

**Warning: Chapter Numbers are  
wonky**



This has to do with how LyX deals with mark-ups. I say "New chapter, please" and it keeps track of which one I'm in. In the whole, original this would be ... twelve? But it starts over at '1'.



# When Last We Saw Them

## Quoting the last paragraph, for context.

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 went back, sticking to the walls just the way he'd arrived.

It was late by this time. The fire river nearly a dozen stories below them was providing enough heat even though open windows simply overlooking the fire that it would never get bitterly cold, and since there was a full roof above everything here keeping the wind out it ended up being nearly as comfortable as sleeping at home. *Except there I have a bed that keeps me off the steel plates, where here I'm right on the stone floor.* But the crew hadn't brought any means of keeping any warmer aside from one blanket each, although Stormflight was next to his new pet who just fit under their blanket, so they could share body heat. They all fell asleep, despite the snoring earth pony couple.



# Chapter 1

## Sell It and They Will Buy.

Stormflight was awake first, it seemed. The sound of ponies walking by, the clanking of wares being packed up to set up in the designated bazaar woke Grey but Stormflight was already sitting upright, watching everypony do their thing. It looked to Grey to have been light for twenty minutes or more.

As Low Sale stretched, rolled onto her belly in preparation to stand upright, Stormy muttered to Grey "Still ain't used to hard surfaces. Clouds are kinda nice to sleep on, I guess." Then he used a fetlock to wipe sleepy dirt from his eyes and perhaps tried to look apologetic, having realized how the ground-bound might feel about having their beds maligned.

Low Sale flapped her wings a few times, then neatly raised herself by flight rather than press her hooves against the stone floor. Grey had already put his pack with the for-sale stuff on his back, when a griffon guard approached (It filtered through Grey's mind that here they expected you to say griffon-pony, but he had never seen evidence of hippogriffons, the hypothetical offspring of any hooved pony, and these clawed fliers of their own mixed heritage). The guard was wearing heavy cloth barding with minimal blue threads, but with him was an earth pony mare carrying various old-world clanky and jangly things.

Pastel orange coat, an orange mane and tail that would have been bright once, but was faded to gray now though the rest of her didn't seem that old. Her cutie mark was of a stopwatch, or at least a watch face that didn't seem too useful for telling time of day.

She pulled a couple long, skinny probes that had wires going back to one of the jangly bits with meters encased in glass. "Hello, I'm here to test the megaspark battery? That there, I presume?" She pointed a hoof to the one visible beneath his sleeping blanket he was using to cover up his flight harness, and was already walking towards it.

"No!" He quickly moved to intercept the mare's travel, adding "I need that one. But ... hmm." While Grey Horn was looking around and remembering Stormflight had them both, Stormflight was fishing one out of his bag. Grey tried to levitate towards himself but was too bleary eyed to focus, as it was heavy, and very dense. Sliding it over to the mare, he said "I'm keeping the other one as a spare because that one" He pointed a hoof at the one this mare had started toward "Is used and I don't know either how much bigger they are or how much power my" Grey faltered, not wanting to explain his flight harness because he didn't want to show her what to every normal pony looked like the fastenings for a gimp suit.

The mare hesitated, looking up with incredulity at the young unicorn. "You have ... **three** megaspark batteries?" Straightening herself up and setting the probes on the floor, she asked "Do you have the whole supply of them?"

Grey nodded, explaining "I suspect, but they're going to be hard to get to. Also as I said I have a use for them and I don't know if I can just use a regular spark battery. Which are also rare, I seem to have noticed."

She had a sheepish, pleasant smile, and tried to explain "These aren't just bigger spark batteries, dear. They're a mega-spell framework surrounding a normal arcanomechanical gem, very similar to a spark battery." The only megaspells Grey knew about, were the ones that had wiped out all civilization. At his look and confusing and dawning realization, she added "They're a million times stronger. If you survived finding them, they're retrievable."

Grey thought about the rainbow goo near the one broken battery. "One definitely has been leaking."

She pursed her lips, tapping a hoof on the opposite leg. "Hmm. Very many ghouls around it, then?" *No, there wasn't enough flesh and barely enough bone to pretend to be alive anymore.*



Aloud, he replied "Just one except he didn't survive long enough to become a ghoul; just a glow in the dark skeleton with some tattered remnants of his uniform." *Of course, it might have been a mare.* The pelvic bones would have revealed, but that was the part most covered by uniform, and Grey had been reluctant to pursue idle curiosity about items that could melt your flesh.

More tapping, now she was staring at the floor, sweeping left to right as if the entire trader's staging room was a giant dial caliper. "Probably still intact, then. Would depend on some important details." Now she looked up, made eye contact with Grey again. "Well, first things first. Let's prove we have here what we think we have here." She held the probes against the battery's contact points, then glanced furtively at her gauge which hadn't moved. She smacked it with a hoof, then looked again at the battery and reversed which hoof held which probe, and tried again. The gauge pegged so hard it swung forward on her back nearly a hoof's distance and shoved her back onto all four feet on the floor.

A satisfied grin on her face as she began putting her probes back into the hanging accouterments, she called over her shoulder "Grind?"

Which was the name of the guard, it seemed. He produced from a fold in his cloth barding, what at first glance looked like a tribal ritual's headdress, with eight round shiny objects, not gems but polished somethings, four on each side held in place by a braided combination of leather strips, glowing blue bands and burlap adjustment straps. The mare explained "You'll need to re-energize it about once a day. Any unicorn can do it it's not a spell, just cast light but without the lighting part, until you feel the spell snap back at you." Humming and Hawing, she looked around, then noticed Low Sale's training ball against Stormflight's chest. "Since pets don't have pets, I'm assuming you're a Dashite."

Stormy nodded and strode forward the half step to be beside Grey. The guard laid the headdress on Stormy's face, and Grey realized the curves in the middle were to more fully go around the eye socket and balance on the nose, then bend again and lay flat across the jawline and clip together well behind his chin. The guard tapped a claw at the square polish thing at Stormy's poll, just behind the ears. "You'll need to energize it here. With it in place it will bond to the wearer right away, so if your blind friend takes it off at night you may need to recharge it in the morning even if it was last evening you

'topped it up' so to speak." His voice was light and scratchy at the same time, but not thick or hard to understand.

Grey held the tip of his horn to the square, and having been fairly well trained to summon thaumaturgical energy with no end goal in mind because that's how his flight gear worked, he 'energized' the square, which immediately got a "whoa." from Stormflight, but Grey continued for perhaps thirty seconds before he was definitively cut off from energizing it any further.

Stepped back half a step to observe, Grey saw Stormflight was holding his eye perfectly still with regard to his skull, but slowly turning his head back and forth, eventually opening "That's weird." then closing his eyes, he repeated the motion, making eye contact with each of the three entities in front of him. Low Sale was politely waiting at the back of the crowd for the ponies to finish doing pony-things before talking again.

The orange mare tapped her chin and watched Stormflight's usage of the headdress. "We don't get many Dashites. I thought they stopped allowing that, in fact."

Still sweeping the room slowly, Stormflight blurted out with his eyes still closed "Whole mess o' raiders stormed us, shot everypony's wings up, I didn't want to be blamed for their deaths so I jes' ran." Before any present could question this alternative narrative, Stormy opened eyes and looked at Grey, saying "Should work fine for her." and then started trying to unclip the chin piece. Grey levitated it off his head and under his blanket with the flight harness.

The orange mare, who hadn't introduced herself, had already thrown the battery onto her back, balanced between a couple of boxes that seemed to be tied in place. "We'll have to speak another time about the place where you got this. I'm not sure what the appropriate price would be for salvage rights there, but you'll be able to finagle it, I'm sure." The guardponygriffon nodded, and they turned and went into one of the normally locked, private stairwells with the spare battery.

Turning to Stormflight, Grey tried to say something, but just yawned. "You sleep pretty heavy, don't you?" asked Stormflight. Of course, just at that moment Low Sale had to stuff her muzzle under a wing to hide her rather loud yawn, followed by some lip-smacking as she straightened back out. Grey was very glad that long look askance was not aimed at him this time.

Grey shrugged at Stormflight and said "You can hang out here or you can come watch me try to make caps. Once we've got something to work with we can buy brunch there should be food vendors if it's like last time." When he strode off to the area open to the sky for vendors to set up kiosks, he heard and saw the pegasi striding after him.

There were no tables. Presumably the locals who sold here all the time knew that, and would bring their own, but Grey was not the only one to make such a mistake as the MEW rifle vendor just laid his wares on top of the lockable cases. Grey looked around and tried to guess where the traffic would come from, as there were several pathways from lower levels, or of course griffons could drop straight down if they saw this place. *Which was unlikely since there's an invisibility spell on the edges; can only see it if you're immediately above.*

Coming up from one stairwells that went to the farmers and 'never-do-wells' of third, was a zebra. A stallion by Grey's guess, and tagging along behind him was a young foal with faded stripes and a pastel yellowish-orange backdrop behind the blue-tinted stripes. He glanced briefly at each vendor and their fancy tables and pursed lips, and made almost a straight line for Grey Horn. Stormflight Trees seemed not to notice, or at least wasn't looking that way when he stood up and surreptitiously re-positioned himself between the oncoming stallion and his pet mare. Grey remembered the awkward discussion the last time they'd all been in this town, at a hotel of sorts where Stormy said he was raised to believe all surviving zebras would pursue pegasus mares to make unwanted foals for the resulting tax fraud it would facilitate. Grey internally sighed, and tried to look neutral, which apparently even the deliberate non-eye-contact was more inviting than any other vendor.

"Shopping on such a fine day! How much, the water, and how long your stay?" The smile seemed genuine, the attitude normal. He seemed not to notice the two local food vendors glaring at him just out of sight.

But the rhymes caught him a bit off guard. Blinking a bit, he tried to remember what water even cost here. "Twelve caps. If I set up a regular run I'll have some cooked goods involving fresh vegetables but once the water is sold I'll probably look for an industrial vendor for the turpentine and go home."

The mention of turpentine, which had a hastily scribbled note in front of the cans

labeling them as such, suddenly drew the stallions attention for a brief moment. "So many caps and I have such a small sum! Will you trade for ammo if it matches your gun?"

Even Stormy had to look over at that comment. "Ah only have a few reloads for the forty four." he tried to hiss inaudibly. Low Sale was taking cues from her owner and sitting pretty looking like no pony was around. Stormy stiffly straightened his neck and likewise stopped looking like he knew there was a customer.

The filly had heard, however. "That's all the way at the bottom, daddy!" and she jumped up and threw her front half into the zebra stallion's pack. Now it was the zebra's stallion to stand stoically and pretend no one else was around.

Amused, Grey couldn't help but inform the assistant "My revolver uses .32acp, so if you have moon clips or that caliber, I'd consider it too." From the bag came a muffled acknowledgment and shortly she was pulling mouthfuls of live ammo and standing them up next to Grey's rows of water bottles.

Grey considered the ammunition, and it's known scarcity, to what he'd heard about clean, fresh water. He arranged one small bottle next to two of his smaller pieces of ammo, and a medium sized bottle next to a two .44 and four .32s. Then six .32s next to another, and four .44s next to another, pointing them out as not really fair but neither party had smaller change to make up the difference with, which garnered a very satisfied sounding "I agree to this assessed price; dealing with you has been nice." At which point he grabbed each water bottle and tossed them into his bag except for the small one, which the small one grabbed and cracked open on the spot.

Halfway through it, she stopped and looked up at her father and commented "It doesn't taste like chewing on iron foil. It's kinda weird really."

The father took a sip and handed it back, looking a little sad about it. "That's what water is supposed to taste like honey. That's why this stuff is so expensive." Tossing her forelock he added "And why we're buying you special drinking water."

Foreign cultures seem to interest Grey, so despite the pegasi's discomfort he added, figuring it was pretty obvious the mother was a normal pony, he blurted out, trying to

check his volume so no one be sure what he'd said, "Why didn't you send the mother? Wouldn't she get less push-back?"

A wry grin and a defeated look met his question with "Father and foal should have matching stripes normally; but pony and half-breed are often refused formally."

"And you only rhyme when talking to the first three pony tribes."

It was the filly, vibrant and full of life, and also answers, who replied. "They call the guards and say he's behaving 'strangely' when he just talks. Don't worry mister he only does that up here even the other farmers don't have to figure his rhymes out."

The zebra stallion mocked surprise with eyes wide as saucers, pointing at the filly with a hoof and replying "So many words of wisdom you have! Surely for every ill your words are the salve!" Which was met on her part by giggling and a hug. The zebra rolled his eyes and waved good bye to the water vendor, who was busy trying to bite his tongue and not burst out laughing.

Once the pair was definitely out of earshot, Grey leaned over and conspiratorially whispered "Y'all know that was one of those Zebrican, right?" Grey looked over at Low Sale, who had a sort of glued on neutral expression. Whatever she felt, she wouldn't be comfortable chiming in.

So Grey looked back at the Dashite and replied in as straight laced a voice as he could manage, "No?. I didn't notice. It's not like I checked ID, but you figured he was born in Zebrica, or just recently immigrated to Equestria?"

Stormflight blinked slowly, once. "Ya know that cloud cover you keep going on about? It's there because of a certain war." Straightening back out like everything was normal again and he was just the bodyguard, he finished with "A war with zebras."

"That was a long time ago, Stormflight. Do you know that sky rats are looked down on too? Because unlike that fine gentlecolt, your kind only come down here when they want to kill something, or when they're stolen by incredibly focused magic fueled foal-napping excursions." Grey straightened, himself. With no further interest right now in his reduced inventory, he added "I had to discuss with myself whether sky rats were

worth saving, you know. The zebra mare went after me, and you had to take on the griffon who ripped out your throat and I almost didn't save you because nopony cares about sky rats."

Low Sale actually winced, lowering her head with pinned ears at 'nopony cares' even though she hadn't seemed to react so much to 'magic fueled foalnapping' Also, so far he hadn't gathered any caps so buying lunch would be hard. But just at that point one of the normally locked doors, almost behind Grey, unlocked and opened, with a brilliant purple stallion and a pastel blue unicorn mare hurrying out and locking the door. They, too, made a fairly straight line to Grey's region, having to carefully step around Low Sale to face Grey. The mare looked over at Low Sale's training ball, then up to the pegasus stallion's face but only briefly.

"Hello, welcome what can I interest you in? Water over here," Grey levitated a small bottle, then pointed a hoof at the other end of his 'stall' finishing with "turpentine over th..."

The mare interrupted with "Yes the turpentine. How much for all of it?"

He had fifteen cans, plus some glass bottles. Fourteen caps each? Counting the glass bottles two to a 'can' that would be about "Two hundred sixty caps." Which didn't have a volume discount at all, but she sounded pretty interested, too, and he hadn't marked it up over that.

She narrowed her eyes and was most of the way through saying "How about two hundred even?" Just as the purple stallion said 'Outrageous! One sixty would be too much.'

Grey decided to close the sale quickly rather than spend time haggling for an extra ten caps. Pointing at the unicorn, he said to the stallion "She already offered two hundred, so I think you've been outbid." At his disapproving scowl he looked back to the unicorn mare who was glaring while squinting. "I'll accept your offer, I guess. But if you want to buy it on the regular, you'll need to scrounge up a better supply of caps for it."

Without moving a muscle, she levitated the stallions bags open, and counted out a stack of two hundred caps, setting them in front of Grey in stacks of ten, and as they counted themselves in front of him, the cans levitated back into his bag. They apparently

didn't know the five glass bottles were turpentine too, but the stallion objected to them being in his bag. "They'll shatter from the stairs' jostling by the time I get down there." So harrumphing and dismissively waving the stallion away, she strode off levitating the bottles of turpentine herself, leaving him to jostle the cans greatly trying to keep up.

Grey waved a pleasant goodbye to the couple and waved Grey over. Counting out twenty caps into his flimsy saddlebags, he told Stormy to get himself and his change a meal somewhere. *Of course, if they're that wigged out about a friendly zebra, a talking pegasus might not go over much better.*

Grey didn't get a chance to see how it went however, as another earth pony mare, a stark, brilliant lemon yellow with pastel blue mane & tail, was making her way towards him. She wasn't striding confidently like he was the only vendor on the floor, but neither was she pretending to look at other vendor's wares either. When she was finally within speaking range if she had spoken up, of Grey she stopped. She stared ahead, to the wall to Grey's right for a few seconds and he considered calling out to her first but she turned, gulped down her fears, and took half a stride toward Grey. "Hello I was told by Brilliant Stripes than you have somehow uncontaminated our water?"

*Seems a simple enough misunderstanding. Bit of an over reaction over it, but...* "No ma'am we still have a working water talisman. Cracked and under-performing but you do what you can. Twelve caps for the medium bottles, fourteen for either of the big bottles and ten for the little ones." The big two were half again the volume of the most common bottle he was selling, and truthfully the bottle was, for him, three quarters of the cost. But to be fair the small ones were exactly half the size of his more common bottle so the inequality of price worked out. *I'll have to set up a system of buying back the empties, especially if I'm the only water seller in this desert. Wait, Stripes, the pony?* "You know the filly has a father, who also speaks Ponish."

Blushing deeply but not making eye contact, she pulled out a small hoof-towel and laid it out and began pulling vegetables and setting them down. Two very large, bright red tomatoes, eight tiny tomatoes, a sizable bundle of celery, one pepper of every color it seemed, for a total of six bell peppers plus long, skinny probably too-hot-to-eat peppers and three rutabagas, Grey was guessing. Having made an end of the finished product, she looked up and said "I have seeds, too." And then began laying out very small bags, six

in total. No idea what they were of course as he wouldn't personally know wheat from carrot at the seed stage of things.

It was a nice arrangement, and Grey was just about to agree when something occurred to him. "So you can get enough water for tomatoes but not...no, wait." And he cast his extra thin shield out, and let it sweep slowly over the towel and its contents. His shield warbled and wavered a bit, but not wildly. Even the seeds were still a little bit hazardous. Also, technically there wasn't anything that he'd held back for the return trip, and there was a third pony to consider now. So he hemm'd and rubbed his chin, considering again the size of the load, and it did include seeds, which would work very well at home as his village still had dedicated and skilled farmers. So he laid a hoof on one of the tall bottles, and said "Okay I'm going to hold back this one, and you can have the rest, for what you're showing here."

She nodded and reach again into her now very skinny, flat saddle bags, and pulled out fourteen bottle caps. "I'll take it too, please." Just as Grey was inhaling to laugh at his own favorable misfortune, the mare mistook his reluctance, and pulled a fifteenth cap out, at which point he gracefully levitated the purchase price for the last of his group's water and began levitating all the produce carefully as she stuffed every bottle of water until her bags were overflowing with containers. They bid each other good day one last time and off she went, and he looked around for the pegasi he knew as he headed off to his hopefully untouched belongings.

There were three pegasi in the bazaar, carrying packages to and fro, all with nicked ears, bald patches on their coats, but none of them were familiar to him. He had made it back to his pile of stuff – just his flight harness and seeing eye headdress, as Stormflight had the rest stuffed into his pack. Stormy and Low Sale were trotting towards him, all hooves on the ground and making a solid clip-clop sound on the stone, and the poor pet mare looking wide eyed and terrified.

"Congratulations kid, you sold out in an hour. I'm thinking we should go now." said the stallion, which was punctuated by vigorous head nodding by the mare.

*This town enforces its laws with capitol punishment only. We should get out while the getting's good.* So Grey distributed the vegetables carefully between his saddle bags, Stormflight's, and even Low Sale who had somewhere acquired her own flight dress or some-



thing, with integrated bags. *Or bags with integrated cutie mark covers.* The saddle bags had a thin cloth extension, all undyed and an off-putting off-white that reached just past the base of her tail and down the sides enough to cover her flank, with a strap that secured just below the hocks to keep it flat against her hide. "What'd you do?"

Low Sale offered a quiet, firm, fast "Not here please" still looking like dinner plates had replaced her eyes.



## Chapter 2

# Longest Journey Might Not Need Any Hoofsteps

### (That Is, If You Fly the Whole Way)

Grey was quickly stuffing everything somewhere and turning to walk out, when Desert Rose stood in the middle of their path, looking slightly upset and very unsure about standing so far away from a wally. Grey had half a mind to just keep walking as if he didn't see him, her, whatever but when she looked up at Grey the unicorn stallion swallowed and said "Have you decided on their offer, then?"

"No decision has been reached." Grey blurted out, simultaneously hoping it wouldn't make these last few steps harder. *Of course if I slap my converter closed we can all float out straight up above the fire.* Until Grey remembered most all of their guards were griffons, who could also fly.

Sounding like he wished could escalate to physical violence, Stormflight spat out "Not fer lack o' trying. Was offered every mare's trainin' ball in this and three other towns."

Grey blinked. *Those would have to first, be stolen. Pretty sure Temnyy would feel that was inappropriate, even if pegasi being soulless pets squeaks by him.* Behind him he heard Low Sale whimper, just a little bit, and the other sound was probably Stormy grinding his teeth.

Desert Rose just looked at the three of them solemnly, then nodded. "Thank you. I guess the best way forward is to keep your battery stash to yourself. That means not stopping there on your way home as some of the guards are purchasable, and they claim to be able to see the ground in great detail even a few hooves into the cloud curtain."

Grey wasn't specifically planning on stopping there anyway, but if these batteries were that important he'd have to watch his back. *Of course we repurposed our metal plating on protecting from burrowing insects instead of flying menaces.* A sensible decision at the time, but currently a little more worisome. Putting on his best game face Grey responded "I plan on returning to this and other towns regularly anyway so when the local politics settles down I can bring a few more batteries then."

The finance pony nodded, and mumbled almost inaudibly "Do be careful. Those are megaspells, even if they're not bombs." and turned and went down a stairwell.

Climbing back into the desert, and with at least a few steps between the invisibility border and their party, Grey asked about food supplies. "Th' vegetables, of course. Don't want to take too long gettin' those back."

Low Sale made a point of standing to Stormy's side and facing him, reminding him perhaps more loudly than was needed "You also bought extra supplies for me that I wasn't expecting so can take a few extra days if you want." Which garnered a long-suffering sigh from Stormy but it inspired Grey Horn, who clamped his converter over his horn, and hovered a little bit, and looked out at what around here was a trackless waste.

"Alright, fresh tomatoes that need to be canned, and the camera headdress for Pear. Then we need to go somewhere else to throw off our pursuers." Grey tried to burst off into the sky like he'd seen pegasi do in historical depictions of pre-war law enforcement employed bird horses. He wasn't sure he was actually all that fast, but he still got vertigo when the ground went from two hooves below him to three hundred in just a few seconds.

When Grey dared glancing back (*It's not like there's anything up here to run into; I could fly backwards, probably, and be okay.*) he saw both pegasi were avidly using their wings to keep up, though neither looked pressured or surprised or even intense. *But is this an all-day pace or will I burn out all of a sudden?* But it made him feel good to feel like he was hurrying.

Grey tried to keep an eye on the cloud cover, and did see three teams of armored Enclave ponies drop out of the sky, corkscrew into some seemingly random direction, and fly off thataway until they were too small to make out. None seemed to have taken notice of these three unarmored ponies who were moving quickly but staying about three hundred hooves or less above ground. There was a raiding party of four scarred, skinny earth ponies that unpacked rifles to take aim at them but Grey never heard a shot fired, and no one dropped suddenly from the ground so maybe they decided to save their ammunition.

But he'd sold all his water, even the last bottle he was going to save for the return trip and even though his legs weren't moving, the constant energy outflow from his horn was starting to make him sweat. In this wind it would make him cold too. After what he guessed to be a quarter day, maybe four hours, he called behind him that he wanted to land. Dropping half way to the ground and letting a fifth of his groundspeed drop off, he looked around for anything resembling a cave, a building, and he saw a dark spot surrounded by a depression in the sand. Pointing at it, he circled around since he hadn't understood what he was seeing until he went past it, and managed an almost normal landing by dropping down.

"A much better landing, Grey. Usually ya coast in like a hot air ballon or zeppelin with no fans." Grey wasn't sure if Stormflight meant that with a side of sarcasm, or was trying to be encouraging of dropping straight out of the sky like a thaumaturgically suspended rock. Low Sale of course had almost no experience flying with Grey and didn't want to get between her owner and his friend regardless of what the pegasus Low Sale might have thought of this. *That's another thing that would have a stock response trained into her wouldn't it?*

Walking up to the cave, for it was a natural hole not pony-made, Grey stowed the converter and levitated out his semiautomatic pistol. "Storm, Low Sale, any idea what kind of thing makes burrows like this?" If it was too big and fast, this would be too dangerous. But if it was here because the occupant woke up, then left, it might be its own form of danger in that it would collapse about the time they realized it was an empty nest.

Stormflight gave a non-verbal headshake, and Low Sale almost called herself a pony with a job, saying "I remember how to keep supply lines populated with movies supplies.

And not anything at all about supplying things on the ground with our populace."

Grey was up to the edge now, horn light at full illumination in broad daylight hoping to expose something about what they were about to go into. Stormy gave the mare's words some consideration and said "Y'know if quarrey eels live here.."

"In this soft sand? Not their style is it?" Of course Grey didn't actually know that much about the giant eels but it seemed not their sort of place. This weren't ants either, as they pushed out debris from their tunnel, leading to a stylistic mound around each opening. Stepping now into the slop enough to see some of the dark edges, he cast his thin shield, showing almost no radiation messing with the color of his magic. "It's wet though. You smell that fetid air?"

Low Sale by this point was almost hyperventilating, and leaning on Stormy's left shoulder, staring hard into the darkness. Stormflight finally noticed, and asked "Are ya claustrophobic? Cain't stand small enclosed places?"

She finally broke eye contact from the darkness to look at Stormy, and tried to unclench her jaw so she could answer. "It's the dark, actually. I've never seen any place that's as dark as the ground at night, and that looks a lot darker." One last look into the gaping maw in the earth and she looked pleadingly back to her permissions giver.

Stormflight seemed unsure how to handle it, so Grey suggested "She doesn't have a weapon anyway. How do you feel about leaving here out here? She can run in and find us if a flock of catbirds descend from heaven guns blazing."

Stormflight looked briefly at the cloud cover and said to the mare "If ya'll could stay outta sight of the sky? That'd be enough for me." Which got an enthusiastic nodding reply. When the trio was far enough into the shadows that she wouldn't stand out too much, and by that point was not visible directly above anyway, Low Sale stopped and waited with her tail to the earth and her left shoulder firmly holding the compressed soil up. Trio a pair, the boys continued down.

The sand was rapidly giving way to a hard clay, and the portion under their hooves was damp and slippery, though not enough to put them at risk of failing to run away. *Still, Grey kept his wings in extended form in case he needed to fly quickly. That will lose me this pistol, of course.* Stormy had his revolver in his mouth already, and Grey considered

adjusting his illumination spell. At full power, the likelihood something could sneak up was dependant on how fast it was, and where it came from since his illumination didn't let him see below ground or around corners, but critters could easily detect him by his light, so unnatural to this place. *So unnatural that even just enough light to not trip over a rock will get us noticed long before we see them get up and run for us.* So he left his light at full illumination.

The tunnel turned left, and the clay dried out. It curved back around to the right, so far that it was going to the right from their original descent they were more than a right angle to the right from their first flight down. The path slowly flattened, which was good as the moisture was back. Grey had never had the opportunity to experience a large clump of decaying vegetation, so he didn't quite understand the smell that now was so thick it was a feel that added itself to the hot, humid wetness he was swimming through. *Good choice to find water, but what trouble comes with it?*

Another left turn, and their hooves were sinking in now. Stormflight opted to hover instead of walk, and as the roof was high enough to not risk a clipped wingbeat, he didn't begrudge him that. But Grey was a unicorn, and valued his magic defenses before his newfound flight. Still, they walked on slowly until a sudden shimmering light flashed in front of them. Terrified for that instance, Grey dropped his light. In the darkness nothing shone, and there were no sounds, and no further flashes.

Bringing his horn light up more slowly, he now saw it was a reflection. He couldn't quite make out why the reflection from his light was so sparkly and refracted until Stormflight said "Lake."

Well, you wanted water. Looking left and right, and seeing no side tunnels, and no prints in the watery mud, he strode forward cautiously to the edge. Casting his detection shield he found it was ... not clean water, but better than most sources out here. Maybe we should try digging a well back home. Still untrusting of his fortune, Grey put his pistol away and fished out two empty canteens, consumed on the way in.

He filled them, and tasted it. Brackish, greasy, something was in this water that he should teach himself to filter out, if he came back here often. Fishing through his pack for any empty, watertight containers, he grabbed some random bottles he'd forgotten he had, and filled those too.

Just as he'd sealed them and was fitting them back into his pack, two orbs popped up out of the middle of the lake. Grey hadn't considered how huge this body of water was, but the green orbs were fifteen hooves apart, and at least fifty hooves away, maybe sixty. And a nictating membrane sluiced across the orbs at that moment.

Something erupted from the water, blocking out all sight of the lake with its amorphous, undulating mass that suddenly left Grey deaf as Stormy's revolver went off. As the bullet tore through the ... flesh, the whole of the creature, nearly a third the size of the lake, rolled back and exposed a bulbous tummy now nearly reaching to the ceiling.

Six more orbs, smaller distances from each pair, erupted from the surface and blinked at him from the very back of the lake.

Grey took the split second to stow his pistol as he slapped the converter down. In his haste not to mention the sudden, absolute darkness, he rocketed to the ceiling and bashed himself against the cave wall, his horn converter and all embedded in the mud. Disoriented he fell, the converter staying in place but yanking on his neck, which caused enough pain he couldn't concentrate until after his hooves sank into the mud, the waves from the fallen monster soaking his hind halfway up his ribcage. Just as he managed a more controlled burst to pull his legs free *And thankfully not of my sides, just the mud* he would later opine about that moment in the story, The glowing toad from the farthest left and back leapt in one jump to a distance maybe fifteen hooves away, surely within sticky tongue range, the lake's water splashed almost far enough knock the pair out of the air again.

But grey was airborne and he started by backing up, then neatly slid around to face back up the way they'd come. Don't hit the wall again his bruised back and sprained withers plead of him and he promised back. The glow was rapidly diminishing as the toad wasn't following, and there wouldn't be any more light until after he'd navigated a few important, but invisible turns.

Making a bit of a wild guess about his speed and the distances, he slid to his left and banked hard, sticking his hooves into the air. It was too soon, and he had started to fall and roll back down but still all four hooves landed painfully on the wall, a cascade of sand pelting his right side, a few grains landing in his eye. *How sharp was that corner?* Grey



tried to think through terror both of being eaten like a defenseless fly and of causing his own burial through flight from the former terror.

The tunnel wasn't exactly straight, as the flight rod, which stuck out the most of any part of him, four times started to drag on the wall, threatening to slam Grey into something. But after what seemed the most interminable six or seven seconds he'd ever remembered, he realized he could see the wall ahead. *Last turn, daylight visible from there!* Grey unconsciously sped up, increasing his chances as an inexperienced flier, to misjudge the last turn. But again, he banked and dropped his right shoulder, this time landing squarely in the muddy walls with all four hooves. This part of the tunnel was secure, and there were no threats of a collapse.

Coming up this direction, it seemed to Grey that Low Sale had slid down further into the tunnel, and now she was facing into the darkness, watching for their return. Having no idea where Stormflight was but trusting he would be able to stay aloft, at least, he shouted to the mare "Get going we're not staying here" And hoped she wouldn't feel obligated to stay and wait for her owner. Later, Grey would remember that had Stormflight died, Low Sale would be an incoherent mess, desperate to climb into the hole for her one ticket to some kind of salvation – finding the training ball and somepony to give it to, or death's release from the former unicorn's terrible magic. That she simply lifted herself and followed close but in Grey's blind spot behind him should have told him something about their flight out of the depths.

Letting his terror at the unthinkable take visceral form, he poured himself into flight. Still only a hundred hooves above the ground and his landmarks to find his home not visible yet, he was going as fast as he ever had, and the wind made his scratched eye hurt something fierce. Blinking against it but not slowing down, he finally let himself look back, to see if Stormflight made it out with him.

Revolver in his mouth, nose less than one hoof behind him, was Stormflight the pegasus, sweat still dripping off his face, whites of his eyes still showing. Low Sale was working hard to keep up, and in the distance I didn't mean for that to take them, but I'll take the blessing in disguise anyway. were four darkly feathered griffons dropping, doing their corkscrew turns that natural fliers took for granted, and disappearing down the tunnel.

Hoping to lose them when they realized nothing but water and amphibians were down there and came bursting out at the same speed he'd used, Grey made a sudden right turn, and dropped next to a sand ridge, hoping to stay out of sight. The existing wind had suspended grains of sand this high, and while it wasn't normally blowing too hard Grey's own speed meant he was slamming into a veritable sandstorm and it freaked him out all the more.

When the ridge ended he eased up a little, so the sand wasn't blowing in his face or pelting his hide anymore, and he thought about places to hide. Even at these speeds the crevasse was an hour's flight away, and few buildings or ground features were common until they crossed to Grey's side of the underground fire-river. Could they keep this speed up that long? Grey pointed at the ground in general, and started slowing down. As he did so, he realized how much his horn hurt. Looking to his right, there was a low ridge, more of a natural sand dune that ran their way but wouldn't cover them unless they were walking. *Fine by me, I think.* Making eye contact with the other travellers he pointed at the low spot in the desert, and aimed for it.

Landing, he first checked for things that would kill him, and found none, so he ripped the converter off his horn dropped to his belly, panting. Stormy fished out one of the bottles and held it away from himself a bit. "I ain't normally given to drinkin' bath-water." Grey saw him lower the water bottle a bit to look at Grey and add "Y'all know some toads are poisonous, right?"

When Grey had caught his breath, he turned his head to look at the pegasus stallion. "You'd taste it though, right? Those poisons were designed to make them taste unpalatable. So if you can't taste anything, it won't hurt you." Grey could see poor Low Sale was dripping now, with sweat. She'd need a fair portion of the precious water just to keep her from getting sick, and then if they camped outside tonight she'd get shivery in the desert cold. Laying his head back down on his forelegs he advised "Stormy give your pet some of that water she hasn't had to fly for her life like that in forever."

With his eyes closed he didn't see her open, or take a sip, but he heard when she asked "This ... was worth risking your life for?"

He stood back up, and turned around, explaining, *probably to both of them come to think of it* "The talisman makes purer water but it's limited. With you coming home too

it'll be twenty eight, thirty ounces a day at most per pony." *But have we expended more than we collected with this foals venture?* Making eye contact with the pet, and then with her owner, Grey continued "And some day it will break, and wells and oases will be our only source. Best to get used to it now."

*Speaking of things to get used to* An armored pegasus, alone, was descending rapidly, and Grey was going to call out a warning, but Stormflight had already seen it, and was prepared to meet the princesses, given his stature of slitted eyes, a turned head, and no weapons drawn. The black menace made a loud thump, spreading sand everywhere, as it hit. Low Sale was wide eyed with surprise but not fear or shock, and Grey felt confident neither of his pistols would penetrate that pre-war armor. Standing upright now, the lone soldier looked between the two winged ponies, and ripped his helmet off and was about to hover a few hooves up to point accusitorially at Stormflight Trees when he looked over his shoulder, at the low dune keeping him from sight of the toad's cave, and landed again, dropping his helmet to point at Stormflight, anger and betrayal wrinkling his nose.

It was Stormflight who spoke first. "Cloud Drop, right? Clouded Bolt's nephew?" Cloud Drop's mouth was frozen, teeth bared for a biting retort. During the angry pause, Stormy sullenly introduced the no-longer-pony standing a few hooves to his right, saying "This is Low Sale, you'd have seen her come and go by now."

Cloud Drop closed his mouth long enough to look at her, who was standing innocently motionless and silent, watching the new comer with idle curiosity and nothing more than that visible in her body language. Cloud Drop was about to open up on Stormflight, front right ready to point vehemently again, when he did a doubletake and stared again at Low Sale, who still didn't respond. Now fear governed Cloud Drop's face, and he took a few steps back.

Grey Horn mentally grunted, and piped up quickly and a little angrily saying "If you're thinking she's infected, she's not. The 'infected' is just one pony, and that pony isn't here though he's injured Low Sale irrevocably, yes." Cloud Drop didn't look at Grey, just ping-pong'd back and forth between the pegasi a few times.

Twisting his head sideways in confusion, Clouded Drop snaked his head out and sort of shouted in a whisper at Stormflight "You were reported dead. What, pray tell happed

mere days after your wedding night would cause you CLAIM you were dead and refuse to come back? No Enclave armor or weapons you're trundling around on the ground with the dregs of equinity so you can have a quick fling with the supply agent who had a dangerously close call with the infected that start calling themselves the dalea downs, though thank the princesses she's alright"

Stormy raised an eyebrow, didn't say anything more. Low Sale managed to overcome her programming long enough to assert "I'm not alright." but maintained her look of idle curiosity.

Grey again tried to explain. "Not down-hairs or an undercoat. His name before the bombs dropped was Diamond Spark Point. The name he gives the Enclave is the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ. But the caveponies knew of a time he tore apart a self-righteous clan of unicorns. He told them his title was the Quisatz Haderach, the ultimate unicorn pony." Grey sat down, and eyes closed, reviewed the few tales he'd heard. It wasn't much more than he'd said aloud, but some of the unicorns, it was said, tried to talk the unkillable unicorn down, using his pre-war name having known him then. "The stories didn't say what they meant when they called him unkillable, but now that I've met him I've put it together." Opening his eyes he looked to the interloper, who still wasn't looking at the pony that was speaking but at his uncle's squadmate.

Cloud Drop finally spoke, steam nearly coming from his ears by the look on his face and the set of his ears. "I still don't know that I shouldn't report you as infected. What is this thing even talking about?"

Stormflight took a breath, and said "This pony saved my life when there was no more room in the clouds for me."

"You declared yourself a Dashite?"

"Nah" Stormy replied calmly. "Just dead. There weren't no wedding. I jus' weren't on the pill since I didn't have no marefriends." Here Stormflight indicated Grey with a forehoof, and added "This here is Grey Horn, and I've met his sister Pear Rump. Fine folk, just strained for resources like we are up there."

Finally Cloud Drop made eye contact with Grey, and through gritted teeth asked "You're the CO here? Somehow you're in charge of two educated, healthy pegasus ponies?"

Grey twisted his ears in greeting, offered the newcomer a smile. "Just lived down here longer. Teaches me things like, that you didn't come here from above that cloud curtain of yours just to find a corpse and berate him for breathing. How can we help you today, fine sir?"

But instead of offering any reply to that, he looked angrily, though now somewhat spent from his tirade a moment ago, at Low Sale, spitting out "What's your angle? What am I to make of you travelling with an undeclared Dashite who supposedly already died?"

Here she did lose her cool, Low Sale's ears trembling, her eyes darting around for something safe to look at. "I was forced to the ground by the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ. He was going to cut my legs off and bind my wings before tossing me off the curtain's hole." Finally finding something safe to look at, on the inside of her eyelids, she was almost hyperventilating when she finished with "I should have made him actually do it."

"Some sort of soul magic. Not like anything I've read about, but I'll freely admit my knowledge of the war itself is lacking." Grey had pieced together now how the unkillable once-unicorn kept switching bodies, but he wasn't sure if that explained directly, how that pony damaged other ponies like Low Sale. Looking up at Cloud Drop's combined disgust and confusion, Grey pointed at Stormy, saying "Her soul was torn out and stuffed into a memory orb with some pain inducing spells. Whoever has that shard of her soul can order her around."

With a lackadaisical pinning of his ears, Stormy added "...Or kill her."

Cloud Drop was back to ping-ponging, and Grey still didn't know what he was actually here for. "So, that's what life down here is like. What's up with you? Pardon me for not wanting to stay here too long I'm a little worried about a certain band of griffons that might survive the trap we accidentally set for them."

Stormflight quickly scanned the skies, all around and Low Sale retreated into her idle curiosity face. Cloud Drop had to, again, look Grey in the eye and it took several attempts at working his jaw before he could speak to the unicorn. "Yes, about that. Intelligence collected says they're planning some sort of move against the clouds. I won't get into our history with them but what do you believe they were after? You said that cave was a trap; what evidence to you have that it wasn't simply a drop transfer of goods?"

Stormflight actually chuckled, and seated himself, asking the younger soldier "Do y'all believe I'd turn on mah home so quick?" But after looking again at Cloud Drop he asked "You mean the Bladed Wing gang? Ah thought we decimated 'em right proper the last time they raided our homes."

Cloud Drop begrudgingly nodded imperceptibly, answering the elder stallion with "Yes and what's left has changed their name to the Claw Gang. They've teamed up with some political uncertainty down here hoping to steal materiel during the coming breakup but we don't know much more because we can't find the town."

Here Low Sale gasped, then realizing she'd drawn attention to herself looked at the sand between everpony's hooves. Stormy was caught a bit off guard by her reaction and was busy watching her when Grey explained "There's a strong invisibility spell, and the town goes straight down into the ground. Also," He stood up and turned sideways to show the Enclave soldier the battery, attached to his flight straps. "Do you know anything about this type of battery? They're apparently valuable."

Cloud Drop looked intently at the battery for a few seconds, then shook his head. "No. Large spark battery, that's all I see."

Straightening and sitting down again he explained to the soldier, who couldn't possibly much more than a year older than himself, "I've been told this is actually a megaspell framework with a spark battery shoved into it. Only a hundred made pre-war, the Muhavé Gōn Dolæ burned through fifty probably building that weird tower town, and they're all scrambling for the chance to find my stash."

"Too bad they couldn't offer to get my cutie mark back, I mighta let 'em have it to actually have a wedding with Noon Treetops."

Cloud Drop looked long and hard at Stormflight Trees, before suggesting "They might make you choose between staying dead, and aborting the foal."

Stormy let his eyes roam across the cloud curtain before nodding. Taking a steady-breath he looked down at Drop's hooves, and replied "Ah guess Ah already made that choice, didn't I?"

With Drop's eyes still aimed at Stormy's nose, his own nose pointed now at Grey and he asked "So what was actually in that cave?"

Low Sale started shaking, and had to squirm a bit to stay quiet, although she did mutter "A lot of dark."

Grey levitated out one of the bottles, explaining "Drinkable water." Which only got a raised eyebrow from Drop until he added "And mutated frogs that could eat you as soon as blink. If we're all lucky, the Claw Gang has been decimated yet again. Though that won't keep Temnyy's opposition in his town from vying for some way to oust him and his weird non-laws ways."

Cloud Drop had his answers, and was putting his helmet back on. "I have no idea how you'll manage Stormflight Trees. I hope you can at least die with honor instead of simply starving in a forgotten hole."

"Tell Noon Treetops I miss her." A tear actually fell from Stormy's face as he added "If you get a chance?"

"You know I can't promise that." And so saying, the Enclave and his black armor shot into the sky, straight up at first and slowly spiraling out as he climbed, a circle easily a hundred hooves across as he disappeared scant seconds after his hooves last touched the solid earth.

Grey had already slapped his converter back into place and was hovering. "Well." After levitating the bottle, it felt weird to not have magic available. But every flight he took made the process of being a pseudo pegasus a little more natural. He rotated around to face the direction of their town. *My town; theirs too unless they wanted to move out. We aren't at all like their home.* "I suggest we get going, if we've rested enough?"

Low Sale looked to her owner, who was unfurling his wings, so at a somewhat more sustainable pace, they proceeded. Grey took a few brief looks back, but didn't see the griffons following them. That could mean a few things, and he daren't assume anything good of it.

But not only were there no sign of the griffons the rest of the way, there were no further life threatening situations at all, now that the whole party could fly above the venus flytrap's spitting range which seemed to be capped about ninety hooves above them. *Quite the spitting plant, actually.* But in addition to taking a minute or so to re-fill whatever propellant was in use, not all plants even noticed them. *Generally rely on hooffalls, I suspect. No hooves on the ground, no reason to think they can spread right now.*





## Chapter 3

# Return of the Blind Sniper

Getting into town with yet another pony could prove difficult, of course. Since there was a newcomer Grey argued they should land outside the gate, and walk in. Stormy thought that sounded a bit excessive, claiming landing inside by the guards should prove adequate. Low Sale thought she didn't count as a new pony, but accepted that no pony that saw her would understand she was missing most of her soul.

As it turned out, she was welcomed despite being yet another mare, and several who said hello assumed she was the long lost marefriend that got Stormflight kicked out. "Soon t' have flyin' foals abound, neigh?" And Stormy didn't take the time to give a fuller explanation beyond "Oh! No, this isn't her, here. They've met but no, different pony, different problem."

Nogg exploded out of Grey Horn's house while the trio were some distance away, and more or less glommed onto the two bucks, hugging Grey's neck and Stormy's. "Welcome back! Everything's been going fine here, more or less. Vine Weeds is off having tea with her friends so she doesn't have to come up with an explanation about Pear's eyesight that might damage her protected worldview." *Sounds about par for the course, yes.* Grey thought to himself. He was worried things were going to get awkward when he asked the new pony, but had forgotten Nuage had grown up around 'pet' pegasi. "And hello to you, what... oh. Yes hello. I'm Nuage Cadeau. Uhm." Nogg looked at the bucks' chest and found Stormflight had the training ball. "I'm sure you'll be comfortable here, miss. Your owner knows all about winged creatures so it will work out fine."

Stormflight was staring glumly ahead, and Low Sale was blinking politely at the enthusiastic winged colt. A certain item in Grey's pack weighed heavily on him just now, and he just said "Where's Pear now?"

Still not wearing any head covering, tapping her hooves lightly on the walls as she went, she was standing in the doorway now, nose facing off into space as it was an incline to get from the walkway to their house but she was looking a cheerful and serious as she always did, orange coat still in full winter fluff. "I'm here Grey! Sounds like everybody made it back? Who's the new pony?"

This time she did pipe up, seeing the problem with Pear's lack of certain facial features. It still wasn't clear if the coat was going to grow back where the skin had melted away and been regrown from magical potion. "My name is Low Sale, I guess" She glanced at Stormflight, who was still staring glumly ahead but gave no contradictions about her new name. "And I'm not a pony I'm Stormflight's pet pegasz." Perhaps realizing there were two pegasus ponies that lived in this household, Low Sale choked up on what kind of a pet she was.

But ever the situationally aware one, Nuage turned and rushed back up to Pear, and while he wasn't whispering, because Grey could make out the words, he did lower his voice when he said "You remember how Temnyy Kogot doesn't like the Enclave? Well, miss Low Sale used to be Enclave and now she's ... not." At a quereluous look from Pear, he added "You'll figure it out; just don't expect to have a conversation with her."

And with that enigmatic statement out of the way, Grey trudged up the ramp and pointed inside with his nose, and Nogg retreated. Within whispering distance of his sister, he said to her "I think we can start to fix this, but let's go to the main room inside." She wouldn't budge without a hug first though.

She walked slowly, tapping hooves against the walls when she expected to be near a wall, and with her nose down at countertop height when she wasn't. Grey slid the table to the farthest corner, and instructed Pear to sit down. He levitated all the pieces of the headdress out, and carefully arranged them on Pear's head, and buckled everything in place. Then with a deep breath, and a decision not to tell Pear what to expect in case he'd broken it during his long flight back, he energized the blue wires.

"Oh!" was her first response. After what to Grey was an agonizing breath later, she looked at him and said "You're not yellow anymore." Then she stood up and whipped her head around to find Nogg, but stumbled a bit, breathing heavily for a second before opening "Okay, no quick movements I guess." Looking again, and finding Nuage Cadeau sitting at the edge opposite Grey, and then suggested "Something like colors are coming through. Your mane was purple, right?"

Somehow the blankflank had a nostalgic look on his face as he replied, not actually look at anything in the room and almost singing. "Tail is purple, mane is green. Eyes the bluest you've ever seen. Coat of yellow's gold, but never soiled or sold." But as soon as he said it he realized his state of reverie and snapped out of it, looking hopefully to Pear for confirmation.

"They taught you colors by nursery rhyme?" Pear had a big grin on her face for the poetry recital, but was also looking around the room, and found Low Sale and was cautiously walking over to give her a onceover.

Nogg helpfully continued his poetry, explaining "Somepony's grandmother on third, wrote us poems to remember what color we were. It was a lot of years ago, I'm sorry I don't remember her name. Or many of the others, but, hmm." His eyes darted in directions contradictory to his ears as he searched his memories. "Bunker Door was an earth pony colt, just a little younger than me."

"Eyes red like a burning coal  
 coat cornflower blue and slick and sharp  
 mane black as the deepest hole  
 tail and forelock shiny silver like the strings of a harp."

Thinking that sounded vaguely like the unicorn trader he'd met, it certainly impressed Grey that some old mare would take the time to write poems for the foals of mistrusted parentage, and that it would be one of the things this particular colt would carry with him all the days of his life. Meanwhile Pear just nodded, saying "That's a pony I wouldn't mistake for a different pony, even using this contraption." But she was saying straight to Low Sale, who was starting to look nervous over and above her mandatory disinterested

disconnectedness. That discomfort wasn't helped when Pear pointed a forehoof at her and said "You know, you look exactly like the ponies that came in with you. What color is your coat, by the way?"

Low Sale swallowed, and looked around for assistance. She just pointed a hoof at Stormflight, saying "you'll want to ask my owner any technical questions."

Pear responded with by blowing her nose on her fetlock, but also backed off a few steps and looked at Stormflight Trees, asking "What color is her coat, then?"

Again looking defiant, angry, ready to spit out rivets like his displeasure of the process alone could build a wall against Temnyy's incursions into Low Sale's mind, he uttered through gritted teeth "Rust red coat and electric blue mane. Matches her eyes."

Low Sale blinked perhaps three times, looking over at Stormy before turning to Pear and nodding vigorously. Nogg was glancing back and forth between pet and owner, and piped up with a carefully intoned "You know she'll believe you if you tell her that, right?"

Stormflight finally exhaled his anger and let his face fall. Holding his muzzle in his left fetlock, eyes closed, he dejectedly responded "Ah know. Nogg could you kindly help Pear sort out those funky colors? What do you see when you look at my dejected, nameless pet?"

Nuage soundlessly flapped and straightened his wings several times as he reoriented his position to stand and examine the 'pet' and her odd color scheme. "Her mane is red. Hmm, that's I guess a pastel? But it's a deep dark red. And there are several strips of brilliant fire-red, and then a stripe of plain red, and then near her withers it's a sort of orange-red." Stopping to look at Pear, he declared the pegasus mare "Overall her mane is the color of a late sunset. And her coat, you remember the sky when you were above the clouds that trip? Well, her coat is exactly that shade of blue." Here he looked back at the pegasus mare, who was staring peacefully back, perhaps hoping to get her name back with her coat colors being declared by an actual pony. "And her eyes! That's the orange of an early sunset. Or a late sunrise, I guess. Her tail ... is red but."

Pear had taken a few steps to the side to see the tail and mane at the same time, and suggested "No stripes." Which got Nogg's agreement for. "I can see it's probably the same colors, just no specific stripes like the mane has." Pointing again at the damaged pegasus,

Pear asked "Does that mesh with your understanding of your tail's color pattern? Same as the mane but without specific stripes?"

Using a very small voice, Low Sale responded with "Yes, miss Pear."

Face still in his hooves, Stormy muttered "Ah'm sorry miss. Ah didn't mean nothing against you."

Which was accepted by Low Sale with a perfunctory "Sir." and nothing more.

Pear backed off, and sat down the middle of the room. Grey got up and in front of her so he wouldn't startle her as he gripped her in a bear hug. Setting himself back a bit, Pear had a lopsided grin. "Hopefully you didn't sell your soul to get this."

Grey immediately shot back "No! No, it was her soul." He reached a hoof around him to point at Low Sale. "That was her job but she's just a skyrat so it's okay." Now that she could see again, her forehoof strike against the middle of his chest struck true, and knocked the wind out of him so his laughter was cut short, giving him the wherewithall to hear Stormy's sudden caughing fit. But it was worth it, even the bruise he'd have for a few days.

"Beggin' yer pardon ma'am" Stormflight recovered his voice before Grey did, having not been punched by an APC, as the pegasus had called her once. "Ah don't rightly know what we did to get that trinket." Looking over at the supposedly soulless mare, Stormflight added "Or her."

*That one's easy.* "One of those two batteries for the tribal headdress, and because you're a grown donkey pegasus colt who chose to live down here, you get one of the hollowed out playthings to make it worthwhile." While Stormflight offered mostly a confused look, and Low Sale only needed to blink a few times to present an especially vacuous look, Grey felt pretty confident that if either of them knew him half *okay, three quarters* as well as his sister, one or both of them would have come over and punched him too. Although he was pretty much right. "Don't you remember Temnyy saying he liked making subjects uncomfortable? That was you, more than her."

"He liked making me feel uncomfortable, too." Came a meek, quiet reply from the mare who was still not focusing her eyes on anypony present. *Now, was that an in-kind joke and I can laugh it off, or should I start sobbing? Too late.*

Reseating himself so he was facing the pet pegasus directly, Grey asked "how soon before I can try to convince you that you still have a soul? Or, at least enough of it to be a proper pony."

Stormflight, tailbones against the wall, looked over hopefully at the finance and supply-chain professional. She had shut her eyes tight, lowered her nose a little and in a confused loop where her defense mechanisms didn't know whether to make her hyperventilate, sob uncontrollably, or just sit there wincing in pain. *Well, not yet then.*

Stormy looked over at the siblings and asked "Do ya suppose it would help, or hurt, if I gave her to y'all?" Which did get Low Sale to open her eyes and look at the three of them. She was weighing, not terrified, not scheming. Just weighing her thoughts.

"There's no pony else in this house?" She asked the siblings, following it with "Can I please ... talk to my owner alone?"

*This could be **short** or **long**. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt then.* Turning to Pear Rump he stood up and asked "How concisely can you see? Let's grab your rifle and a few rounds, go kill a few ghouls."

Pear raised an eyebrow, but looking at the pegasi couple for input, and getting none, she looked back at him and said "Five minutes. I'll meet you at the gate, then." And strode off to her bedroom. Grey put on a too-large smile and considered his remaining audience, who looked approximately like he'd have guessed a young pair of foals would look if they came home from partying to find their parents dead because they'd left the door unlocked when they left and so maybe the couple were responsible. These two, sitting against the wall next to the front door looked that serious. Having no idea what he could say even just avoiding making it worse somehow, he just offered the wall between them a half-bow like the ponies in that weird tower town did, and he walked outside, and started realigning his wings for flight.

It wasn't a long wait. Somewhere during the trip away, Pear had recieved a silken head cover that went over and around her ears, then covered her eyes, and tastefully draped across her jaw. The seeing eye headdress was tied over that and while the result was a little like a spider's head glued onto a pony it didn't look that weird on second glance. *Not in full sunlight anyway.*

Given that she would have had to take the headdress off, and have Nogg resecure it later, Grey was worried she would be blind until a unicorn re-energized the blue energy wires, but she was navigating steps and curbs without difficulty. He even saw her greet a neighbor who stepped out of the way and hesitantly waved at the odd apparition passing by.

She was, of course, wearing her 14mm breach loading antimateriel cannon, and by the apparent weight in the saddle bag on the opposite side had thrown in a number of rounds for it. *Of course; she's been missing this.* A grin spread across Grey's face as the guards opened the gate for the two of them to exit. The struck off to the east this time, away from the Republic of Dave as it had at least once been named.

The highway of crushed cars was this way, where they'd run into a glowing one zebra stallion not that long ago. An odd encounter, but regular feral ghouls were around, and of course radscorpions though they tended to live a bit farther to the north, on the flatter spots. *I wonder what **they** eat?*

They headed uphill, to the highest spot within an hour's walk. From here four raiders playing cat and mouse with a radscorpion could be seen, and closer to them was a unicorn ghoull standing nose to tail with that glowing zebra. They hadn't deigned to notice the raiders, or for that matter that they were enemies, and would have blamed each other for their current state, if they had enough life to understand how much they'd lost, or who was standing around them.

Pear's cannon just relied on iron sights, but she had brought a small spotting scope and was trying to figure out how to look through it. "My eyes aren't where my eyes are, are they?"

Grey looked at he sliding the scope and and down, trying to line up with whichever sensor could see the kind of image that was coming out of the business end of the scope. "No sis. I think the left and the right sides are the same, so you have binocular vision when you need it." Then it occurred to him Stormflight had looked through it, but he hadn't since there wasn't another unicorn to energize it for him. "How wide is your field of view? Can you see me standing her when you look at the ghouls?"

She set the scope on its tripod in no particular orientation, which meant it was facing off into the invisible wastes across the sand plains just now, and she lowered her

nose to focus on the two ghouls, immediately wrinkling her nose and saying "He's not really glowing that brightly in mid day, is he? Hurts to even look at him." Grey curiously turned his gaze directly at the zebra stallion and blinked. *Visible, and visibly glowing. But not painfully so, and not even unspeakably so.* While Grey considered his own eyesight, Pear added "I can see the wound to his shoulder I gave him though. Looks like a dark spot to me."

Grey couldn't see that from where he stood, but thinking the angle might be preventing that he walked around behind, then up next to Pear on her right. Still seeing no dark spot on the ghoul, he said as much, which just got a angled pursed lip expression from his sister, when then without moving her head said "Yes I can see you. But only your nose." She turned to him, gauged his position, and looked back to the ghouls. "Hundred ninety degrees, maybe two hundred. Not bad, but now that you've pointed it out I'll never stop seeing the black edges."

The filly it had been made for, was born blind; would never had known there was something missing. But she'd gained something too, since she could see the radiation directly now, not just when it dissipated back into heat and visible light. Looking up at the untextured cloud curtain, he asked Pear "What about the clouds? Can you see through them?"

She looked up, and around. With the cloth covering her eyes, some of her shocked expression was muted, but the ears gave her away before she said "Yes!" Then, squinting as if that could help, "No." Sitting now, she sat and considered a particular place in the sky, about thirty degrees down from above them, and north by northwest of them. "It's opaque. Like muddy water, so I can't make out individual ponies, but I can see buildings, and things moving. Energy, they have lights and other things energized and I can see door open and close but just at the edges."

Thinking about how many times Stormy had said to stop talking about the clouds and their hidden denizens, Grey laid a hoof on his sister's shoulder. "Best not to tell Stormy. He'll get nervous. Even if he doesn't tear up your headdress any still viable Enclave would want it destroyed. Secrecy above all other security measures."

Which got a raspberry sound from Pear's tongue by response before she went back to finding out that it was the lowest sensor on the rounded ramp of her nose that was



the best at seeing visible light, but the very highest, near her ears that gave the crispest focus. "I can't see their barding, hardly. But the rest of them stands out against the sand pretty clearly." After a moment of examining the four raider, who were three now plus a dead radscorpion she added "and one is eating their fallen comrade and another is humping the scorpion's corpse."

She quickly loaded up and tried figuring out how to aim. "I could almost" she turned her head to forcefully point at Grey at this point "ALMOST" before going back to figuring out her gun's sights with eight eyes. "have been able to forgive them if they did it the right way. Pony humping pony, eat the raw radscorpion so you can at least die of a belly full, albeit of poisoned meat."

She unlatched her cannon from the battle saddle and reattached it four inches farther forward, putting the iron sights some distance from all her new eyes. "But this? That?" And the gun roared.

In its new configuration the battle saddle wasn't properly absorbing the recoil, so what wasn't transferred to the wielder caused the barrel to jump to the right, nearly smacking Grey in the neck. Grey scrambled back to Pear's left as she cycled the action, loading what by its markings was an incendiary. He thought about pointing that out, or at least asking if she knew what she was loading, but she was very familiar with the ammunition types and would have now, asked Grey about it if she had hesitations or didn't fully know what she'd brought with her.

Looking out over the plains, he saw the pony humping the radscorpion was in two separate pieces now. The remaining two were whooping and hollering as they took off at a dead run towards the siblings. They seemed to have skinny battle rifles, which wouldn't reach this far for another minute of running. In that interim...

## **BOOM**

The noise was scarcely less pronounced for having Pear's not inconsiderable bulk between Grey and the combustion chamber. The incendiary round ignited before actually hitting, a testament to its age as most rounds didn't do that. But for the last thirty hooves before impact, a brilliant red line pointed out the point of impact, smack dab into the middle of the trailing raider who exploded into fiery incandescence and was silenced.

The rain of burning blood and singed hide landing on his former companion slowed him not at all, nor dissuaded his forward progress. The third round a solid steel wad-cutter slug, did. "Three for three, not bad eh bro?"

Grey was still deaf and while he saw she had said something, couldn't even hear the ringing in his ears yet. At his lack of congratulatory whooping, she looked over and poked him with a hoof, and waved that hoof in the general direction of the gore and disused guns. Grey looked out and nodded appreciatively. "Three shots, three kills!" he shouted, wondering if it was out loud because he couldn't hear it. "Guess you still got it!"

Laughing and giggling Pear grabbed Grey in a hug, gave him a noogie and then wrestled him to the ground so she could bury her nose in his thin mane, and laughing still, he could tell because of the way her ribcage was shaking, she laid flat more or less across Grey's shoulder and side. It made breathing a bit hard because she was kinda heavy, and so was the gun. But he couldn't wipe the grin off his own face, so he just hugged her back, and pretended to be napping for the minute or so before she got up, and he could mostly hear by then anyway.

It was at that time that a voice said not far behind them "You're going to have company soon."

As soon as Grey jumped and looked he realized he knew the voice. Nuage Cadeau had followed them out at some point, and was sitting a discreet distance away. Pear had a giant cannon barrel to consider so hadn't whipped around so much as curled and twisted her back and neck, almost putting her chin on top of her flank before straightening again. "Oh, it's you. Hi."

About that time he parsed what Nogg had said, and he looked skyward, following the colt's gaze. From straight above, and dropping more or less straight down, were five skyrats. Only the outer four were armored, though. The middle one seemed to be wearing a uniform, and some bright flashy pieces of bling, or tech Grey couldn't tell at this distance. But no actual armor, and his tan coat and pale, kahki mane and tail, not to mention given the angle the fact it was a stallion, were all visible.

All five landed with a soft thud, spraying the siblings with sand. The guards, or so Grey assumed them to be, stood rock still with energy weapon battle saddles pointed

approximately in their direction. All the barrels were lowered, just a bit so if they fired without moving they'd miss – and to hit anypony they'd need to rear up, or hover about ten hooves straight up. Grey took a millisecond to remind himself they probably already knew all of that.

The tan stallion took a small step forward and made eye contact with Grey Horn, greeting him with "I'm Colonel Leaf Runner of the Grand Pegasus Enclave." A hoof was waved, encompassing perhaps Nogg, perhaps the town behind them, or perhaps the whole of the wasteland. "And my intelligence reports indicate you're trading in megaspell frameworks. I need to buy them before the Steel Rangers learn you've found them."

Grey had a moment to think *Aren't the Enclave and the Rangers working for the same ideals? For the princesses and for Equestria?* before he spoke up with "Not an empty framework, sir. They're batteries." Turning sideways he showed off the battery attached to his wings, though the colonel seemed more concerned with the construction of his flight harness. Grey was about to launch into a defensive explanation that it really wasn't as S&M get-up when the stallion's eyes slid quickly to Pear's headdress, which garnered a squint and a grimace. In that amount of time Grey had parsed that a pony who had lived in the clouds all his life and probably never seen a tree up close let alone one with leaves, and didn't stop himself before he asked aloud "They have trees up there? Or is that considered an exotic and mystical name?"

His back of the hoof insult served to regain Leaf Runner's attention, who casually responded "It's just a name kid, we all have something that sounds stupid." He didn't sound mad nor was he giving a command, but his voice was as hard as steel. Grey's vilage had no soldiers, so the volume alone, let alone the unyielding syllables struck Grey forcefully. But just before the colonel continued, Grey Horn considered that even though his horn was as yellow as his coat, he was called gray, though he'd been told he had the esoteric spelling because his father liked the one small nod to pretense in this blasted wasteland.

"We'd like to open trade relations with the sky!" this from the over-eager, never-supressed colt behind him. *Well, yes Temnyy did steal him to train him as an amabassador to the clouds. Not sure he's ready for primetime but thie Enclave is standing on the ground, right here in front of us.*

Now the colonel's gaze looked a bit confused, as he tried to parse a winged colt that represented **the ground**, of all places. The colonel swallowed nervously, took a moment to recenter himself as revealed by the twirling twitch his ears went through, and then he barked out "What's your name, son?"

With a grin and a distracted flapping of wings, Nogg just blurted out Nogg, so while Pear was covering her lips with a fetlock to hide her chuckle, Grey piped up with a more complete introduction of "May I introduce Nuage Cadeau, or in Ponish 'Clouds Gift' who, yes was stolen by Temnyy Kogot but it was because he wanted to see an end to the battle between the ground and the sky."

Nogg looked over at Grey, a little confused then stepped forward until he was beside Grey, and waved a greeting and tried again. "Yep! The ultimate goal of course is for the earth ponies to grow food and sell it to the pegasi in exchange for your weather control, but small steps are how we get there!" He was hovering now, eyes unfocused as he read off a mental note surely written by his mentor. "Mutual trust and respect that allow for yearly increases in shared expectations, eventually resulting in trips by all parties to their neighbor's realms allowing for healing of the pony lands starting with their hearts."

The colonel's eyes were as pale as his coat, but they were green, implying a washed out gemstone or the reflection of grass in the spray of a water fall. They were pointed solely on Grey now. "Temnyy?"

Grey nodded, saying "My understanding is you've had dealings with him that you've known about, in addition to whatever hoof he had in getting the bandit troop to your security breach that happened a few days ago." That netted a tic, but no other reaction. The guards, as they had since they landed, hadn't even twitched an ear.

"He's not here, don't worry." Even the font of optimism Nogg seemed to hope that would convince and allay all fears.

The colonel, who had been nervous long enough to have sweat dripping down from his ears now, looked over at Nogg but didn't seem to be making actual eye contact. Loudly, he called out "Color!" which caused the guard nearest Leaf Runner's right flank to look at his colonel, then down at the colt.

Sighing, the guard, who apparently was named Color, took his helmet off and revealed the color of his coat to be nearly white, though it either had black tips or he was

in dire need of a bath. His eyes were ruby red, too bright even to call them blood red. He set his helmet on his side, held it in place with that wing, and walked up to Nuage Cadeau.

The guard lowered his head, his nose within a hoof's width from Nogg's nose, who happily held the guard's gaze. After a moment of Nogg's tiny grin, and the guard's grim look of determination, the guard straightened, and turned to his colonel. "Normal, sir. It's just a pony."

"You have magic." That, from Pear. "I could see it sort of evaporate from your nose."

The guard looked over, and was about to answer when he realized what he was looking at, and started, his wings up and ready to leave, his helmet rolling around on the sand. After a breath, the guard's white's weren't showing around the reds, and through drooping eyelids and a wry slant to his pursed lips he said to Grey's sister "He got himself another blind consort?"

Nogg had dashed forward to pick up the helmet and was hovering just above anybody's need for eye contact with anypony on the ground, and was shaking the sand out as he said distractedly "It's not like she was born blind. Happed a week ago is all."

Pear was blushing deeply and also grinding her teeth. Grey tried to cut off any word wars lest they lead to laser wars, for which he felt particularly unprepared for. "Actually the favor was to me, also having to do with this batteries. But the former unicorn and my sister only met once, and they didn't exactly hit it off too well." *Partly because he was a mare just then, looking for his killers. Partly because she was strangle any stallion that spoke to her of foal-making.*

The guard graciously accepted his helmet back from Nogg, who positively beamed as he drifted back to his prior standing spot and lowered himself to the ground again.

The colonel had regained his composure, and seemed to have made up his mind. "Knowing the infected is just one pony, and that pony is content to stay on the ground, could be a great talking point." Looking briefly at Nogg, he looked back at Pear, then again at Grey. "It will be longer than in my lifetime before we let any of you" He was clearly about to spit out an epithet like misborn, or earthbound, or something but skipped it, again his ears revealing he had changed course mid stream. "visit our realms, or let

the civvies down here." Pointing a hoof at Nogg, the colonel finished his speech aimed at the youngest member of the crowd. "But food for drinkable rain, steel for mouthguns, I think there's room for that."

The guard, Color, had put his helmet back on and was back in formation. Looking his soldiers over briefly, Leaf Runner said "We'll find you again in a week, maybe less. Have at least one battery, and we'll discuss what concessions can be made." Here he pointed a hoof straight at Nogg, saying to Grey "With him. Not the infected."

Both Grey and Nuage nodded agreement, and the five Enclave soldiers were airborne, sand everywhere and wind gusts blinding the earth bound except for Pear, whose eye sockets were covered and whose vision sensors were not sensitive to the application of sand.

Realizing how big of a step forward this was, for everypony everywhere, Grey whirled on Nuage and stuck a hoof out, shouting "Congratulations! You're officially an ambassador to the clouds, Nogg!" And with his biggest smile yet Nuage shook Grey's hoof, but that was interrupted by a hug from Grey's sister.