Chapter Ten

Nightfall found the three travellers trudging along the dirt road through the Zebrican plains, still far from the next town along their route.

"Are you sure we didn't take a wrong turn?" asked Sky. "I don't see any inns around here."

"It was clearly marked on the map," White Noise replied curtly. "I'm sure it's right over the next hill."

"I'll be the judge of that," Sky replied indignantly.

With that, she flapped her wings and soared up into the air, soon flying past the hill. She scanned the ground that spread out beyond it, squinting to make things out in the darkness.

"I can't see anything down there!" she shouted back to her companions. "Nothing except more grass and trees."

White Noise sighed heavily as Sky landed back with her companions.

"Well, maybe we did take a wrong turn somewhere," he admitted. "I guess I should have asked you to fly up and check, instead of placing all my confidence in this cheap map – piece of junk."

"What should we do now?" Sibwashie asked, interjecting calmly.

"I guess we should just keep walking," White suggested. "It's not like we really have a choice. If we need to, we'll find some comfortable grass to sleep on."

The three travellers exchanged glances. White shrugged and they continued walking.

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"I don't... think that that's an inn," said Sky, battling to keep her eyes open.

The three of them had been walking through the night for hours, with only the light of the lantern they'd purchased in Molaro to guide them. They had passed many trees, gone over many small hills and navigated a number of places along the road where the grass had grown to almost pony-height, but this was the first time they had come across any sign of civilisation.

"It looks like it could function as one though," White added hopefully.

To the right of the road, a gravel path led to a large brick mansion. Two neatly-trimmed walls of hedges lined the path and were themselves surrounded by a well-maintained garden, full of boxy flowerbeds and straight rows of trees. The contrast this had with the wild, sparsely foliaged plains around it was quite jarring.

"I am not averse to sleeping under the stars," Sibwashie stated, "but I feel that it would be a mistake to pass by this establishment without at least finding out a little bit more about it."

"Alright, let's do that," replied White. "Guess it can't hurt."

The travellers made their way up the gravel path towards the mansion's large wooden doors. Sibwashie made a movement to grab the knocker with his mouth, but White held up a hoof to stop him.

"I think I've got this," he said, closing his eyes and furrowing his brow in concentration.

White's horn glowed faintly, and the knocker soon followed suit, slowly rising into the air, and then falling back down as White released his magic. He smiled to himself as the knocker hit the door, and then proceeded to repeat the process two more times.

"It shouldn't be too much longer until I'm back in action," he told his companions cheerfully.

Before they could respond, the sounds of locks being released and heavy latches being lifted were heard from beyond the door, followed by a creaking as it slowly opened.

"Hello," said the pony at the door. "What brings you here? It's not often that I have guests."

The speaker was a gaunt blue pegasus, his mane and tail white from age. He wore a rumpled black tuxedo with a large red bowtie and had a neatly trimmed white goatee. His brown eyes twinkled warmly, and his facial expression showed the beginnings of a smile.

Sibwashie was the first to speak:
"Wise father, we feel that we are truly fortunate to have chanced upon this stately nest
With your permission and the necessary fee, we ask that you accommodate our rest."

"No 'fee' is necessary, young travellers!" the old pegasus said with a smile. "Of course I'll let you spend the night in my house – it's far too big for just one pony, and lately, I've been rather lonely."

Showering the old pony with thanks, the three hurried into the mansion.

"You can call me Mr Drifter. I was quite the globetrotter in my youth, so I sympathise with your situation entirely. Please, let my escort you to the guest wing – you all look positively exhausted!"

The mansion looked even larger from the inside than it did from the outside. A long stretch of red carpeting cut across a hard stone floor and scurried up the wide staircase the dominated the room the travellers had just entered. An enormous glass chandelier hung above their heads, and colourful tapestries hung on the walls around them.

White, Sky and Sibwashie glanced down at their dusty hooves self-consciously, feeling very out-of-place amidst the grand proportions of the room's entrance hall.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Mr Drifter chattered as he led his guests up the wide staircase and down the hall to the left. "I had it transported here from Equestria, you know – flown and teleported brick by brick!"

As the three travellers marvelled at the scale of such an operation, Mr Drifter swiftly brought them to the advertised guest wing. Using a wing, he pointed each of them to what would be their rooms, mentioning

little bits of trivia as he went.

"... that room was once occupied by Galineigho... the telescope stand is still attached to the window... and that one once hosted Marey, Queen of Oats..."

"Thank you for your generosity," White Noise eventually said, cutting Mr Drifter off. "We really are very grateful for such hospitality."

"And these rooms!" Sky interjected, having just peeked behind her door. "They're the most beautiful rooms I've ever seen!"

Mr Drifter smiled at White and latched onto Sky's excitement with a twinkle in his eye. "I would expect that to be the case, Ms Wave. Whatever positive things you can say about the cloud buildings we pegasi usually live in, nothing else ever quite compares to the majesty of a good, old-fashioned, earth-bound structure made out of solid stone."

White's eyelids drooped. *I could really go for the majesty of a soft bed right now*, he thought.

"Oh!" Mr Drifter exclaimed, noticing Sibwashie stifle a large yawn. "How rude of me! You three must be dying to get to sleep. Well, you know where your rooms are, so let me not keep you up any longer."

After a final round of profuse thanks, Mr Drifter trotted off to his own bedroom, and the three travellers entered their own. Sibwashie and White Noise had neighbouring rooms, and Sky Wave's was just across the hallway.

"Night everypony!" Sky said cheerfully.

"Good night."

"Night."

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Sibwashie stood on the edge of a great cliff, looking out at the plains of inland Zebrica. The veld was sporadically dotted by low, wide trees and herds of elephants, rhinos and wildebeest roamed around in the long grass.

He turned around to face a small village behind him. A few zebras milled around the dirt huts with their thatched roofs. Many wore colourful cloaks and saddlebags, and a group in the center of the village were trying on elongated wooden masks. Smiling at this peaceful scene, Sibwashie trotted forward to enter the village.

He was stopped in his tracks by a sudden chill in the air. The wind's direction changed, and Sibwashie felt his mane bristle against it. The zebras in the village lost their carefree demeanours and turned to face him, their eyes blank of expression. The expressions on the wooden masks seemed to contort into severe frowns.

Sibwashie opened his mouth to protest, but no words came from it. In their place, a torrent of glowing

cyan light flooded out, wrapping the entire village in its sparkly glow.

At first, the magical glowing did nothing but obscure the true colours of the village and its inhabitants, but soon enough, larger changes became evident.

The yellow bales of dried grass, charming in their unevenness, morphed into painted planks of wood. The circular huts started growing corners, and the dirt flecked away from their walls to reveal stone and wood. The black stripes on the zebras' faces began to fade to white.

Sibwashie felt a sharp pain in his forehead and glanced upwards to see a horn, alit with magic.

He awoke with a start, breathing heavily. A film of sweat drenched his face, and he felt his heart thumping against his ribs.

Sibwashie put a forehoof to his forehead. *Everything's fine,* he thought. *It was just a dream.*

Collapsing his head against his pillow, Sibwashie tried to go back to sleep.

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The three travellers awoke almost simultaneously the following morning, as their weeks on the road had taught them to. They met in the hallway just outside their rooms and headed downstairs together, hoping they would be able to find Mr Drifter in the great big rambling house.

"Mornin' everypony," White Noise yawned. "I slept very well last night – these beds are amazing! I trust you two had a good night's sleep as well?"

"Well, actually..." Sibwashie began, remembering his strange dream.

"I kept waking up from nightmares!" Sky blurted out. "...The beds are very comfy, though. You've got that right!"

"Hmm, well, that's unfortunate," White replied, his cheerful expression dampened by the sour ones on his friends' faces. "I wonder if there's any specific reason for it... I had some friends who studied dreams back at the school... fascinating stuff, it was..."

"Why don't we go downstairs and find Mr Drifter?" Sky suggested, the hole in her stomach making her less receptive to another of White Noise's school stories. "Perhaps we can have breakfast with him before we hit the road!"

"Well, I wouldn't want to be a burden," White replied, "but I suppose it'll be okay if he offers. He seems like the type who might."

White, Sky and Sibwashie made their way down the hall and towards the stairs, their hooves barely making a sound as they traversed the house's thick carpeting. On their way, they glanced at the many portraits of stern-looking, long-dead mares and stallions: presumably previous occupants of the castle.

As soon as the group reached the top of the stairs, a cheerful voice called up to them. "Ah, there you lot

are! Come on down here, you're up just in time for breakfast!"

Mr Drifter was smiling up at his guests from the first floor of the manor, clad in the same – or at least a similar – black tuxedo with a red bowtie from the previous night. *Probably the same one*, mused Sky Wave. *I wonder if he even* has *an iron in this great big house of his.*

The travellers made their way down the stairs and were quickly ushered into the kitchen by a their host.

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"I've always been a firm believer in labour-saving devices," Mr Drifter said. "They're the way of the future, you know!"

Drifter and his guests were seated around a small wooden table in the manor's kitchen, eating a traditional Equestrian breakfast of oats, hay and some barley, with a course of toast, marmalade and some coffee to wash it down. The breakfast and the table were arguably the most traditional things about the room.

Everything else – the fridge, the stove, the toaster – was covered by multitudes of metal manipulating appendages. The appendages were long, thin metal rods with various devices mounted on their ends, the most common of which was a grabbing device that strongly resembled a dragon's claw.

White, Sky and Sibwashie had been a little taken aback by the way their food had been prepared and served by dozens of spindly machines, but soon found themselves marvelling at the speed and efficiency of the automated kitchen. Sky reckoned that it probably made fewer mistakes and dropped fewer plates than a regular pony chef-slash-waiter.

"An old friend of mine made everything you see here," Mr Drifter continued. "Those earth pony engineers are something else!"

"Indeed they are," White Noise replied knowingly.

"The system didn't run nearly this smoothly at first, of course. Old Cogwork and I had to work out a lot of kinks just to stop it from endangering the lives of the ponies it was trying to feed! Of course, he did most of the work – I would just mention that 'the stove's left arm moves a tad fast, old boy' or 'maybe you should make that bit out of flame-retardant material'; things like that."

"I'm sure you were a greater help than you realised," Sky said sweetly.

"Thank you, dear – perhaps you're right! I certainly *helped* with all the testing meals we made – blew me up like a balloon, all the food did."

Sibwashie stifled a harsh glare, pushing thoughts of the country's drought and the famine it was creating out of his mind. *It will not do to be rude to Mr Drifter*, he thought to himself. *A pony this rich has to be influential as well; even if he lives in the middle of nowhere.*

"Why not head out into the garden with me?" Mr Drifter suggested, changing the subject as he noticed that his guests had finished eating. "It's not very often that I have guests, and it's such a terrible shame

that my beautiful garden never gets to delight anypony else."

"That sounds lovely," replied Sky Wave, already getting up from her place at the table. "We'd really appreciate a chance to see your garden up close, Mr Drifter."

"Excellent!" Drifter beamed, his eyes scrunching up against his cheeks. "Please, follow me – oh, don't worry about the dishes, Mr Sibwashie! They'll take care of themselves."

Sibwashie placed his breakfast crockery back on the table and got up with the others to visit the garden. His ears picked up the sound of the mechanical arms grabbing plates and dunking them into sinks of soapy water as he exited.

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The manor's back garden was even larger and more astounding than the gathering of plantlife that furnished the front of the building. Where the front garden had short, neatly trimmed hedges, the back garden had rows of tall, pointy conifers, many of which poked their tops above the slanted roof that sat upon manor's three-storey frame. Where the front garden had flowerbeds of daffodils and daisies, the back garden grew a more eclectic collection of Heart's Desire, Windroot and Manalily – there was even a specially-cordoned-off bed full of Poison Joke.

"Welcome to my garden, filly and gentlecolts," Mr Drifter said, beaming with pride as a made a sweeping gesture towards the garden with a forehoof. "This place is the fruit of my life's labour; the sum total of my long and numerous endeavours! Please, look around freely, and do not hesitate to ask about any of the trees and plants on display."

Sibwashie gazed up at a strong, tall oak tree to his left, frowning ever so slightly. Making a mental note to be polite, he caught Mr Drifter's attention with a wave of his hoof.

"This garden is a great achievement, with trees and flowers from all over the earth
But in the dry Zebrican climate, how do you give them each the water they're worth?" he asked.

Mr Drifter's eyes twinkled as he responded. "That's where being a pegasus pony comes in handy, my boy!"

He fluttered his wings and pointed a hoof at the door of a small square building, semi-detached from the manor. "I keep a healthy stock of clouds in my storeroom over there, and whenever the garden needs some water, it's a simple matter of pulling out a cloud and hopping on it a few times."

"How do you get your clouds, may I ask?" Sibwashie began.

"Griffon freelancers; with them it's an easy task," Drifter replied nonchalantly.

White Noise, who had been staring intently at one of the flowerbed and rubbing his chin with a forehoof, suddenly spoke up. "How do you manage to grow the Beneviolet here, Mr Drifter? Surely it can't survive away from the magic of its natural habitat."

"Astute question. The answer: it's Lesser Beneviolet – *Much Lesser Beneviolet*, I'd call it. I bolster it by

surrounding each individual flower with a circle of Manalilies, but if you were to pluck it and eat it right now, the best it could do is cure a papercut or maybe an upset tummy."

White Noise nodded with satisfaction. Sky Wave then pretended to gaze intently at the short, not-at-all-exotic lawn while she tried to come up with an intelligent-sounding question for Mr Drifter to answer.

"I could probably increase the potency of the Beneviolets a little if I used some magic harvested from my Poison Joke collection," Drifter mused, talking more to himself than anypony else, "but I don't really like to mess around with that stuff unnecessarily. I ended up with crossed eyes last time I did that."

"Crossed eyes?" asked White Noise, thinking back to what he'd learnt about Poison Joke in Introductory Alchemy.

"Oh!" Drifter exclaimed, suddenly yanked from his thoughts. "I don't suppose I ever told you travellers what my special talent is. And you couldn't have guessed either, what with the way this silly tuxedo (why do I wear such an outfit in this heat?) hides my cutie mark."

With that, Mr Drifter lifted one of his tuxedo's twin tails to reveal a picture of a weathered brown rolled-up map on his flank.

"You're a pirate!" Sky gasped.

"No, no, but my parents had the same concern!" Drifter assured, laughing to himself. "Before I retired, I was a cartographer – a maker of maps. But I was no ordinary mapmaker, no... I was also an explorer! I've always believed that mapping is about knowing, and there's no knowing without going!"

White nodded slowly.

"So, you see, the crossed eyes made it quite impossible for me draw maps, or to read them, for that matter!" Drifter quickly added, remembering White's question. "Of course, the joke was on the Joke, because I'm retired!"

Mr Drifter laughed heartily at his own joke, and his guests joined him with polite, rather more restrained laughter.

"It is so very nice to have company!" Drifter gushed. "You can't imagine how lonely it gets out here sometimes... I have my plants, my machines and my maps for company, but between you and me, I think they're starting to drive me mad..."

"Company alone cannot possibly be enough to repay your hospitality, Mr Drifter," White said, clearing his throat. "Please, allow us to give you a reasonable fee for –"

"Ha!" Drifter cried, waving White Noise off with a hoof. "Trust me, son, I'm much happier to have some company than having more money! I've got more of that than I'll ever know what to do with – I don't need to add to it."

"But, surely there's something more we can do for you," White pleaded.

Drifter put a hoof to his chin and thought for a moment before responding. "Well, some of my machines could do with a recharging, Mr Noise. Severing is so very much more effective than Manalilies and so much less hazardous than Poison Joke extract."

"That's actually the one thing I can't offer," White apologised, rubbing the back of his neck. "I severed my entire magic supply a few weeks ago, and it's been really slow in recovering. Right now I can barely lift a knife and fork."

"Well, that's a shame... but at least now I don't have to apologise for not having any of that funny unicorn cutlery stuff in the house!"

"Yeah, that's... something."

Smiling at his joke, Mr Drifter glanced casually at the watch on his left foreleg, and then looked back up at his guests, obviously preparing to launch into another of his speeches. Before he could even open his mouth, his eyes widened in realisation and he stared back at his watch.

"Oh my!" he cried. "My new shipment of clouds should be here! Since five minutes ago! Please excuse me while I go fetch that."

With that, Drifter flapped his wings and took off, flying over the manor instead of going through it.

Sky approached White. "Are you sure there's nothing wrong with you? Your magic is really taking its time to regenerate. Maybe you should find a unicorn doctor or something."

"I don't think I'm going to find any 'unicorn doctors' in Zebrica, Sky," White said, sighing heavily, "but you do have a point. My magic should be back to full strength by now. Even after that thing at the orchard, it's had plenty of time to recover. I don't know why I'm struggling like this."

Sibwashie stepped up to the two ponies and joined the conversation: "White, you mentioned a while ago that you were able to cast the spell that saved my life because of the relationship between magic and friendship. Perhaps you should look into that."

"An interesting idea, Sibwashie, but I don't know that I can," White replied. "From what Twilight Sparkle told me, I know only that 'friendship' between ponies has some sort of enhancing effect on magic. From my own experience, I can say that seeing my friends in danger recharges by magic by a large degree. Beyond that, friendship's exact relationship to magic isn't something I can pin down or use in any practical way."

A sudden breeze blew across the garden, ruffling the ponies' manes and breaking against Sibwashie's mohawk. A leaf detached from a large oak tree and slowly drifted down the ground.

CRACK!

A sudden, lound thundercrack sounded from in front of the house, startling the travellers.

"What was that?" Sky asked, looking up at the cloudless blue sky.

"Sounded like Mr Drifter's testing his new clouds," White replied calmly.

CRACK! CRACK!

"*AAAAH!*"

Hearing the sudden scream from the front of the house, Sky flicked her wings out and took off. "I don't think there's supposed to be screaming..."

White and Sibwashie nodded to each other and were already galloping back through the manor as Sky flew over its roof.

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Sky flew over the roof of the manor and into view of the front garden. She scanned the dirt road beyond the short, neat hedge walls and spotted a dark-brown, wooden caravan, parked directly in front of the path leading to the manor's front door.

Mr Drifter was standing just in front of the caravan, talking to three scruffy-looking figures. A particularly feathery one was holding a dark storm cloud right above his head, ready to strike him with lightning.

Sky let out a low squeak, immediately covering her mouth with her forehooves and hoping that she hadn't been seen.

"Hey! You there," shouted a gravelly voice. "Get down here, or the old guy gets it!"

Her eyes filled with dread, Sky meekly complied.

"That's a good girl," the gravelly voice continued, its tone now edged with menacing mock-kindness.

Sky landed between the gap in the low hedge walls in at the edge of the front garden. She could now see the three new arrivals very clearly, and they weren't a welcome sight.

A zebra mare and brown-coated earth pony mare stood on either side of a grizzled male griffon, whose right eye was covered by an eyepatch. The griffon gripped a small black cloud in his talons, which he was holding inches from the frightened face of a very pale Mr Drifter.

"Now just play along, and no-one gets hurt," the zebra rasped.

"I'll do as you ask! No need to be curt," Sky replied, suddenly getting a very cheeky idea. "Say, do you like oranges?"

The zebra replied with a swift slap across Sky's face. "Not everyzebra does that cute little rhyme thing, featherbrain."

"Hey! Leave her alone!" shouted a voice from the manor's door.

"What? There are more of you?!" the earth pony shouted.

White Noise and Sibwashie swiftly galloped to Sky's side, doing their best to look intimidating by scrunching their faces up in determined scowls.

"There sure are!" White Noise said confidently. "Now, you'd better tell us just what it is that –"

CRACK!

White was cut off mid-sentence by another loud thundercrack. A bolt of lightning shot up into the sky, briefly turning everything white.

A faint plume of smoke rose from the uplifted talons of the one-eyed griffon. "Enough!"

The griffon slowly brought his cloud back down into Mr Drifter's face. His beak twisted into a cruel smile. "You are going to co-operate with us, my little ponies. You are going to take us to where Grampa here keeps his clouds, or Grampa is going to light up like a firecracker."

Sky nudged her companions in the ribs, silently urging them to do as the griffon said. Sighing, they bowed their heads in defeated nods.

"Follow us," Sky said softly.

The seven creatures slowly marched to the still-open front door of the manor. Mr Drifter tried to eek out a "thank you" to his guests, but was cut short by a low growl from the griffon.

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The strange group made their way through the manor's ground floor and out into its back garden. Sky lead them, while the griffon dragged Mr Drifter along with him and the mares, brandishing knives in their mouths, kept four focused eyes on White and Sibwashie.

"There it is," Sky said, pointing a hoof at the small building built into the back of the manor. "Mr Drifter... he told us that the clouds are in there."

"Good," growled the griffon. "Now, ladies, please take care of Grampa, Needlehead and Stripes. Ribbonflank, you come with me. You're going to help move the clouds."

White, Sibwashie and Mr Drifter were ushered back into the kitchen, where they were held at knife-point while the mares used some rope from their fraying saddlebags to tie them each to one of the kitchen's many mechanical arms. At the griffon's request, Mr Drifter was gagged.

Sibwashie glanced at the hard brown eyes of the zebra mare and felt the need to say something.

"Sister, why are you doing this? It is not the way of our people to steal
If you have fallen on hard times, you know anyzebra will give you a meal."

The zebra frowned and glared at Sibwashie.

"Heh. A traditional," she smirked. "Well, brother, if you're so concerned about 'the way of our people', then maybe you should have thought twice before entering the home of The Drier."

"The Drier?" White Noise asked.

"The one you call 'Drifter'," the zebra replied, sighing. "He stores up this country's precious few clouds, drying our land and killing our crops. He cares not for the plight of the zebra – only for his precious garden."

Sibwashie let out a sharp breath. Mr Difter's garden was the greenest part of Zebrica he'd seen since getting off the boat at Molaro.

"We are taking The Drier's clouds to the people of Zebrica – the ones who need them to survive. The Drier can go arrange his flowers back in pony land."

Composing himself, Sibwashie quickly prepared a couplet.

"Why do you steal? You could have just said please.
Mr Drifter is wealthy; he gives kindly and with ease."

White Noise nodded enthusiastically at Sibwashie's words. "He'd probably throw in a free breakfast!"

White and Sibwashie's captors both had their backs to Mr Drifter, so they could not see him nodding enthusiastically, or starting to tear up.

"I do not believe it," the zebra said. "Now stop bothering me, or I will have Quarry gag you as well."

The earth pony's eyes flashed at the mention of her name, and she grinned menacingly at White and Sibwashie, her knife still clasped between her teeth. White caught a glance of her flank – three jagged rocks, arranged haphazardly.

"I'm sure you would find her special talent very intriguing, Mister Unicorn. However, I doubt you would be able to write a dissertation on it after I ask her to give you a demonstration."

White gulped and smiled nervously. "I'll... take your word for it, Miss..."

"Siela, if you must know. Now why don't we all introduce ourselves and have a little tea party? I'm sure you would enjoy that very much, Mister Pony."

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The door of the cloud storage room was not locked. The one-eyed griffon was pleased at this; he explained to Sky that he had left his crowbar in the caravan and was glad that he would not have to waste his valuable time fetching it.

"Now, here's how this is going to work," he growled, narrowing his good eye at Sky. "You are going to float all the clouds that you can handle out of this storeroom, over the house and into the back of my caravan.

It's enchanted, so there will be enough space."

The griffon then raised a sharp talon to Sky's nose, gently touching its tip. "If you try anything – anything at all – I will make your pretty little face look just like mine. So unless you want to go eyepatch shopping on your little Zebrican vacation, you won't try to escape, or call for help, or fight me."

Sky took a deep breath and nodded vigorously. "Y-yes sir."

"You don't want to test me, girl. I lost this eye in a fight with a dragon, and I was the lucky one."

Turning towards the small storage room, Sky noticed that its door opened up into thin air. Instead of a floor, the room descended into inky blackness. *I wonder how far down this goes...* she thought, peering over the threshhold.

Suddenly, Sky felt a cold set of talons touch her flanks. Before she could react, the griffon behind the talons gave her a hefty shove, knocking her off her hooves and down the hole.

Seconds later, Sky's wings flicked out, and she caught herself in the air. Recovering from unexpected dives was one of the first things young pegasi learnt at flight school, so she was a little put out by the griffon's conduct, but not flustered or hurt. *I probably should have been expecting that,* she thought.

Flapping her wings steadily, Sky looked around. She saw nothing, as the room was still quite dark. Apparently Mr Drifter, for all his love of technology and labour-saving devices, had not had automatic lights installed in his windowless, underground room. Sky listened to the flapping of her wings and pondered trying to use echolocation for a moment.

The flapping of Sky's wings was joined by the striking of a match, followed by a crackling sound. A light appeared behind her as the one-eyed griffon entered the room, torch in talon.

"Wow," remarked Sky, seeing the room for the first time as the torch's light illuminated it. "This place is huge!"

"Much like my future bank balance," the griffon quietly snarled.

The cloud storeroom was twice as tall as it was wide, and a thick layer of clouds shrouded its floor. Sky estimated that it was at one fourth of its cloud-storing capacity. A sharp one-eyed glare told her that she would need to bring that percentage down speedily if she valued her life.

Meekly staring down into the cloud blanket, Sky dived down and gathered some of it between her four hooves. Gathering the clouds was a lot like gathering up huge swaths of cotton candy, but less sticky, and – as Sky had disappointedly discovered as a foal – not as tasty.

Thinking back to her attempt to eat clouds as a foal helped calmed Sky's nerves, and she tried to pretend she was back in Weather Organisation class at flight school. She had found it dreadfully boring as a foal, but imagining the one-eyed griffon as the dour Ms Rain gave her some small solace.

Ms Rain had always been very particular about what she liked to call "conservation of energy". She would always insist that the children in her class take as much cloud matter in their hooves as possible before

moving it around, and preached the importance of carefully planning the positioning and size of every cloud before even thinking about actually placing any.

"That's good," Ms Rain said in a bored voice. "Now fly those clouds up and put them in the caravan."

"Yes m– sir." Sky's breath caught in her throat as her reminiscence shattered around her.

The griffon narrowed an eye at her. "I'm not a big fan of comedy."

Sky gulped nervously. She and the griffon, each carrying as much cloud as they could, flew out of the storeroom, over the roof of the manor and to the griffon's caravan. Foisting his clouds onto Sky, the griffon swiftly swung the caravan's back double-doors open and stared into its gaping interior.

Sky peeked through the mountain of clouds that was making her resemble a snowpony very closely, and her jaw dropped at the size of the caravan's interior. *It must be at least THREE times the size of Mr Drifter's storeroom!* she thought.

"Impressive, isn't it?" the griffon boasted. "Used to belong to a very famous, very talented unicorn. She... left it to me as a gift, in exchange for a favour. I find that you ponies are nice like that."

Under the griffon's watchful eye, Sky obediently floated the mass of the clouds into the caravan's cavernous depths, barely taking up any space inside it at all.

The two fliers made a few more trips between the storeroom and the caravan without incident. Sky's mind was reeling with plans to thwart the theft, but the griffon was too attentive. Although he had half Sky's vision, she was sure he was at least twice as observant.

"You thinkin' of pushing me in there and locking the door?" the griffon asked, upon packing the last of Mr Drifter's clouds into the caravan. "I wouldn't, if I were you."

"N-no, I wasn't," Sky stammered.

"Good. It's my caravan, and I know it like the back of my wing. There's a secret exit that I like to come out of when I want to... surprise ponies like you."

With that, the griffon slammed the caravan doors and slid a padlock onto them, locking it with a key he had been concealing. He then turned to Sky, and his beak broke into a crooked smile. "I like you, kid."

Sky didn't like where he was going. "Uh..."

"You've been helpful, and you haven't tried to pull one over on ol' Eric Deadeye. I like that in a pony."

Sky smiled awkwardly, silently hoping for her life.

"It's not a very productive business, stealin' clouds with the help of two dirt-crawlers. I have to do all the dirty work, just because Siela and Quarry's useless little hooves can't grab clouds. It's a bit of a problem – but I think I've found the solution."

"Um... yay?"

"What's your name, Pinkfeathers?"

"Sky Wave, sir."

"Well, Sky Wave, how would you like to earn more bits than you've ever dreamed possible? You're a pegasus, and I need one of those on my little team if I'm going to make this thing work. Besides, you're a pretty filly, and I like the way you fly... could make a very usable distraction..."

Before Sky could reply, Eric thankfully changed the subject. "Well, first things first. Let's go see how our friends are doing, and then you can give me your answer."

Sky and Eric turned tail on the caravan and walked up to the manor in silence; the latter's menacing gaze staring a hole into the former's soul.

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At the behest of Siela's strange sense of humour, Quarry raided Mr Drifter's kitchen cupboards and served tea and biscuits to herself, her companion and their prisoners. The two impromptu wardens gulped their tea down while the tea prepared for the prisoners sat untouched on the table, out of their reach.

White looked around at his fellow prisoners. Sibwashie was standing very still, staring at the wall with a stone-faced expression. Mr Drifter's eyes were closed, and he seemed to have dozed off.

"Mister Unicorn," Siela began, between licking stray drips of tea off her nose, "why do you not levitate your teacup to your mouth to drink from it? In 'my culture', it is very impolite to refuse food when it is offered to you."

White sighed heavily, anticipating the ridicule that would follow the statement he was about make. "My magic's not working very well at the moment. I... can't lift the cup from that far away."

"Hahaha!" Siela laughed. "A unicorn without magic! How pointless!"

Quarry smiled slightly, but said nothing.

"It is here that the magic of the zebras shows its true strength," Siela said, getting up from her place at the table and stepping towards White. "Our magic is gathered from the earth; we cook brews and fashion talismans without any need for your fancy horns. We do not have magic within ourselves like the high and mighty unicorn, but we are stronger for it. Ours is never a magic that 'doesn't work very well at the moment'."

Sibwashie cleared his throat.

"And speaking of us zebras," Siela growled, turning her attention to Sibwashie before he could open his mouth to speak. "You are exactly the type of zebra I despise, *Brother*. You uphold our customs, but you do not care for the people beneath those customs. All that poetic rhetoric does nothing but steal clouds from our skies and food from our tables! I may not be as *proper* as you, but I am a zebra where it counts,

and I am not afraid to say what I feel!"

Sibwashie blinked, saying nothing.

"Just as I thought," Siela smirked. "Maybe I'll come back and talk to you again in a few minutes, once you've made your reply rhyme."

With that, she returned to her place at the kitchen table and nibbled at the remains of her biscuit.

White looked at Sibwashie. Neither of them had anything to say to the other.

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"Hello, hello, everyone!" cried Eric as he pushed open the door of the manor's kitchen. "I hope that you all behaved well while Ms Wave and I were busy working!"

Eric's tone sent a shiver down Sibwashie's spine. It was cheerful, but had a very sharp edge of menace to it, as if Eric would turn from joy to violent rage at the slightest provocation. *I don't want to be there when that happens,* thought Sibwashie. *I hope these jerks will just leave now that they've got what they came for.*

"So you have collected The Drier's clouds?" asked Siela.

Eric nodded solemnly.

"Excellent," Siela continued. "Now we can take them to my family's farm – Mom and Dad will be so happy to see the rain again!"

A very small smile flicked across Eric's beak momentarily. White Noise was the only one to notice it.

"That is not the only good news," Eric replied. "I am also happy to announce that Ms Sky Wave here has agreed to become the newest member of our little team."

Sky felt as if she had been kicked in the stomach. White and Sibwashie cast forlorn looks at her, and the world started spinning as she shook her head in vigorous denial. *What?! I never agreed to that!* she screamed inside her head.

"There are many things I don't know about ponies," Eric began, turning to face Sky, his voice softer than it had been since she had met him, "but one of the things I do know is that when ponies shake their heads like that, it is not because they agree with what is being said."

Eric reached for Sky's face with his talons, brushing them across her fur very lightly. "I don't like it when ponies disagree with me. And when I don't like something..."

Eric slowly moved his right arm back. Sky was frozen to the spot. White Noise's eyes widened in horror. Sunlight streamed in through the kitchen window, reflecting off the golden surface of Eric's very, very sharp talons.

All of a sudden, time seemed to come to a halt for White Noise. He suddenly felt very detached; as if he was not in that kitchen, but was instead looking at a painting of it – a painting that showed a bound Sibwashie and Mr Drifter, two stoic ruffian equines, a griffon with a raised arm and a terrified Sky Wave.

It will be a shame to ruin her pretty little face, but it is important to inspire respect in my followers.

White Noise's head exploded with pain. He longed to grasp it with his hooves, but they remained bound to his sides.

That griffon's going to hurt Sky! Must... break... free!

White bit his lip. Thoughts were coming thick and fast, bombarding him right in the center of his mind. He felt his horn light up, but it was not by his command.

I do not entirely approve of Eric's barbaric practices, but I must put up with it for the sake of my family.

White's horn was throbbing with magic, more than he had felt for weeks. His head threatened to rip in two from his headache, but a small part of him was overjoyed.

I wonder if Eric will let me go next. She's a pegasus, so I'll focus on her feathers and pretend I'm beating on him.

I must say, Princess Luna, it was awfully nice of you to invite me for tea like this. I have always been an admirer of your work with the night sky...

The room exploded with cyan light as magic dripped from White's horn. His reserves were full, and still the magic kept building up. It needed to be released.

White Noise breathed in and closed his eyes. The thoughts – which he now knew to be the thoughts of everyone in the room around him – swirled around in his brain, waiting for him to take care of them. All he had to do was send each one on its way, to where it would do the most good.

That zebra sure is a stupid one. I can't believe she thinks I'm going to all this trouble just to help her pathetic little family. I've earned these clouds, and I'm going to make a fortune selling them!

That's the one, White thought, smiling.

Eric's thought shot off into Siela's mind on a bridge of cyan magic. Smiling, White turned his focus to a thought that had stood out to him earlier.

I wonder if Eric will let me go next. She's a pegasus, so I focus on her feathers and pretend I'm beating on him.

And this one's for Eric.

White breathed out, smiling serenely. Time resumed.

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Sky shut her eyes tight, scrunching up her face. She was too scared to move, and could only stand there and wait for Eric's talons to rip into her skin.

"WAARGH!" came a primeval battle cry.

Strange, thought Sky. *That doesn't sound like Eric.*

A loud thud sounded from just in front of her, and Sky jumped back in fright, finally snapping out of her frozen fear. Keeping her eyes shut, she raised a tentative forehoof to her face. She felt no pain, no blood and no scar.

"HOW DARE YOU!" shouted Siela.

Sky opened her eyes to see a pile of striped limbs and feathers sprawled across the floor in front of her. Siela was slamming her hooves into Eric's face, hitting him over and over and over again.

"YOU TRAITOR!"

With a shrug, Quarry trotted over to the fighters and jumped into the fray, baring her teeth.

Sky averted her eyes from the fight, turning to look at her bound friends.

"Hurry!" shouted White. "Untie us before they kill each other! I mean, I don't like these guys, but, well, y'know..."

Sky nodded jerkily and untied the two ponies and the zebra in a flurry of hooves and teeth.

As the ropes fell around their feet, White wasted no time in lifting them with his newly recovered telekinesis and wrapping them around the fighting thieves, bringing them into a rather vicious and painful embrace.

"Kiss and make up, you guys," he said confidently, tying the rope in the most complicated knot he knew.

The thieves growled at White as they struggled at their bonds in futility.

"Oh my!" said an elderly voice from behind the three travellers. "I am growing more grateful for you guests every passing minute!"

Mr Drifter, who had just woken up, straightened his bowtie with a hoof and beamed at his rescuers.

"It really wasn't us," Sky was quick to mention. "They just started fighting inexplicably. It was really weird."

"Well, actually," White began, raising a hoof, "what happened was I... I..."

White Noise's face went whiter than usual, and his smile cracked. His head drooped and he squeaked out something barely audible.

"What have I done...?"

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"*Yes officer... yes, three travellers apprehended the gang on my estate... yes, that will be fine... thank you, officer."*

The sound of Mr Drifter speaking to the police in the closest village on his two-way radio drifted out of the open door in the kitchen and into his tranquil garden.

The moon cast an eerie glow on the solitary figure of a unicorn sitting on the edge of Mr Drifter's back veranda, staring intently at the ground. The only movements White made were the gently, almost imperceptible rises and falls of his chest as he breathed out. Even his face was still – its serious expression may as well have been carved out of marble.

A soft patter of hooves gently probed the quiet around him, and Sky sat down next to him, her face turned up towards the stars instead of down to the ground.

White Noise didn't react to her presence.

"It's a nice night," she said softly. "I'm sure it's a great one for stargazing – that's something you Canterlot ponies do, right?"

It could have been Sky's imagination, but White's head seemed to nod just slightly.

"I'm glad everything worked out alright in the end," Sky continued. "The police should be here soon, but in the meantime Sibwashie's in there negotiating a deal between Mr Drifter and Siela, on behalf of her family. She seems like the most reasonable one of the bunch."

"Heh, yeah," White muttered, a bitter edge in his voice. "Reasonable. I guess one does tend to get 'reasonable' after one gets mind-controlled into it."

"White..."

"You don't need to sugarcoat it, Sky. I know what I did. What I can do. I finally understand all those weird dreams I've been having since that night on the *Moonchaser*, and I really wish I didn't."

The two ponies sat in silence for a moment. White continued to stare intently at the blades of grass growing just beyond the veranda, and Sky shifted her gaze from the stars to the moon.

"Those dreams you and Sibwashie told me about earlier," White continued. "The ones where he turned into a unicorn and you..."

"Teleported around the world on a surfboard made of green flame?"

"Yeah, those ones. I caused them – subconsciously. I was busy mind-controlling you guys in my sleep."

"Well, I wouldn't say –"

"I told you not to sugarcoat it!"

White snapped his head around and glared daggers at Sky, who shrank back with a quizzical look in her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, White rested his head in his hooves. "I'm sorry, Sky. It's just... well, I always knew communications magic was my special talent, but this... I'm not sure I should be allowed to have this kind of power."

"Think about what would have happened if you didn't have it."

Sky would have had her face cut in half by Eric, White thought. *And then she would have been forced into joining his gang and going around stealing clouds and reselling them to desperate zebras at exorbitant prices.*

"Sky..." White began, his mouth suddenly feeling quite dry. "I... I didn't think of it that way."

Sky Wave smiled at her friend, and then began to say something she'd been thinking about for a good few hours. "I understand that you're scared of this new power of yours, White. I know that it may seem bad and dangerous, but it can be used for good, and it was. Sibwashie and me, we're your friends. We'll help you figure this out."

White wanted to say thank you, but he couldn't find the words. Instead, he just smiled back at Sky, nodding weakly.

The two ponies embraced under the moon's soft glow.

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