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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly realizing she might have repeated her earlier offense she snapped her mouth shut and blinked her now very large eyes, glancing back and forth between Stormy & Grey Horn, who reassured her with "If there were just there looking for trouble, they were probably raiders. Since I imagine we can't ask them now we'll just assume you mean raiders. By the way," it seemed natural to Grey that he would be called an earth-bound pony by a pair of natural born

cloud-walking pegasi, but down here there were further standards to adhere to. "I'm not an earth pony. I may be earth-bound, but I'm not anymore because I found this palladium rod, and also, I'm a unicorn. Everybody draws the distinction between earth pony and unicorn pony."

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

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

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

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

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

The door they'd come in was a mud room, or the like. There were shelves of stuff Grey didn't think would matter to anypony, and at the end of it were two doors. To the left was a broom closet, and straight ahead was a door that

went to an ell-shaped corner of a hallway. Stormflight had already started walking straight ahead, which would cut across the narrow portion of the building. To the right, Grey could see windows, desks, and paper piles that had adhered together from five quarters of a century of stagnant air. Low Sale had caught up with Stormflight, and was trying to just touch her chin whiskers to his flank

Stormy stopped, and turned his head, not quite able to make the pegasus' gaze. Grey was still eying the hallway ahead for movement and kept walking past the two as Low Sale asked "I need to know if you would like me to talk like I was still a pony, or if I should just follow you around like a hound dog would, and bark at things to distract them while you shoot them."

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

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

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

Grey, ear nearly on the door, lock almost unlocked, whispered "Not to disturb the news report, but there's something moving out there." He'd been hearing a clank, clank and occasional other noises, and it was definitely a thing walking around. The metallic clanking was at the same two points, one near and one further away, and had happened twice now, evenly spaced.

Mechanical actuation? Or a nest of giant ants? Only one way to find out, and it could be dangerous considering he had a revolver with fairly limited ammo, the new member of the party could be pressed to carry goods but had no weapons, and Stormy had four remaining rounds for his rifle plus about ten rounds for his heavy duty, heavy hitting revolver.

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

"I at least want to look. We'll run pell mell for the door if it's bad." And so saying, he finished throwing the lock which operated the door mechanism too. Creaking just a little, the door opened inwards enough that Grey could see, but he didn't throw it open so the pegasi could see anything more than his reaction, which involved a lot of blinking, and a slight head tip as the meaning slowly dawned on him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

Trader's Parking Lot

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This at least got a surprised look as Low Sale looked up at Grey, probably trying to ascertain what answer was expected. *Good, no stock answers so I can trap her, or at least expose the truth to Stormflight.* "I haven't heard of anything like that. Certainly my trainer didn't bring me to another pet owner for ... oh!"

Now she smiled, and tried to look like she was feeling embaressed with her ear-set but she wasn't blushing or stuttering. "If you're asking about breeding me yourself, I can promise you I won't put up a fight since there would be too much chance of my owner here misunderstanding or just thinking it wasn't right for a pet to fight against a pony."

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

The accusation shocked Low Sale back into stuttering and frantically trying to eyeball dustmotes around Grey's hooves. "Yes. Yes of course sir I didn't mean to imply you'd be interested only trying to answer your question. I haven't seen any pegasus foals in town." Just as Grey was trying to choose the wording to move to the next stage of the argument, Low Sale made it for him by turning to her owner with a sly knowing grin and said "If he's asking for your sake I'll tell you that even though he's right, a lot of stuff goes unnoticed in the wasteland; I'll forget whatever you tell me needs to be forgotten so neither of us will realize what happened."

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

That diatribe did get a long, slow burning glare of disbelief from Storm-flight. But it also got a stock answer, as she shuffled her hooves a little and said, again to Grey's hooves, "Yes, you're right. If I have a foal, let me know when it's born what you see, and I'll behave accordingly." She looked over to her owner, whose wing was still resting on her back, and added "If it's a pony,"

I can never spank it, but I can refuse to help spoil it, and I can let you know what I saw – so you can spank the foal later after you get back from work or wherever you are."

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

He was interrupted by a hoof against his lips, shushing him; Low Sale had bounded silently and with incredible speed to close the gap and keep Grey from speaking against her status as 'just an animal'. Hoof still in place, she whispered "Please don't speak against my status. Not in this town, where the infected live." 'Infected' must mean the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ. I'll have to explain it's just one unicorn that can't die even when he's killed. As she dropped her hoof she glanced quickly at the two traders, who had not taken any notice of this interchange, and continued, trying to sultry with a strained whisper "Any foal I have will be at least a year away, so it doesn't matter right now, does it? And if you want to practice making foals, there are things we can do that will make sure your practice doesn't make you upset; no winged foal that you have to explain and if you have a wife or whatever is done down here, she'll still have a foal without you needing to explain why your equipment doesn't work." A breath, and he eyes wandered around the room for a moment as she changed gears. "I just really need you not to question my acceptance of not having a soul anymore. It's really important"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sole was definitely sorry to hear that question. "Well, actually it's just the two raider camps. They're both due north from here. Like, three days and once you're on dirt, not sand, just start looking for holes to buried buildings or caves and there might be a few ponies living there but ... most of them don't want visitors, and don't have spare money anyway." Now Sole looked

rather sheepishly at the stone walls surrounding him and confided "Honestly I just come here for the chance to kill the mutated animals that get in my way. But I've found so many different rifles I thought I should try selling one or two."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye, for it has never before the war, been the pony way to take the life of another breathing thing." Grey glanced over their packages briefly, and didn't think he saw a good place to keep a rifle stashed, and th*I think this will have to be categorized as 'agree to disagree'*ey weren't carrying pistols themselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thinking of the pegasus colt stolen to be trained up as an ambassador to the clouds from which he'd been stolen, made Grey sit down, feeling his own sense of loss, or rather his sister's. Nogg had said he'd heard his 'uncle' Temnyy speak of machines that could heal even more accurately than healing

potions. The kid might have misheard; he has more than his share of foalish misunderstandings. But it can't hurt to ask. "Yes, he's safe at my village. Temnyy wanted him to leave in case violence broke out while he dug around with the plot to kill him via you via poison via a lot of distance." Rose very slightly retracted her head, and slitted her eyelids as she both twisted and pursed her lips. "But Nogg mentioned that Temnyy Kogot might have access to, might share the use of a healing machine to restore my sister's sight."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rose softly interjected, perhaps hoping to quell an argument, or perhaps hoping to feel out the loyalties and strengths of the pair, saying "Well, there

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

I'll have to trust her with something, then. "On that return trip, we were attacked by a trio of alicorn monsters. One of them used a fireball spell which burned my sister's face completely off. But she was able to find by feel. Or?" He turned to Stormflight for clarification "How involved were you?"

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

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

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

ambassador blue, leader red rules." Here the unicorn laughed, covering his lips with a fetlock. "Well, I mean and the fact he would brutally rip apart anyone who impersonated him."

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

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

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

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