

Perquisition

Chapter 15

Sketch's eyes drifted slowly to the side, not wanting to make eye contact with Crimson.

"About what happened in the temple," he started. "... I...I..."

She breathed deeply before continuing. "Why is this always so hard?" she muttered. "Might as well get this over with. Crimson Aegis... I... I li—"

"Like me," he finished for her. "I a-already know that," he said quietly with a smirk.

Sketch began to glance towards Crimson's face. "Right, because that's what you... *heard*. I was sort of hoping we could have this nice talk first before you found out. Maybe something to drink..."

Crimson put on another nervous smile. "I'm f-flattered. R-R-Really, I am... but..." His voice trailed off.

"But? But what?" Sketch asked. She walked up to him, just close enough so that they were talking face to face.

Crimson inhaled and paused his breath for a moment. "I'm s-sorry... but... I d-d-don't feel th-the same way."

An awkward silence filled the room. All that could be heard was the breathing of the two ponies.

"I... see," Sketch said. "I guess that idea's out of the window." She tried to laugh, hoping the sound covered up the sound of her voice cracking. "Are you sure we couldn't give it... you know... a shot? Just... a date maybe?"

The stallion bit his lips and looked away. "N-n-no, it's... Th-the thing is... I don't feel that w-way... about..." He mumbled something, almost in a whisper, and Sketch leaned closer to him while raising her brow.

"What was that last part?"

He sighed heavily, trying his hardest not to look at her. Eventually, he had to bite the bullet.

“...I’m not s-sure if I like mares...”

It took a few moments for Sketch to realise what he had just said, but once it sunk in she began to blink at him with wide eyes. “Wait... so it’s not me? I thought you didn’t like me as in you thought I had a bad personality or something... but you don’t like *mares*?! As in, you don’t *like* them, but nothing against them personally?” She rambled, exhaling when done and instantly feeling relieved. Her eyes suddenly narrowed into small cracks as she looked in his direction. “Wait... does that mean that you like...”

She didn’t have to say another word, as Crimson was already blushing as he sat down and stared into the wall, nodding meekly. “I had always th-thought you and K-Kickbolt were... *together*. But s-since I I-I-learned that you liked *me*... I figured you two w-weren’t a c-c-couple.”

The light green mare tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

Crimson swallowed. “I w-wanted t-to ask... d-do you think I have a chance with K-Kickbolt?”

The exhaustion she had felt earlier was completely gone by this point. She began to hum to herself and scratched behind an ear. “When I first met Kickbolt a couple of years ago, I tried to... approach him. I got rejected by him, too. At the time he said something about... not being sure if he liked girls that way.” She cracked a smile towards Crimson, who was listening with both ears perked up. “I’ve never really confirmed it myself... but I always assumed he was a coltcuddler. There’s been a lot of signs, though.”

The unicorn raised an eyebrow at the expression, then smiled. “I... Th-Thank you, Sketch. I m-may not *like* you in such a w-way, but you’re still a g-good friend.”

After the her guest returned to his room, Sketch sat on the edge of her own bed for a while, tapping against the wooden floor with her hooves dangling. As she thought about what had just happened, her smile slowly turned into a frown, until she finally let out a heavy sigh as she crawled in under her sheets.

Just as she managed to make herself comfortable, a dark head popped out of the wall.

“K’les confused. What ‘coltcuddler’?”

Shrieking loudly, she threw her pillow at the shadow’s face, yelling at him to get out.

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The elder held up his ear trumpet as he tried to make out what Sketch was shouting in his general direction. He nodded once he realized that she was thanking him for his hospitality.

"You sure you don't want to stay? We could use more ponies like you around here," Full Bellows yelled back at the mare. Adjusting his ear trumpet further, he finally relaxed as he signaled, using his hoof, that he could hear now.

"Thanks, but no thanks. We sort of have this... *thing* we have to do. By the looks of it, we'll be going to Ever City first," Kickbolt said, grinning at the thought of going to the big city again.

"You're going to Ever City?" Full Bellows asked. He pulled out a letter from his vest. *"Could you bring this letter with you? It's for my son. I'd appreciate it if you could get it to him."*

"Uh, sure, I guess," Sketch answered as she took the letter and stashed it in her bag. "But why not just send it with normal mail?"

"Too important. Lucky for you, I trust you." He winked towards Sketch, who stepped back in the process with an awkward smile on her face.

"Rrrright..." Crimson and Kickbolt traded a look with each other, then Sketch who nodded firmly. "Well, it's been a blast, but we're losing daylight here! We'll get this letter delivered for you. Buhbye!" She scurried towards the exit, trying to somehow stay inconspicuous.

Without wasting any more time, the trio headed out away from Hill's Base and towards Ever City.

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The grey young pony was standing alone in the clearing, busying himself with trying to erect a set of metal poles near the middle. Gathered closely together, they formed a small circle where they connected at the top like a tent. After Gearbox finished with putting them up, he stared at them for a moment before giving a nod to himself for a job well done. Giving them a light kick, they all simultaneously sparked to life as they began to hum in harmony with the small yellow light that was dancing around the top of it.

"No, I'm telling you Pledgeword. If we want to find anything we need to stay low."

"Fine. We'll attempt your way of doing this in the morning."

Gearbox turned his head to see his two female companions coming out from behind a

particularly large tree they'd decided to set up camp at. He smiled when they noticed him, and eventually began to grin as they began to stare at the contraption he'd set up.

"Gearbox, what in the blazes is *that*?!" Pledgeword immediately demanded. As she walked closer, the small light at the top fixed itself in her direction, turning bright red and buzzing loudly. Alarmed, the unicorn stumbled backwards, slamming her back into the tree they'd just walked around.

"Hostility detector," he responded simply with a wry smile, wagging his eyebrows at the mares.

Pledgeword and Spyglass looked at each other the latter just shrugged before the pink pony sighed. "Fair enough," she said as she moved her head about after the impact. The red light that had been buzzing to and from suddenly returned to its previous form as it began to calmly look around them.

"Is this the thing that will warn us if in case of danger?" Spyglass asked, flying above it and having a staring competition with the magical eye. Eventually, she forfeited as she descended again, rubbing her sore eyelids.

"Yes."

"I'm not so sure I'm willing to trust this thing, Gearbox. It looks like a piece of overgrown junk," Spyglass said with a frown.

The colt flinched, as if he'd been struck physically. After looking back to his beloved construction and then to the orange pegasus again, he pouted, his lip trembling ever so slightly. "Trust?" he asked, tilting his head sideways.

The pegasus glared at him for a couple of seconds, finally sighing in defeat. "Fine," she grumbled.

Pledgeword slowly cracked a smile of her own. "I suppose we can give him this. After all, his inventions have yet to actually cause any problems aside from not doing anything at all, at worst." She slowly paced around both Gearbox and his magically powered machine, slowly nodding to herself. "With this, we won't need somepony to stay watch while we rest," she argued, causing the colt to beam once again. "Where do you keep getting the magic stones to power these things, anyway?"

He turned back to the device, poking a small screen that had only appeared after he twisted a knob. After changing some settings back and forth, he turned back the same knob, causing the yellow transparent monitor to fade away. "Custom ordered," he replied flatly, as if deep in thought. He pulled a small lever, and stared at a small needle pointing at some numbers

as if there was currently nothing more important in the world.

"I might as well take this opportunity to inform you that I've finally agreed to Spyglass' suggestions. From now on we'll attempting a more subtle approach, rather than the usual scouting we've been doing up until now."

The gray pony flicked an ear and tilted his head backwards, glancing at the pink unicorn for a moment before returning to his apparatus. "Reconnaissance?"

"Pretty much," Spyglass confirmed. "We can't just look around aimlessly out in the open if we want to find these things; for all we know, they're actually *hiding* from us," the pegasus added. She pulled out a small blanket that she placed on the ground, making herself as comfortable as possible on the rugged cloth.

Pledgeword followed her lead, rolling out her own thin mattress on the camp ground, grimacing as she tried to flatten it properly against the damp leaves. As one final act before allowing herself any rest, she carefully brought out a pink pillow with white small frills and a silky pattern etched across it. As her head touched it, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Do you always need that over-stitched piece of fluff when you try to sleep? It's a waste of packing space," Spyglass growled with with one eye half-open. "Just look at Gearbox! He can sleep fine without any 'nice commodities'." She pointed a hoof in the colts direction. He was lying flat on the ground, already having fallen asleep whilst Pledgeword was readying her own sleeping area.

"Forgive me for bringing me a piece of home to help me relax," the unicorn replied in a snarky voice. "Does my pillow *bother* you? Is it *keeping you awake*?" she countered, to which the pegasus just rolled over, without responding. "Besides, have you actually *seen* his home? I wouldn't be surprised if he can make himself comfortable on the top of a heap of metal scraps."

"Right, whatever. I'm sorry," Spyglass said. "I guess I'm just tired after flying around all day, looking for something we're not even sure is there. Or maybe because it's the third day in the row I'm doing this? Or was it fourth? I lost count."

"We'll head back to town tomorrow night." Pledgeword gave a long yawn. "I'm not entirely happy with what we're doing either, but orders are orders."

"Orders'? The Explorer's Guild is practically based on volunteer work! We could just quit anytime we wanted and do some real work again instead of following instructions from a senile old mare under the belief that we're being invaded from another world!" She turned on her back and flung her legs into the air. "I'm telling you, she's nuts! And I'm not sure I can take this any longer!"

Pledgeword sat up and looked in the orange pony's direction. "Spyglass, what are you implying?"

"I'm 'implying' that I've had enough! When we get back to town next time, I'm quitting the guild. Maybe I'll see if I can move to Ever City and start my own shop or something, get a *real life*."

She shot the pegasus a glance. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "Since a couple of weeks ago, I guess? I'm just not sure that this is what I want to do any longer, especially with all..." she stretched out her hooves into the air. "All of *this* going on."

"If that is what you truly think, then so be it..." Pledgeword quietly responded. "We'll talk more about this in the morning, Spyclass. Good night."

The pegasus just muttered something to herself, turning back to face the gray bark of a tree.

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The three ponies all woke up in an instant as soon as the siren began to call.

"*What's going on?!*" Spyclass called out, covering her ears as she grimaced. "*What's that noise?!*"

Gearbox pointed towards the top of the gadget, at the mystic eye that had been looking around earlier. It was now a blood red color and focused towards a couple of bushes at the other side of the camp. He gave it a confident kick and the siren shut off, but the eye continued to stare towards the same direction.

Only moments after the trio looked to the bush, it rustled briefly, before a dark shape barreled out of it, running away.

"Wh-what was that?!" Spyclass blurted out, shaking heavily. "Did you see that? What was that?!"

"A hostile, if Gearbox's machine is to be believed," Pledgeword said. "Did anypony get a good look at it?"

"I *just* asked what it was!"

“But did you *see* it? Yes or no, Spyglass?” Pledgeword asked again.

“I don’t know *what* I saw!” The pegasus pulled at her own face. “It was... it was...”

“Here,” Gearbox said from behind them, by his machine.

A soft orange projection appeared before them, floating in mid-air as the eye on top of the machine conjured it. A picture of the bush could be seen, as well as a creature behind it.

“It would seem that whatever we’re out here looking for...” She swallowed. “...found us first,” Pledgeword said softly, inspecting the picture keenly.

“What do we do? Follow it?” Spyglass asked, sweat beads forming on her forehead.

“No,” the unicorn responded sharply. “For now, we report back to Master at the guild...”

Pledgeword paused, deep in thought, and then began to chuckle heartily. “What’s the matter with you?!” the pegasus snapped. “We’re dealing with *who* knows what and you suddenly throw a laughing fit?”

“I was just thinking about our *senile* and *nutty* master, about how right she seems to have been.”

Spyglass spoke through clenched teeth. “Not the time, *Pledgie*.” The pink unicorn flinched slightly at the nickname.

“Correct,” Gearbox cut in. He brought up another monitor like the first, except it seemed to show an overlay of the area they currently were in. He pointed towards a set of red dots closing in towards the middle, circling around three blue dots they could only assume meant themselves.

“There... There’s more, and they’re surrounding us.”

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“I’m telling you Sketch, once a mare enters the marketplaces of Ever City, they *never* leave!”

The green mare huffed. “You’re *that* eager to get rid of me?”

“What? No! That’s not what I meant!” Kickbolt assured her. “I just mean—”

“Relax, I’m just teasing you. Sarcasm really does go over your head sometimes,” she said, giggling as she covered her mouth with a hoof.

The pegasus dropped down a level, now flying parallelly with the other’s walking. “Not fun.”

“S-So...” Crimson began. “Where e-exactly are we going? I th-though we were just passing through Ever City, b-but from everything K-Kickbolt wants to sh-show us it s-seems like it’d take days.”

“Uh...” Sketch opened her mouth while thinking about the question. “K’les, help me out, where exactly are we going?”

The shadow’s head popped out of the dark mass that had been following them close to the ground. “Don’t know. Only know which way.”

“What, so it could be days on the other side of the town? *Weeks?*”

K’les, now fully surfaced, stilled for a couple of seconds as he thought about the question. Suddenly his head began bobbing as usual when he came up with an answer. “Maybe?”

“*Aaargh!*” Sketch yelled out to the sky. “That’s it! Once we get there, I’m officially taking a vacation. We’ve been walking for *days* and my legs are sore!”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Kickbolt agreed as he floated alongside her. He received an evil eye from Sketch, which finally got the pegasus to land and walk again. “At least we’re close now, I mean we can actually see it now!”

“We *know*. You’ve been saying that all day, but it still doesn’t feel like we’re getting any closer. How big is that place?” Sketch asked, staring off towards the mountain in the distance. On top of it a fort like structure could be seen, and surrounding the fort itself, the actual city could be seen tapering off the further away from the hill it got.

“Big. Many parts of the actual city still haven’t been occupied... I think.” He smiled nervously, tapping his chin. “That, or they might have just been empty whenever I passed through. I dunno.”

“Well... y-you’re the local e-expert. Where d-do you th-think we should go first?”

“Oh!” The pegasus brightened up immediately. “I have *got* to show you this Steam-tech

store! It's the place I've been getting my custom-ordered things from, *and* that made these for me!" He flexed his wings, showing off the wing-harness he'd been wearing for most of the trip. "You liked all that stuff I had back in my house? They make things like that for a living!"

"What," Sketch deadpanned. "Do you seriously want to take him to—" She stopped once she turned to see Kickbolt, giving her his best pair of puppy eyes. What had really stopped her was seeing Crimson behind the pegasus, smiling at her, mouthing the word 'please'. She sighed loudly. "Fine. I guess it's okay, as long as you don't end up buying something that'll burn your mane off."

"That only happened once!" he retorted. "Actually, when I think about it, maybe you should come with us too. There's something I want you to try."

"*What*," she deadpanned again, this time louder. She looked at Kickbolt, who was grinning back at her widely. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I may have only just remembered it, but there's an actual reason for it!"

"What? What reason could there *possibly* be for you to bring me into a deathtrap store like that?"

Kickbolt chuckled. "You'll see."

"Then I guess I'm not going," she said decisively with a huff.

"Aw, come on, Sketch! I'm serious here!" Kickbolt flew up in front of her, flying backwards as he tried to convince her. "I want it to be a surprise! Is that too much to ask for?"

"Why d-don't you t-trust him, Sketch? How b-bad could it be?" Crimsoned argued.

"You're only saying that because you haven't seen what his... his... *things* sometimes do! I was serious about not lighting his mane on fire, that actually happened once!"

The pegasus crossed his forelegs, still in mid-air. "I'm never hearing the end of that, am I?"

Sketch cleared her throat, trying to adjust her voice. "*My mane is on fire! My mane is on fireeee!!*" She flailed her legs around into the air, mimicking a scream for help. By now, K'les was mimicking Sketch. "*Put it out put it out putitoutputit--*"

"*Alright!*" the pegasus boomed. Sketch's laughter began to die out after she stopped, and Crimson was stifling his own much more subtle chuckles.

“No more dance?” the shadow asked, now doing the flailing motion much slower and waiting for approval to continue.

“No dancing,” Kickbolt replied irritably, as to which the shadow sunk back into the ground, hiding beneath Crimson’s shadow with a sulk.

He glanced the other way. “Maybe it’s a *little* dangerous, but this is Sprocket’s Store. It’s in the middle of Ever City! Do you think they’d just let *any* store be in the middle of the city if it was dangerous?”

“Well maybe... wait, what did you say?” Sketch asked as she began rummaging in her pack.

“Uh...” Kickbolt began. “It’s in the middle of Ever City?”

“No, before that,” she replied. After a moment she found what she was looking for, and she pulled out the letter they had received from Full Bellows.

“...Sprocket’s Store?” he tried again, which was followed by a long and loud sigh from the mare’s part. “What’s wrong?”

“Ugh.... *that’s* where the letter is meant to be delivered. To this Sprocket guy.”

“You mean you’ll...?”

She sighed again. “Fine, I’ll come with.”

“Yes!” Kickbolt bellowed, swooping down to hug the smaller mare. “I promise you won’t regret this!”

Sketch narrowed her eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

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“Wow...”

Both Sketch and Crimson gasped in awe whilst Kickbolt stood beside them, grinning widely. Their necks craned up as their eyes followed the buildings. House after house, stacked on top of each others all around them, with bridges connecting back and forth in different angles. Looking into the distance instead of just up, they could see how this same pattern continued further than they could see.

Ponies could be seen trotting around, minding their own everyday business, either by shouting out for others to come take a look at their wares at their stalls or the random ponies walking around just chatting to each other. The buzzing of the community could already be heard before they actually entered the city as they walked past the guards.

“There’s... so many ponies,” Sketch murmured. “I’ve never seen this many ponies before!”

“D-D-Ditto,” Crimson gasped out, backing off a few steps upon seeing them all. “I-I-I’m n-n-not so s-s-sure...”

“Relax!” Kickbolt placed himself next to him, pulling him closer with a wing. “Nothing’s going to happen. I grew up here, I know this place like I know my own wings!”

Crimson turned his head away to hide his blush. “R-Right...” he responded meekly. Sketch saw how he acted and nodded towards them with a wink and a smirk, but he just returned a mild shake of his head.

“What are you two doing?” the pegasus asked, folding his wing back as he used it to scratch his head.

“Nothing!” they both squealed out. Sketch attempting to hide her smirk with a hoof as Crimson continued to blush.

“So,” the green mare tried to change the subject. “Where do we go? Where is this store?”

“Oh! I think I know where it is,” Kickbolt answered. “Well, more or less,” he added. “Sorta-ish.”

“I thought you knew this place like your own wings,” Sketch replied flatly.

“What?! I never said that!”

She sighed. “You did, like thirty seconds ago.” Crimson nodded slightly in agreement.

“I did? Heh, must have forgotten I said that.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he grinned as usual, chuckling to himself. “No matter! We’ll probably find it sooner or later, we could just look around, maybe I could give you a tour along the way!”

“Let’s just focus on finding that stupid store already,” Sketch murmured. “I promised I’d deliver the letter, so let’s get that done first before we start wandering.”

The darker than average shadow underneath Crimson suddenly shifted to Sketch, and a low voice could be heard echoing in their immediate vicinity. "K'les help too!"

"Shh!" Sketch hushed him. "What are you doing?! You've got to stay hidden when in towns, remember?"

The shadow shrunk slightly, merging better with her own. "Sorry..."

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"Girl, sorry, but I don't sell those things. No pony in their right mind eats them."

The mare frowned at the merchant. "But your sign says 'Fruits, Berries and Nuts', why *wouldn't* you sell them?"

"Why? They're disgusting! I've never actually met a pony who'd willingly eat a rotnut. You know why they're called that? Because they taste as if they're *rotten*. Now do you actually want to buy anything or are you going to continue making my other customers lose their appetite by mentioning those damnable things all the time?"

Sketch sighed and handed over the money she owed for a pair of red shiny apples.

"Thank you," the old mare muttered as she greedily grabbed the coins. "Now please leave already, I'm already feeling queasy from thinking about those things for too long."

With a roll of her eyes, Sketch walked out of the store with a disappointed look once again.

"N-No luck?" Crimson asked, sitting on a bench whilst staring down to a couple of levels below. He was looking past a few bridges, at all the ponies literally running from place to place.

"No luck," the mare repeated as she joined him. "That's two stalls and one store, and all I've got is the name of the thing. 'Rotnut', apparently because they taste as if they're rotten already," she muttered. "I really liked them! How hard is meant to be to purchase a couple of giant blue nuts?"

The unicorn stallion stuck out his tongue at the memory of the fruit. "R-Rotnut? S-Sounds about right..."

"So how are you holding up? You don't seem to like crowded places." She pulled out one

of the newly bought apples and tossed it to Crimson, who caught it with his magic. He rubbed it against his chest to get the shine just right.

“I-I’m not s-sure. It’s b-better up here, where there’s l-less p-ponies running a-about, b-but...” He stopped to take a small bite out of the apple, swallowing it quickly. “It’s l-l-like I n-need t-to see all the ponies n-nearby, or I d-don’t know what they’re c-currently doing... and th-that... frightens me.”

“So you dislike crowds? We’ll, you’re doing way better than me or Kickbolt.” She took a bite out of her own apple while the unicorn gave her an odd look. “Well... you saw how I reacted to...” She gulped. “...water?” To which he nodded once. “And we both saw what happened to Kickbolt when he saw blood. Both of us freaked out for different reasons, you’re just uncomfortable,” she reasoned. “Besides, the risk of you freaking out because of a crowd of ponies while in the middle of nowhere is highly unlikely, while I could... I could--”

“Sketch?” Crimson interrupted her, nodding her shoulder slightly. “T-Thanks,” he said with a weak smile.

“Y-Yeah,” she blurted out. “No problem!”

After a few seconds of silence, aside from a passersby ever so often and the sound of the marketplace several levels beneath them, both of them took a bite out of their fruits.

“Sho,” Sketch began again with a mouth full of apple, “what about Kickbolt?” She swallowed. “I mean, are you going to say anything?”

Crimson responded with his trademark blush as he began to choke on his apple momentarily. “I-I-I-I...” he trailed off.

She smirked and prodded him with her elbow. “If you want, I could try and set you up or something.”

Crimson continued to blush, and stared out into space without saying anything.

“Crimson?” She tried again. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you or anything. Look, how about this. The next time we’re all together and I get a chance to leave the two of you alone,” she stared down at her own shadow. “That’s assuming hitchhikers do as they’re told.” The shadow quivered slightly. “I’ll just let the two of you go and do something. Ask him to show you around or something, maybe eventually you could talk to him.”

“M-Maybe...” he said. “I-I... d-don’t know. Whenever I t-think about s-saying anything, my whole b-body s-s-screams at me.”

Sketch stared at him, then began giggling loudly, with the occasional high pitched snort.

“W-What’s so f-f-funny?!” Crimson asked with a glare.

“I think *somepony* really has a crush!” she said with a grin. “I can’t believe I was thinking the same thing just a couple of days ago.”

“W-What?” the unicorn asked, lowering an eyebrow.

She poked him in the chest. “About *you*. I don’t know why, but after our first time on the field with you along with us, I began to feel that way about you. I’ve always liked figuring out puzzles of sorts, and you were just one big question mark. But I suppose it wasn’t really more than a crush,” she sighed.

By now Crimson was staring down at the ground beneath them again, past the bridges. “S-Sorry…”

“Oh! Don’t worry about it! As I said, it was just a crush, and I’m over it already,” she said with a smile. “Right now I’m more concerned about *you* and *Mr. Back-in-a-jiffy*. Speaking of which, where *is* he?!” She asked nopony in particular, as she got up on the ledge of the bridge connecting the two tower like buildings together, scouting around for the navy blue pegasus out of the many ones zipping around the city.

As if on cue, the pegasus in question popped down before the bench they’d been sitting on a moment ago, wiping the sweat of his brow. “Whew!” he let out. “I found it! Turns out it was much closer than I thought. I didn’t actually have to fly around half the city to find it.”

Sketch having now jumped down again met him with a tired glare. “How close?”

He pointed to his own right. “One building, two levels down, that way.”

Crimson repeated what he’d just heard in a low voice. “W-Weren’t we th-there an h-hour ago?”

“I guess we must have missed it?” The pegasus shrugged his wings as he smiled sheepishly. The accompanying mare just hid her face behind a hoof.

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Upon entering, the sign said “Sprocket’s Store. Trinkets, Gadgets, and Experimental Weaponry.” Sketch trembled after reading it, mouthing the last two words to herself in fear.

However, her male companions gladly began to feast their eyes upon the many objects hanging on the walls and lying on shelves, much like in Kickbolt's home. Saddles with mechanical arms hanging out of them, or what looked like tanks with attached nozzles. Weapons that could be strapped directly onto the legs or the body, with blades and such that looked as if they would fold inside when not in use. And finally a vast display of seemingly random gadgets lying about, ranging from some familiar ball shaped objects they recognized as linked switches, all the way to what looked like a giant suit of armor on wheels, standing in a corner by itself. The main difference was that there was some degree of organization here, as expected of a store.

"Hello?" Kickbolt called out, popping his head over the empty front desk. "Is anypony here?"

"Back here!" a voice boomed out through a door just behind the desk.

Walking in, they could see a large, brawny, forest green stallion, working with his back turned towards them.

"Just a moment! I'm almost done here," he said, louder than he needed to. "Can't take my eyes off this until I've got the springs in place. Meanwhile, any business that could be settled with just talking?"

"Uh, we've got a letter for you? Assuming you're Sprocket?" Sketch answered.

"The one and only!" he replied. "Just place it on the desk, thanks. I'd shake hooves and introduce myself properly, but—" He flinched suddenly. "Darnit, almost lost the linkages!"

"Uh, don't worry about it, we'll just be—"

"You don't happen to make those leg mounted magic stone shooters?" Kickbolt suddenly cut in. "We'd like one for our friend here."

Sketch shot him a look. "*What—*"

"Leg mounted magic stone shooters'? I named them 'Conjury Shots' when I first invented them, *thank you very much.*" He responded with a slight annoyance to his tone. "But yeah, I make them, sell them and modify them as needed, whatever you need—" His entire visage suddenly seemed much more relaxed as he began to turn around. "*Finally,* got those darn springs aligned correctly. Sorry about that."

"Right, we'd like one of those Conjury Shot's for Sketch here," Kickbolt said, pointing to the mare."

"Again, Kickbolt, *what?*" she tried to get his attention, but failed.

The dark green earth pony slowly pulled his eyes down to Sketch, who was seemingly half his size, and he blinked slowly. "Sorry, I don't make them filly-sized."

Sketch's eyes twitched ever so slightly.

He scratched his white stubble as he hummed to himself, suddenly bringing his attention to the other stallions in the room. "Anything I could get for you two, perhaps?"

"Well, probably," Kickbolt responded, "but I really wanted Sketch to have a Conjury Shot... see—"

"I already said I'm sorry, but the half-pint is going to have to look elsewhere if she wants to arm herself."

This time, her eyes and tail twitched, but this was only noticed by the pegasus in the room, who suddenly began to sweat beads.

Sprocket sighed. "Okay, as thanks for delivering that letter, which is probably from my father, considering nopony else ever sends me letters, I'll see what I can do with shorty over here."

"Aaaaarrggghh!"

Sketch tackled him with enough force to send both of them rolling along the floor. An impressive feat considering how the earth pony she had just assaulted was much larger than anypony else nearby.

Crimson was suddenly being pulled out of the room. "W-What's g-g-going on?!" he uttered. "W-Where are we g-g-going?"

"Away," Kickbolt responded briskly, as he pulled the unicorn out of the store. "Before we become witnesses to a murder."

The light green earth pony was now standing on top of the much larger stallion whose face was almost as pale as his mane, staring into his brown eyes.

*"Don't. Call. Me. **Small.**"*

(Author's note: Okay! This chapter took longer than I had hoped, but it was still faster than the last one. Right? If anything, I'm sort of getting used to writing again. Maybe. I don't know. Please don't hate me.

As usual, many thanks to LysanderasD and ARBPW, the people who somehow manage to turn this mind-numbingly rage-inducing writing not fit for toilet paper into something readable. Or something like that.

So... thoughts on what's going on? Shipping isn't... I'm not very familiar with writing shipping, and it's not exactly core to the story. I'm not sure how well I'm doing it, so any comments on that would help, because right now I'm a nail-biting wreck, afraid of people who may not approve of the current events.

If you want you can reach me at diexna@gmail.com, or just on my account on fimfiction. Suggestions, comments, or if you just want to talk or anything! Please leave a comment and rate! (Please, like, really. I can sit up for hours waiting for new comments to drop in. I do read every single one of them, but I don't always answer because sometimes it just feels like I can't come up with a good response. Because I'm stupid.)