

Lunchtime disturbances

Class I portal caster! Unicorn fugitive and she's getting away doggonit!"

That, from about twenty hooves above the floor. A stern looking mare was flapping her wings madly and shouting. The response from two stallions was immediate and surprising considering how little sense they made in this crowded restaurant. The pegasus stallion on the far end threw his free cider into somepony's face and proceeded to kick some unicorn's ribcage in. Sharp Wit didn't see if it was a mare or a stallion as his attention was drawn to a periwinkle unicorn, gender also currently unclear, casting some absolutely nasty spells at a scrawny pegasus who was probably homeless considering how poor his coat looked and how many ribs showed through it anyway.

The singer who'd brought so many from so far away, a mare named Meadowlark, seemed to expect this. She dove into the crowd belly first, like it was a planned moshpit event. Grinning and shouting encouragements to dissuade panic as the pegasus mare high above drew a sword from Sharp Wit knew not where so help him princess or jarl alike. Sharp Wit saw her glance at the flying mare. The earth pony was, he realized, gauging where the mad pegasus was looking.

From far away, over the incredible din, came a shout of a male voice, probably gryphon by the scratchiness. "Emerald, dear heart RUN child!" Sharp Wit could not see the speaker, but he could see two female equines in the middle wade in, seemingly on the side of the singer.

Another scrawny homeless pegasus was shooting a magically enchanted crossbow at the mad mare. The bolts struck, and flashed brightly but the mare seemed to take no notice. She was staring intently at each table, her eyes actually glowing which is odd since magic is not readily available to the pegasus tribe

In the middle a red and white unicorn of strong muscle, and stronger bone, began casting fireballs at the pegasus/unicorn brawl towards the patio exit. Of all things, the jennet next to her, a nondescript gray and no horn to show for this, was casting ponykinesis as if she were a great unicorn mage. Levitating tables out of the way of combats and fleeing ponies alike. She seemed to be hesitating greatly about choosing sides, but she was reducing collateral damage with her magic.

The singer, Meadowlark, started kicking the periwinkle unicorn now, having reaching him. Sharp wit was surprised it was a 'him' as he was so slim of frame and refined of face he had somehow assumed it was probably a mare but the only mad mare was the flying one. Plus the three homeless pegasi who had somehow produced small crossbows that did nothing to the mad pegasus who even now was swooping down upon a particular table just after the donkey set it back on the ground.

Her hooves hit the table, her suit flashed with terrible magic that made him wince to see it, and then the table fell to splinters. The mare swung her sword quickly, repeatedly, madly even. At nothing. Sharp Wit could see nothing there.

The homeless pegasus count was up to nine, now. Quickly recounted, and reexamined, Sharp Wit

was certain. They were all pegasi, with coats that spoke of malnutrition, and no clothing among them, and many were armed but seemed unfamiliar with fighting, though their eyes shone brightly with anger and determination. They would see the grave this day, or they would see victory. No other choices could be fit into those eyes.

The mad pegasus who had started this, shouted in dismay, a wordless grunt that caused every pony who had come just for Meadowlarks singing, and a good bowl of chowder, to cringe under their seat. Two of the homeless ponies near the door jumped upright, and after whipping their heads quickly to see the floor as if no pony was in their way, they whipped their wings to become aloft. One of them shouted; a stallion. "Clear! She's clear! FLY, FALL COMPLETE!"

Every homeless pegasus dropped their weapons at this strange statement, and took a moment, even to allow the three enemies to strike deeply at them, to bunch up their haunches. Then as a single unit, they launched themselves mightily into the air.

The ceiling of Tastes of a Broad Winged Owlbear stood no chance. Shattered wood began to fall, and Sharp Wit dug straight down. The wood floor did not slow his claws; indeed he could dig through solid rock though the split second he had before the whole of the restaurant collapsed on him would not be enough, quite, to burrow through before something hit him. But this was a refined port city of pony kind, and the soft clay was barely harder than the wood already gone. Sharp Wit grabbed the two nearby equines, who happened to be the bright red fireballing unicorn, and her companion the donkey, and he drug them forcibly into his foxhole.

He could see, through the rubble, that the homeless ponies had formed a spiraling formation, and were glowing with magic of he knew not what origin. His many years of travel, and of academia among the refined races had never revealed pegasus to be natural magic users. Their magic here, though, had reached a crescendo and while the angry mare, and her stallion companion who could also fly had tried to follow, the bright flash indicated, it seemed, the departure of the homeless ponies, their migration completed in as mysterious a fashion as it began.

Thus began the grand adventure in which a lowly, albeit well educated and moderately well off diamond dog assisted somewhat in saving the great land known as Equestria. He had reduced the bruising of two equines. That was about it.

Adventure ho, pony!

Lifting his bounty of mareflesh back onto the ground, he thought it proper to introduce himself. "Many apologies. Is ponies unhurt? I am Sharp Wit, a diamond dog."

The unicorn shimmy shook the dust loose, and offered a quick hug to Sharp Wit. "Not sure if that was better or worse, actually. But your heart was in the right place. Unlike that roof. They should plan these things!" And with that rushed off to begin levitating the debris off of the bystanders.

The donkey sniffed, and lightly brushed her coat flat where Sharp Wit's hooflong claws had disturbed it. "Would never have figured you for a diamond dog. I'm a donkey. If you'll excuse me." And likewise, began levitating the debris ... in her case, the two-hoof-square segments that had once been support beams and now were temporary tombs for certain lunch guests.

The singer, Meadowlark, was looking frantically around. Not finding the something, she closed her eyes, and breathed deeply once. Eyes open and face calm, she brushed some debris aside, but mostly was just making her way across the treacherous surface.

The guard were already here. Four unicorns, two earth ponies, and three pegasi. The lead seemed to be a pegasus stallion with only one wing. The mad mare, now less mad that she was defeated and also covered in dust and wood splinters, glowered at the guard. "She was here. What kind of job are you doing that she could be in the same town as you? Or have you so soon."

"Yes that happens. Portal caster, remember? I don't have your fancy equipment I'm just town guard now. Look you guys have made a mess and I'm going to file a report."

By this time the mad pegasus stallion had flown the periwinkle unicorn fop, that the three of them could stare down the one winged stallion who was, Sharp Wit now realized, of a respectable age. The mare spoke again. "You know the deal on paperwork. I can't stay to fix this so it's your problem. Make it look normal or you'll be an earth pony." And so saying, the three of them trotted smartly off through what had never been engineered to be a door but functioned as one now. When two of the other, younger guards sought to slow the mad ponies' departure, the lead stallion waved them away with a hoof but without looking. Sadly, he examined the destruction, and signaled to the unicorns, who began arcanelly rebuilding the structure. The pegasi were instructed otherwise, and so they flew above the establishment, to hover back to back, watching for wrongdoers. The earth pony guards and the sergeant entered the establishment, what was left of it, and began assisting ponies, gryphons, and other patrons of the establishment to their feet.

"Earthquake. Completely unrelated to the singing just a bad coincidence. I think this is the only building damaged. Nope didn't see anything odd. Two pegasus guards up there, right? They would have seen magical pegasi. No pegasi just left when the building collapsed I'm sure everything's fine it's just, you know they can fly and boy howdy can that come in handy during an earth quake. Not a sky quake, you know?"

The guards were spending as much time easing fears by spreading lies as they were helping ponies up. But those whose eyes bespoke an understanding of the treachery, simply looked away and said nothing. Once the building was cleared, Sharp Wit found himself standing with the two equines he had saved, and the singer, and the proprietor of the Owlbear.

"You finished your singing so of course I'll pay you in full. Once the insurance money comes in, I mean. I hope you can understand." This, from a gryphon of some age. Sharp Wit wasn't convinced but thought it was the male who shouted into the din that a certain Emerald should run.

The singer, Meadowlark, thought so too. "You've met Emerald Lightning, haven't you?" The elderly gryphon nervously jerked his head up, and glanced around to see who might be listening.

A hooved gryphon trotted up, and answered for his boss. "Yeah but don't say anything. I know who it is but never met the ..." He hesitantly made eye contact with the very fearful looking gryphon. Shrugging, he continued. "I know the boss here raised a pony that was, shall we say

lost in the woods? That's been a number of years, and they don't see each other much anymore. There's an unconfirmed rumor that his adopted daughter died traveling through the Everfree Forest. Oh hi officer."

The last, was far too early for the one winged stallion, now in the company of an almost bumbling unicorn wearing a similar badge, were approaching from around the nearly reconstructed restaurant. "Sorry about that of course but you should examine your structure for code compliance, old bird. I say this every year, don't I?" Turning to the rest of the assembled crowd the one winged pony said "Hello I'm sergeant Strong Pinion of the Stableside guard. I hope you're all unhurt? If so you're free to go we have what information we need. Simple structural failure."

The mare and jennet were somewhat appalled. "Do you not wish to hear our eye witness accounts, officer?" from the jennet, and "Crazy stuff! Not an earthquake it was magic wielding pegasus ponies with crossbows and everything except fire. I tried setting them on fire but it didn't work."

The unicorn guard seemed unsurprised at this revelation, and officer Pinion simply raised an eyebrow, then his remaining good wing. "Young lady if pegasi were magical, I would still be flying. No, it's clear the roof was already collapsing when certain of the clientele left by feather."

Sharp Wit noticed the singer's face was as hard as a rock as she clenched her jaw to hold in her words. The proprietor simply wrung his claws together, a motion Sharp Wit understood natively having fingers and claws himself, and the gryphon asked "Your team will fix my roof, then? I can reopen in the morning?"

Pinion nodded, and proceeded to say his goodbyes. The unicorn guard waved him on. "I have the other matter with these two. Doesn't look related to oranges, this roof thing. But thanks for bringing me I needed to talk to them."

Shrugging, the pegasus left, and his airborne contingent landed to follow him off the scene in a stately saunter. The unicorn guard remaining introduced himself, to the singer first, of course "Hey I'm detective Turnover nice to meetcha miss. Hang on just a second I probably should get your autograph or something, right?" then to the brilliant red and white unicorn mare he asked "You didn't see anybody you recognize in there, did you? The orange thieves, friends of poor miss Windy?"

The jennet answered instead. "What will become of dragon Shane? This is all so confusing, Turnover. I don't know if we should tell you what, if anything, we did see. You seem to so little to *want* our input."

Sharp Wit could stand it no further. He was a dog of integrity, and this whole affair, since the singer's offer of cider to what would become an enraged pegasus stallion, had smacked of intrigue, and even a little evil. "There were homeless pegasi detective. They teleported in during a fight, and tore the roof off when they left in a bright flash of light. Why do you tell good ponies what is not true about the earth quaking? I am a digger among ponies, I know the earth. Ask the earth pony singer Meadowlark, who knows the ground as all farming ponies would know. There

was no quake I was digging to avoid the roof.”

A sad, wan smile crept over the detective’s face. ”Yes, I know it must seem like that. So, since some of you I know, and the rest I’ll guess about, let me tell you an utmost secret that can’t leave this little enclave. The celestial government itself is fighting some sort of terrorism in this town and the ruffled feathers, literal feathers in this case, need to think they’re being ignored. So I’m told. So, earthquake. That’s the official answer, alright? And as to the, hmm, homeless did you say? An interesting word, to be sure. These two have fought them personally.” He indicated the donkey and unicorn. Turning to them he answered the jennet’s question. ”Shane is a bit of a complication. We’re not sure if he’s of age actually dragons being so uncommon. But he was obstructing justice with threats of violence just the same. He’s to be on a train in a few days, when there is one, to Canterlot. I guess the princess herself will question him and decide his fate. As for, well, I guess you didn’t ask but Windy will be on the same train, maximum security poor thing. All that ever happened is she was accused of poisoning some guards to avoid taking her flight school final and no one before now found her. So she’s wanted on a long string of things that nobody’s been able to question her about but it’ll be execution most likely, if she’s found guilty of half that stuff.”

The jenny just blinked, but the mare looked genuinely confused. ”She wasn’t dangerous. I could take her.”

”Well, and you did, young lady. Speaking of ladies, ma’am is there any way I could get you to sign this for my niece? She’s a big fan after all.” Turnover held out a blank sheet on his notepad, and a pencil, to the singer.

Whose jaw was still tightly clenched. It took her a few tries to work her jaw loose enough to take the proffered pencil and sign a ’thanks for being my number one fan! Meadowlark and the Songbirds’ on the sheet. As the pencil levitated out of her mouth she glowered at the detective. ”So, this Windy is to be executed in three days?”

Turnover’s eyes went as wide as saucers for just a brief moment. Regaining his composure he explained ”No, the train *arrives* here in three days. And as you might be aware we’re sorta on the fringes of the nation so it’s about two days, probably, to Canterlot. There she’ll be tried, miss, not executed. Even if it were a total kangaroo mockup there are forms to follow and paperwork to file. Nothing could be decided any earlier than six days from now. Honestly if you show up at their prison a couple weeks from now I fear she’ll be forgotten and rotting so you could visit her then if you liked. Maybe hold a benefit concert to buy her better food than what I bet they’ll be serving, all the pegasi guards being so sensitive about flight school dropouts for some unfathomable reason.”

Meadowlark nodded, and answered ”Six days. Thank you officer.” Turning to the proprietor, who was still wringing his claws, the earth pony mare wrapped him in a big hug, and said ”And if I learn anything of your adoptive daughter, I’ll do what I can for her. I promise.”

At which display, the detective bowed to the assembled crowd before offering them a good day. The aging gryphon quietly thanked Meadowlark, adding ”You know, perhaps, why I had to cut all ties with her. Why she must remain dead to me.” Sharp Wit could hear, however, a hopeful

longing as well as a painful dread underlying his words.

Meadowlark nodded, and whispered so quietly Sharp Wit's incredible ears barely picked it up. "She explained the dangers, yes. But she got out okay, and I know enough to start this path."

The two former diners were about to dismiss themselves when Sharp Wit disrupted their thinking by speaking aloud "Path! Pony follows a path? May I help ponies?"

The donkey spoke up at that, asking Meadowlark "You're going to take down the thieves? Not sure, actually, what this has to do with my traveling companion's family business but if those indeed were the orange thieves you should know you're in the company of a family member deeply affected by their predations."

The unicorn spoke up quickly "No my cousin is deeply affected I'm just deeply related. Didn't actually know which town down here they lived it just sorta ran into him." Giggling, she added "Literally."

Sharp Wit watched the earth pony mare shift from front hoof, to the other front hoof, and with a troubled look, said "if you ladies would like to come with me, I would be grateful. I actually don't even know where to begin."

"What a coincidence neither do we! Hi I'm Flarestar who're you?" to which the jennet quickly poked her traveling companion hard enough to force the stouter mare to lean a bit before straightening. To Sharp Wit's eye she didn't seem to care.

"And I am Seiko, graduate of the Evisican school of magic. Pleased to meet you miss Meadowlark despite the strange circumstances."

The hippogryph, and gryphon proprietor made their exit, to re-enter their establishment. And the group sauntered toward the library. Sharp Wit discovered the two mages had entered town with a young dragon who had grown up alone but after meeting with Seiko had tended to travel together for the next year or so. That there had been a discussion of unknown import between a homeless orange thief and the Shane the dragon. As a result the dragon had tried to insist that thief was acting against her own will despite a lack of evidence for it, although there was evidence that another, more battle hardened thief had tried to murder the captured thief. "No evidence" had been his goodbye to her.

Sharp Wit saw many emotions flit across Meadowlark's face, and heard her not react to any statement. It confused him, this earth pony. But when the group reached the library, she spoke up finally. "The government pegasus mare. She said they were escapees. But you all saw them; they weren't prisoners. What did they escape? I'm going to start by reading about the schooling of young pegasi. Maybe the clue is in what they threaten each other with during flight school. Foals are so cruel."

"I like fire. Seiko does the library have books on fire?"

To which the jennet responded to her friend in a tone so flat even Sharp Wit, with his many years traveling amongst the ponies did not know if the donkey spoke in jest or in honesty, "None of their books are on fire right now, Flarestar. I daresay they'd probably prefer to keep that ratio,

too.”

Nevertheless those two traveled to one section of the library, to read about the history of this town. Sharp Wit tried very hard to ask how he could assist Meadowlark. He considered it a rare and great honor to be somehow 'adventuring' with a famous performer even if he was not entirely sure what the group was trying to save.

But in the end he proceeded to the newspaper archives, and read about Stableside's history. He asked a clerk if she remembered articles about crime waves, and was fortunate that she gave approximate dates for five crime waves that had swept the town in her lifetime. One was alchemical reagents that college undergrads would mine from the nearby jungle, and a tribe of fierce zebra warriors, not inclined to trade in the pony way, and would instead steal the valuable components for their own potion-making. Celestia herself spent a day, Sharp Wit read in one crumbling paper from more than forty years ago, teaching select members of the town guard, how to speak the Zebra tongue.

It had been a difficult road, and was still mentioned in papers more than a year later, but the tribe had agreed to trade in the pony way, but only with certain approved representatives from the town's warrior class, otherwise known as the town guard. When one of the guards was killed on duty and a 'backup' member had to speak to the tribe, the zebras had chosen to pack up and leave, finding death ill omen for their potions.

Much more recently there had been a gem thief who had wintered nearly six months, stealing millions of bits worth of valuables before leaving, but again he read that the green earth pony stallion had made a crucial mistake in dealing with his fences, and been killed for his insolence and found by the guard in the morning in a small town not far from Canterlot.

As much as was stolen, they were solved eventually. Even when the things stolen were never returned, where they went was now known. But three waves had never been solved – they just stopped happening. First for apples, stolen for six months from two family farms far to the north of Stableside. Then carrots two years ago. The guard was mentioned as pursuing the thieves, as if they had leads, then no further mention of the guards, their leads, or the thieving was ever mentioned. And recently, in much the same fashion, whole trainloads of oranges began disappearing. This time, said certain less reputable sources, no magic was used, as the guard's detective Rocks Turned was a specialist in detecting fading enchantments and he had told reporters there was no sign of magic found.

Just as Sharp Wit realized Rocks Turned must be the bumbling detective Turnover, Meadowlark startled the diamond dog by jumping into the aisle next to him, and shouting "I've got it!"

Sharp Wit pulled his muzzle out of the newsprint long enough to glance around and verify that despite the possible vaguity of the energetic unicorn's words, no books had been set on fire. Those two equines were now making their way to where the singer was excitedly glancing about for an audience. "What has the singer pony discovered, Meadowlark?"

She was only too happy to unload her findings on the tall canine. "Flight school itself! The biggest insult, curse, whatever, is to say a pegasus foal won't pass their final exam, because of

how crucial it is to their racial identity to prove they can fly a basic exam. But some ponies, you know how school is, they fail that day and all their friends spit on them and tell them they're not ponies anymore and then the Cloudsdale guard come and escort them away to the town of failures where no one will write to them because that's for ponies to do, not failures."

"Sharp Wit has not finished college." But in truth he was not sure that was the same. Their society didn't have anything like 'high school' because many diamond dogs were not employed in fields that required a great deal of education anyway.

"Do you really think failing a final exam is enough to cause a pony to become a criminal? Although come to that, if I were to fail one of my exams I would probably burn the college down out of a need for cosmic retribution."

Flarestar turned to her hornless magefriend. "If you failed an exam, it's because it was about cooking or something. Or they just decided you drew the short straw and should stop screwing with their curve so much."

Meadowlark nodded. "Yes, but a few refuse to go to this veritable penal colony. When they run, it's considered a very grave crime, and in fact in order to stay free the escapee usually has to do something that will get him or her marked as an enemy of the state, even though all they want is to live somewhere where they're not spat on for missing one particular, if particularly important, test." Meadowlark sat down, and began waving her forehooves wildly. "We might not be able to change Cloudsdale law or culture, but if we can find this colony, get them to write letters to home, or heck even just to random earth ponies who'll be pen-pals with a poor forgotten soul then we'll be well on our way to reducing this crime spree. I hope."

Flarestar looked confused at the earth pony. "I forgot a soul once. I think I set it on fire accidentally."

"It was a ." whisper-shouted Seiko.

"Yes, I set a rabbit soul on fire and now I feel bad." Though Sharp Wit noted her expression did not actually change from its state of wistful confusion.

"You do things like that. Also, I saw Shane set rabbits on fire so he could eat them. Is that meaningfully different from what you did on accident?"

"Uuhmm." Flarestar stared off into the distance, tapping her chin rapidly. "Hmmm."

"Anyway," continued Seiko. "how will us communicating with contained and complacent exiles reduce the financial burden on my not enough times removed companion's family business?"

"Because." Meadowlark hesitated. "Well, you heard Sharp Wit here, call those ponies today 'homeless pegasi'. They haven't eaten anything in forever because they're afraid of being caught and sentenced to death. But if they can write letters, or even read letters from others who've failed their test too, then maybe they'll give up. Right?" She held a hopeful look of enthusiasm for her plan.

"No I guess it's not meaningfully different. So Shane should feel bad, too."

Seiko was studiously examining the ceiling, Sharp Wit would have to say Meadowlark looked crestfallen to have her denouement taken so soundly away by insanity, and for himself ... he had to remind himself that facehoofing with hoof-long claws could be dangerous. *Use the palm of the hand, not the cutting hooves themselves.* It looked so effortless when ponies did it. Diamond dogs, he would later conclude, should probably not make political or even satirical statements by the fingered equivalent of facehoofing.

”What?!?” Flarestar noticed, at least, that her assertion was not well received. ”Setting fire to rabbits that aren’t dead yet is disrespectful; that’s all I’m saying. Anyway we can’t go to Cloudsdale because I only know spells to melt their clouds and bring ponies down here but I tried that once and got into a lot of trouble.”

Sharp Wit raised his paw for attention, and interjected ”I can enchant simple items. Not permanent but still good. Ponies can walk on clouds.” But after lowering his hands he realized that would only be half the problem the team would face. ”Still need ponies with wings to carry us to cloud, though. Or pay cloudbuilder to make stairway.”

Seiko sounded unimpressed. ”At which point we all climb, probably single file, the stairway to heaven. Will we have the coin to add a railing at least, or will missteps lead to a three thousand hoof fall?” Sharp Wit only shrugged.

Flarestar turned to her shorter companion, a concerned look on her face. ”Seiko do you remember that great big rabbit we’ve been traveling with for the past few days?” When the donkey turned to look flatly at the taller unicorn, Flarestar continued ”I think she. Wait. Okay well she’s more than a rabbit, right? I mean.” Clearly flustered by whatever idea was flitting through her fire enhanced brain, she sighed and asked ”Well I suppose rabbits can’t fly, can they?”

Seiko’s answer was simply to raise one eyebrow. After a very long, pregnant pause in which the effusive red and white unicorn’s hopes and dreams were clearly reaching critical pressure levels and the donkey’s patience reaching new levels of weight-loss, Seiko gave in, and asked in all seriousness (although Sharp Wit had to admit at this point having never heard her speak in less than all seriousness) ”My dear Flarestar, have you ever seen evidence that Sugar Plum the Flemish giant can fly?”

Flarestar’s breathing quickened, and the diamond dog watched her eyes flit from meeting one of Seiko’s eyes, to the other, and back again in an accelerating rate.

”Flarestar,” began Seiko again. ”Can Sugar Plum fly well enough to carry even one of us at a time into Cloudsdale? I’d like to reiterate, it is roughly three thousand hooves up, and I believe we all, individually, outweigh her by roughly a factor of five with the exception of the biped who is probably ten times her weight.” Still, the unicorn did not speak, though eventually one eyebrow fell so that it resembled in ways Seiko’s look from a moment before, but this was more defeated than incredulous.

”So.” interjected the singer. Sharp Wit was truly beginning to respect the practicality of this earth pony. Insane mages were arguing about the soul of a rabbit who could fly, and she was calmly

talking about something. Sharp Wit deciding he should catch the rest of it, too. "...Some friends that are pegasi. We can get into the town but I don't exactly know what we're really looking for. I mean, they're so down on these failures they wouldn't keep them somewhere in the city."

Seiko tilted her head, and turned to face her new friends that way. It felt odd to Sharp Wit, but ponies had a habit of surprising him with their ways, even after all these years. "I am willing to assist you on your journeys and studies. But I request that you first assist me in mine." Her head straightening, she explained "There is a rumor, and a myth, and even a little documentation that the old city used to be plagued by zombies."

At which point the unicorn began running around the entire group, her earlier distress having a viable outlet now. "Yes you said that it sounded just like that creepy book Pony Cemetery where you can bury ponies but they don't stay there so you have to kill them again and bury them somewhere else but sometimes in the process the recently deceased kill someone else and the town forgets why its important and the bury the new pony in the same local cemetery but they come back and have to be killed because they're already dead That story is why I want to be cremated so I don't kill anypony if I come back as a zombie Because bone salts and ash remains aren't really very dangerous although they're not very sanitary either When my grandmother left us she sat in the closet for a couple months then the can was knocked out of the box and we all spent two or three days sweeping up gramma and tossing her out the back She was such a neatfreak in life I bet she felt awful being such a messy gal after she left."

Seiko had levitated the running unicorn at some point, and was holding Flarestar aloft, legs cantering happily despite the fact she wasn't going anywhere except the few hooflengths until she was floating next to Seiko, who did not look at her as she set Flarestar down and promised "If you come back as a zombie, Flarestar, I will remind you of your oath to your friends, and at that point you can cremate yourself."

Flarestar gasped in joy, and wrapped her forelegs around the slender donkey almost in tears. "Thank you Seiko you're the greatest!" then stood back, and asked "When's lunch?"

This time Seiko did smack her hoof loudly into her forehead.

"Uhm, I think you had a salad? At the place that fell apart after I finished singing." explained Meadowlark.

"Pony unicorn only doesn't remember because damage was from earthquake not fire. It didn't burn down but was still much flatter when your meal was done." Sharp Wit hoped he could assist this poor addled pony's brain but by Seiko's reactions it was sort of an ongoing problem with her.

"And then the guard un-burned it down before anything caught fire. Honestly I feel cheated."

Seiko, recovered now, said flatly. "Your fireballs spells are cheating in battle."

Flarestar nodded vigorously. "That's what magic is good for, really. Cheating."

Sharp Wit wasn't sure he was ready for this particular adventure. It didn't help when she repeated her much early question to the reference staffpony about books on fire, although to her incredible credit, the library mare didn't bat an eye nor did she respond snarkily. "We have

history books about *particular* fires, but if you're wanting books about firespells I'm afraid that's not something we've acquired, mostly because the nearby college's library has a great many spell books and books on theories and applications, including I'm sure, firespells though I can't name any particular unicorns with a destiny in fire magic, like yourself."

Flarestar looked crestfallen, but Sharp Wit heard her thank the librarian anyway, and she wandered off, Seiko calling after her "Meet at the oranges? We must have our supplies to go caving." To which the unicorn nodded vigorously. Turning back to the remaining two, Seiko resumed her explanation. "I'm honestly not sure what to make of the tales, but as my enthusiastic friend says, there is a cave with some sort of artifact that, according to some of the oldest tales here, raised an army of zombies just to wipe out the old town, then was never seen from again."

Sharp Wit was in favor of travel, and learning, but was not sure he wanted to be in favor of challenging things that could take down whole towns with a single claw. "Why would donkey go looking for such big trouble? This diamond dog is not in favor of disrupting the dead."

As Meadowlark looked expectantly at Seiko, a smile crept over the jennet's face. "Because there is power to be learned, and shared in defeating monsters. I am still made fun of for being a magic inclined donkey, but I feel I have proven it can be done. No, this is not for sheer power, but for learning. I would know everything, and I hope to make Equestria and its neighbors a better place for the use of my knowledge." Sharp Wit would have described the look in the jennet's face as 'wistful' but it could have been nostalgic (though she didn't look to be much past the age of majority) or perhaps even bittersweet. Sharp Wit tried to imagine what it would be like if he knew he could wield magic but his pack told him that diamond dogs did not do magic.

"You don't talk to your family anymore, do you donkey Seiko?" Sharp Wit saw the donkey blink away several tears as she processed the question.

"Because you are able to wield magic? I know of some earth pony families that are superstitious about such things. In fact the whole city of Ponyville disallows the use of magic for a couple of their yearly festivals like Winter Wrap Up." Meadowlark looked both confused and sad as she tried to verbally comfort the donkey.

Seiko shook her head, and this time used a fetlock to wipe away the tears. "Because I studied magic. It did not come naturally. It never has. But I mastered it, and my family disowned me not because I mastered it, but because I tried." She looked blankly out the door where the large muscular unicorn had just left. "Flarestar and Shane have been my family for some time, now. Perhaps I should take note of how insane they both are, in their way. They are a constant mirror for me; a reminder that I am an equine, and must live the life with constant reminders that equines have limits.

"My aunt Hoende writes to me, and I to her. She says she crosses out the parts of my letters where I talk about my silly magic, and then make my letters available to the rest of my family, who I am told usually choose not to read them." Blinking her expression back to its normal, blank self, with perhaps a tone of enthusiasm added, she looked around, and waved her nose in a 'follow me' motion as she walked back to the shelf she had just been in. "But enough about me. Let me show you the passage that bids me follow."

Digging out a very dog-eared (Sharp Wit acknowledged the phrase, even though the dogs of his personal acquaintance had perfectly formed ears, and also maintained their things with as much structural integrity as could be maintained while living underground in burrows of one's own making) book titled "Lejandes of olde" which, Seiko explained, was written with a unicorn's levitation, and bound by methods common among earth ponies of the era – roughly a hundred years prior.

Using levitation to flip through the crumbling pages very carefully, she explained "Most of these are tripe, and I've since read books published as recently as twenty years ago talking about how certain of these legends have been disproven. But one remains, and I think it intrigues me enough to warrant further examination." Finding the page in question, she quoted:

Where the beloved dead get angry

Doth have one lonesome yard, where our lost were lain to their rest. By cold, and froste, even nose run hard, our emotions much messt. But following a morn and a night, did they return and yell or mayhap more a moan, I know only I ran, else would I not tell the tale to you today of the cemetery's pet; a creature o! so greatly foul. On this path let your hooves not set. Ne'er walk it else lose your soul.

So with that made plain, I will say where we buried the half. Not to pay respects, because none living could remain. And the once dead, with worm and insects do crawl and moan, and kill e'en today. Too lonely mayhap for their eternal rest. The once town was a days worth o' hay, trotting with the moon on your chest and the fleeting sun will rise to show, a turn to the right is a crater of awe. was once my towne, would that I could go. But the Pet guards with a giant paw, it's master hungry for more. The cemetery the master and will tomorrow eat your soul when you explore. That blighted land 'twixt death and city seat.

"Moon on your chest? Early or late evening?" Was Meadowlark's first question.

This one Sharp Wit knew. "Long ago, pony. Even with mare in the moon locked away, ponies not like the night. They quit, or if they must take a long journey, they start before Celestia exchange moon for sun. But not much before. To have moon on your chest during start of journey? That would mean due west. To the right of that is north. North west of town except writer pony says town was all dead."

"And the jungle has reclaimed any roads. Asked about that part, too." Finished Seiko as she carefully placed the book back into its slot on the shelf. "Now, via a strange set of circumstances, Flarestar and myself have a sizable cart that we can take with us into the jungle looking for adventure and loose, unclaimed power before it runs amok. But I would feel better if we had a full complement of ranged and melee fighters. After we have found what written about, I would be happy to accompany you to Cloudsdale to find where underperforming students are sent."

"Donkey is very sure she can find, what in a hundred years has been lost?" Again, Sharp Wit saw an almost vicious smile cross the jennet's features.

Seiko nodded, and explained "I have made a lifetime of surpassing others' expectations. This

author had something to write about, and the fact that no one found it, means that it is there yet, to be found. I shall be the one to write an article about the old town, and it's supposed pet cemetery."

In truth, Sharp Wit would have been grateful simply for the chance to walk again on untreated ground. The packed dirt, and worse paved and even just hard gravel roads reminded him how far from home he was. He enjoyed his travels, and his time with ponies greatly, but he was by construction, a burrower. When his toes told him that to start the journey straight down would be hard, it made his claws itch for reasons he couldn't fully explain.

But still there was the famous singer, whom Sharp Wit had most wanted to hear, and was eagerly looking forward to the chance to travel with. What would she say to traipsing so far from her citified surroundings? It seemed to him, that something more than a roof collapsing had happened in that restaurant. On Meadowlark's face he saw determination. He surmised the earth pony's heart was on fire, and its heat hardened her face into a stony gaze. "Very well, Seiko. We will help each other. I should get my things, if there's room in the cart for a couple bags? Tell me where to meet you, and I'll be there in time for dinner."

Seiko's smile softened, and she explained how to find the farmhouse where she had stayed a couple days so far. Now they would split up, and Sharp Wit would need to decide who he needed to travel with for the next hour or two. "Sharp Wit would like to help the singer pony." Since he wasn't much past the age of majority himself, he should by definition have '*puppy dog eyes*' but in his travels he had found not every pony, nor in fact all that many, were impressed by his small, beady puppy dog eyes so very much higher than the pony he was asking for a boon from.

But while she looked every so slightly wary, she agreed to let him follow her around. With that decided everyone went their way, and the route from the library to the hotel where Meadowlark was staying took them within a half block of the alleyway where he had buried his suitcase. The daisy he had planted to mark it's placement had been run over by some pony moving the refuse carts around, but the ground had not been disturbed. The alley had never been paved and was still dirt, albeit hard from use but the spot where he had dug in a day ago was still soft. Suitcase in hand he kicked the loose dirt back into the four hoof deep hole, a noticeably depression visible but, Sharp Wit thought, not a hole that would cause surface dwellers harm if they tripped in it.

From the main street, Meadowlark watched curiously, a smirk on her face. "That would make stealing your bag much harder, but don't you worry you'd lose track of where you buried your bones?"

An old joke, and Sharp Wit tried not to be short with the surface pony. Diamond dogs were not like surface dogs; they didn't bury bones to be chewed on later. "No bones, pony. Is my other good suit. And what pony bits I earn carrying heavy things for weak unicorns, or farmer pony in Glasgow pay me to dig fence posts. Earth ponies can work hard" Suddenly he remembered he was, in fact, talking to an earth pony. So he graciously waved his claws to indicate his present company should know about the hardworking nature of the earth pony. "But for digging is faster to hire diamond dog. Mile of fence ready for posts by end of first day. Forty five bits, that day bought me a train ticket."

Stableside was a port city, and all sorts of creatures wandered the streets. So a 'tame' diamond dog didn't attract any attention, which meant Sharp Wit could concentrate on watching the comings and goings of the ponies, and gryphons, and two adolescent dragons on their walk through, and out of the city. There were carrot farms near the edge of town, and celery and somehow a small strawberry patch thriving just off the main road. No one had accosted the pair, although with his excellent hearing Sharp Wit could tell that many ponies stopped and talked about how their small town (as if Stableside could be called small) had been graced by the Songbirds' lead singer. Sharp Wit was building up the courage to ask about why Meadowlark was no longer with the rest of the band, when a yellow coated pegasus with orange mane landed abruptly in front of them. It was a stallion, and at first Sharp Wit thought it was an older pony, but on second glance, it was clearer this pony had lead a very challenging life that prematurely aged him. His coat was still bright but his mane was badly faded, and he held a haunted expression, which also was currently his only possession. No saddle bags, no clothing, he was even missing a few teeth.

"You're" the stallion started, then quickly glanced into the trees, the sky, and both ways on the road they were on. "You're the singer, Meadowlark."

At this Meadowlark eased a little bit, and reached around to fish into one of her bags for a quill. "Yes. Were you hoping for an autograph? Who are you?"

"The living failures were there, too, weren't they? Were the PPP there as well?"

These words, which Sharp Wit was having quite a bit of trouble put in proper context, caused the mare to freeze. Then, leaving the quill in the pack, she turned slowly, a forced calmness covering her fear, as if she thought this was a stallion of limited mind, and he might have some sort of episode if she were to disagree too strongly with his delusions. "I think I know what you mean. But, who are the Pee Pee Pee?"

The stallion's wings fluttered nervously, and he swallowed once before answered quietly, and a little too quickly. "Pegasi Protection Ponies. The Cloudsdale guard but it's more, and less than that. They've made deals. They get things. In exchange the failures have to be eaten." He lowered his head, and closed his eyes, breathing heavily now.

"Are you one of the living failures? You failed your flight te ..."

But as soon as the question was out of the mare's mouth, the stallion started stumbling backwards, stammering an answer as he fell over and continued to claw ('hoof his way'? thought Sharp Wit) his way backwards and he answered. "No. No I didn't. Not a fai-no. Why would you even say that?" The poor pony was hyperventilating now, and began rapidly checking the trees again for pony-eating birds in the orange tree boughs.

Meadowlark took half a step toward the retreating pegasus, but Sharp Wit decided he looked enough un-pony that approaching a stallion in such mental distress would not help him. So instead he did his own check of the road, the nonexistent underbrush, the sky. There were no ponies, nor gryphons in the area. A large rabbit, ahead of them. In fact it was a very large rabbit, but it was eating a stolen carrot, apparently carried at least forty hooves since that was the last

place for such a farm. But now that it felt comfortable with its catch it was eating the spoils of the trip, its eyes glowing a gentle green. This struck Sharp Wit as slightly odd, but it was clearly just a rabbit, so he let it go and concentrated on the stallion who was shivering in fear now.

Meadowlark had approached the poor thing by now, and was trying to hug the recumbent pony without risking her own safety too much in case he turned suddenly on her. This would save her in just a moment, but for now, he was talking calmly again. "I'm not fodder for the machine I work there. For the PPP. Not as guard you understand I just ..." Sobbing, then "We had to make the agreements. So that we wouldn't see them. But that means we never know where those things are and if you don't have the food ready then they eat you."

"Is this in Cloudsdale, or some other city? Can these things fly?"

The stallion's eyes bugged out and he tried to stammer a response but was just foaming and sputtering instead. Taking several ragged breaths, he said "Don't go there, miss. For the love of the princesses don't poke you nose in. Every pony that makes the deal is evil but they're at least ponies. Better a few stupid ponies die quietly than we have to fight these things."

Meadowlark grit her teeth. "Do you actually believe that? Why are you here, if you believe killing foals is okay?"

A calmer sobbing, now. He was grieving. "A foal. Normally they've just graduated. Full of themselves and ripe for shoving into the machine. But this was a foal and she looked just like my little filly." Ragged breathing, again. "for a brief moment I thought it was my filly. Maybe it was I don't remember now. But I wouldn't put her into the machine. I broke the deal and they chased me except I couldn't see them. And the PPP. The guards, I could see them but they didn't have their armor. They never wear it inside it makes the beasts angry so I could outfly them. I took the filly straight to the ground and I found a couple and gave them the filly. Poor girl was terrified but I hope she stopped crying long enough for the PPP to stop looking for her. They think I still have her." Here the stallion, still prone on the ground and eyes closed, chuckled heartily. "Me, a worker. I saved one from the machine just because it might have been my own daughter."

Then suddenly the stallion choked, his eyes bugging out of their skull again, and he launched himself into the standing position, and tried to fling Meadowlark aside. But her stance was sound, her back hooves held their ground. The stallion was flying, now. Away from town, climbing steeply to clear the treetops. About the time was in open air, something very strange happened.

There was a dark patch of air that was vaguely almond shaped, that began more wormlike but as it caught up to the fleeing pegasus it opened, and then closed around the stallion. There was a squishing sound as of an air bubble popping through a muddy surface, and the dark patch closed quickly, leaving only a sizable squirting of blood, which fell to the trees below. There was no further sound.

Sharp Wit had not considered pegasus feathers to be noisy, but when the dark patch closed around the pegasus, there was a very strong absence of sound that had been there a moment before. There now was nothing except Meadowlark, Sharp Wit, and that rabbit, all staring

blankly at the sky, where a moment before a pony had been, but now was not. High above, a weather pony laid out a rainbow, resplendent and beautiful. Also suddenly a little out of place for this dark world Sharp Wit did not know he occupied.

The rabbit rushed off, dragging the carrot with it.

In Search of Zombies

Sharp Wit found he was still a little shell shocked when he arrived at the Orange family farmhouse to find Flarestar already within the traces, which were being secured by Seiko. The cart was large, half again larger even than Flarestar, and easily twice as long. It was an open interior, three walls with a very narrow seat at the front wall where a pony could navigate the driver who was pulling. Raring to wave both hooves wildly, Flarestar nearly tossed Seiko aside in her eagerness to greet Meadowlark and himself.

Seiko turned and said "Hello, and welcome. We are beginning tonight and will camp just outside of town. Please through your belongings into the back it should not rain." Turning back to double-check her work she mumbled, though Sharp Wit could hear it, "I can shield us if it does, come to that."

Meadowlark had carefully chosen three saddlepacks, all of which she wore. Walking to the back of the wagon she reached under for the clasps, and released them, then raised her head, squinted, and bucked hard. Her packs landed neatly at the front of the wagon.

Sharp Wit reach out and dropped his suitcase with his few belongings onto the floor at the back. "Is this not heavy for a single pony?" Sharp Wit didn't know whose pack was which but there were a dozen bags with provisions, a tent he guessed, all their personal possessions. Sharp Wit could only imagine what it would be like to live with such a valuable tool as to take you whole house with you, across Equestria. Seeing this made his small suitcase seem so inadequate, it almost caused Sharp Wit to tear up, just a little at the thought.

"Don't know how heavy it is! My ... uhm, second cousin thrice removed just built it for us yesterday. Says it's probably fireproof. YEEHAWW!" So saying, Flarestar again rared, and this time began to glow. All of her. By the time her hooves hit ground again, she was a living torch, oranges and reds with wisps of blue and white flames flickering through her coat of heat. Heat which, while it had not melted the textiles yet, was already putting Sharp Wit in mind of a roaring campfire at twenty hooves distant with the heat she was putting out.

Everyone's belonging's were jostled. None came out, but they would not be where they they had been. Not because the road was rough, or the excellent engineering was too stiff for the circumstances. No, the living torch of enthusiasm was galloping. Only the weight behind her kept her down to a speed that the light Seiko and powerful Meadowlark could keep up.

Sharp Wit was young, yes, but not lithe. No diamond dog was lithe. So he jogged, and with his un-pony hearing, noted the exasperation of Seiko's voice as she cast ice spells onto the traces. "For Celestia's sake, Flarestar. We just acquired this thing."

"And it might be fireproof!" came the reply, sparks erupting at every syllable.

Only Sharp Wit's youth let him jog for as long as he did. He was utterly winded, but when he came to the still lit torch, who was levitating tent and furniture into a camp-like arrangement, he saw that Seiko was very still, and breathing very heavily, levitating with magic as colorless as she was. And to one side, Meadowlark, a pony used to fineries and hotel beds and leisurely saunters, was fast asleep on her side, curled up like a cat. Sharp Wit would like to join her shortly.

"There is only one tent?" Sharp Wit panted, sitting about ten hooves from the earth pony.

Seiko looked up, and shrugged. "I'll ... modify some tree or something." And her eyes glazed over, as much he hoped in thought of a solution as in fatigue. Sharp Wit noticed, after a minute, that her eyes glowed in waves, as if they were a sparkling diamond, when she was casting magic.

Six branches, mostly straight and about eight to ten hooves long, floated in from the nearby orchard. The party had gone just far enough north and east of town that the trees were not as often tended. There was more debris, and even brush, to work with. The limbs planted themselves so as to imply a wall between Sharp Wit and Meadowlark, with walls around each. Then leaves started to float it, slowly, and fuse together to form two domes. The leaves made three walls; a small stall. When Sharp Wit climbed out, he saw it was indeed duplicated for Meadowlark, who had not stirred. He left her to wake and get her own blanket, if her coat were not warm enough. This place had been almost oppressively warm during the day, and was far from cold at night.

Flarestar had finally agreed to put the lights out, and was simply making her horn glow as many unicorns knew to do. She smiled widely, but did not say anything. Perhaps because she too was tired, or perhaps it was out of respect for the sleeping earth pony. Seiko spoke gently. "That won't hold if it rains serious. Or winds. Or keep out bugs. But it's a good start and wasn't hard for me to make. So, once the traveling bundle of never ending energy gets our own tent up, I'm going to sleep. See you at dawn Sharp Wit."

He nodded, and went about preparing his bed. He did not need blankets, but he changed from his luncheon with pony suit, to his hard denim suit that could not be abraded by rocks. Its familiarity was comforting to him. Then he put his suitcase in one corner of his new tent, and dug deep enough he would barely be seen were someone to look. He was still breathing hard when sleep took him.

In the morning – if it could be called that, because it was still dark and since moving to the surface Sharp Wit had taken to using the sun as his clock – Seiko was noisily packing their tent, ignoring the still sleeping Flarestar. Meadowlark waved hello as she silently took on half of a saddle bag off the path to a nearby irrigation valve. To brush her teeth, it would seem. She brushed her coat into a semblance of order, also wetting her brush but just slightly. Sharp Wit saw her grimace as she walked back, but he himself thought he looked every bit the part of the famous singer even as she looked on stage yesterday.

Sharp Wit had only his suitcase, which he retrieved, and set in the cart. Brushing the worst of the loose dust off, he looked to the sky. He could not see the moon, but perhaps the trees covered it. He could not see the sun, but the sky behind them looked every so slightly lighter.

A moan escaped Flarestar. "Seiko you know I hate this time. Ponies live to honor Celestia in the day, or Luna at night. Now that we have her again I mean. This time when you are most alert is neither." She had not opened her eyes, and had not even turned over in her sleep.

Seiko was not impressed. "In Evisica, we started the day one hour before anyone brought the sun out. And the job of moving the sun from land to land is the destiny of *many* monarchs, I have said this before. It would crash to the earth at our hooves if the nine did not grab and swing it to the next monarch." She didn't sound mad, just matter of fact. The spoiled foal should know that good ponies cared not about light, or the clock. Sharp Wit found he sided with the unicorn.

"Sleep is a strange mistress." Is all Meadowlark said. The large rabbit with green eyes at the edge of camp said nothing. Honestly it was starting to get on his nerves, the way it seemed to watch them. No one else looked at it; at least not when Sharp Wit could see them do so.

Once the tent was taken down, Meadowlark was brushing her mane into its former glory, when Flarestar, finally wrested from sleep, wandered over to Sharp Wit. "Hey aren't you guys like, lithovores? You're dogs that eat diamonds, right?"

In truth he had just been snacking on diamond dust and ruby crumbs, but their small size made them not very filling. "We eat many things, unicorn. Omnivores. Diamond dogs eat insects, and squirrels, and grains like wheat and oat. And good gems, but not rocks, and not hay either."

"Well I hope your appetite isn't significantly larger than ours or we'll need to go back to town for supplies." Seiko was levitating four small bowls filled with a mix of unground wheat, still encumbered by the chaff, mixed with beet pulp shreds and just a little powdered sugar sprinkled across the top. Sharp Wit had initially assumed the physically largest bowl would be his, even though they did indeed seem to contain the same volume of food.

But the largest bowl was handed to Flarestar, who levitated it to her mouth and dove in with the same enthusiasm she tackled all her life's problem. The chaff was spread everywhere in short order, and only the high sides of the large bowl kept food loss to a minimum, but the sugar still absorbed moisture from her breath and caused the chaff to stick to her chin hairs and eyebrows.

Sharp Wit was just realizing that he was staring, when he also realized she was done. He carefully lifted the bowl to his lips, and tipped a little of the mixture into his mouth. Flarestar did not seem to immediately know her face was decorated, and she simply brought the bowl back to their cart, tapped it upside down several times, and shoved it back into what seemed to be a random bag. "Needs coffee." Was her only comment.

"And a wet nap." added Seiko, whose eyes glowed in the predawn darkness as she summoned some water that was unceremoniously dropped onto Flarestar's head. Flarestar, for her part, seemed to take no offense, and simply shook her head to fling chaff encumbered droplets everywhere. But from over there by the cart, nothing reached him, or even the still flabbergastedly staring Meadowlark.

The water had been summoned from a lake, obviously, as there was a trout or the like flopping at Flarestar's hooves. Before any of the ponies could protest, Sharp Wit jumped up and grabbed it, spearing it with his claws on one hand, and setting the bowl into the cart somewhere with his

other hand. Carrying the fish out of immediate hearing range, he made a rather noisome mess of his face by eating the very tasty trout. When he cast the fish skeleton aside, he came back to camp finding everything put away, and Meadowlark holding up a very wet hoof towel.

She explained "More river water. Fewer fish this time." Sharp Wit took the towel and cleaned the fish innards from his face and brushed aside what he could from his chest. Wringing out the towel, he handed it back, whereupon the earth pony remarked "You know most ponies consider that pretty disgusting, right?"

Sharp Wit smirked. "Is why I took it away from camp. Not wanting to make good ponies sick watching me eat what was dropped at my feet. Well, Flarestar's feet." But it was true he had not wanted to offend. In the cities ponies were apparently just jaded to other designs; he had never gotten more than a glance that quickly looked away. Sharp Wit would have to think about this.

Meanwhile, Seiko was levitating the traces into place, double checking them as she went. The cart had four wooden wheels, so unless the shaft's height was already well mated to where Sharp Wit's hand's went, he would have trouble pulling it. But he reckoned he could probably pull it like a wheel barrow – no traces needed. He would think about this, too.

"If the omnivores are done voring omni, I believe we are ready to depart." So saying, Seiko simply left. The parking spot where it had been, at least. She was much slimmer of frame, in addition to being shorter of height, and probably weighed half what Flarestar did. The cart was moving slowly, even after Meadowlark leaned against the side to push it along. "And does anyone know what that green eyed thing is, that's following us?"

Seiko kept pulling, but everyone else looked quickly around for their pursuer. Understanding reached Sharp Wit, and he looked down. The rabbit was just out of reach, eating, but definitely following their progress. He pointed to the deep gray fluffball and said "She saw the pony eaten by a shadow. Perhaps she knows what it was." Looking up at the others he realized both Meadowlark and Flarestar had an 'are you harmlessly crazy or should I be worried' look. Seiko was pulling the cart, looking to the west. "Does any pony here speak the animal tongue? Ponyville element holder Fluttershy can, but she is not here."

"If it comes to that, I can expend enough effort to construct a one-use spell. Still, is it a rabbit? I have never in my travels seen one that large." Seiko, still pulling. Slowly.

"Soul of a rabbit problem, again." Flarestar said helpfully, looking eagerly at the fluffy lepine.

Meadowlark, going back to pushing the cart from the back, said "Its a flemish giant. Though I don't believe they normally have glowing eyes so it's probably an offshoot from some pet lost in the everfree or the like. That place is haunted."

"Flaming rabbit?"

"No Flarestar" Meadowlark patiently corrected. "Flemish. Land of Flem comes from ... Between Hoofswell and Trottowa, I think? Snow everywhere. Anyway that doe looks harmless enough."

"Yeah. I could take her." Flarestar stepped sideways, staring at the uncaring large lepine until the rabbit jumped off the trail and hid ineffectively in a bush. Snorting after her imaginary pursuer,

Flarestar went back to walking alongside the cart.

At about noon, the party stopped to fix lunch. Meadowlark said she had expected to graze since no time was taken to purchase foodstuffs, but Seiko graciously summoned flour, sugar, and seasonings from her house's stores so long forgotten in Evisica. Flarestar set herself on fire again, and Seiko used her friend to bake crackers for the equines.

Sharp Wit was able to dig up a couple of quartz rocks but they had almost no nutritional value, even for a lithivore. He had a cracker, but made mental preparations to leave the party to go hunting. He even considered the rabbit, but it seemed it had been following Flarestar for a while now. She would probably be offended if Sharp Wit were to eat her pet, threats to set it on fire notwithstanding.

Both Meadowlark and himself had tried to speak of the shadow that removed a deeply troubled stallion, but they could not. There simply was no explaining it. All they were able to convey was a pegasus stallion had met them outside the Orange's, and he had an accident from there.

As to pulling the cart, the shafts were too low. So with Meadowlark taking a turn in the traces, Sharp Wit pushed, and progress was considerably faster though as the jungle became more wild and dense, he did not see their first threat.

The cart stopped, and he heard the earth pony call out questioningly, only to immediately scream. The cart was rocking from side to side, and Flarestar was casting fireballs at something immediately in front of them.

The fire did not seem to bother the skeleton, but the lightning from Seiko's hooves separated the bones, and they did not try to reassemble themselves. The shaking, it turned out, was an inexperienced Meadowlark trying to release herself from the traces ... she was still attached on the left side, and her belly straddled the right shaft. Since the battle was over and he had not been able to help, he reached across the singer's back to free her, and help her slide free of the shaft.

She never let her eyes off the bones. "I've been through the Everfree, actually," she explained, caution and expectant fear leaving her voice a tremulous whisper. "There are carnivores there called timber wolves. Animated sticks, and you can't kill them by separating their parts – they just reassemble."

Flarestar dropped a small fireball onto the unmoving, dried, now scorched bones. They did not change any, being somehow resistant to further scorching, but neither did they react. The vegetation, however, was patently on fire now. The unicorn's eyes followed the flames, her mouth slowly opening and her tongue lolling out as she gazed upon the conflagration.

Until a great volume of water came cascading down upon it all, and smoke was replaced by steam, heat by wetness, and Flarestar's openmouthed awe with a bemused smirk directed at Seiko, who said simply. "These bones do not appear to reassemble themselves. Perhaps only the graveyard's pet can do that."

"And why are we looking for somebody's pet who can animate dead bones? What if we meet its owner?" While they were Meadowlark's words, as she realigned the traces and put herself back in

them, Sharp Wit felt she had a good question. Although knowing where the first town of Stableside had been would answer some of his own questions about ponies, too.

”To set it on fire? I hope?”

Seiko politely ignored the mouth sounds of the large unicorn. ”Because I will help you in your silly endeavor. Consider how badly you need the help of a strong mage, before you respond.”

”And evocation magic.” those words were offered by Flarestar. Also ignored as if unspoken by Seiko.

The bones did not reassemble, and with many gallons of river water summoned, the jungle was no longer burning down. Unicorn mare’s disappointment aside, everyone went back to their prior position and progress resumed, slowed just a tiny bit when Sharp Wit found a trout flopping helplessly at his feet as the cart rolled over it. No one said anything as he leaned over to set it in the cart and nibbled at it.

When the next skeleton this time more likely of a donkey, came shambling into view, Meadowlark calmly released herself from the traces and called out ”zombie, folks.” Seiko teleported next to Flarestar and wrapped a fetlock around the mare’s horn while the earth pony sized up the threat.

At least that’s what Sharp Wit assumed was happened up front. For himself he dove straight down. At twelve hooves deep he turned and dug level. At forty five hooves he paused for a long breath. Too long for a fight, but he did not hear screaming, did not feel more than one large equine dancing, and the light tapping must be the dried bones of the skeleton. At sixty, perhaps seventy hooves forward he had been eager and careless and lost count, he went up. There was a decided shock traveling through the ground. Sharp Wit assumed it was Meadowlark spinning, landing on her forehooves as she sailed with a two barreled kick. There was no answering shock which meant the bones absorbed it handily. Sharp Wit was halfway to the surface when he felt her back hooves land, and leave again the ground. There was perhaps a tremor but it was not of a skeleton being stunned. He had not felt the other two ladies leave their spot.

Sharp Wit burst through and found to no surprise of his own, he dug too far. The skeleton’s back hooves were almost out of reach as he grabbed one and yanked back. He saw as he did so, that Meadowlark bucked a third time but this time wrapped her hooves around the skull, which tried to bite her, until her legs and muscled, heavy back came with her legs, taking the skull with it. But with Sharp Wit bracing the back half, something had to give – and it was the neck, near the poll.

The skull stopped biting, and had not pierced skin. But the rest of the skeleton continued to walk, then to poke with a forehoof, the singer. Meadowlark stared dumbfounded as her assailant seemed certain it still had a jaw with which to bite down.

Sharp Wit came out of his tunnel, and carefully karate chopped the back, not wanting the sharp lumbar to pierce his hands. The front half and the back half separated, and still the front legs twitched, confused. Seiko released Flarestar, and walked up to the skeleton and examined the wretched thing for a long moment. Then the mage reared up, and dropped both her small hooves

at once on a foreleg, breaking it. She repeated the process for the other foreleg but a higher bone, just below the shoulder. At this, the twitching stopped.

"This tells me a great deal about how they were animated." Seiko said to no one in particular. "It was supposed to be life magic. But something corrupted the spell. The poor thing probably never knew it was being ensorcelled." Raising her gray head, the young mage had a smile in her eyes, though not precisely on her lips. "We will be doing all Equestria a great favor to release them, though I fear it will be done by destroying the probably inanimate '*graveyards pet*'." Then looking back the way they came, she frowned. "What is that thing still doing here?"

A set of glowing green eyes outshone the afternoon sun, at a height of half a hoof. The dark gray flea-bitten rabbit that owned them were not watching any among the adventuring party. Flarestar looked, and stated matter of factly "Grazing. Looks tasty. But I like barbecue."

So saying a sword of blue, incredibly hot flame emerged from her horn, and the unicorn mare cut down several large, broad leaves from a nearby tree. Or bush; Sharp Wit was far from a botanist. The leaves hit the ground dried, still a slight bit green, and crispy. This latter he knew because when the unicorn extinguished her flame, she began to loudly eat her catch.

Flarestar took the next shift at pulling the wagon, and although the complete and utter lack of road made going as slow as when Seiko had been pulling, Flarestar was happily dancing in between the shafts, and singing some drinking song about Luna's underwear as off-key as if she was deep in her cups. Meadowlark was wincing to varying degrees, depending Sharp Wit thought, more on how far off key she was then how off color the words were.

"You sing to the crowd." She had said when he asked her about not minding the words themselves. "I'm afraid I know the song. In a rowdy bar, yeah, that'll get tips and thankfully it's been a lot of years since that's where I was. But while everyone whose as drunk as the night mare will be laugh – ow. Gee Flare. – be laughing about your singing that doesn't. You know, get ponies to pay you for all the." At this she shook her head, and concentrated on trying not to hear the unicorn.

The song ended abruptly with a flash of light. It was from a fireball, cast by Flarestar, who had seen another skeleton. This one, a gryphon, took several steps before getting hit again with a smaller fire spell, and its bones cracked open and the structure fell. The mare watched her horn's majesty a moment longer, but did not this time add to it, and Seiko stared resolutely ahead waiting for it to die out enough on its own that the party could continue.

After another twenty minutes, Seiko called for a halt, and Sharp Wit saw her eyes flicker as she sniffed the air. There was one small spell he knew, and thought it would help the jennet's quest now. "I can find the pet, if we are close, friend Seiko." So saying he stepped aside, so as to have enough room to dance, if need be. Standing tall, spreading his claws wide, his arms level, he raised his nose to the wind, to the sky, to everything that was above his home in the earth. He took in a long, careful breath, and thought about the magic he had seen, and the words Seiko had spoken. Healing magic. He could taste its taint – something had corrupted a powerful artifact. He couldn't tell how far, exactly but considering how much of a directional change it would be, he hoped they were within a quarter mile finally. Tang of old, bad magic was over that ...

He almost tripped over the cart. He had, in his concentration, been unconsciously dancing. Not as at a formal ball, but more akin to the ritual circle dances he had seen the buffalo perform. As the dance took him, so did his answer. Pointing to their right, he found he was actually draped over the cart's shafts, and a unicorn's rump. Raising himself to an upright posture with as little inappropriate contact as possible, he found the rump's owner was only very slightly chagrined. He pointed again, and said aloud. "Good magic made bad is that way. A stone, atop a perch, Sharp Wit saw it as in a dream. It smelled bad and wants to go home now."

At which it was Seiko's turn to blush in chagrin. "Truly." was all she said, looking away.

Meadowlark looked at the direction he had pointed in, and said "But there's no pa" and was interrupted by a giant fireball. After the second one sailed towards their hoped for destination, Meadowlark said, just a little shortly, "You like doing that, don't you?"

"Yes." Whoosh went a third fireball, and the cart was turning now.

"You are either being sarcastic, or are slow on the uptake. Of course, the same could be said of me." opined Seiko.

It was late afternoon when the party reached a clearing. The charred, smoldering path behind them appeared to be about a quarter mile, as Sharp Wit had surmised, but he could not see a totally straight line as there had been two trees too substantial to fall to a single blast, and Seiko advised her friend that since there were others present, the party should simply divert. It would only be a few hooves this way, a few back.

Sharp Wit was not prepared for the clearing, however. It was a sudden transition to a blackened, barren section of what appeared to be wilted leaves, heated tar, and the corpses of many jungle creatures, not all of them old enough to be skeletons. The smell of rot had not yet reached his delicate nose, but his indelicate eyes were offended. It was telling, that the firemage had not yet laid a single spell on the creatures shambling about in front of them.

It was also telling, he realized after a moment, that not a one of them had looked towards the hole in their sanctuary at the still living ponies – and rabbit and diamond dog, that were staring open mouthed at them. Seiko whispered to Flarestar to release herself from the cart.

Sharp Wit could not whisper very well. So rather than make too much noise, he tapped Meadowlark, and waved at the two equines at the front, then he made small clawing motions in front of himself, and then held up his palms to ask them to stop.

Stepping behind the cart a small distance, he began to dig. He didn't actually know how loud it was; his kind could feel the ground tremble and read footsteps, or understand where a colleague was digging towards him. But it wasn't always a 'sound' like how you heard other people speak. Perhaps these dead had that ability too; he didn't know. But he would like to have a second means of entrance, and thus egress, if it were earthly possible.

As it turned out, it was not. He crossed about the distance to be beneath the graveyard's boundry, and he heard a noise as of a howling wind. He stopped digging, and the noise seemed to stop. But now his head hurt. He dug a ways farther and felt the dirt claw back at him. He seemed to be

going as fast as before – he made a magic'd gem that hung around his neck to produce light. It was a ruby, but a pink one. So pink light filled the tunnel, and the odd light created ever-shifting patterns as of terrible faces in the dirt, all of them screaming for his demise.

Sharp Wit acknowledged all these sensations, but they did not sink in. That he had always perceived the separation between emotions, and reactions, had been a guiding force that drove him from his tunnels many years prior. But there was no denying that this tunnel, in this unnatural place, unnerved Sharp Wit.

He began to dig again, and while he was assaulted by silent screams, and felt the dirt angrily claw back at him, he saw he was indeed tunneling as fast as he should expect to be tunneling. When his sense of balance tried to tell him the tunnel was slowly twisting, that he was actually on his side now, and looking back he could almost, but not quite see his footprints circling back as if he had been spiraling in, he was truly nervous. Gauging by hard logic alone, he dug straight up now. The screams began even louder, though still silent. But for every hooflength he went towards the surface, the more real the dirt seemed.

Which was odd, because its texture was that of sand, and shifting quickly to a clingy, expanding thing not unlike foam made in the pony factories from he knew not what noxious chemicals. Finally he made his way to the lake of tar, and by this time he could hear a howling wind below him, his emotions told him there was a rumbling as of a huge tunneler approaching fast even though his senses disagreed strongly, that he was alone down here. His claws told him the tar was indeed hot enough that it could burn eventually.

Then he burst through the surface, and cried out, pulling himself frantically towards the beautiful light, and the warm breeze. At this noise, the zombies noticed him. None moved, which in itself was unnerving for an already frayed set of nerves for they had been aimlessly shambling when last he saw them. But the ... *cold*, he decided ... emanating from the hole whence had come was both senseless and terrifying.

There were two pony zombies with a little flesh in the crowd, and one fairly intact gryphon female. They spoke, now. The ponies words were well muffled by rotting tongues but the gryphon could be understood. And he understood none of it. About nine words, he guessed. None of the other zombies made a move beyond to stare, eyelessly in most cases, at him.

Seiko stepped into the circle, and responded several words in the unknown tongue. "Sandwrit. Dead language used by camels a great long number of years ago." Two more sentences spoken, one from each side, and Seiko said "They all speak as if there is only one entity here, actually, and it says if we make too much noise, we'll wake the slumbering sleeper. There's a colorful rock in the town hall, and apparently the sleeper treats it as a temple to himself."

"So, do we set them all on fire, or...?"

It was Meadowlark who spoke up against fire, this time. "None of them are moving to stop us. Maybe we can examine the rock thing without offending anyone. Heal it or whatever so they can get their proper eternal rest?"

Nearly panting now, Sharp Wit said "It is not the dead which concern me. Something has made

the dirt angry. Something has warped sight, and sound in this place. That which should not be, seems to be spread everywhere in this place.” He pointed a single claw at his tunnel.

”You mean the zombie thing is pretty normal?” Flarestar, again. Sharp Wit shrugged in response.

Seiko explained something to the gryphon corpse, and motioned for the ponies to follow her. Then she walked carefully towards the structure of stone standing in the distance, but stopped after about a dozen steps in. She closed her eyes, pursed her lips, and took a slow breath in before saying, eyes still held tightly shut, ”That makes my head hurt.” Another breath, and finally her face relaxed. Eyes still shut, she warned her friends ”This is a deep corruption of everything that is. I suspect it’s no more than that – there is no pet, no master. But it makes my skin crawl just standing here.”

Sharp Wit did not relish the thought of walking towards whatever caused the howling cold to erupt from his simple tunnel, but he did not think it was right to abandon the ponies or even the crazy donkey to its abuses, either. Perhaps the four of them could stem the tide of madness long enough to solve this town’s problem.

Meadowlark’s Madness

She had come to Stableside to make a new start. Emerald Lightning had confided terrible truths to her, and only asked to borrow her brushes in exchange for nearly dying. *But still*. Why did she need this donkey’s assistance? Seiko was powerful, but the jennet still thought they were just thieves. She thought their fate, still living ponies, was less important than this. *This*. These poor woodland creatures who had died some hundred years ago by the look of it.

Granted most things that died didn’t stand up and stare at her when she walked past. This must be why you don’t stand on somepony’s gravestone.

As the jennet had said, it made her head hurt. But she could almost understand why Sharp Wit had said the zombies didn’t bother him. Everytime she looked away, she thought she saw jointless limbs stick up out of that hole, reaching for purchase, for ponies, for – but no. Looking at it just made her think the town hall was whistling tunelessly. It was not an improvement.

The ground was moist, made of a strange residue of she didn’t want to think about what. It didn’t actually make slime trails or stick to her hooves like she was expecting. Oddly, it didn’t even have a smell. For being surrounded by slowly rotting squirrels, birds, and a gryphon there was very little stench, and no flies.

No, she thought. *Scratch that. The flies are zombies too*. They weren’t flying, but in places where ants should be crawling there were instead emptied out husks of deer flies, house flies, other sizes and varieties. Apparently placing their eggs in the corrupted bodies caused their demise, or this was what hatched. But there were no live flies trying to plant fresh eggs on any of the corpses, and Meadowlark decided she did not want to think more about that.

With the cart left in the normal jungle, everyone could walk freely. But no one was, and neither were they speaking. Just squish, squish across the tar like sponge that was where paving stones should have been. The few small stone structures she could see resembled the occupants.

Hollowed out shells, or broken pieces with the missing pieces nowhere to be seen.

A motion behind her caused Meadowlark to look back. It was the hole again, but there were no black tentacles rising from it. Poor Sharp Wit, whatever his five senses were telling him, left him pale and nearly hyperventilating. She noted he was not looking back at the tunnel he had used to enter. She surmised whatever was at work here, was stronger underground. It either didn't like the sunlight, or perhaps the warm air. "Hey?" the singer called out. "You doing okay Sharp Wit?"

The diamond dog nodded too quickly. "I have seen many things in my travels, and heard tales of many more things. Sharp Wit desperately hopes Seiko can push this place off its ledge, and let it slide into decay. Decay would be a healthy improvement for this place."

Seiko, still in front, walking despite deeply wrinkled forehead for her effort, started to say she agreed. But was interrupted by the still cheerful red and white unicorn. "It's really kind of cool how the plants haven't overtaken this place. I mean, there's probably forgotten gold, and I don't know ancient scrolls it looks just like a place we'd run into Ahuizotl, or maybe Xiuhtecuhtli."

Behind her, Meadowlark heard a slightly confused sounding Sharp Wit reply "The princesses bless your health."

To which, as Seiko made her way past one of the pony skeletons that turned its white skull to mark her progress, the jennet corrected the diamond dog, saying "Just say *gesundheit*. That phrase predates even the princesses by hundreds of years." The skeleton's head reset, focusing on an oblivious Flarestar as the donkey continued. "And Flarestar if you're going to hope for meeting fictional characters you should really pick just one universe. One of those was a villain of unknown breeding added to a horribly trite, and terribly recently written, fictional universe for a pegasus anthropologist to combat against."

Bouncing on all fours now, the squishing sound magnified for it, Flarestar appended "And the other is a fire god from the jungle. I'd love to meet either of them. Actually I'd like to meet them both at once because then I could watch Xiuhtecuhtli set fire to Ahuizotl." She began pronking in circles, her vector of locomotion remaining the same as before. "That would really make my day."

Again, with the tentacles, replaced by whistling. The flemish giant from the Everfree had decided to follow them in, and was cautiously examining the rent in the earth left by their burrowing companion.

Meadowlark had looked back because of Sharp Wit's words, at first. What they been? Oh, yes. "Sharp Wit thinks all fires make Flarestar's day."

"To which end," The earth pony almost missed the jennet's words, as she was walking closer than she had expected to one of the plain skeletons, this one of a gryphon. It's upper beak had broken off, so a small & strange cup followed her progress as Seiko spoke. "If we have need of more fire, I'll be sure to call on you. But I suspect it is not the right ingredient, fellow mage." The unicorn stopped pronking and went back to walking normally, her head just a little lower than it had been a moment before. Meadowlark was surprised by how far back the gryphon's wings attached to the spine. It appeared there was a second set of shoulders just for operating the

wings.

At the largest building, their destination, seven desiccated skeletons sat on their haunches, or would if they had any, in a semicircle in front of the entrance, facing inward with their heads bowed as if in prayer. The living ponies assembled in front of the door at about the same 15 hoof distance as the worshipers, and Seiko lifted a hoof to indicate the entrance.

Their heads didn't move, but from some distance back the not too rotten gryphon's voice could be heard. "We will not stop you from entering, but we tell you not to wake the slumberer."

Seiko just nodded, and groaning as she stepped closer, levitating the door open. It was solid stone two thirds of a hoof thick, and the hinges were made of amethyst deposits worked into a proper shape by an early unicorn engineer. The door squeaked, anti-mute testament to the corrupting power of this place. While gemstone hinges weren't often used anymore because of their brittleness, particularly when foals of the household reach their difficult teen years and start slamming doors behind them. But they never wore out; squeaking shouldn't even be possible.

Like most of the rest of this place.

Since the roof was still intact, and there were no window opening low enough to give any meaningful light inside, Seiko caused a ball of light to float above her head, near her eartips. Flarestar just set herself on fire, making it difficult to stand too close to her but she put off a lot of light – so long as burning dust didn't engulf them in flames.

In the center of the rotunda the floor had been cracked open, and a giant molehill of dirt, large rocks, gemstones, and bones. At the top, alternating black as night, or covered with brilliantly colored flashes of light, was a cylinder. Probably three hooves across, and about four tall. The rest of the area seemed devoid of more than a few stray bits of some forgotten era. Even the tapestries had faded to tattered, moth eaten shreds of debris. Considering the time and money that went into just the hinges, Meadowlark assumed the pigments should have been enchanted, but she couldn't sense any kind of magic in this room at all. The dead roots that kept turning into small tentacles when she looked away implied the story was deeper than what she could see.

"Foot and a half, two tall. Must weigh four hundred pounds." Unless the rabbit had come this far, Sharp Wit was the last in, just behind Meadowlark. Their kind must use the same principle for measuring, but their feet were bigger than pony feet. "How we release rainbows out of dark stone?"

"Ideally," replied Seiko after a surprisingly short gap of silence. "We would use the blood of the poor fool who summoned their slumberer to this place. But I suspect it's all long since been drained into the soil."

"And eaten by worms from there." explained the walking torch pony.

Meadowlark found herself almost hyperventilating, much as Sharp Wit had been earlier. "How do you know so much about it? Have you seen this kind of thing before?"

Seiko shook her head, no. "Only in my young companion's poor choice of reading materials."

Which was all the encouragement she needed to launch into a defense of penny serials. "So, that's an altar to an elder creation, and they're all really mad about being forgotten for so many thousands of millennia so when they can poke their withered hooves through to our plane of existence they kill any and everyone they can but we have really good defenses like, uhm, rainbows and candy, and" Seiko scratched her ear with her left forehoof. "Anyway if you arrange to break a hole in the world and talk to them first they give you extra power until they get tired of you not *actually* breaking a hole or until you actually do, when they kill you because they can't be expected to tell one living pony from another we all look the same to the oldest of creations. I wonder if the bones would be enough fuel to make a bonfire to melt the rock?"

"So, how we stop elder creations, unicorn?" Sharp Wit was turning out to be an odd mix of practical, and mystical. Meanwhile her back was twitching like something was slithering across it. She fought the urge to spin violently to shake it off, but even knowing there wasn't anything there it was hard.

"Huh?" the bonfire turned to face the crowd behind her. "No, you don't stop them you just run away. They're too big." Meadowlark facehoofed. The smack echoed several times around the stone structure, and she almost thought she saw the mound shift in response.

Seiko was the only one here wasn't visibly frightened, although her expression of sheer pain didn't leave Meadowlark feeling jealous of her experiences in here. The donkey took a deep breath, and said "Before anypony asks what we're doing here if running is the preferred solution, let me explain. Bad novel writing aside, we have a way to combat at least part of this, and I believe it will cascade from there. But we will all need to donate a drop of blood. I can use levitation as a knife, if no one has one handy."

This time she was sure she had seen the mound shift at one point, although there was no cascade of debris. But she didn't say anything when Seiko raised her right fore, and suddenly it began bleeding from a cut at the inside of her coronet band. Chanting in what sounded a lot like sandwrit that the skeletons had greeted them in, she walked, eyes closed, up the mound to the stone, and laid her right front hoof on the top of the stone as well as she could, given the steep angles involved. After a couple seconds, and still chanting, she turned and skittered carefully down. No debris fell, and Meadowlark didn't see anything move with that ball of light right there between the donkey's ears, but the jennet was very worried about her footing.

"Please, the rest of you. I'd take that rabbit's blood too if I thought I could force it to bleed on the rock." With that, she went back to chanting, head down, eyes closed as Flarestar began the ascent of what had originally looked like no more than twenty hooves up. It was hard to follow her passage since all of her was so bright, but she was galloping, and took too many steps to get there to Meadowlark's quickly tiring eyes. Once up there, a tiny, precise flame erupted from her horn, and she wielded that like a knife, managing several drops of blood before the wound selfcauterized from the tool's heat. Again, turning and slip-sliding down like Seiko had done.

"Ground rumbles. Do you feel it earth pony? A great burrower approaches. Slow, but very very large. Building-large." He wiped a claw from his right hand, across the outside edge of his left forefinger, and began the climb. "Mage Seiko, make this work. Ground is very unhappy with us." With that cryptic advice, and with Seiko still chanting what sounded like a six or seven verse

poem, Sharp Wit dropped to all three, keeping his slowly dripping finger in the air.

A tapping at Meadowlark's right forehoof nearly sent her through the roof. The glowing green bug almost got stomped out of instinct until she recognized the flaming giant rabbit, whose eyes were themselves a viable source of light in this evil room.

"Cut me. Rabbits don't carry knives."

Meadowlark blinked. Several times. Then laid herself on her belly to be sure she could smell, touch, verify beyond reproach this was a rabbit, albeit a very large one, at her hooves. "Dear? Did you just speak to me?"

It nodded, loose ears flopping. "I heard the donkey girl. I want to help. Cut me." It held up its left forepaw, looking inquisitively at the earth pony.

Quite certain she was insane, and hoping she would wake up in a mental institution where the nice ponies in white coats would explain how she'd never made it to Tastes of a Broad Winged Owlbear because her train had crashed and she'd suffered a massive head injury and started rambling utter nonsense, Meadowlark reached into her pack and brought out a small camp knife. Holding the rabbit's leg in place with a hoof, she wielded the small knife as best she could and stabbed the poor thing, going clear through the wrist.

It screamed the rabbit death cry and bolted like a hydra had just taken notice of her as its next snack.

But to Meadowlark's great relief, and in defense of her sanity, if indeed she still had any, the rabbit was running up the mound, toward the rock. There was a faltering in the chant as Seiko saw this, but more frightening was the rumble that now Meadowlark could feel. Also, even looking straight at the mound she still saw what looked like tiny tentacles of darkness writhing at odd angles from the mound. By the zig-zagging the rabbit, still bleeding profusely from its mangled limb, was taking, it saw the same tentacles and thought them worth avoiding. At the apex of the mound, the rabbit took a mighty leap, and surprisingly did not reach the top of the rock except for all of its foreclaws. Scrambling against the surface of the odd cylinder as colorful strobes continued unaffected beneath the lagomorph. The rabbit scrambled up without needing a second jump, and it trotted all around for a couple seconds, patting its bad leg everywhere it could then screamed again and leapt as high as it could, seeming to fly outward before collapsing in a heap at the base of the mound.

Her turn. She didn't really want to use this knife again. Partly because she didn't want to share blood with a ... *talking rabbit*, partly because it was so dull it was bound to injure her too. So she walked to Seiko and held her left fore up, and winced quietly when a sharp pain indicated she'd been prepared.

As soon as she set hoof on the mound itself, there came from all around – so far as she could tell – a thrumming, as of drums. And an insane piccolo player accompanied it, and the mound jumped on some of the beats as if it were, itself, the drum being struck by the mad band. The tentacles were twice her height now, and her training in enchanted items kept wildly flaring, as if this bone, that gem, the rock over there ... were enchanted but blank – powerful artifacts of no

effect, then the sense would fade as quickly as it flared.

Senselessly the mound had grown. It was a small mountain now, and easily fifty hooves up. As she galloped to her destination, hoping to reach it before her wound closed itself naturally, she heard Sharp Wit bellow something from below. She couldn't make it out but he was hurriedly closing the doors. Twenty strides at a full gallop, and she was only half way. Forty strides, and she was about two thirds up. Sixty strides, and still much too far to jump even in a normal sane dream. This nightmare she was having made no sense to her, and she was terrified. But she had to get the blood to the stone so it would wake up. That small mantra became her focus, her reality. She couldn't hear the chanting anymore, couldn't see her friends with her night vision all wonky from the frequent multi-hued strobes of angry light from her destination.

There were eruptions on the mound. A foul smelling stench and a sticky looking fluid would burst as if the world had a canker sore that had just been lanced. At one hundred and twenty strides at full gallop she was within reach of her destination but the wall was too much. The mound had become a sheer cliff, placing her escape route too high to even scramble, or jump. The sides were too smooth to even think of climbing it.

Dodging another canker volcano, she stood up on just her hind legs, and placed them as close to the stone as she could. She could almost get her forelocks across it but no more. She was wondering if she was successful in bleeding on the stone and she could wake up now, when a dried root from the other side reached across and grabbed both her legs and yanked her up. On the other side of the mound was darkness. Here the piccolo was maddeningly loud, the drums only a sensation the bones could acknowledge, so drowned out were they by the screaming wind instrument.

She drew her small knife and hacked wildly at the tentacle / root thing that had her. Almost falling down into the depths of the far side where tentacles wailed rhythmically and poisonous ooze flowed freely. Not knowing what else to do, she braced her self as best she could on the tiny island of sanity, brightly colored though it had become. Her four hooves balanced inside a stone circle barely three hooves on a side.

What more did she need to do to wake up? *WAKE UP!* she shouted at herself and she knew not if it was aloud or in her head or if there was a difference anymore. *WAKE UP MEADOWLARK THIS IS A NIGHTMA*

At that a bomb went off. The rock's skin fell away and a brilliant rainbow, having no ends and no real directions, just colors, exploded with the force of a thousand suns. Meadowlark was launched skyward and blinded at the same time. *I hope I don't hit my head on the ceiling too hard. Aren't you supposed to wear helmets when you go rock climbing?* were her last thoughts before realizing she was actually falling down, not up. Then she hit the mound of loose bones, rocks, and sharp gems. She also hit her jaw on the light bulb thing at the top of the mound, and it jarred her head hard enough that the stars were very quickly replaced by darkness.

Trading Adventures

an exercise in friendship and futility

3em-1 When Meadowlark awoke, she was indeed on leaves and grass again, somewhere in the wilds of south east Equestria. But her hopes that everything had been a dream were well quashed when her fluttering eyelids garnered a loud "Pony! Earth pony is blinking! We have visitors singer Meadowlark." in what could only be Sharp Wit's gravelly tenor.

It was followed closely by an enthusiastic Flarestar shouting "we set EVERYTHING on FIRE!" from about two inches away from her ear.

Speaking of fire, there was one nearby, but this seemed like a normal cooking fire. She reached up and patted whatever part of Flarestar was nearby, which she guessed was her right jawline, and proceeded to stretch before sitting up.

Several things. First, she was sore in several places and might have suffered real injuries. Her jaw, the left two legs particular in the first joint, and her right side just behind the shoulder blade.

The campfire was being tended by Seiko, who was frying up some red flower clusters that she didn't recognize. Across from Seiko and to Meadowlark's right, were two pegasi. Both probably in their early adulthood, neither mare nor colt looked as unkempt or unfed as the supposed thieves she had seen in the restaurant fight. They were huddled close to the fire, and were warming their legs despite the jungle's unbearable heat still being well into the comfortable range even now.

The donkey answered that part, at least. Not looking up from her cooking, she said "You'll have a concussion, Meadowlark. You've been out ninety minutes and for your valiant efforts towards the end there, I'd like to thank you profusely. We won." All this, without looking up or modulating her voice.

With a lot more modulation was Flarestar, who added "It was AWESOME!!"

The pegasi chuckled. The mare, who appeared to be a shade of pink by the fire's light, said "You set off some sort of rainboom inside that stone building. The magic part of the rainbow went right through everything but left stuff like stone and trees alone. But it nearly melted the cloud we were napping on." Her eyes, and Meadowlark was going to have to reassess this in the light, appeared to be purple, like the amethyst hinges on the building last night. That afternoon. Whenever it was.

Seiko again added her interpretation. "It also negated the necromantic energies holding the long deceased townsonies to their bones. It looks like a bomb went off in their town but at least everyone is dead – even the chipmunks." Levitating a plate with two of the flower clusters towards her, Seiko added "Jungle bloom? It's nutritious, but I'll admit I've never eaten it before."

Taking the proffered plate, Meadowlark added comments of her own. "And even the rabbits?" She nibbled on the still-hot flowers. They were ... a bit bland. The nearly rancid oil Seiko was

cooking with was the dominant taste, but Meadowlark had to admit she had always been a pony of the city; of refinements. She looked over at Flarestar who was rubbing her chin reflexively, and at the two pegasi. They weren't skinny, but she knew they weren't government agents. Deciding to err on the side of both caution and compassion, she asked "How many clusters did you collect?" while pointing to their guests.

"I wasn't expecting company, so they'll have to be happy with one each. And I didn't see the rabbit, to answer that question. I have no idea." So saying Seiko levitated two more plates, with one cluster each, to the flying pair.

After finishing one of them, she held her plate out to the couple and said "One and a half, or you can fight over who gets the second one." But instead of splitting it, the two ponies looked each other deeply in the eye, the colt whose face Meadowlark could see looked grim, sad, maybe even depressed. He had green eyes that were as bright as first grass freshly broken through the ground in early spring.

The mare, blushing, turned to Meadowlark's plate and pushed the proffered flower cluster to her own plate, and the colt's face relaxed into its prior neutrality. *So, they are a couple, and have been for long enough to know about her.* She thought to herself. Pretending to sing a campfire song, she stared into the flames and started humming, quickly assembling words that rhymed in her head. What had Emerald Lighting said? Sing about pegasi who are failures. If they talk to you because of it, they're my family.

Was a pony named George
Flew through ghaſtly gorge
briars took an eye, eels took a
hoof We don't know why, he can't fly that goof

Ol George flew north with the birds
mistaking wrap up for layout's words.
Woulda froze the family o' geeses
if he wasn't slower than molasses

Now George just got old and built a
cloudly hold giant igloo in the sky
every pony asking why oh why can't
that poor pony fly?

She'd been right. Her friends stared at her, and other than Flarestar, just enjoyed her voice, not thinking about where the song had come from or why she was singing it now. Singers sang, right? But Flarestar, bless her large heart and small brain, was trying to sing along and apparently was stymied by the fact she'd never heard the song before. So she was humming somewhat tunelessly in an attempt to continue the song.

But the young couple were eyeing her with eager trepidation, free food forgotten. They looked at her like she was either the biggest boon, or biggest threat they'd ever come across – and they weren't quite sure yet whether to throw their hooves around her, or fly for the nearest bolt hole. She looked up from the fire to meet their gaze, and smiled as gently as she could manage.

After a moment the colt said "Hey that was pretty good. Reminds me of another singer ... uhm ..." The intonation said *'im still thinking'* but his eyes said *'finish the sentence for me'*

"Hmm?" Meadowlark played the game. Some around this fire were not yet to be fully trusted. How much to give away? "A green unicorn, probably? Emerald ... somebody?"

It was enough. A single tear of joy started to roll down the colt's face and even hidden by his deliberate nonchalance his joy was overwhelming him. He was holding his breath, apparently to keep from shouting his thanks. The mare set her plate down and hugged Meadowlark tightly.

"How far along are you? And, pardon me but is this your brother or I'm assuming the father..." Again, the pink pegasus blushed as she picked up her plate to finish the flowers.

That did get Seiko's attention. She moved the next batch of jungle blooms to plates while giving the young couple the once over. "You two came way out here just for a tryst? Even in the clouds ... oh, I guess not much messes with the clouds. Have you been out here all day? We were recently tasked with stopping a wholesale orange thieving ring and have been stymied by their means on a couple of levels." *Oops*, thought Meadowlark.

The colt coughed, and said "No, sorry ma'am. We're on vacation and wanted to see the forests down here. Haven't been into the city so couldn't say anything about their comings and goings." The mare looked warily over at the donkey and added to her colt friend's words. "It wasn't a tryst, more like an anniversary. Although I'm only like maybe four of the eleven months along Cloudsong & I have been together for awhile now."

If Seiko had glasses she would be staring over their rims at the young pegasus couple. "Congratulations, then." And with that went back to the remaining food to be cooked.

Flarestar was tapping her chin and staring appreciatively at the pegasi. About the moment Meadowlark was going to speak out that setting them on fire would not make an appropriate gift, the candy cane unicorn rushed off into the darkness of the night. With her headache, trying to look for her made Meadowlark dizzy. But within a minute Flarestar was back, dragging an odd compilation of jungle leaves, downed wood decoratively singed into a large barrel shape, and she'd somehow managed to enchant flight onto the set of large open leaves at the top.

"I'm a big fan of fire, you two. Well, and flight. I can only manage it for a few seconds myself but I thought I'd combine the two. Here's a barbecue stand that should be able to follow you into the clouds!" Wheeling it toward the happy couple she warned them. "The glue might give way I'm not sure yet so for the first few barbecues don't make it float right above somepony. Well, unless you want to dump hot coals on their head but you two don't look the type."

The young stallion graciously accepted the odd gift from the odd pony and offered to fly it to their cloud campsite. The young mare nodded and away the pony went, slower than most pegasi launches because while the barbecue was following orders and following him up, it was not to be confused for a lithe and fluid pegasus. It floated up about half the speed the colt wanted to go.

Meadowlark tried to think of ways to separate herself from Seiko and the probably too talkative Flarestar. Since her headache was making thinking hard, she settled on making eye contact with the grown filly when she could tell Seiko wasn't watching, and said "Hey I'll be right back." and got up and left.

Now, the ruse was supposed to be that she needed to go pee, but actually would talk to the pegasus about she didn't know what yet. She wasn't really sure what she had seen in the village, actually. But once she got up she realized she actually did need to go pee and was thankful the

pegasus had not followed her.

So it was just her luck when, backed off the trail and tail in some bushes, a dark pink blob dropped straight out of the sky, silent as an owl landing with an introduction of "You wanted to talk to ... oh."

"Just hang on. Sorry." There wasn't exactly any niceties out here and she didn't trust a random leaf she couldn't identify to wipe herself with, so she made sure she was finished dripping, and hoped in the much reduced firelight it wouldn't show how much she was blushing. "Okay really did need to go. But yes, I'm afraid I don't have much help to offer you but I think there's a powerful magic artifact only I don't know what it does. It appears to be surrounded by zombies."

Again, the pink mare hugged Meadowlark. "Dearest Meadowlark," she whispered, even more cautious of being overheard than she herself was being. "Even you knowing I'm ... whatever you think I am, and telling me you want to help is such an encouragement."

"And I can tell you a little about the thing you found. The zombies all dropped, and as of nightfall haven't gotten back up. And it really was a rainboom Colors were lacking any kind of focus and oddly the energy went through solid matter like it wasn't slowing it down but the power and the beauty were all there."

Meadowlark wished she had a spare brush to offer this young pony. But a friendly face would have to be her help, and it seemed it would be enough, for now. "Does an artifact that can drop zombies and create beauty help you in any way? I'm hoping to make my own journey, probably bringing along that donkey, to find where the drop-outs actually go. I've heard you guys, well in general you guys have looked but I want to try too."

A sharp intake of breath behind her. The colt, free of the barbecue unit, had dropped in completely silently behind Meadowlark. "Quite a few have tried, but be my guest." he said, also whispering very quietly. "Here's an interesting thing, though. We know that a lot of money – like, canterlot porkbarrel levels of a lot, have been spent by the Cloudsdale Weather Factory's research and development labs. As near as we can tell, it has to do with understanding rainbows – and there was a flurry of spending on reproducing the sonic rainboom mechanically, or magically, instead of just flying quickly. You've probably heard of the Rainbow family? I guess a fill from it, made a rainboom during a middle school race against other students."

Actually she had heard something about that, but it had been a few years. "Well, maybe if it's not too terribly heavy, you should take the rock and hid it somewhere. No idea why it was so hidden in here but I'd hate for that awful stuck up pegasus mare from the PPP to get ahold of it."

Both pegasi reacted noticeably – she, by wrinkling her lips and wringing her ears. Cloudsong whipped his head off to look at the darkness to his right, and sighed strongly, his anger and impotence preventing him from doing anything. But after a moment he looked back, a hardness in his eyes that had not been there a moment before. He nodded once, and said "You're right. They have enough magical artifacts; no sense letting this one slip."

His wife, whose name she hadn't learned, said gently to them both "We should get back now." Waving Meadowlark on, she repeated herself "Go on." And with that, both of them launched

themselves straight up, their wings barely a whisper in the night.

When she had made it back to the campsite, Sharp Wit asked if she was okay, and she nodded but immediately regretted it, and patted him on the back. Looking around at the others she asked "Oh, did I miss them both, then?"

But at that moment they both dropped straight out of the sky, and Cloudsong said "Thank you, ma'am, for the ... barbecue. But we're catching up with some friends on a cruise ship sometime tomorrow so we should get back to our cloud and get it drifting west."

The mare, too, waved goodbye to everyone. This time her eyes were just a little colder. Guarded. She didn't hover over Meadowlark's eyes even a split second longer than any of the others. And with that, they pushed off, and were somewhere in the night.

To Meadowlark's chagrin, Flarestar leapt up after them, and managed both to get more than thirty hooves in the air, she stayed there. At first Meadowlark thought she was not moving at all, but then realized the unicorn was not moving but was floating back down very slowly. To all of this, Seiko did not react. She was busy writing in her diary, even when Flarestar's hooves set back down ... a little off from her launch point and she landed in the campfire directly. The unicorn jumped quickly out of the fire, spitting up sparks everywhere but she didn't seem upset about it.

"We'll need to retrieve our artifact in the morning." Spoken by the donkey, but she still wasn't looking up from her diary. Meadowlark felt her heart sink. Would the runaways have time to hide the artifact? If not, she would just have to make sure it stayed with Seiko and was not turned over as part of any "investigation."

"What all happened? I mean, I was there." She looked around, found the cart where the party had left it. She went to retrieve her bedding since it appeared they were sleeping right here, next to the edge of reality. "But things just kept getting weirder and I was pretty sure reality stopped enforcing itself when you started chanting."

Sharp Wit sighed. "It is true, singer mare, what you say. That angry molehill should not have been as tall to walk as it was, considering how short it was to look upon." That he didn't wave his claws around to point could, she thought, have been because in the darkness there was nothing to point to. But it could also be he was so worn out that he did not want to move beyond the minimum.

Even Flarestar seemed subdued from her normal effervescence. "Really tall. And there was an earthquake going on and the thing got steeper when you climbed up I had to really stretch to reach the top of the thing what about you Seiko" The unicorn whipped her head to look at the donkey, who was putting her glasses away now. "Did it start rumbling when you walked down or anything?"

"The only reality suspension I saw," She made eye contact with the unicorn, but did not lift her head. "Was that the rabbit whom I have not seen since we left the road, seemed to have been present, and seemed to offer her lifeforce willingly, as if it were not a rabbit but a full pony, conscious of her choices and their impart." Now the donkey sat up, and made eye contact with

Meadowlark. "The rest, was simple magic. Understandable to a well studied mage such as myself." Seiko yawned, turning her head and wrapping her muzzle in her right fetlock. "There are details I don't understand, such as why all the zombies de-energized when we broke the corruption curse upon their artifact. And I'm fascinated by how the release of built up pony magics from so long ago would manifest as a rainboom in particular."

In the near distance, just outside of the dying firelight, Meadowlark could see two green eyes, low to the ground, bob up, make eye contact with just her, then disappear again into the underbrush somewhere vaguely back the way they had come – behind Seiko.

"Aww, you're always sleeping." Said Flarestar to the back of Seiko, who was tucking herself into her bedroll face first.

"Questions for the morning, my ever burning companion. Tonight is only the question of sleep" Came the muffled reply as Seiko turned herself around in the cramped quarters and her head emerged whence it had gone.

"What is question of sleep?" Asked a bemused diamond dog who was not doing anything in particular to prepare for bed. But then again, yesterday he had just dug a depression in the ground and called that his bedroll.

Seiko barely mumbled a reply. "Will I be able to, even though you all are" the word '*awake*' was probably appended to that, but the mage was far enough gone that words couldn't be pronounced any more. Which considering it had probably taken great personal effort to maintain the chant while giant pimples and root-tentacles erupted from a social services location turned graveyard, was understandable.

A light was ignited at the time of Flarestar's horn. It was a normal white, non flickering, and neither unbearably bright nor firestartingly hot. "Hey want to play a game of gin rummy?" Flarestar was shuffling by levitation of deck of cards.

Her head still hurt, but she was worried about Emerald Lightning. And the mare Windy, whom she had not met but would, according to Emerald, be executed in – She had slept once, and was about to sleep again, so in the morning it would be – four more days. Meadowlark needed to think and perhaps a simple card game would be the best way to not seem to be brooding.

Only, "There's not really a table, Flarestar." she said, looking around at the dying embers, the logs rolled into place to act as chairs, and the crushed vegetation still singed at the edges from their rather unconventional for non-Flarestar-ponies entry.

Sharp Wit patted the ground firmly around him, and mumbled "There is a rock." Then stood, and bent down, and set to digging. Mounds of earth, a pony's weight every second, flew between his back legs as his front half disappeared into the ground. About the time all of him was below the surface, he jumped back out with a rock with a flat side that was easily eight hooves long by an irregular four to six or seven hooves wide. Slapping it firmly into the singed vegetation, Sharp Wit proclaimed "Rock table for cards"

The ladies harrumphed and Flarstar set about cleaning the dirt off with excessive magic, ill

chosen magic, and bright, blustery magic. Once the surface was mostly prepared, and much smoother than when Sharp Wit had retrieved it, the three of them played cards for quite a while, chatting about what it might mean that there was a rock that could rainboom zombies into their eternal slumber.

Semi-precious gems and barbecuing techniques were also discussed at length before the night was done.

Save the DropOuts. Collect the whole set!

The oppressive heat, soft bedding of crushed vegetation, and the tall canopy hiding the sunrise saw last night's card players sort of slumped around the stone Sharp Wit had dug up. Meadowlark awoke to a loud 'clunk' as the stone cylinder was dropped into the middle of the cart.

Rolling onto one elbow, Meadowlark blinked until the world was less blurry and she saw several things. Seiko had cooked up (using a much smaller fire) more jungle flowers and some sort of nuts with them. Also, the stone was sitting in their cart. She could see this because it was not dark. Daylight had come upon the world long enough ago that even in the trees, under the canopy, Meadowlark could make out the state of things.

Meadowlark squinted at the cylinder. It was not glowing, and she was pretty sure at this distance that it was not enchanted. But she had mostly thought that last night, too. So she wasn't sure if her forewarned extended family had swapped the artifact, or if the source of its power was always hidden – or if in fact the cylinder was a red herring all along, and it was this place that was enchanted, or had a hole through the universe or something. Being an earth pony, Meadowlark felt out of her element discussing the finer points of magic. Or the coarser points, really.

Sharp Wit was already waking, his breath nearly to his waking normal rate, and he had stirred several times since Meadowlark had sat up. But Flarestar was fast asleep, snoring and dead to the world. Standing now, Meadowlark took a step towards the unicorn, and gently shook her.

Seiko tsk'd the effort. Or the sleeping unicorn, she didn't actually say which. "You were up playing cards I presume?" was what she did say. "She'll be out like a light for a few minutes yet. Have some breakfast and don't stand in front of her in case she wakes suddenly."

While Meadowlark nibbled on the flowers which were actually well complimented by the jungle nuts, Seiko strapped herself into the cart's traces and practiced some sort of spell that was probably meant to apply force to the cart. It seemed she was aiming at the axles, at any rate.

A giant clawed hand reached out and snatched his share of the nuts. Sharp Wit was awake. "You can spell cart into going faster, donkey?" Which was followed by noisy crunching of nuts, his mouth lolling open while he was still on his side.

And there there was a snort, and the northeast corner of their camp was filled with a thirty hoof wide orange ball of flame rising rapidly and emanating about fifty thousand basic thermal units over the span of about two seconds. "Xiuhtecuhtli I am honored to. Oh." The unicorn looked

around at the modest camp, the ducking diamond dog, the bemused jennet and mare behind her staring wide-eyed, and the vegetation not attacking her, or doing much of anything besides smoldering as internal moisture fought against external combustion to the tune of a hiss and the occasional pop. She dropped from standing at attention to sitting, then rubbed her eyes. "Good morning guys. Was dreaming about that Aztec god challenging me to a drinking contest."

Meadowlark helpfully pointed out the remaining food, and Seiko said "If only the world could be seen through the lens of your eyes, friend. We have obligations to keep before taking this artifact to a proper college laboratory."

All fires extinguished, now-empty skillet levitated into the back of the cart next to the still inert looking rock, and Seiko fired her spell for real this time. The cart didn't move, but when Seiko leaned into the rigging she was able to pull it with only a little more pressure than a normal walking pace.

"Didn't that spell nearly get you run over last time?" Said an ever enthusiastic Flarestar as she ran from leaf to leaf trying to suck morning dew off of them. Meadowlark still had water in her canteen from the last creek they'd passed.

"Oh hush. This isn't any variant of a come to life spell it's a weightlessness spell."

"So the one that nearly broke you back the time before, then?" Clearly, thought Meadowlark, these two have some adventures to tell under their belt. Seiko just snorted in response to the unicorn's second question.

Having found several gems Sharp Wit looked happy, if still sleepy when he asked "How weightlessness break your back, pony?"

Another derisive snort, but Seiko followed this one with an explanation. "It was actually an antigravity spell that she's referring to. It made a portion of the cart want to fall up. The rest was still attached but wanted to fall down as per the usual, and it should have netted me a weightless vessel."

Done sucking down mouthfuls of dew, Flarestar was doing her pogo stick pronk now. "Half by volume but you didn't split it by density." Meadowlark could have sworn the unicorn's eyes were closed as she bounced with a pleased smile on her face.

Seiko sighed, defeated. "Yes. So it ended up floating up like a hot air balloon after a few seconds and I was caught dangling by my rather bony tuchus region. It made canceling the spell difficult to concentrate on."

Nibbling on flowers now, Flarestar added between mouthfuls "Had'ta fly up. Add my bulk it" munch, munch. "Brought everything back down."

Nibbling on one of his gems, Sharp Wit asked "Pony can fly? Where are wings, pony?" At which point Flarestar's coat began to glow a gentle red, and when she reared up ... she kept going. Flying quickly above everyone's head she zoomed past Sharp Wit's ear, and landed exactly where she had started.

It was the first time Meadowlark had seen the unicorn panting. "Tiring. Concentration, magic, whole bit." But she seemed to recover quickly enough, and was trotting in circles again within a minute or two.