

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 speed-bumps that separated trader's rows for a few seconds before admitting "I don't know."

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

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

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.

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 contct 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

