite, yes."

The almost-pink gray mare pulled her front right leg under her, and folded the other leg half way, pausing for a split second before standing up straight again. It wasn't precisely a bow because she wasn't facing either of them, but the 'window' that went all the way around the abyss. It wasn't any motion of respect Grey knew about, but she clearly meant it as a motion of acceptance. She held that painful eye contact a moment longer before moving her gaze to Grey.

"Your vest, ma'am. Are you with the guard?" The mare tipped her head so she could examine her own clothing. "I've accepted a courier mission with a rather uncomfortable lack of information. But if I could speak to the stallion that's officially in charge of this place I suspect I'll find I've come to the right town." As if there were any other towns, let alone that were made from a hole in the ground.

"Courier. Who sent you? What is the message?"

"It's a package, ma'am." Grey replied. "A trader named Ditzzy Doo accepted it from another trader she met, but both of them were going the wrong way to bring it here."

Her ears pricked at the trader's name. "Derpy? Ghoul pegasus? Never made any sense?" As if anything recently had made any sense.

"She said her name was Ditzzy Doo, but yes, a ghoul pegasus. She could still fly, though.

"You didn't mention her being a ghoul." Stormflight interjected.

"Yes, her friends call her Derpy Hooves. Or possibly her enemies. It's hard to tell, partly because she treats them both the same." Her ears were still forward, but the interest was rapidly waning. Grey could see her eyes unfocus, presumably in lieu of looking away, she was just trying to 'focus' on everything rather than just where she was looking.

"Which are you? If you don't mind me asking." Grey's head tipped quizzically, subconsciously trying to win back this strange mare's attention.

She sighed, and looked at her hooves, then out across the abyss, eyes tracking something for a second before replying "I'm not sure anymore." Now looking at him again, though the ears flopped to neutral. "May I see it?"

He levitated the package out of his bag. "I was told this town had a stallion as its overmare."

She looked at it as Grey rotated it within his horn's grasp, and she grinned, eyes narrowed as she tracked each and every rune she saw. "Clever. Elegant. Also booby trapped. Unlock them in the wrong order and you might poison yourself ... or turn into a cactus."

"What's a cactus?" Grey had never heard the term though he was sure it was something ponies did not want to be.

"A type of plant" she said off hoofedly.

Unfortunately for Grey's edification, Stormflight spoke at exactly the same moment, saying "Type of Rock, I think?"

The two answers didn't mesh, and his brain only filtered out Stormy's voice. But it didn't matter what a cactus was – Grey was right; ponies didn't want to be turned to them. Grey put the package back, visualizing it accidentally petrifying him as he did so. "Can I meet your leader, then?"

The mare started, ears twitching, eyes wide as she stared at Grey. Then she regained her composure just as fast, and explained "It can happen. But it will not happen the way you would expect."

"You do have a stallion as overmare, then?" The wording sounded awkward on his tongue, but it was



exactly how Ditzzy / Derpy had said it, and perhaps that was more because it was this leader's title rather than just Ditzzy not making sense.

"That would not be untrue." Back to the dead stare; the expression of bad news.

*Creepy. That much is right.* He thought to himself. Aloud, he asked "So, would you be able to make any arrangements, or do I speak to somepony else?"

Her eyes examined the room for answers, before finding Grey's again. "Time was recent, that you would talk to this pony for such. But our self described leader has experienced tumult in his inner council. And so it is, that this pony before you no longer sits as a **member** of that council. But I will make certain inquiries, and if you would, please find, either on this or the lower level, a griffon guard. With a vest as you see, yes. Or."

And she pulled the necklace out of her vest, and Grey did a double take. The red glow seemed to vanish, replaced by a gentle blue glow. She continued her advice, saying of the necklace, "Blue means they act as emissaries of our leader. They have no proper leadership themselves, but are listened to more closely by our" She paused, and blinked at Grey. "Overstallion." With that she tucked the necklace's many cubes back into her guard's vest, and Grey was sure that when the mare had forgotten about it, the necklace was glowing red again.

Grey duplicated her half-bow, straightening his neck too so it felt like he was actually showing proper deference, then bidding her good day, and proceeded to the next vendor.

The violet colored unicorn mare, who had a variety of electronics components on display, was also displaying the whites of her eyes; saucer plate orbs of fear pointed at the creepy emissary mare behind the stallions. "That was red, wasn't it?"

Grey looked back to remind himself, but she was nowhere to be found. "Yeah, I think so. What does that mean?" at the incredulous stare from the vendor, he added "Yes, just blew in from the desert, first day here, no idea. What does it mean?"

"Only the leader pony himself may wear red lights around his neck. It means he or she is the current leader, proper. We all have to do what **ever** a pony like that says. Except of course of how dangerous it is to mimic. I have no idea what Desert Rose thought she was doing wearing it today."

"Do the guards arrest you for red glowy bits, ma'am?" asked Stormflight, still bewildered.

"Not exactly. But just a few days ago a young griffon colt got caught in that lie." The mare stopped cold when her gaze fell across Stormflight's wings. The ven-

dor's nose whipped to face Grey, fear still the overriding emotion on her face.

"Yes I let my pet talk." It bothered Grey to even spit those words out, and he knew he'd have to talk it out with Stormflight later, but he wanted to know what kind of crazy this town was before it strangled him.

The mare straightened her neck, and laid her ears to the side. Her display of wares covered up what her body was doing, but a single 'clop' of a hoof being placed back under her was heard as she continued, facing Stormflight again. "Guards or emissary, I don't know, but his wings were broken and bleeding, and he was tossed into the fire. Oh, right you're new here. That" She pointed out the window "is the hole above the fire. At the bottom is a lava river that carries megaspell fallout. Only ghouls can work on the seventh level, and by the ninth even *they* die of exposure. I think its the eleventh or twelfth, if we kept building, that would be flooded by the fire."

Stormflight blinked, stunned. Grey Horn was speechless for a moment, but asked "How much power do the guards? Who decided on that punishment?" The griffon he had met first, seemed very frightened of his job. But to mangle a pony and then throw him to his death required either a direct order from the overstallion, or the security force had a *very* loose tether.

The violet mare snorted. "Our taxes are used to buy them guns and armor, but I don't generally see them use those. They mingle with crowds just for the intimidation factor so far as I can tell." Grey took from that, that a direct order was involved in the death of the cheating local.

Grey looked for a little bit of clear space to set out his own wares, telling the vendor that he wanted to trade and she seemed the most likely to value what he had brought. "I'd also like to meet your overstallion. Do you know what office I would go to, to arrange that?"

Another snort. "Let me see about buying your stuff. Well, at least you know what to collect for best weight to cap ratio." She levitated a small blackboard and started writing notes on it, while speaking a little distractedly. "Where to find our official leader, is a bit of a mystery. Some people say he just lives on the next floor down in a reasonable but not great suite. Some, especially the poor actually, say he travels down to the lower levels and hangs out to hear cases from ne'er do wells. And tosses the guilty into the well of fire just from there." The mare looked up, her deep red eyes soft now, not afraid anymore. "I don't know that I believe that, but I know we don't have hardly any crime. I've lived two other places, honey, and taxes are about triple here what they should be, but for twelve caps out of a hundred I've never been stolen from, and all the raunchy poor ponies that live down below are at least polite."

She finished her notes, and presented a list. The one sparkle cola, never opened, fetched what Grey thought to be an enormous rate; likewise bottle of turpentine he carried just to clean electronics was listed at seven caps. But some of his control board pieces, that granted would require solder work by a skilled unicorn to be useful for anything, were being offered one and a half caps each rounded down. Still, the net total for everything showing. "So, that would be 175 for everything I'm showing. I'm hoping to set up trade relations with my village, you know. We can brew the turpentine from the trees there, for instance."

Her eyebrows went up considerably. "One seventy five for what you're showing here. Let me count it out honey, and yes, fresh turpentine has a lot of uses." She started levitating caps out from a partially hidden locked safe behind her display, stacking them in tens. "Talk to Redwing or Broken Claw about getting a trader's contract. Lower cost to set up a stall in the nice part of the top level or a protected and patrolled section of the second floor. More ponies less money."

Grey gratefully levitated the 'coins' into his now much lighter bag. "Where would I find them, ma'am?"

The vendor tapped a hoof against her chin. "Right. We've sort of been going through some sort of guard succession thing the past couple of days; supposedly the leader died and the guard are deciding who replaces him." She put her hoof down and looked Grey in the eye and added conspiratorially, "Of course the guard all say they don't decide anything but I've seen it happen. Some random passerby will shoot the leader in the head, and of course he dies from that and a bunch of ponies riot and always about four, maybe five get violently killed, then all the guards run for cover. Then the next day somebody new is wearing that red glowing necklace and sussing out would be criminals, like nothing changed."

"So, ma'am?" Stormflight quietly interjected, his voice barely enunciated. "Do you suppose the leader is a figure head? If nothing changes when he dies, I mean." Grey thought the pegasus looked just a little bit afraid of the answer, but he was definitely watching for it from her.

"Oh don't say that. That also gets ponies thrown into the fire. So I don't have an answer for you. Just follow all the laws. Norms, whatever. Nothing bad should happen if you keep your head down." Turning back to Grey she said "Room 92 on floor two. So, floor two has a narrower hallway, and lots of doors based on their compass heading away from the fire. Like, due north" She pointed a hoof in what was approximately a northerly direction. "Will get room 0. Except there isn't one there the door is to a research lab at 352 just to the left. East of the fire though," Here she switched hooves to point in a somewhat easterly direction "would be a heading

of 90, and those two are roommates I think? Anyway, just after dark and not in the middle of the night they'll probably be home."

Grey thanked her, and went about looking for something for Pear. He ended up buying a prepackaged, pre-war chocolate 'cake' to go with another bowl of noodles and a bottle of fresh water. Another thing that was exorbitantly expensive.

Pear had fallen asleep on their stuff, but was grateful for the soup, and laughed at the 'chocolate' "You guys. I wasn't that serious. This is good, though." The bucks tried to condense their conversations, but it got a little confusing since each latched onto a different thread of what was happening, politically, right now.

"I cain't tell you how frightening, for a winged person, the prospect of falling to your death is. It's not natural and back home it would rightly be stopped as cruel and unusual punishment."

"Something big is up the emissary said the leader was just poisoned and she wasn't on the inner council anymore. But she wasn't invalidating her influence she just didn't want to talk to him right now."

Food eaten, the trio packed their bags back onto their backs and looked for stairs, as it was well into the afternoon and Grey thought finding Redwing or Broken Claw now would be a better plan than risking waking them up after a hard day of keeping a tumultuous inner council appeased.

On the second floor, there was less traffic. Ponies found the door they wanted, and went in. The doors themselves were of a humble size; big enough a large earth stallion could fit without ducking, but his ears would have touched the door frame. But some of the doors were of wood that had not been burned by the megaspells, and did not show seams where it might have been assembled from separate trees, and outlined in shiny metals like aluminum, and chromed steel. Other doors were of stone, with no lock visible, or welded together (very skillfully, Grey Horn had to admit to himself) from piles of scrap.

The stairs they eventually felt good about going down dumped them at 172, so it was less than a quarter turn the short way, but if this hallway was public space, again Grey wanted to get the political lay of the land, so they went the long way around and spent nearly half an hour. Ponies had to squeeze just a little to get past, but none seemed to look offended at the imposition. None had a blue glowing necklace, and the two guards - one female griffon and later one unicorn stallion, were in a hurry so Grey didn't interrupt them.

Finally a pattern occurred to Grey Horn. The nicer doors were farther from the next door in either direction. So not only were the doors nicer, they went with

bigger rooms, assuming all the rooms were roughly the same depth into the surrounding ground.

Every door was clearly numbered, but oddly Grey never saw a nameplate. At 92, a plain stone door with a keyhole drilled through, exposing the fact it was roughly a hoof thick door, was locked and had no obvious knocking mechanism. So, hoping not to get tossed into the fire for his lack of tact, he kicked the door four times in rapid succession.

"You figure they heard that?" Pear asked.

The lock clicked a few seconds later, and the door opened a crack. One yellow eye, and most of a beak could be seen. "What is the matter? There are guards on duty right now that are not me."

Grey suddenly thought that perhaps these two had a night shift, and he had woken them up three hours early; like being summoned at 4:30 because an enthusiastic trader couldn't understand the night watch pony. "Good evening sir, I'm from out of town and was told to come here to speak to either of Redwing or Broken Claw of the guard, about a trader's contract. Also there's a separate issue that I have a package for your leader."

The eye roved up and down Grey Horn several times, then repeated the process for his sister and their winged friend. "You" the griffon said, his voice muffled for have been directly more at the door than around it. "Enclave should not be here. Not even plain citizen of Enclave. Are you a soldier?"

Stormflight sighed, just a little through his nose. "No, sir. I'm a just a friend of these two. As a Dashite, I'm not with the Enclave any more." The griffon was not satisfied, and demanded to know the buck's name. "Stormflight Trees, sir." But the guard repeated the question for the siblings, watching closely as told him their name.

The griffon poked his head out his door, and looked up and down the hallway. Finding no one here, he invited the trio in. "But you can not invite more. My door is closed." And indeed, he re-locked it after they had entered.



## Chapter 8

# Courier, Trader, Emissary.

Inside the floor was a paler stone, and herringbone patterns had been etched lightly into the entire surface. They had entered into the middle of a large single room whose curves mimicked the hallway they had left. The wall however would have to be two hooves thick solid stone. Grey was beginning to mistrust that this was all natural and merely carved out with pickaxes as he had first surmised, but didn't yet know what else to believe about the construction he was looking at. A gentle breeze brought cool air that nevertheless smelled of the hot desert above. No other rooms were immediately visible; both a couch and a bed were visible from the where they stood. So perhaps this was indeed a large studio apartment, which would put it at nearly triple the floor space of the apartment back home.

So, the way you figured surface area, he tried to remember the math from a pre-war history book, related to how a triangle had three sides, and a circle, like a wheel, had none at all. Eightyish hooves in the short way, from the door he'd just come in to the wall by the bed, and roughly oval except the back wall was more curved and the front wall was less curved . . . call it eighty by a hundred forty hooves times three, except you divided by four to get a squashed wheel's area. *Roughly . . . eighty five hundred?* Spacious by anypony's measure, although the resident seemed to prefer spartan furnishings, as most of it was empty space.

And a blue necklace. Stranger yet, it was being worn by a fairly skinny colt. He was laying on the floor near a low table in front of the couch, and working on some sort of puzzle. He had a dingy green mane that was wild and uncombed in the extreme, but a tail that was the most striking purple Grey had ever seen. In between was a coat of golden yellow sand. When he looked up the colt immediately stood up and offered a cautious smile to the newcomers.

"Nogg please clear table. I think we have new trader moving in, yes?" Said the middle aged griffon. As the colt shoved his puzzle into a wooden crate, Grey noticed the blank flank, lending a guess to his age.

"Should I get some sparkle cola or whiskey or are they not high enough rollers?" The colt suddenly blushed and looked at the newcomers and started apologizing "I'm sorry I didn't mean to arbitrarily pass judgment. It's just, you know that's stuff spendy. And you have wings."

This last, was aimed of course at Stormflight, who flicked his ears in acknowledgment at the colt. "My name's Stormflight, kid. Nice to meet ya. What's cheaper, then? Whiskey or water or century old Sparkle cola?"

The colt latched his blue eyes onto Stormy's ice blue eyes for several seconds. And then he flew through the air, low ceiling notwithstanding, to stand before the dashite and interrogate him.

"You're not a pet! I can tell by how you stand!" He stepped back a little, and looked back and forth quickly between the siblings. "Where'd you get him? Why's he here, I thought pegasi were illegal?" Turning to the middle aged griffon, who still had not identified himself, the colt asked "Where'd they come from? Don't mud ponies pull the wings off of pegasi?"

"Nuage Cadeau, I have just met them I do not know where they came from. Nothing is illegal, either. Only sometimes ponies shoot you, and yes pegasi get shot more than mud ponies." Turning to his guests, the griffon apologized for the colt's enthusiasm. "The great leader likes to make everypony uncomfortable. So he ordered a pet Enclave to steal a foal. It was successful, and this rugrat was the result. Pleased to meet Nogg, rare emissary of great leader pony."

Pear walked up to the colt and offered a hug as greeting, and the colt returned the hug. "So, my name, despite the cornflower blue coat, is Pear Rump. Our mother is, like, insane? Or at least some of the time so don't mind her if you meet her I guess but I'm Pear."

"Yeah, I know about names." He blushed, tracing random lines on the floor with a fore-hoof as he watched himself. "My name's Nuage Cadeau, which is Fancy." He looked up at Pear again. "It means cloud's gift. Even though, I guess I found out about a year ago my parents didn't abandon me so much as Temny wanted me to know about this place first."

"You should let them talk, Nogg. They come from another city." The griffon motioned for them toward the table, which had a woven rug under it. The party all seated themselves on the floor, across from the griffon. Nuage practically in Stormflight's lap, which Grey was surprised to see didn't seem to bother the elder pegasus much. By all appearances the griffon guard had forgotten about his equine charge. As he shuffled his wings the long feathers of the underside trailing edge could be seen to be a deep red. "Now you want to set up shop, yes? How often you will be coming back to sell again?"



It was Grey's turn to blush. "I'm not sure at all, sir. This is my first trip and I just know that there's a wonderful opportunity for our cities to benefit from each other."

"He's a history buff." Pear interjected, seating herself opposite the griffon that was probably Redwing. Grey had briefly looked forward to hinted at refreshments, but there were none on the table, nor any signs of a contract to read over. "He thinks we can recreate what we lost by joining with everybody else."

"Right. Well," Grey tried to reroute his train of thought. "I want my people to come here and experience something this foreign, and I know that we can brew turpentine, so that will sell well. And water. Our water talisman is cracked almost to breaking but I bet we can spare a few bottles per trip of clean drinking water."

The griffon's eyebrows shot straight up, and Nogg burst out laughing, his wings flapping in time. Grey noticed a deep blue on the underside of his feathers, to match his eyes, which Grey thought an interesting arrangement, all things considered. The colt stopped laughing long enough to say "I've seen shrewd business ponies sell a bottle for twenty caps."

"From the poor, to the poor. Gangers, those." The griffon seemed upset at something the colt had seen. "It is fourteen caps up top, if you can make it past second." To the would-be traders, the griffon explained "Our great leader, who has never seen fit to share his name, by the way, believes Nogg should spend part of each day playing with poor earth ponies in third level."

"They can't help they were born to ex-raiders and thieves. They're just foals, like me." whined Nogg. "They cower from you because you make it clear you don't trust any of them." he further whined as he got up to retrieve a water bottle and some cups.

"I do not trust them because they learned what it means to be pony, from almost raiders and almost thieves. Do not forgot how many of our criminals are from third." The catbird responded without looking at the young pegasus, but rather staring at the wall behind Grey. He took a breath, and again speaking without looking at anypony, added "You must know your uncle Temny does not send you down there to make friends. He sends you every day to learn, and comparing those foals to the caravanner's foals on second is valuable."

Balancing cups on his wings, Nuage came back with a small jug of water in his teeth. As he was setting these things down, he pointed his nose at the griffon, keeping his eyes on the refreshments as he put on the table. "Yes, Redwing. I understand that and I do compare them. That's why I still don't know why you don't trust them just because they're poor. Isn't that what

all this is about? We're poor mudponies and Temnyy hopes to open regular discussions with the rich ponies above us?"

The griffon suddenly looked much older; saddened as he focused on the glasses of water being poured by their young host. "Sky ponies toss mud ponies into the fire too. That there is no lava handy does not stop them from telling us all to go away."

"Can I ask something, mister?" Stormflight hesitantly interrupted as the griffon retrieved some paper forms and an inkwell. "What authority do guards have, here? I mean, is there a jail or brig, or can you only throw ponies to their death once they cross far enough over the invisible line?" While waiting for an answer he helped distribute the four cups with a bottle's water split between them.

The griffon considered the stallion's question, and gestured to him with his claws. "When I was asked, many years ago, to help this town stay in order, I was given many authorities. Our great leader did not trust me with his name, but he had created a thriving town that demanded honor among citizens. Now, if you speak to him of it, and I will not say the town's name because it is a sore point with him, but he believes they devolved into chaos and fighting; the war all over again.

"Not so. They wanted to be a normal town, with normal thieves, and a normal jail. Great leader left them to their death, and several times a year I visit my cousin Shadow who lives there. Is doing well.

"As to this town, is same design. No jail ever, but I could stare, or cut thieves open, and yes I have killed many without so much as a trial because guards' eyes were trial enough. Oh!" The griffon used a single claw to indicate Stormflight's wings. "Do not fly over river of fire when criminal is tossed in. Even up at first level the sudden updraft may push you out of sky. Narrow stream of hot air surrounded by still cold air, you understand."

Stormflight nodded. Grey looked at his folded 'wings' and wondered. They didn't work by any variant of aerodynamics, so perhaps he just wouldn't be subject to things like updrafts. Then Grey had to focus again because the griffon had gone back to talking.

"But our great leader, and I ask those who are not marked emissary like Nuage, not to call him by name since it's not his name anyway but the name of a titled lord from Griffon mythology, he wanted greater confidence in fairness. Ponies need reason to leave desert behind; to live here in volcano. So, he spends all his time finding the most guilty, and executing them himself. Guards mostly just look busy, and big, and act as spies." Redwing looked around his room, making a point to stare into any dark crevice or shadow but not,

Grey noticed, at the ceiling. *So something pony sized. Can 'great leader' turn invisible, then?*

The door was slammed shut, and the red speckled gray mare whom the trader had this afternoon called Desert Rose, was standing inside, her necklace definitely red, and her eyes definitely pronouncing death. Currently they were pointed at the griffon, but the colt jumped up from his place on the floor and cautiously looked at the mare, taking a couple steps towards her.

"Nogg. I'm sorry for my appearance. How are you?" No inflection, but the eyes softened as they found the pegasus colt.

The colt's face lit up and he cantered joyfully into the mare's offered hug. "Temnyy! There are out of towners talking about trading with us I want you to be nice to them. No hitting alright?" The colt whipped around and sat underneath the mare's chest, a fore-leg wrapped around the mare's right front leg. "Storm-flight, Pear, uh ..." Grey said his name so he could continue with the introductions. "Greyhorn, this is Temnyy Kogot Krasnykh Peryev"

The griffon stood up so he could bow, although he used only his neck and did not move his legs or back or wings to his 'great leader' but said, cryptically, "Lovit i poyedayet malkov"

"Stealer of children, was that?" She asked the griffon, who had already straightened back up.

"Eater, actually, sir."

To which the colt looked up at the mare and added "Children of fish, actually. Something about the fire being made of water once?" At that Redwing burst out laughing, and the red roan mare looked askance at the colt, who shrugged. "Anyway where did you put Desert Rose?"

At this the mare's face fell, and she gently hugged the colt. Walking slowly to the low table, she said "Desert Rose decided ... well, I think she was told to decide this, but she seems to have decided that we don't need a former unicorn telling ponies what to do, and she apparently thought that the caterers would protect her. Or something, I'm actually not sure yet." The mare seemed to blink back a tear, and had to look in a generic direction that was not at the colt to finish. "Desert Rose is not with us, anymore."

The colt's face fell, and he asked "Is that why Broken Claw isn't here playing cards with uncle Redwing?"

"It may be, Nogg." Since the senior griffon guard had left the furniture to stand in the more open section of the room, the others slowly followed him. "I think he knows something. He's not at his own house either so I don't know where he is." Looking up at the griffon now, she asked "Do you? Have you seen anything, Redwing?"

The griffon shook his head. "I have not seen him all my shift today, and he did not visit last night, but children at the stairs of third said he came to work today, so he is not far gone if he hides, or runs from you sir."

The mare sighed, and stood before the trio of visitors. Her gaze fell on Stormflight Trees, and her eyes narrowed sharply. Thinking there could be serious trouble, Grey spat out the first thing that came to mind. "He's my pet its okay."

Stormflight, Grey suddenly realized, was sweating. He was very nervous about something and he was making a point to not look at Temnyy, who angrily said, eyes never wavering from Stormflight's face, "Since I personally break every Enclave scum and make them pets to sell to my beloved mud ponies, I know for a fact that is not true."

Nogg nervously jumped up and ran past, to stand against Stormflight's tail area, and almost shouted at Temnyy "But look he doesn't have a cutie mark anymore! He's a blank flank and he travels with mud ponies; I bet he's one of those rainbow dash things where they *help* ponies look!"

Temnyy was shorter than Stormflight, but the stallion was still clearly intimidated as she took several steps closer. She wasn't wearing so much as a saddle bag, so no hidden weapons, but Grey knew earth ponies could be ferocious fighters in a hoof to hoof fight. Grey held his ground and watched, hoping this could be talked out. "A dashite, miss. Except the catbird calls you sir, so I'll do that too if you'd like." Stormy's voice didn't crack, but sounded close to it. And he still wasn't looking at her, instead standing at attention, sweating heavily.

"Do you know something about me, then, Enclave?" the roan mare approached as she spoke; her eyes bright but her voice a growl. "Seventy years ago, there was a pegasus town about half a day's flight north by north east of here. Do you know why it's not there now?" She seated herself a scant four hooves away from Stormflight's face.

Stormflight was taller than the former council mare, and making an express point not to look at her. "Yes ma'am." He swallowed. "Except they call you sir so I can do that, too. The stories are kinda varied at this point but we believe a race of body snatchers or changelings or something invaded." At this, the roan mare snorted. "We found the bodies of most of our outpost eventually, but they had fallen through the curtain to the ground, deceased by small arms fire – and some sprinkling of ashes we think are the remains of the missing bodies."

"Like they turned on each other, one pony at a time?" The mare asked, squinting.

Stormflight nodded, almost imperceptibly. "There were some garbled reports we put together to that effect. It looked like the Enclave stationed there had gone mad and were shooting their own."

"By garbled, you mean recordings on individual pipbucks were all that was left after the megaspell destroyed the town and its nasty curtain of shame."

Stormflight swallowed hard, again. "Yes ma'am. Sir. All the changelings died or left, but apparently eye contact allowed some sort of extended control."

"There were no changelings there." After this, the growl left her voice. "But yes, either killing me or, if I chose, making eye contact with me would be enough for me to switch to another Enclave. I'm not proud anymore of that day, but I remember it. Sadly, as no Enclave backed down from their destruction of the ground, I am now the only one that remembers." And still the roan mare sat, watching Stormflight for a reaction.

He looked cautiously down, around his nose to barely look at the earth pony. "You were there? Personally? Either that's a real good disguise, or you're in good shape for seventy plus years old."

She sighed, and looked down. "Not a disguise. And I'm not seventy. More like a hundred and seventy, now." She looked up to squint at the pegasus stallion. "My work was supposed to be turned against the striped horde. But you, our own kind supposedly, made yourself the bigger threat."

The colt was getting nervous, and was walking along Stormflight's side, balancing himself as he kept his back upright and slid around to the elder pegasus' front left shoulder. "You wanted me to be an ambassador to the clouds, right? So here's the clouds, right here. Let me talk to him if you'd like but he hasn't done anything wrong so you can't punish him for being a pegasus anymore than you would punish Tough Cookie for coming from a raider family group."

"Colt is right, sir. Sky rat has not looked in disgust at one thing in this place, nor spoken ill of pony ways for entire time I have seen him." the griffon said with a flourish of a wingtip pointed at Stormy.

The rose gray mare looked back and forth a few times between Stormflight, and Nogg before sighing dejectedly and taking a few steps back. She was not grinding her teeth, and her ears now were just at an irritated angle. "You cut off all support at a critical time; turned your back on Equestria just because you could."

"Ah'm made t' understand there was one pegasus that agreed with you." Stormy mumbled under his breath, which accentuated his normally understated accent.

"You didn't meet her, though, did you? But here you stand, representing her."

"I suppose you met her personally, ma'am?" Stormflight had taken to hesitantly looking at the earth pony mare, but hadn't really relaxed yet.

"I worked for mas; Arcane ministry was under Twilight Sparkle. And if Rainbow Dash was anything like Ms. Sparkle, I should be glad I didn't meet her, too."

Grey didn't feel he understood yet, nor needed to interject questions about, why the former council mare was being addressed in the masculine while she/he claimed to be nearly two centuries old. Grey assumed some of it had to do with her level of authority and was just a cultural difference between this odd hole in the ground village, and his walled above the ground village back home. The words that this mare had destroyed a small village seven decades earlier was confusing, but Grey was just setting that aside until he felt he'd have time to let it percolate and come back up, like those prewar coffee machines he'd found.

Pear however, had had enough. She walked behind and around Stormflight, and was approaching Desert Rose / Temnyy Kogot. Nogg tried to distract and dissuade the necklaced mare by calling her name pleadingly, but Pear interrupted that. "I won't listen to another word until you explain what nonsense possesses these insane locals. Why does the catbird"

At that, Temnyy's head whipped to the right to make eye contact with Pear, and they both froze for an instant. Then the mare the trader upstairs had called Desert Rose, made a choking sound. A look of genuine distress was painted on her face, and Pear Rump, using a very odd diction, pointed to the gray and red mare and said "Nogg can you unhook that please? Before she falls unconscious."

But Redwing was faster, leaping the body length between them to grasp rapidly, the clasp of the glowing necklace. By the time Nogg was halfway there, the necklace was free, and falling to the floor.

Pear, still pronouncing her words oddly, thanked Redwing and Nogg, then sat down and stared at the former council mare.

Desert Rose's eyes were flicking quickly from pony to pony, blinking rapidly and breathing in short, shallow breaths. Her ears dropped in defeat and tried to pin in fear as she raised her right fore and pointed at Grey's sister. But the roan mare's words died in her throat as she saw her own upraised hoof, and froze as if it were a monster about to eat her. Pear Rump raised an eyebrow, and nothing more.

Hoping he could get an answer without getting 'hit', he asked "What ... just happened?"

Redwing retreated to his spot before the lunge for the necklace, but was now rotated so he was more nearly facing his visitors, although he hadn't rotated all the way to face them. Looking at the roan mare, he said "Am truly sorry miss. He is in bad mood today; please forgive."

The change to the feminine was odd, but not as odd as what Grey's sister was doing. "What **did** happen, miss? Normally I ask something lewd like, who's got the girl bits now ... except." At this, the pale blue mare lifted a back leg, and wove it in a circle a few times. "I'll have to go elsewhere if I want to change **that**."

"Pear?" Grey glanced at Nogg, who was looking at the ground, his ears unsure what position they wanted to settle on.

The gray mare who had just came in, managed a shaky "I'm over here, Grey."

Grey looked at the blue mare, whom he knew as Pear Rump, but she was smirking, and looking only at the former council mare. "Nogg, is that what you meant by *hitting*?"

Nogg shook his head. "No, Grey. That was a full transfer. Half transfers are when you fall asleep and wake up, sometimes in another pony's body, weeks later when Temnyy gets around to putting you back in charge. I've actually never seen what hitting looks like; just the effects. Like when foals would bully me Temnyy" at this, the colt pointed at his sister. "would pick on them back, and they'd ... not do that to me again."

Grey listened to the two mares carefully, and decided he could indeed hear the characteristic diction, despite the voice change, in the red and gray former council mare. It was a bit creepy not least of which that it happened, but particularly that it happened so fast, and with so little fanfare.

"You can full transfer me back, though, right?" Roan Pear said, tears forming. Blue mare Temnyy was looking back at Pear still but had a deeply contemplative, unfocused look on her face.

With a mixture of sadness and distractedness, Temnyy finally responded. "Your arrival here puts me in mind of some of the political shifting that's been going on. I'm afraid this town is going to collapse." At that, she looked back at Redwing, and looked like she was about to say something but instead looked around the room. At the couch, then at Grey, briefly at Stormflight with an involuntary pinning of her ears before looking down at Nuage Cadeau, where her gaze stayed a little longer.

"Sir?" Pear again, her voice shaking in fear. "Since you can have any young pony from your town, can you give me back"

Temnyy looked up, like before, rapidly making eye contact, and then both mares jumped, just a very tiny amount.

The speckled gray mare efficiently wiped the remaining tears away. "So you're saying I should keep my arthritis to myself, then?" The smirk she had in Pear's body was now on Desert Rose's face. At least over there, it looked like it belonged. Her head dropped again to Nogg, who had followed Temnyy's transfers without distress. Since the colt had only referred to this pony by name, never by title, Grey wasn't exactly sure what she was to him. Uncle? Schoolmaster? "Nogg you're very special to this town. Proof that the sky rats can live down here. I hope someday you'll be a trader to the skies but that can't happen if you get caught in the middle of stuff going on down here. I want you to travel with these ponies to their home town and stay there. For a few weeks at least preferably until you hear stuff here is settled."

*Thanks for asking our opinion, great leader.* Aloud, Grey said "That won't necessarily work out, sir." It felt weird using the masculine title to a mare, but now he understood their great leader probably spent more of his time as a stallion, and probably preferred the title for historical reasons.

Stormflight shuffled his wings and interjected "If you think they'll let me in, they'll let him in. I'll just say he's my nephew or something if we need to do that."

Pear looked like she was about to start crying. "I was your foalsitter when you were that age." *And all the younger ages too since Mom ... wasn't always entirely there.* Pear looked up at Grey "We can leverage this for that trader's stall, right?"

Grey's eyes were scowling, he was pretty sure. "What about in a few years, you know, when he starts looking at the mares?"

Pear actually hadn't considered that. "Well we'll just ... I mean, he. If he lives with his Uncle Stormy. Because at least it's not I mean ..."

Temnyy raised her right foreleg straight up into the air. "Question."

While Grey was sighing just so he could shove his pride far enough aside he could answer the obvious question, Stormflight mumbled quickly "Something about the stallions all missing so the mares have been ordered to pimp themselves to the remaining three."

Nogg held his head at a quirky angle, and asked Grey "So, that just means I can get an okay marefriend even if it turns out I'm awkward with the ladies, right?" Pear actually grimaced.

"Let's not worry about it. You won't be the only colt so maybe it'll play out just fine." Next problem, how



to we get back with a young and inexperienced to the wastes traveler?

"Next question, if I may." Temnyy had put her hoof down but was still looking at Grey for answers to this odd side discussion. "What event, and I don't mean to pry or judge, but how is it you have no stallions at all? How big is your village?"

*Rinse, repeat.* "Alicorn monsters came and carried off every stallion they could find, plus a few unicorns. After the casualties were counted, we went overnight from two hundred strong to less than seventy. Two colts at that time, four have been born since but five of those have the same father so the other two working stallions have been asked to ... get around more."

Temnyy's eyes darkened, and her eyebrows dropped low enough to almost occlude the pupils entirely. "The Goddess. Of course." She closed her eyes, and looked away. "This is pretty far south. The hive mind would have difficulties staying connected. They probably won't be back."

Redwing had heard enough to know where this was going. "Nogg pack things. You travel to their village." Then, his beak mostly facing Stormy since he was in the middle of the trio, "I will expedite your application. But tonight I will put you up in rental spot at level three, and get you supplied in the morning. Sir?" He looked down at Temnyy's ears, which politely rotated back to listen to her guard's words. "We have monies for sending them off? Or do I use pocket caps I am carrying?"

Temnyy pointed at Nogg, and said "Use his foalsitting funds. I'd tell you who's carrying them but Desert Rose was the head of finances. I'm sure we'll find everything." And with that, the trio was escorted out by the griffon.

Who handed us off to a unicorn guard wearing the same vest with blue stripes. "If you see Broken Claw send him to me, yes? Late for card game and also great leader has been here and is gone." The unicorn nodded curtly at the lie, and walked us to an especially narrow stairwell at 22.

On level three, at 350, was a wide door; possibly the widest Grey had seen yet. It was an amalgam of wood and metal, with a spring loaded hinge and no latch. Inside, a sign hung over the curved desk, saying "Third & Out / cheap beds for ponies who got kicked out / or don't want to be seen on third"

The guard didn't have any caps himself, but his word was accepted. Also, the receptionist, an earth pony mare with a coat so dark yellow it looked brown in the pale artificial lights, responded to questions about Broken Claw with "Haven't seen him in a few days. He's got a fling with that money mare I guess. The one

with the roan coat? Always paid with caps too so there wouldn't be a paper trail but everypony knows Broken Claw's beak down here." She also said, in response to seeing Stormflight "Hey we need his owner to sign a pet release form."

"I'm not actually a pet." This received blinking stares of disbelief from both the unicorn & earth ponies. "Hey, it's like your sign says," Stormflight used a wingtip to point to the etched wood hanging over the receptionist. "I got kicked out. So, now I'm here."

"You got kicked out ...?" The receptionist, release form held in a fetlock still.

"Of the clouds." Stormflight turned to show off his lack of a cutie mark. "No brand no experience no equipment. My supposedly loyal squad figured that was close enough to murdering me." The receptionist reluctantly put the release form back, and just got the guard to sign the governmental agreements form, which apparently stated the Great Leader of Pony had not expressly directed this rental and was not expected to visit these particular ponies during their stay.

"The guards can run up a tab but their commander can't?" Grey asked, thinking the question's implication were very odd.

"Our leader tends to strangle ponies when he's down here. Either the receptionist — that's how I got promoted, actually — or the ponies that stay here." The guard added that revolutionaries were encouraged to stay at rental squares like this one because, when caught yes they were kicked out of the village after some torture like a broken leg or gouged out eye, but if they were caught in more clandestine places he tended to torture them until they agreed to jump, on their own, into the fire.

"Nice guy" was Pear's observation.

The guard shrugged. "It's a nice town actually. I've lived in three so far. The laws as recommendations thing is weird but the system as a whole works out since we all have to mind our Ps and Qs to avoid sudden painful death." And with that, he left and the receptionist handed Grey a key, with directions on how to get there.

The room had a power source, and a hotplate plugged into it. So while Pear heated up some of their pre-war foodstuffs, they tried to make sense of what they'd learned over the course of the day.

Pear, while stirring the mashed potatoes, "Are you sure about doing business with a town whose overmare no one has seen? I mean, the guards and emissaries might know he can do that full transfer thing but I bet he hops around a lot. That's why ponies who just live here don't comment on it."

"From the sounds of your home village," Stormflight started, a nearly empty water bottle in his hoof. "It's got some weird things too. Stuff that outsiders would not want to know too much about."

Grey would have been happy to cook the dinner but Pear had already started, so he was looking his harness and wings over for signs of wear. Not that he knew what they'd look like, but he didn't want his wings to fall off mid flight either. "I didn't get the sense Temnyy Kogot had much of an agenda. Aside from taking the Enclave down a notch, I mean."

While Stormflight looked away at nothing in particular, Pear said "He actually has an agenda with the Enclave but I think he's going about it all wrong."

"Snatch all the foals and raise them as dashites, you mean?" Stormflight hadn't moved his head, but had managed to unclench his jaw long enough to comment indirectly on Nogg. Grey could just make out that he was mouthing the words "Cloud's Gift." but no sound came out, even when the pegasus' ears pinned flat against his neck and he repeated the phrase.

"That's the wrong part I was talking about. The right part is he wants trade relations. He sounds like he's okay with them living up there so long as they come down here once in a while." Pear started doling out the potatoes into three equal piles. "Hey Stormy if I wrote a letter would anypony be able to deliver it? Like, I want a pen-pal in the clouds."

Stormflight's ears unpinned as he snorted in derision. "Good luck with that. The ponies with wings aren't allowed back on pain of death, and the ponies without wings can't deliver nothing. I suppose if a unicorn teleported the letter," Here the buck hefted his water bottle to indicate Grey's horn with the bottle's lip. "But since no one down here knows where to teleport it to, it'd just float back down through the clouds, unread and now soggy."

Pear opened a can of alfalfa gravy and started adding it to the potatoes. "Could you tell us where to send it? Since I mean, you'd know where their cities are."

Violent headshaking, 'no' "Not a chance, ma'am. That, they'd destroy whole cities down here to protect. Isolation and privacy is the primary reason the cloud curtain gets left up. See, they don't trust mud ponies not to megaspell them again so they do a lot to make sure no pony knows for sure where their cities are."

Grey looked up from his inspections. "Mud ponies megaspelled the pegasi? Before or after the war?"

Stormflight's ears sheepishly slid to the side as he swished the remaining water around his nearly empty bottle. "Err, you know. During. Although I guess technically we should say it was the mud . . ."

“...Zebra?” Grey finished for him. “Does anybody up there know we mud ponies sorta got megaspelled by the same zebra?”

Stormflight was actually blushing as he waved his hoof around trying to misdirect the conversation, water sloshing violently within its container. “Mud zebra / pony. The not wing-ed have, according to what the history books. Our history books say, at least you know the way it’s taught and most of the voting citizens believe strongly even if the ground was safe to inhabit we have to make sure Cloudsdale doesn’t, you know we don’t have another Cloudsdale on our hooves.”

Grey was glaring at the pegasus, and also starting to understand Leader Temnyy’s desire to steal foals from them. Although how he managed in the first place was still confusing as a used haypile.

Pear, handing the poor flustered buck a plate of food, asked “So, I wonder, would you call a half pony half zebra a zony?”

Rolling his eyes as he levitated his own plate to him, Grey said “You’re assuming that an honest working stallion could have those kind of feelings for a female zebra, and further that she would have a foal for their efforts.”

Between mouthfuls, Stormflight added, his eyes never leaving his plate. “It can happen. Zony is one of the nicer word” At which point he looked up, and saw Grey glaring, and Pear looking skeptically askance at him. “Well, again our teachers. I guess we’ve never seen it but they say. Well what they say is that when the zebra rise again they’ll, uh, their stallions will storm through and force themselves, you know, on our mares but the offspring won’t have wings so the zebra will have to raise them and will sue the mares all the way to Neighvarro courts getting foal support payments from yeah I know what it sounds like that’s, you know, sorta compressed from about six different sources but I’m moderately sure I’m not the only one who put it together like that.”

Grey, for one, was speechless. But Pear was not talking because she was busy laughing. She did finally manage to say “So, you believe that a zebra’s primary concern is that your cloud-based tax monies be used to raise foals they don’t want because their educational system was nuked into the stone age?”

Stormflight buried his muzzle in the remains of the mashed potatoes, mumbling “Not when you put it like that, miss.”

## Chapter 9

# First Real Flight

The next morning, before breakfast was started, there was a knock at the door. It was the rose-gray mare and a bright tan pegasus colt with blue tail and green mane. But something was definitely off; neither wore a necklace of office today. Grey invited them in, but did not introduce anyone to anypony else.

"Nuage?" Pear asked, looking at the unadorned pegasus colt. He nodded. Then Pear asked "And, you're Temny?"

The mare chuckled, and shook her head. "Nyet. It seems glorious leader wants to use old catbird to track down young catbird. Said finance pony draws too much attention. So, I enjoy less old joint problems this morning." She sighed. "Will be disappointing when he puts me back."

Stormflight blurted out "The receptionist did mention that card-playing buddy of yours had been meeting, uh," he raised a hoof to point at the rose-gray mare "Desert Rose, at least by job and physical description."

The mare nodded. "So, that is why he wanted my wings. Broken Claw will not know to hide from him." She looked up at the trio. "Very sad. Has been good friend for longer than we have been guards here. I will pray to your princesses he can talk his way through to surviving."

"He's probably going to be fine." Nogg angrily spat out. Then he squinted at Grey Horn's wings, sitting on the floor where he had left it in a heap last night. "Hey, you were wearing that last night." He trotted around the grown ups to stand over the leather straps and odd super-battery. "I was assuming this was some sort of kinky sex thing but what's the battery for then?"

The mare that had escorted the favored pegasus here, scowled at her charge. Stormflight started to say "You know it does sorta look"

"Yes I know what it looks like" Said Grey angrily, who meandered over to Nogg. "And if that's what is was, I would refuse to answer your question because foals should just stick to the vanilla stuff until that's boring." Steam finally spent, Grey deflated as he added

"At least that's what my dad said once. I wouldn't know I've never been with a mare."

Nogg looked up at Grey with his big, innocent eyes and said "Do you mean you prefer other stallions? I've always thought that was kinda weird but so is this harness so I guess it makes sense." He started to look back down at the harness, but then suddenly looked back up, stating firmly "I'm straight by the way." And made a point of sidling sideways along the pile of harness leather, away from Grey.

Grey was twisting his ears in confusion, trying to put together what he'd just heard, Stormflight was forcibly gripping his muzzle with a fetlock to keep from laughing too loudly, and it was Pear who blurted out "How does that even work?"

Nogg looked over his shoulder, and condescendingly replied "They seem to manage."

Grey shook his head. "No, that doesn't even make sense. I've never heard of such a thing."

Redwing the mare was chuckling too now, and Pear had to admit "No actually I heard that with our village's ... current state, that a couple of mares tried experimenting."

"That makes even less sense" Grey said, wondering if the room was going to start spinning since clearly everything had gone mad.

"Well, you know. They had their foal on the same day, foal heat the next, neighbors, Canonbone was busy with some other mare." Grey raised an eyebrow. To which, Pear shrugged.

"So, what is harness for?" asked the wingless former griffon.

"Mud pony thinks he's people. Wants to visit the clouds." Stormflight answered, a big grin still plastered across his face.

"Eh? But how could he flap? Wings are wrong shape and also tied too firmly." Redwing said, staring critically at what she could see of the harness from just inside the door. Grey thought she was too far to make sound judgments about the pile of leather from so far away as she was just inside the door. But griffons ate meat, meaning they probably had leather, and having no magic of their own might be experienced with flight capable harnesses.

"Well, I can't cloud walk, so I wasn't really going to go that high. But it would make getting to and from work a lot less unsafe." He started to put the harness on, explaining the memory orb, and the broken legs. "So, when they rebuilt it, they used leather because it doesn't bend as much and won't tear as easily."

The mare marched over and closely inspected the harness' stress points. Reinforcing the concept that

griffons were familiar with flight harnesses she went straight to where the thing pulled the most painfully on Grey's body. Which was a little uncomfortable to have a strange mare's nose inches from his sides, but he tried to stay relaxed.

"Yes, will crack soon. Here, and here." She pointed with a hoof tip to a spot just below where the wing was secured, and one of the cross straps connecting front and back girth straps. "Do you have, no. You won't" She stepped back, and tried to rub her beak in her claws, and ended up poking herself in the nose. Unsatisfied, she put the hoof back down and just 'hmm'd a moment. "From mountains north west of here, a squirrel. You would collect or breed these squirrels and rub their oil; it is the oil that their hocks exude to mark territory; you rub oils on leather. Keeps leather bendable."

"So, uh?" Stormflight flattened his neck, extending his head in confusion at Redwing. "What happens to the squirrel after you have his marking oils?"

She formed a smile with her mouth that did not reach her eyes. "Depends on vendor. Where griffon kind trade with ponies, breeders would find ways to collect from living squirrels. Needs more squirrels, very inefficient. Farther inland, oil is extracted like from a vegetable – by grinding the leg in machine for oil collection."

Nogg couldn't decide, by Grey's estimation, on disdain, or disgust. Either way, he managed to look down his nose at the mare twice his height. "I suppose they just barbecued the rest of this special squirrel."

This time the smile did reach the eyes. "More efficient that way." Smile gone, she looked back at Grey, and finally looked him in the eye and said "there are oils here. In the marketplace. If you come back, you can trade for them I will show you what to buy."

"So, Pear Rump can you fly?" again all innocence and everything he said caused consternation and embarrassment.

"No, Nogg. I'm an earth pony so even if there was another harness with unicorn wings, I couldn't make it do anything."

"We have a sky sled." Redwing said somewhat out of context, but looking straight at Pear, the only one of the now four pony traveling party that couldn't fly.

"Would you give it to us, then?" asked Stormflight, who apparently thought it was a perfectly logical comment.

Redwing managed to tap her hoof to her chin this time, and decided "Yes. For Nogg, I will send sky sled as well as supplies. He will be safer that way." Looking down at the colt, the middle aged mare said in her somewhat incongruous accent "You will finally get to have real flight today. But you must stay with the

group. They have traveled out there, and know what things will kill you quickly, and what things will kill you more slowly.”

Nuage Cadeau celebrated by hovering briefly, then flying quickly around the room shouting “Yippee! I’m going to see the clouds from the sky!”

The next hour was sort of a whirlwind of stuffing food, ammunition, and guns. Grey could have cried with joy. He was given a 10mm semi-auto mouthgun. Granted, one made from factory seconds. Probably what was left after pulling all the goods parts from five mediocre pistols to make one guard-issue pistol plus this pile of scrap. And fifty rounds, which he estimated would destroy the pistol before his last five rounds were spent. Two earth ponies who had rust-orange vests where the latticework pattern was undyed, worked on retrofitting a .32acp barrel into a battle saddle for his harness. Finally, he was given forty rounds for it. Again, it was far from really convenient, as it was four ten round magazines, and an extra clip to shove his three remaining rounds into. But he felt confident he could survive the wastes now.

And the sled. It was by all outward appearances, a metal platform made of about six sheets of metal bolted to each other. But it tried to float off the ground. It would tip if you climbed up clumsily, but it would right itself once you shifted again. There were very small metal bars along three sides, to tie cargo to, and the forth side had two harness clips.

Grey Horn’s artificial wings stuck out way more than a pegasus’ wingspan; almost double Stormflight’s, in fact. Since there wouldn’t be enough room for both bucks to remain attached at the same altitude, it was decided that since only Pear Rump had to be ‘carried’ it would be up to just Grey to pull her. Packs were redistributed between the two natural pegasi.

After all this, the package that had brought him here was taken without fanfare. Temnyy hadn’t offered ten caps, or even five. But he was financing Nuage’s trip with tax monies skimmed from traders like he himself hoped to be soon, so he didn’t say anything about it.

The griffon, red tinged trailing-edge feathers showing as balanced awkwardly, shoved the small box into a bag hanging loosely by griffon standards across his chest. A bright string of red glowing cubes hung above that. “I’m afraid this will be related to the conspiracy. But I know not whether to trust its import should it implicate still living ponies.”

This was the first time Temnyy had seen Grey’s wings extended, and he stared thoughtfully at the horn redirector, and the palladium rod. Grey explained “I guess I didn’t tell you before. I can fly. Gotta be about the only unicorn that can.”



He pointed a claw at the center of the rod, and said "I think I met the unicorn who developed that. Only his design had two rods; a skinnier one for steering and the heavy one for propulsion. I thought then it needed a leather harness." The yellow eyes turned to look at Grey, as their leader finished with "I'm sending a letter with you, if I may. The wasteland is starting to regrow, and wickedness with it. We'll all need to relearn how to network with fellow ponies. I don't believe trade itself will save the wasteland, but communication will."

Grey nodded, and politely shoved the wrapped scroll into his bag, which was on Nogg's back at the moment. The young pegasus hugged the griffon, saying "Don't kill anypony if it's avoidable. That was your advice when you gave me a gun for my birthday and I'm reminding you now."

The griffon smiled, and agreed it had been good advice, and was well received in turn.

Aside from what could only be described as government officials, no pony saw them off. But with the pegasi watching Pear closely, Grey floated up a few hooves. The sled tilted, then righted itself. Then Grey squeezed through the continuous window into the open chasm above the fire.

And almost lost his nerve, dropping Pear into the pit of flaming radiation.

It was a long ways down. Each level was at least twelve hooves tall, level three closer to twenty. And it was twelve or thirteen levels down, were the villagers to dig that deep, to reach the exposed lava river. He had gone from inches away from stone so solid a dozen earth pony stallions couldn't shake it by kicking or bucking, even in coordination, to two hundred plus, probably two hundred thirty hooves above an exact replica of the chasm that had, a century prior, eaten one of his wings. Probably the same river, actually.

But he had flown higher before. Looking back to see the pegasi, both of whom were hovering without distress over the chasm, he propelled himself upward. Whatever illusion spell had been cast, it had sharp edges. One moment there was a lava river untold depths below him, the next there was sort of a sandy depression that, while unappealing, looked a lot closer than the three hundred hooves it should have been.

Nogg appeared and disappeared several times, watching for the transition before Stormflight called for him to stop. "Climbing is hard work, and we're going to be in the air for awhile. Save your youthful enthusiasm for the trip proper."

Nogg pouted. "Yes, sir."

Grey started in a direction, and got perhaps as far as fifteen hooves when he realized he had no idea where they had come from. Stormflight had noticed it too. "Hey, uh, Grey? Where you going?"

Pear looked up from her carefully tied perch to take stock of the mountains and valleys, and pointed a direction. "I think we came from over there?"

Stormflight floated closer. "Nope. Guess again. I landed someplace over there" He pointed with his right front hoof. "And I think you folks were coming from there." Left front, slightly different direction.

"Let's just try it." Grey wasn't actually sure but was willing to bet he'd either recognize it soon, or else it didn't matter so just pick a direction until they found something that could point them south.

Pear 'eep'd as he sped away. He wasn't even trying that hard, it was just the same thing he'd done near the ground during his practice flights.

Nogg was having a grand time; he never got more than forty or fifty hooves away but swooped all around the trio, laughing and giggling. Occasionally he'd see something in the clouds or something on the ground, and get all serious and quickly fall in line right behind Stormflight, which put him level with Pear about fifteen hooves from her.

"I'm guessing they don't let you out much? It's not like your tribe thinks this is so high up." Said Pear, crouching low so she couldn't see the ground.

Nogg looked down, and let his legs dangle for a moment before tucking them back into a conventional flight position. "No, miss Pear. I got shuffled between guardians but it was a pretty routine thing. Mornings with ms. Blue for history and math, after lunch which was often with Broken Claw I would visit whichever earth pony tutor they'd picked for me that month. Music lessons, ballet, karate, historical literature. Then afternoons with miss Apple -- oh! Her name was something Orange but all the foals called her Apple because it made her mad and ignore the student. Anyway I'd have recess with the Mires' foals deep in level three. They're dirt poor but Temnyy says it's really good to see all walks of life so you don't get like my birth parents and stop visiting the other ponies who matter but aren't right next to you.

"But I was told, by Redwing and Temnyy and the other guards but not so much the council, told me it was true. That if I flew out here, I'd have one good, free flight and then I'd be gone. Either kidnapped by the sky rats and beaten for getting mud on my hooves, or captured by slaver unicorns and forced to work on pain of exploding neck, or captured by feral griffons and eaten."

Grey thought about his experiences these past three years venturing outside the walls. He'd been lucky he was just the right balance of adventuresome and cautious. Others had gotten scraped up, or poisoned by a glowing one's distant anger, and given up. He'd also

seen mares who agreed to travel into the wastes with him be a little too carefree, and didn't make it out in time.

"I'd like to clear up one of those stories." Started Stormflight. He was tipping his head a little bit but not enough to aim his words directly behind him. Grey took note of how much louder Stormflight was shouting; his experience with this wind was, you couldn't hear the pony in front.

"Which one?" Nogg eased closer.

"I was in the Enclave not that long ago, so I know about the sky rats." Grey was very impressed that, even for the sake of explaining an unrelated truth to a pegasus foal, he was agreeing to 'go native' and call his own tribe by the unicorns' derogatory term for his former neighbors. "Now, it never happened that a pegasus raised on the ground flew up to us, but we have some routines in place in case it does. And" Here he did look all the way back, to make eye contact with the colt. In that split second, he looked lost and empty.

Then he looked forward again, and had raised his emotional defenses again. "We would assume that the pegasus was an accidental throwback, and as such treat it as an invading mud pony."

"And shoot it full of holes with a rifle, you mean?" Nogg sounded eager to be right, but Grey thought the expression on his face looked more somber than other looks he had.

"Well, see, we have novascourge rifles, which shoot disintegration rays. Since you don't have barding you'd just be a pile of ash after that. But no, not right at first, necessarily. We'd tell you to go away, and after that start shooting."

Grey thought he heard Nogg sigh, but no other words were spoken. But the colt did start drifting up above the other three, head high and ears pricked for everything that was out there. Again, he'd get about fifty hooves above the grownups, and he'd fold his wings for a second and fall back into line. "I've never been able to see so far away before."

"Yeah, kid. It's neat." Stormflight said just far enough above a whisper that Grey could make it out. Louder now, he asked "So, how you holding up? It's a day's flight at least but I don't want to sprain your wings either."

"What about me? Can I get a potty break too?" Came from behind Grey.

Grey looked down; they'd been staying about a thousand hooves up, hoping it was just the right elevation to not attract attention from anypony, above or below. "You're afraid some raider will melt in the rain?"

Nogg cracked up laughing and Stormflight was blushing deeply. Pear's response was "No bushes up here

you creep!”

Stormflight pointed out a building, well to the party’s left, that looked suspiciously like one they had camped in coming in. It had, of all the bizarre things left working after a century plus of disuse, a working toilet. Water there exuded radiation fast enough that squatting over the bowl added ten rads to a pony but there were ways around that. Pear looked up, and agreed.

Everything was farther away than Grey was used to. It took another twenty minutes, even bringing up the speed a little, to get to the building. Pear was visibly shaking and her heavy coat was dripping in sweat as she stepped off the sled. “I think I need sleeping pills the next time I agree to fly somewhere.”

Nogg landed nearby, trotted around a little, and yawned and curled up right next to their sled. “Wake me when you’re ready to go, huh?”

Stormflight smirked at the colt, and seemed not to be surprised when the pile of hair and feathers at their feet started snoring. While Pear meandered to the ‘little colts room’ as she had called it their first trip through, Stormflight helped Grey unhook from the sled, seeming to concentrate on not making any noise.

Two rooms down, at what was probably a staff lunchroom once, Stormflight cracked open a bottle of water and set it on the remaining table. “Foals are like that. Lots of energy in small bursts. We’ll probably need a few more stops than we’d planned to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.”

“Do you envy him, or pity him?” Grey asked, curious about the buck’s concern for the stolen colt.

Stormflight’s eyes twinkled. “Both. He hasn’t idolized me, he hasn’t avoided me. I’m the first healthy pegasus he’s seen and his first real flight and he’s adapted like he was born to be a diplomat to the worst types, and teach them what friendship is actually supposed to look like.”

## Chapter 10

# First Real Fight

That heartfelt proclamation was punctuated by Pear, screaming, followed by the sound of her cannon going off. That was closely followed by a wall collapsing as it crumbled from the anti tank shell passing through its meager remains, and Grey could just make out despite his ringing ears, the sound of a very frightened Nuage Cadeau.

Since he was still wearing his wings, albeit folded, he couldn't run very fast down what was left of the hallways. But he could run while levitating his new gun in front of him. Behind him, Stormflight had fished out his .44 and shouted around the handle of his gun for Nogg to wake up.

In the bathroom was a hole. It went straight down, not entirely unlike the village for which no pony who lived there seemed to have a common name. If this hole had a name, it would probably be *Tia's fresh milk*, as standing just outside it, was some sort of giant mole rat relative that probably outweighed Pear, and had three fingers like a griffon but at the end of each were claws three hooves long. Said claws were swiping with considerable speed and unstoppable strength at the dancing and kicking mare.

Both mouthguns when off, and the tiny shells buried themselves in the back of this beast. Screaming, it lunged for Pear. When she survived the first few seconds of that struggle, Grey shouted "Stormy! find Nogg I'll take care of this." His ears were ringing too badly to know if Stormflight heard, or did, anything. But he didn't dare look away.

Pear had risked the flexibility of its forelegs, by jamming her own up to her elbow into the maw of this thing and pull on its tongue from the middle of its throat. Rather than waste mental capacity wondering why her hoof didn't get bit off, Grey just fired into the lower portion of a back leg. The bullets had penetrated the skin but the thing refused to fall down.

Four more rounds in the right front leg while Pear danced around to the monster's shoulder blades, the claws having gotten a bit too close to her former hiding spot under its chin.

A much, much larger paw, claws four hooves long if they were an inch, reached up from the hole and grabbed his compatriot and started pulling. The whole body of the beast disappeared almost instantly back down the hole it came from. Grey let his pistol clatter so he could concentrate on not losing his sister. Left front leg around the barrel of her chest, and levitation magic to make it a little more effective. She took a hint and let go of the monster, thankfully, and he was able to set her bleeding but not broken form down beside him.

Pear apparently thought she could run well enough that no pony needed to fish out a healing potion right now. She ran, he levitated his pistol and ran. There was a rumbling and Pear stopped dead, blood dripping off her like summer sweat and her eyes were white saucer plates of fear.

An overturned bookcase started to wiggle on its own. Pear pointed at it, and jumped up in the air to get past it by as wide a margin as possible. Grey wasn't that agile because of his wings, so instead he fired two rounds (emptying a soon to be forgotten magazine) into where he thought the head of this beast would be when it erupted from the burrow.

He dared a glance over his shoulder as the siblings left the building. The bookcase was missing completely. In its place was an even larger molerat, mad in both senses of the word. At fifteen hooves long from tail to buck teeth, it had gotten himself stuck into the wall and was preoccupied trying to swipe whatever monster was holding his head still.

Outside at the sky sled lay Stormflight, drooling and twitching. Hovering above him was the blank flank diplomat, holding Stormy's .44 revolver. On the ground not too far away was a radscorpion who was diplomatically missing its head.

Nogg grabbed the weapon in his front hooves to start crying, both vocally and in the form of tears. "That thing stung him now he can't talk. I finished shooting one of them but there's two more around the wall over -"

"Pear hook me up Nogg! shove him onto the sled if you can. We can't wait, just try to keep up." Too much happening at once. Howlsqueaks were heard from 'over there.' Hopefully it was the sound of the small but painful radscorpions trying to feed on the gigantic molerats. Pear concentrated on attaching the harness as best she knew while Grey levitated and secured his wings.

Stormflight had half the gear and there wasn't time to sift through and decide what to throw out, and Grey wasn't comfortable throwing it all out. He figured he had several seconds and he just had to get a few hooves into the air, anyway.

Pear had no sooner shouted 'clear!' than a shot rang out from the desert, the bullet knocking more stonework near Nogg to the ground in a miniature avalanche. *Okay, not just a few hooves.*

"Enclave one o'clock!" shouted Nogg. Grey actually had time to think *but its not even 11AM yet* before parsing the upraised hoof. Sure enough, black floating dots could be seen, surrounded by various bright dots where their power armor was illuminated for some purpose.

There was a rumbling and Grey could feel the earth under his hooves shift. "Hang on!" was shouted as Grey poured all his magic at the converter. It would send them in a straight line that was only slightly climbing, but when the four hoof long claw sprouted from the desert sands, none of the adventurers were present to see it.

It took several seconds, with heart pounding and bullets flying, to remember how to steer. By that time, since his first heading was taking them straight towards the raider / sky rat intersection, he had to steer faster than the normal twist and propel method. With but a brief glance to make sure his cargo was hanging on to a rope (and he was greatly relieved to see both ponies with a tether in their mouth) he tilted hard to the left. Pear screamed.

It was followed by Nogg screaming, only he didn't quit. Even when he shoved his muzzle into one of the four packs on his back he kept screaming. Grey looked back to see he was also streaming blood. Apparently a raider had tagged him in the tuckus. Nogg's muzzle came up for air with a healing potion already half empty. Having less body mass to distribute the magic, the leg stopped bleeding immediately, but Nogg was still woozy, judging by the uneven wing beats.

"Nogg! If you can't keep up, climb onto the sky sled; I won't be able to slow down for you." Grey had no idea if that was true, or if he was dooming himself by even trying to carry the extra weight. Already he could feel the beginnings of fatigue brought on by extended magic use.

"Luna's tears. Grey!" Now that he had straightened out and was flying level at thirty hooves he saw Pear had let go of her tether and wrapped it around her right front instead. Grey was terrified for a moment her shout meant Stormflight was gone, but her other front leg was pointed ahead, down, and to the right. "Monster squad! They never fly high go straight up."

Four alicorn monsters, a green one, a purple, and two blue ones, were beating their wings slowly, staring his way. They were still a couple thousand hooves distant but also in front of him. A bullet ricocheted off the sky sled; another tore just the very tip of his right ear off.

*Sure. Straight up. Carrying three or four times more weight than the sled was ever intended for, by a single unicorn who's never pulled more than half the sled's rated limit.*

He knew the sky rats were following, because he saw all four alicorns turn their head to the right, ears pointed up. They adjusted course, a little. At this distance Grey wasn't sure if that meant he'd gone up, or down on their importance scale. It gave him an idea, however. Try to make the sky rats fight the alicorns, and maybe he could escape.

Since his flight relied on sheer thrust, like a rocket, rather than airflow creating a pressure differential, he actually could choose to go straight up, and wouldn't falter for a high angle of attack. He'd falter instead for fighting gravity. And he needed speed as badly as he needed altitude. *Precious scrap slagged on the fires of an irradiated lava river.* Aloud, he said "Is everypony hanging on for dear life? Because I need to dip into what're called evasive maneuvers."

He waited one full second for everypony not flying by their own wingpower to grip a tether tightly. Then he turned.

Hard to the right, the harness cutting off his air so he had to work his legs like they were bellows. Galloping sideways to circle until he was almost facing the power armor encased sky rats who had a tremendous altitude advantage being just below the clouds. Still galloping, he climbed. Roughly a thirty five degree angle and concentrating on every trick taught in arcane class on how to pour out the magic. Levitation, illumination, teleportation. He even tried to replicate the spell the one colt had tried years ago that saw him teleport while casting a disintegration ray. It had worked, sort of. The student cast a plasma borne disintegration spell, and teleported to thirty hooves in front of his prior point. Just in time for his own plasma to render him so many disparate atoms. The resulting conflagration, as all those single atoms found lower states of matter, had set several prewar books on fire.

None of that mattered. Every spell he cast, successful or not, was grabbed by the gemstone veins in the rod over his back, and converted by onyx and obsidian into so much thrust. So much but not enough. The raiders below were splitting their sport, shooting at both the six sky rats and the sled and himself, and none of them could hit a mountain from the foothills. But sometimes they'd be aiming at the sky rats and the bullet would whistle past him. He was high enough now they might not even hurt him, since he was easily past a thousand hooves above them. Maybe two thousand he didn't know or care. One of those shots would connect, and actually put a hole in him. What then?

Green plasma flashed past him. Too close. He



started to vary his climb angle. It was as close to juking and diving as he could get while simultaneously climbing as close to straight up as he could go.

Another hard right, and he flattened out. He'd go immediately below the lowest of the six. Two had laser battle saddles. When all six loosed a volley of deadly fire, one of the lasers melted a rib from off his left side. He didn't black out, didn't start falling. But it hurt like he hadn't the words for. Grey had no thoughts left. No plan, no memories of school, not even an awareness of his passengers. Just one single idea: *run*.

So he pumped his legs, hoping he didn't bump into anything. Galloping forces air in, and out of a pony's chest. It can be done even when the belly muscles are seizing, as was currently the case. But it meant he was still conscious, and able to still cast magic. He was nearly to the clouds, now.

Grey heard more shots behind him, but didn't see any pass him. He dared a very tiny glance behind him. The alicorns had engaged the Enclave, and he would have a brief reprieve; his plan had worked. He climbed. The cloud curtain had intimidated him before. He was diving into a murky lake – and he didn't know whether he was about to crack his head open on a rock.

Diving upward into solid gray, Grey closed his eyes and pumped his legs. Also he sincerely hoped he still had passengers. He had a thought that if he'd killed his sister and the pegasi had fallen off or flown away, he'd just freefall long enough to cut the stupid sled free, and then flee for the rest of his life – however many minutes that gave him.

When he first opened his eyes, he couldn't see anything. The cloud curtain still contained him, blocking all light out. He tried to guess what direction he was going in, and angled upwards just a little bit more.

Blue sky. Brilliant sunshine.

It took Grey's breath away, and he forgot all about . . . everything. He was crying and would have been unable to describe to anypony ever in his life, if they were tears of joy for seeing something so beautiful, or pain because his rib was still occupied by a cauterized hole from a laser blast, or fear that he was about to die. All of them were true, and it was all too much for him.

Legs dangling, eyes taking in the sky, the sun, and the odd columns of white, fluffy clouds, Grey forgot to gallop. Without his legs' motion, and with his diaphragm still seizing, Grey stopped breathing. He, and to a lesser extent the sky sled, started to freefall when Grey stopped casting magic. Pear didn't like heights very much, Grey remembered, as the world started to go gray and quiet. He hoped she could forgive him in

the afterlife for letting her die this *particular* way. He could almost hear Pear's terrified voice as she screamed his name. Then he passed out, and knew no more.

## Chapter 11

# Good Morning, and Welcome to Tartarus.

The strong wind was making him cough. No, Grey took that back. It was the fluid in his throat. The wind didn't help. He was also extremely disoriented, but he could feel something against his back, so he assumed he was laying down under a giant fan. He coughed again, and tried to spit out whatever had spilled on him.

"I understand that stuff's expensive. You probably want to swallow instead of spit it out." A small voice, shouting nearby. Grey tried to roll over again, and found he was tied down. He opened his eyes, and confirmed that there was nothing under his hooves.

To Grey's right, hanging on to a couple leather bands wrapping through his mane, was a tan colt with a disheveled green mane. His left side ached horribly, and he couldn't remember yet how he got here. Grey looked back at the bed he was tied to, and saw only a gray quilt. It looked quite soft but was also receding rapidly.

"Precious slag melted in Tia's milk!" He must have only been out a few seconds. But looking behind and below him, he saw it had been long enough for the four alicorns to dispatch the six Enclave. "Nogg, fly or hang on!" He wasn't sure if the shouting was necessary, but he dare not make assumptions as those required thinking, and right now he needed to be flying.

He looked behind him, and saw Stormflight was still gripping his tether but also using his wings to stabilize the skysled. Nogg too, grabbed a tether and flapped for all he was worth. Grey noticed it significantly offset the fact that Pear was still there in the center. She was curled into a fetal position, legs braced against the tie down bars even as she held her tether in her teeth, while her head was tucked between her legs as well as she could and still hang on to everything at once. It would have to do.

Grey went back to pumping his legs, and poured as much magic out as he could. The sled rose with him,

rather than behind him, and he was not falling, then climbing again. Straight through the curtain again.

Blue sky. Brilliant sunshine.

He was actually in a town of pegasi, he realized. The odd mounds and spires were buildings, and he could see dots, none too close yet, of pegasi floating about. He'd have to dodge the buildings or risk impacting something solid even to mud ponies.

Clear of the curtain, he banked sharply left. It was odd, galloping on a wall that wasn't there. The he straightened out as quickly as he had dipped. A quick glance showed he still had all his passengers. Next pie in the sky wish was that the hooves of the goddess had to rely on the same means a pony knew about, for finding things. Like flying unicorns. If they couldn't see him and couldn't magic their way to knowing where he was headed, they should come above the curtain in the wrong place, and the wrong direction by enough to let the Enclave guards save him.

If they didn't shoot him first.

A laser filled the air and while it wasn't even within fifty hooves of him, it was clearly aimed in his direction. Maybe if he went above most of the buildings they'd feel less threatened...

He banked again, this time upwards. The next tower he came close to, was too tall and too close. A hard bank right, then back left to get on course. *I bet the sky rats use the sun to determine their heading.* If Stormflight was conscious, he could probably give meaningful directions on how to get closer to their village. Of course he'd need to know the alicorns weren't on his tail or he'd just kill off the rest of his family by returning.

Two older colts, one pink and one an odd red / pink color, flew up next to him. A respectful forty hooves to Grey's left, but still deliberately keeping up, and staring at him.

"You're a mud pony, aren't you?" said the Pink pegasus. "From the ground?" asked the salmon colored one.

"My name's Grey Horn yes I'm" legs cycled, forcing him to inhale. "From the ground but there're" Breath in, "Four alicorns chasing don't" Grey was actually able to spare enough mental capacity to be frustrated and angry these two teenagers could just run along side him and chat, while he nearly passed out. "Get caught they're dangerous."

The pink one asked "What's wrong with your dashite friend? I see they took his cutie mark but his wings look intact enough."

"One's poisoned one's shot." Legs, breath, air to burn into magic. "Busy running but you could" This

would get old. How close were the monsters? "ask if you feel up to it." They weren't even sweating, he realized. "Tan colt was born down there."

He saw the two colts drop back a bit, and whisper to Stormflight Trees. Then he didn't see them anymore. Grey decided he didn't have the time or the oxygen to pursue the matter further. In fact, seeing nothing pursue him, he eased back to a more maintainable output and concentrated on catching his breath.

Behind him and slightly to his right, a herd of about eight pegasi were on an intercept course. Just brightly colored jump suits not barding so far as he could see, but they all had something slung over their side that looked like Pear's improvised battle saddle. He shouted behind him "Pear do you think those guys to our right look hostile?"

He saw her uncurl and look over Nogg's wings, which would periodically flap furiously before he ducked back down to rest. Ahead of him at least thirty seconds at his current speed was either downtown Pegasusville, or their bedroom community of suburbs. A dozen staggered columns of cloud construction three times as high as the other thing he had climbed over. While he could appreciate the light, and for the first time in his life he could actually feel the warmth of the sunshine, it was cold, and he had the distinct impression there was less air up here. Not knowing how quickly the effect worsened, Grey was very reluctant to climb further.

"They're busy with the alicorn squad." Pear reported. In the very edge of his peripheral vision he could see the flashes of laser borne destruction spells. "No wait, two are coming this way. They're not shooting, though."

Grey adjusted his path so he wouldn't have to dip and swerve too steeply. The cloud construction was wider at the bottom, leaving less room to fly between them at speed. Which by Grey's judgment, he was still flying 'at speed' but the envoy from the citizenry militia caught up with him before he passed the first of the buildings.

"So, no idea what you're doing here mud pony. But we need to coordinate your flight as a proper distraction. Leave the clouds too soon those things will concentrate on wiping us out. Stay up here too long and it will turn out the same. So once we kill one of them, you drop down and get the hay outta our city."

It was a yellow stallion, with striking blue mane, and a green and black jumpsuit that probably wouldn't slow down any offensive attack but did have pockets everywhere. His companion was a deep blue mare with a dirty yellow mane and tail, and they both had square tubes with writing and odds and ends sticking out, slung over their side. It wasn't a laser rifle design he'd ever seen before, but they both seemed to have firing

bits in their mouths, cables going back to the same side of their harness.

"Hey Stormy" Grey shouted over his shoulder. "Are we even going in the right direction?"

The blue mare looked at the sled, and lost her wing's rhythm for a moment. From the sled, came a slurred "Mostly."

Pear shouted to the pegasi "He was poisoned I don't suppose you can help in the few seconds we'll be up here?"

The stallion glared, but the mare touched a hoof to the stallion's side, looking at her companion with deep concern. He looked at her, and then they both drifted onto the sky sled. The sudden drag felt like he'd just been kicked in the chest by the neighborhood bully. Grey went back to panic level magic output, and almost built up to recovery speeds he'd been at a moment before. Thus he was fairly unaware of what was transpiring on the sled.

Then a collective shout from dozens of ponies reached his ears, and a split second later he was speeding away, the two pegasi having gone back to flying on their own. "That's it! We're done here. Run, and take those blasted things with you!" That, from the otherwise slightly compassionate mare.

So be it. Grey reached up and unclasped his converter, and wiped the sweat off his face. Grey was immediately chilled by the higher humidity combined with the sudden lack of direct sunlight.

Then they fell through, and the ground was a long ways away. Far enough that aside from the wind, he couldn't really tell he was 'falling'. He looked 'down' to see the alicorn monsters dropping through the curtain too. The purple one was already about a third of the way to the ground, surrounded by a cloud of blood and missing at least one leg, possibly one wing as well. Their green member was falling behind the two blue ones, having suffered serious wing injuries of some sort.

Then the pair of moderately healthy alicorns weren't there. Grey was fairly sure they either teleported closer, or were invisible. Part of him didn't really want to know, but part of him refused to believe he was so lucky as to not still be their target. He repositioned the converter and slapped it closed.

Moderate forward force, as he didn't really want to have to maneuver up here. His passengers were all gripping their tether with white gums. "Hey Nogg, any chance you could get a bottle of water up here?"

He fished one out of his pack, and half flew, half crawled along the traces to get it to Grey. "The Enclave couple said they had something that would help

Stormflight. But I'm not sure if they gave it to him, or what."

Grey had gulped down half the bottle in his first swallow before stopping to respond. "Nogg your wings work you just can't keep up. So, here's the deal: if I fall, you fly away and hide somewhere. They probably won't look very long. Your biggest asset, if you're out here alone, is how small you are. Wings are a second I'll grant you but everything can see what's in the sky." The colt nodded solemnly. Grey didn't know how sheltered his life so far had been, but out here, it was good to know that stuff could happen. "Nogg? If I die, the sky sled will fall, but Stormflight can still coast to the ground without breaking anything. I want you to grab hold of Pear and get her to the ground in one piece if you can. Even if you can't set her down gently, just getting her down with nothing more than broken legs will make me feel a lot better about going to heaven before her." The colt nodded again, tears in his eyes this time. "In the mean time, I want to be down right next to the ground before those things catch up. So go back there and hang on for dear life again."

Nogg sort of half climbed, half fell back into place. Grey finished his water until he was holding tight onto the sled. Then he dove, nose to the ground, and galloped as fast as he could.

None too soon, as screeches could be heard behind him. Two voices shouted in unison "You belong to me! I lay claim to all unicorns!"

Grey decided they managed to out-creepify the over-mare stallion from the town he couldn't find and might also have no name.

He tried to calculate how fast they could fly given the time it took them to fly the roughly three thousand hooves but then he realized he had been free falling, and since he didn't know his terminal velocity, nor even if he had reached it, that he was visualizing a triangle with two unknowns. Even if he could calculate pythagorean's theorem while flying for his very horn, he wouldn't have workable numbers. But he did know a significant portion of the roughly six thousand hooves from the curtain to the ground had been eaten up by their power dive.

Grey risked a glance back, just in time to see the purple one appear unannounced, actually on the sky sled. But Pear had already made her cannon to point at the other two so when she discharged it, in addition to pushing the sled into a neutral weight for the split second during which it was propelling them, it also tore through the purple alicorn's gut. Combined with the wing failures, she was done.

The now free-falling alicorn floated upwards, forcing the two blue ones to divert around their sister. That was good, but there was nothing on the ground to force

them to fly around. So Grey maintained his power dive, legs pumping, recounting spell tests, his forehead burning now from all the waste heat. Four hundred hooves left, and he was going as fast as the more experienced fliers behind him. *How quick can **they** turn?*

Afraid he was going to die of a heart attack, he played chicken with the ground, waiting as long as he dared. At ninety hooves he took one deep breath, no magic, just free falling now.

At the end of the breath he poured everything he could muster into pulling his nose up. Too late, he thought he should have shouted a warning, as two pegasi could at least shove their wings out, help ease their curve. As it was, he saw three halves of saddle packs fly loose from the impact as the sky sled smacked into the ground. *My new gun, right? And the healing potions considering murphy's law.* His grief was mollified when he saw one of the alicorn monsters misjudge badly, and broke its front legs on the hard ground. The remaining monster continued pursuit.

In order to not break her legs, she had pulled up before Grey; this meant she was now immediately above him. She started kicking at the sky sled, and his passengers started biting the goddess. Pear even got her cannon to discharge, but it wasn't pointed at any variant of pony flesh. Given the circumstances, Grey would one day be thankful she hadn't accidentally killed her brother with that shot.

The still in pursuit alicorn monster cast a shield spell. Only, it was all wrong. Expanding outward rapidly from her hide was a strong force coupled with incredible heat. A fireball spell, and it was hot enough to burn away the traces. The sky sled dropped away, and Grey didn't see what happened too it.

Afraid that the sudden shift in flight dynamics meant the monster had somehow gripped him, he slammed upward as hard as he could, actually flying nose first straight up. For about three hooves; then his horn met the monster's jaw; for a brief moment the world went black.

He didn't actually black out, but the Immelman turn he executed hurt like few things he'd ever done to himself in the past three years had hurt. He guessed he'd cracked his horn, but judging by the blood on the monster's lips, he'd done a serious number to his pursuer's mouth.

But with no sled, he could run. *Nogg, Stormy, please save Pear. I'll introduce you to all the mares I know back home.* Right now the monster was still close enough she covered up the part of the ground where the sled should have wound up. And he was flying for all he was worth, cracked horn and all, to save his own hide.



From what he'd seen, he had way more maneuverability, but the monster, having more muscle mass and bigger wings even relative to her body, could eventually outpace him. If they were both better rested, he would have put money on his own endurance exceeding the monster, but then again Stormy had said they see through each other's eyes. A pure endurance race would have been a losing battle because there was only one Grey.

What else could they do? He had an idea, having seen a giant rent in the earth during the power dive. He should be about there, but if the thing didn't follow him in his plan wouldn't work. First thing, then, was to make it incredibly mad.

He drifted clockwise, and braked hard by going 'forward'. Then he rotated nose up, and smacked his hooves into the monster's forehead. Pulling away so hard his cracked horn almost caused him to black out again, he raced away, unscathed.

Into his head burst a psychic blast so loud it also almost knocked him out. 'it is the tail of the tiger you play with. Not the nose.'

*Oh great*, Grey thought. *Can they mind read too?* He made as much of a point as possible to not draw an image in his head of what he planned.

He sped past the canyon. It was big enough it would do what he needed. Into his head came another blast, trying to be sultry at a hundred and twenty decibels. 'Do you not want to play with this tiger's tail?'

He did the crazy Ivan maneuver, but this time she folded her wings and dropped her head, ready. He sped above and flew past then rotated upside down, pulling his nose into a power dive straight into the canyon. Given how long it was before he saw the monster follow him, she must have tried kicking him as he went past, rather than braking and turning.

His wings were narrower than the canyon, but he could already see places where he'd have to be exactly in the middle for that to be true. Also, quarray eels. He passed a hole big enough for three ponies to fit into if it wasn't for the jutting maw of red stone rocketing out from the hole. Since Grey was still in a power dive he flew past, and the eel stayed to snap at the blue monster behind him. Furthering his lead, but he'd have to climb wherever there wasn't a hole so he could always be in a power dive. Those eels moved their enormous bulk *fast*.

The problem with that theory is the eels were the only reason he wasn't getting caught. He'd drop down and gain four or five of his own body lengths as she dodged the territorial worms, and when he climbed, since she was already above him and could just fly less steeply, he'd lose twice what he'd gained. Worse, the bottom of the canyon was just ahead.

The river wasn't lava, but it didn't look healthy. It was glowing yellow, although it was getting dark down here so it was a dingy yellow. He dare not drop into it as he'd succumb to radiation poisoning just as the thing behind him caught up. Maybe he could kill it that way, though. How would he drag a monster with probably eight times his own mass, into the water and hold her there?

'We are not adversely affected by the wasteland's dangers! Join the goddess, and you will not fear radiation either!'

*Oh, right. She's telepathic. Or good at guessing games.* Now what? Only way forward was to move without thinking.

Just at the surface of the water, he pulled up flat along the surface. She had already anticipated that and started braking and aiming farther out. Intercept course now. He banked hard left, and just as his hooves hit the canyon wall, so did his left wingtip dip into the water. It quit working immediately causing him to 'cap-size' and catapult himself back first into the water. The monster folded her wings and plummeted neatly into the river, disappearing from view.

Just as the nausea started to make him dizzy the tidal wave from the alicorn's dive reached him, and flung him out of the water long enough that the emitters were free of water. Freedom! He poured everything he had into forward thrust, and he was just barely tipped enough that he wouldn't be immediately propelled back into the water.

'GOTCHA!'

Out from the surface came two hooves, which wrapped around his backside. Screaming he pulled his back legs up to his belly but it wouldn't help because her feathered expanse was wetly propelling the monster closer.

Through the wall of water he could see two tentacles. They went from pointing straight up, paralleling the sides of the canyon walls, then suddenly dropped. They wrapped around the base of each wing and pulled. The once-pony's forward momentum was diverted back down to the river. She tried biting down on Grey's belly but he didn't exactly have a lot of extra skin, and thankfully she missed the existing flap she might have been aiming for.

But she did tear a hoof square flap of skin clean off just as she was pulled under the surface, causing Grey to forget about the precision of magic casting. The next thing he knew, he was drowning in a filthy soup. The vomiting really didn't help him get his bearings, any.

Somehow, over the next second, he found where the surface of the river was, and breathed air again. He tried to right himself so he could at least tread water but was stung deeply when the once-water hit where once he had skin. But that was not water, and he didn't have any skin, and he was dry heaving in the middle

of a turbulent river that just *ate* an alicorn monster whole. Oh and he was bleeding into the river in case there was any doubt he was going to die.

His wings were acting like rudders, making turning with just hoof strokes ineffectual. But he managed to get his hooves on the sandy banks without being eaten. Next was the task of producing magic once the wings had dripped dry enough.

Alicorn monster nowhere in sight, alternating between puking bile and puking nothing, he floated up. He remembered to look up periodically so he could navigate the eel dens as he was in no shape at all to dodge a snail, much less those monstrosities. It was well into the afternoon when he finally found the lip of the canyon. Intact sans that belly flap that was still oozing, and breathing albeit in short, rapid gasps.

He was tired of magic. Tired of flying. Tired. Grey unsnapped the converter and started levitating the buckles of his harness. As he collapsed not five hooves from the precipitous drop-off, a blue sky rat dropped into his vision. He was very blurry, but the voice sounded familiar. "Grey? You okay? I mean, what's hurt? Healing potion first? Water?"

"Rad away." *For the love of everything undiscovered, please give me a radaway dose.*

Stormflight started digging through his packs, and found rad-X pills. Setting those down near Grey's head, he searched again, and this time found a bottle of water. "You'll want this in a second but I know I have the rad away." Finally the pegasus fished out a pouch of citrusy sand-paper drink. "Here it is. Looks like I lost the matching straw."

Stormflight was still holding it in a fetlock. Grey greedily levitated it down to the ground and used as little magic as he could possibly summon, to open it. Then without moving his head or the chem pouch so much as an inch off the ground, he tipped it so the opening would land on his lips.

As much as he wanted to gulp it down, he knew his stomach would refuse the medicine and he dare not lose it. He had to quickly levitate it back upright after the first mouthful. By sheer will and mostly a lot of luck, he managed to hold his reaction to one dry heave, and then he swallowed, and the heave that followed wasn't strong enough to push the fluid back out. The second mouthful he just held there, hoping it would soak up through his tongue.

"That bad, huh?" While Grey eased his way through the pouch of rad away by tipping and un-tipping it one mouthful at a time, Stormflight set out a healing potion, a bottle of water, one of the hole in the ground's 'off brand' copies of med-x, another pouch of radaway, and started to fly away. The breeze from his wingbeats was very comforting, just now. "Look, Grey?"

Grey was able to pick his head up this time, but the pegasus was still blurry.

"It's going to be dark soon so I want to get back to Nogg and Pear while I can still find them. I think you should rest here unless something chases you off, okay?"

Talking required breathing, apparently. "You're not worried I'll just drift off to sleep and never wake up?" To illustrate, Grey laid out flat, and closed his eyes. The sense of security having a trusted pony stand over him almost let him fall asleep right there.

Stormflight chuckled. "No, Grey. You mud ponies are too tough for that. If my cousins had to power dive past quarry eels and swim in a radioactive river to escape their death, several would seriously consider dying, and the other half probably would die for lack of determination." Stormflight laid a hoof on Grey's shoulder. "Congratulations Grey Horn, you've shown us up."

The Radaway had nearly finished its work and he could look up without giving himself dry heaves. Also in the less than bright light the pegasus was finally not so blurry. Grey reached up and grabbed Stormy's fetlock. "I wish your people would share the sunlight. Seeing the open sky was the most amazing experience I've ever had."

Stormflight pursed his lips, and nodded once. With that he flew off. Grey sat up and cracked open the water. If he remembered there were only two bottles left at this point and the party would have to either fly at night, the implications of which he didn't know, or camp in the relative open desert.

It wasn't until he was halfway through downing the second radaway pouch he caught what Stormy had said. 'Nogg and Pear' – they were both alive, and able to travel still.

Grey finished the water bottle and looked at the healing potion and pain killer. He decided against them, and looked for anything resembling shelter. There were some prewar tree trunks which were hard to knock down but mediocre to hide behind. There was a shrub but it was moving more than the wind was pushing it, so he mistrusted it in the failing light.

He ended up taking a nap at the crest of a small knoll with several tree trunks around him and he found a wind break, not that there was any wind, in a low wall of a pre-war building – scarcely three hooves high but it made him feel better to crouch against an almost building.

After the nap he put the full harness on, and locked the wings in flight position but left the converter hanging on his mane. With the cloud curtain nights were always pitch black, but he thought he saw a shape approach via the sky, and land moderately close to where he had been found by Stormflight.

Of course, that could be a number of other things too. He shoved his meager supplies under the straps of his harness since he didn't have a pack himself, and traipsed quietly a hundred hooves to his right. He was three hundred hooves from where he had collapsed, and he couldn't make out any details of the three shapes sifting through the empty containers he'd left there.

So he brought up a full illumination spell, and tried to make out what was out there. Three pony sized shapes, one much shorter than the other two, and his eyes gleamed in the light of the spell as he looked up. Quickly Grey canceled the spell and began sneaking back to his napping spot.

At first there was no cry of recognition, and Grey began to wish he had asked for a gun to go with the med-x. If these were scavenging griffons his wings would barely save him, or more likely make him a bigger target since he was unused to flying at night but even if griffons couldn't see better at night, they at least had used flight since their earliest memories unlike this unicorn.

He could hear voices as the three talked amongst themselves. They started walking towards where he had illuminated the desert, and Pear levitated the converter into flight position, but didn't close it, uncertain whether spells and standing, or flight through the air would yield better odds.

Then Pear Rump shouted out "Grey! Grey where are you!"



## Chapter 12

# It's Been So Long Since I've Seen You

"Pear!" Grey shouted. It might be one of a variety of tricks, of course, but the wait had been only a little longer than he'd expected. The three visitors changed their direction silently to converge on his voice. No reply but for the small one to fly up and approach at some speed.

To his discredit, or perhaps out here it was wise, he considered running. He still couldn't see who it was. But instead, he lit up his horn again and saw it was a somewhat scared looking Nuage Cadeau, who landed near Grey, and did the half-bow that the ponies of his village offered. "Hey." was all he said as hello, and it was subdued. As was his next comment, "C'mon."

The young pegasus waved toward the other two with his head and started walking at measured, resolute pace. Grey's heart rate began to climb. Stormflight had looked completely okay a few hours before, and Nogg looked okay now, leading him as he was to introduce him ... *to his sister*.

"Pear! Are you alright?" But she was walking. Also a measured pace, he saw. But all her legs were there and bent in the conventional places from what he could see in the poor light.

"Kinda, yeah. Stormy said you tried to turn yourself into a melted ghouel by going skinny dipping with the alicorn monsters?" Her voice was shaking, unsteady. Grey could tell her emotions were all jarred and the 'skinny dipping' comment was unlike her ... except as a self defense against fear.

Finally they were close enough he could see the problem. Grey stopped, then Stormflight stopped. Nogg stopped and looked over his shoulder at Grey, but Pear, whose head was barely two hooves from Stormflight's rib cage, stopped and looked sharply. But at Stormflight, not towards Grey.

*Turned her head to face him*, Grey corrected himself. Her forehead was blackened, with patches of fresh, hairless flesh grown by a healing potion. But her eyes were empty sockets, the flesh around having puffed up

to fill the gap so it was nothing like a skeleton. But there were no eyes there. "Hmm?" Pear whispered to Stormflight, barely audible at this distance.

"Uh, he's here." Stormflight mumbled back.

Grey took a step forward and announced himself. "Hey Pear." *What were you supposed to say to a sibling who'd just been permanently crippled? 'glad you have all your limbs it'll make bumping into things less challenging of a danger' ?*

"So, Stormy here says I look like a mess." Aside from the burned hair and recently regrown skin, the only problem really was the lack of eyes.

"You've looked worse." Grey considered the long term implications. She'd have to live at home, all the time. But this wouldn't be the time to discuss the hows of it. She'd need to be reminded she was still a valid pony. Not coddled but not just ignored. Grey felt overwhelmed at the responsibility just to choose the right vocal tone, and he was mentally kicking himself for the end result of not saying hardly anything.

"Yes but I haven't looked worse. In fact, this looking is the worst I think I've ever done. Can't see my hooves in front of my face." She reached up to wave, demonstrating her inability to look at things. "How're you? Can you come over here?"

"Sure." He thought about just bumping noses so she'd know where he was exactly, but in the four steps it took him to close the distance, he added a fifth. She didn't want to know he was in front of her, she wanted reassurance Grey thought she was still alive in some *meaningful* sense.

She wanted a hug from her baby brother.

"I'm going to hug you, okay?" Pear said as Grey's mane brushed against hers. She sat down and reached up with both front legs to pull Grey's neck into a tight embrace. "Don't ever go off and die like that, okay! I can't go back to mom and say you aren't coming back." Pear's tears ran freely into Grey's mane. "You know she'd just say you got lost and shout your name every night like she still does for dad sometimes."

It was true, she did. Tended dutifully to her rock petunias with a coffee can Grey had soldered a handle onto so she would water all her imaginary flowers every day. Swept the pretend cobblestone with a cooking spoon she kept outside for that purpose. And would do things like meander through the house, asking Pear & Grey multiple times if they'd seen their dad since he went to the store. *No mom I haven't seen him in three years. Are you sure he went to buy food? Because we haven't had a grocery store in town for over a century.*

The last Pear had seen ... had seen at all, was when the fireball spell severed the sky sled. "You got burned by the spell that destroyed the sled traces, I'm



guessing?" Pear nodded wordlessly. She had landed mostly intact; probably been able to find a potion still bleeding from the blast. The sled probably landed a little rough but even if she broke anything, the healing potion would fix that. Unable to see her brother, Stormflight would have said 'he disappeared with three of the monsters in close pursuit.'

"You can't hide very well in the sky Grey." Pear said, still crying into Grey's mane.

"Not many trees to make them dodge either." Grey admitted. Speaking up then, he asked Stormflight "Is the sky sled still usable?"

Nogg snorted, and Stormflight answered "As a hunk of metal. Did a right proper job of saving Pear's legs and I could fly by then, antidote having finished its job. But all the magic bits broke or fell off. We'll have to just carry it while she balances in the middle."

"At least I can't tell how high you're going." Pear said, crying less but not letting go either.

"I think Temnyy has a little pre-war tech. Stuff that can regrow eyes. There's a chance we can talk him into using it, if he told me right." Nogg hadn't moved from where he'd stopped to figure out why Grey had stopped walking.

Grey made a point of not letting false and wild hopes drive his perception of the current situation. "Do we have a tent?" He hadn't remembered one being packed, but ...

"No." Stormflight said matter of factly. "But I think we probably should spend the night. Better spot here than where we landed or I'd have taken you to her. Quivering plants with jaws in a few places and Pear said they ate ponies."

Grey nodded. "and I'm guessing the likelihood of needing to fight in the dark is higher than if we waited 'til everypony can see?"

"I'm comfortable enough flying in the dark. But I don't know where we're going – and y'all can't see well enough to tell if we're approaching the right landmarks to change course or what have you. Combined with having to carry the sled, yeah Grey we need to wait for first light." Stormflight stared down at his hooves, and drew random circles in the sand with one. "I've never actually lost a squad member before."

Grey sighed. "She's not lost she's just forcibly retired. Might even be fixable if Nogg is right." Grey thought about camping outside with no tent and no usable structures. It got cold at night but not dangerously so. "So, do we have any blankets in these generously provided packs?"

"I've got one." Nogg said "So I'll sleep alright."

"If I recall there's two more." Stormflight drawled. "Since I'm used to sleeping out on the clouds it's not

really cold to me so I'll go without." Stormflight looked around, as if checking for approaching trouble, but unless his night vision was considerably better than Grey's, he couldn't see too far away.

But then he was pulling off his pack, and digging through it. As he did so Grey levitated out a few dinner items and set them in a pile. There wasn't much fuel around to heat them with but everything pre-war could be eaten cold anyway. After getting the two blankets, which weren't, Grey saw, bedspread sized but just oversized clothing, Stormflight looked over at the pile of food and commented on it. "Y'all don't eat much, down here."

"There's not much down here to eat." Replied Pear, now able to speak matter of factly again, without her voice quivering.

"Again if you shared your sunshine, I bet we could grow a lot more. According to a history book I read – well, a play presented as historical in nature – it used to be the earth ponies would trade food for sunshine."

Stormflight bit his lip in consternation. "Yeah, Grey. I've read that account too. The unicorns made the sunshine, the pegasi proved just a little rain at times, and the earth ponies sold off their excess food. It's ..." Stormflight hesitated. "It's not something the Enclave would ever agree to."

Nogg had dug his camping blanket out too, and was securing its straps as he added "Temnyy says that account can't be true because the sun is too big for a few unicorns to manipulate. He told me the dead princesses must have lied to the unicorns to maintain their status quo of power like the Enclave lie to their citizens to keep from having to share with the mud ponies."

Grey would have facehoofed except there was a sister in his way. "Nogg, some of what Temnyy taught you is inflamatory. Do you know what that word means?" Grey was quite proud of learning an entire word strictly from digging old books out of nooks and crannies and reading them.

"Uh, it sets things on fire?" Nogg suggested.

It was Pear who responded. "Yes, Nogg. And in this case, talking badly of the princesses, or rubbing in the fact that they don't appear to still be with us down here, sets people angers on fire."

"Oh." was his only reply.

Fortunately nothing tried to eat them overnight, and the radscorpions they flew over couldn't reach even the low altitude the flight had started out at.

"You're making it wiggle." Pear complained as she tried to lay herself flatter on the sky sled. She was already spread eagled, each fetlock around a separate cargo tiedown's metal loop.

Nogg was holding up one back corner, to Grey's right. He was tied to the back left corner, and Stormflight was in the restored traces. Said traces were shorter, and of about three different materials bolted together or tied with baling wire. In the event something broke, Grey's rope was attached with a quick release knot, and he told the other bucks he would dive for her, free of the sled, if such a maneuver became necessary.

"Are we still over the campground or did you just start flying?" In order to get the best arrangement, there had been several attempts at putting ponies into different places, and discussion about how to fly safely from their current campground, to Grey & Pear's home village. All that had taken place less than three hooves off the ground so that if they had been surprised by some aspect of their makeshift work, no one would get hurt.

"Not to burst your bubble Pear, but we've been on the move for half an hour." Grey explained. Pear had been wiggling into her most nearly comfortable position, and more or less but not quite settled on her spread eagled position. While she was complaining about the sled shifting, as she herself shifted amongst the packs that were tied to the sled around her, Stormflight had pointed up, and Grey nodded and waved Nogg upwards too. She never noticed how much harder he was flapping as they ascended.

"We're still just a few hooves above the ground though, right?" Pear lurched forward to grip the rail harder.

"Sure, Pear." Grey said with a flat tone.

Pear took several rapid breaths. "Do I want to know how high we really are?"

Grey looked down at the ground, roughly a thousand hooves away. "Not really sis." To which Pear whimpered, and Nogg was visibly restraining himself from answering the question.

It was a long flight for how uncomfortable some parties were. Nogg was getting tired, and Pear was unable to relax, but eventually the steel walls of scrap were visible. Grey pointed it out to Stormflight, who had to do most of the steering. The pegasus called back, when they were a thousand hooves from the front gate and had eased down to twenty hooves off the ground to avoid being shot at as 'pesky sky rats' "Hey Pear? We're going to land. Might be a jarring stop but it's all okay."

Of course when they were two inches off the ground is when the traces finally broke free, and the right front corner dropped, smacking into the ground and nearly tossing Pear onto her nose. Grey stopped transmitting magic, but he was closer to three hooves off the ground and had a hard landing himself. As soon as he was down and Pear was standing back up, he set about folding his 'wings.'

"That wasn't as smooth as it was supposed to be, was it?" Pear asked.

"No ma'am. Traces broke and you fell to earth." Stormflight said sheepishly, trying to unhook himself from the still intact lines.

Young Nogg, not used to such physical labor, did not immediately hover back into the air. But neither did he curl up on the sled and nap. Grey levitated his own pack under the metal 'wings' and latched them, then put Nogg's smaller pack on him. "Since we're walking, and I don't want to drag a large square piece of scrap in, you can carry some stuff." The young pesasus nodded.

"How do you want to deal with me?" Pear asked the open air in front of her. "I can hold on to a tether, or just walk close enough to feel when you stop, or use your tail as a tether I suppose."

"Sis I haven't bathed in forever you don't want to be chewing on my tail." Plus their mom would probably follow Pear around for weeks and paint everybody's tail with pepper solution, like she was still a filly. "You've got a serious winter coat I bet you can feel every nuance of the breeze, right? Just stick close to me." Grey waited for his sister to stumble into his backside, then make her way to his shoulder where she could walk and not be bumping into his arcanomechanical wings.

The gates opened, and two earth ponies stepped out, spears at the ready, and sat down to either side of the gate as two more guards, a unicorn and an earth pony, break action rifles hanging at their shoulder, trotted cautiously towards the visitors.

"Grey what's the town's standard response to visitors?" asked Stormflight, eyes following the bouncing of the makeshift rifles that at this distance resembled Pear Rump's saddle cannon.

"Council said we didn't have one" piped up Pear quickly. "Why? What're they doing?"

Grey could tell which two mares these were, now. "Two spear holding guards as per usual but trotting straight for us with confused looks on their face are Rocks Roll Mossless and Sticks Afire."

"I don't know them." replied Pear. After a breath she added "How high were we flying? They might think we're skyrats."

"Some of us are sky rats. Is this going to be a problem?" Stormflight's eyes still hadn't left the weapons, whose carriers had halved the distance in this time.

"Sticks and Rocks may break my bones," added Nogg helpfully.

"It'll be fine just let the natives do the talking until everybody's okay with pegasi down here." It had only been a few days, after all. They shouldn't have assumed Grey simply wasn't coming back. "Sticks!" Grey called,

then lit up his horn as if it was night. Granted, it was a fairly common spell but since not even a third of the unicorns could cast it, he thought it might make him seem more unique ... and memorable that he knew the spell.

"Aye what what manner of scrap have ye brought, laddie? Does the next town trade in Skyrat, then?" That, from Rocks, who was the outside guard slightly more often when Grey would leave, than Rocks specifically would be on duty when he got back.

"And what the heck did you do to your sister? She looks like a piebald." Rocks Afire that time.

"Hey you two! I know that voice you get shuffled into shopping mall cop!" Pear stopped walking long enough to wave a hoof, then carefully catch up with Grey.