

Chapter 1

Return, Reload, Re-route

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Boys Night Up, Out, Under

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Stable familiarity, Crushing + Darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

That's Cold

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

Buy Low-Sell. Hi!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That did a reaction. The colt twisted his ears, and dragged the bag a few hooves closer to the pair, and the building now behind them. Finally looking up and turning

fully to face the ponies who actually looked like adults, he said "You understand that's not properly my name, right?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grey watched carefully to see what the ball would do to Stormy, but he didn't dare plan on shooting Former Unicorn, because that would just result in an automatic 'full transfer' to the mortally wounded pony body, and Former Unicorn would be currently, again, a unicorn. And that would creep Stormy out way more than he was having to put up with now. Probably.

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

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

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

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

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

Unperturbed, Former Unicorn replied "Rename her whatever you want. The pony that used to be, if that was her name, isn't. This isn't a pony, because pets are weak, fragile, and most of all, not people anymore. I trust you'll keep her in line, but you should understand the best ways to punish your new pet for misbehaving." Turning to the mare, the colt exclaimed "Miss? What do you say to your new owner?"

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

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

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

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

"So, anytime you think I might be straying, or want to know if I'm staying in my playpen you can ask my training ball, and at literally any distance within this universe,

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

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

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

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

This time the mare tensed all through her body; her breathing was just a little bit labored. As soon as Stormy bent his fetlock joint, she breathed deeply, then hissed it back out but was breathing deep, cleansing breaths. She looked over her shoulder, not quite turning far enough to make eye contact. "If that's enough, sir?"

With Stormy's ascent, she turned around, and now her voice did crack. "There is a steeper climb, from two to three. Three is for when I have deliberately disobeyed, such as hiding something from you, or telling you no to your face. But since you can't tell I'm

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

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

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

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

"If you let me sir, yes."

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

A little ashamed he hadn't made a move to prepare for a more precipitous departure before now, Grey Horn quickly snapped his converter shut and began flying straight up. Low Sale stayed at the same level as Stormflight, and the proceeded towards the town,

more or less. The column of smoke wasn't visible, but Grey thought that's where it had been.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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