



THE CAVERN OF BABEL



Alpacas are tidy. Unlike some animals, which answer nature's call wherever they please in the pasture, alpacas agree upon a spot of ground to use for such business. This is because they like routine. A place for everything, and everything in its place. Of course, when this routine is broken somehow, alpacas can become rather high strung.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MOVE



“Now this is just getting ridiculous.” Buttersby stared out her stall door at the opposite field. For the past few months, the humans had been as busy as ants, pouring out rock and pounding boards together.

“What is it now?” Floral Vale asked. She didn’t even bother to get up from her hay.

Buttersby sniffed. “The humans. They’ve got a swarm of Smokebutts together, and it looks like they’re bringing other animals to that excuse for a barn.”

That got Floral Vale’s attention. “Animals? You mean other alpacas?” She stumbled to her feet and went over to her own stall door to peek outside.

Buttersby shook her head. “If they are, they’re the ugliest alpacas I’ve ever seen.” And it was true. Just now a pair of creatures were being led out of one of the Smokebutts into the heavy Virginian air. They were short, stumpy creatures with blunt noses and curly tails of all things. And there was another animal that had pointy



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horns poking out of its head and big black splotches all over its fur. With a coat like that, it would never win any awards, that was certain. She had heard stories of animals like these—she just never thought she'd see pigs and cows in the flesh. It was like seeing a fairy tale come alive.

“But . . . why?” Floral Vale asked. All the alpacas at Sleepyvale farm had watched the humans with interest. They had them well-trained, and if the beasts wanted to play around by building another barn one summer, then what did that matter? But bringing foreign creatures to Sleepyvale—that was quite a different story.

“Maybe they're going . . .” Buttersby paused, not wanting to say the word, but not being able to think of another reason. “Feral,” she said at last.

She hadn't meant to say it loudly, but Applebloom, the alpaca in the stall opposite hers, heard it. “Did somebody say feral?” she practically shouted.

And then all the alpacas were up and humming. Nothing was worse than your humans going wild, but it was known to happen. Alpacas weren't sure if it was some sort of plague or simply a mental imbalance in certain breeds that only time brought out. Some of their best thinkers had studied the matter, but it was still an unknown. Once a pack of humans went feral, they were known to do anything: they stopped obeying orders and had even done things as drastic as sell alpacas off to other farms. And the worst thing was, you never knew when it would strike.

“Nonsense,” Buttersby yelled over the confusion. The other alpacas heard her, and stopped their frantic humming. There were advantages to being the head alpaca. “That's better,” she said more



softly. “No one’s going feral under my watch. We all know humans are generally unstable. Only our calming influence keeps them under control, and if we lose our heads, whatever results will be our own fault. This is just a temporary quirk, some silly idea they got into their small brains and are acting on. Nothing is wrong.”

The rest of the alpacas stared out of the barn at the strange animals, but their panic was gone. Buttersby only wished there was someone to comfort her and convince her that what she had just said was true. She had an uncomfortable twitch in her stomach, and every time she looked at the new barn and the new animals, the twitch grew a bit stronger. Of course, this was easily dealt with: she simply stopped looking at the barn. Eventually, the twitch went away.

But two hours later, when some humans made an unscheduled visit in the afternoon, the twitch came back stronger than ever.

“It’s probably another admirer,” Buttersby said, suppressing a hum. She could hear the humans honking, and they’d be inside the barn soon enough. “Floral Vale, would you mind going to sniff at it for a bit until it loses interest?”

Floral Vale, who had just settled down herself, sniffed. “No.”

That perked Buttersby’s ears up. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t have to.”

Buttersby stood up and went to loom over the other alpaca. “Yes, you do. I’m the lead ribbon winner now, remember?”

“You’re only two—no more than a child.”

Buttersby’s eyes narrowed. “I’m of age, and I’m prettier than you are, so do what you’re told.”

The other alpacas had gotten wind of what was going on, and they had gathered to watch. Floral Vale looked around her. With



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such an audience, she couldn't very well keep spitting in the face of tradition. She had lost her position fair and square. With a groan, she stood up. "This isn't visiting hours," she said. "Humans know better than that." She looked over at the human. Its footsteps could be heard easily. Outside, some of the other alpacas were chatting in the shade, enjoying the last few cool breezes of spring. "Besides," Floral Vale added, a tone of fear creeping into her voice, "this one has a leash with it."

At the mention of the word "leash," all the alpacas were nervous again. Sure enough, the human looked as if it meant business. It had blue skins on its hind legs, and a sturdy looking brown skin on its upper body. Classic work-skin.

"Code Red!" Buttersby shouted, no longer caring about keeping the rest of the herd calm. She wished she had listened to the first twitch and started coming up with some sort of plan. The hums of the alpacas around her changed pitch, going up a few steps and growing louder as they all scrambled to find an exit. But unseen to the herd until now, the human had a helper with it—a helper who had gone around the outside and come in through Buttersby's stall door. It was a standard human tactic, usually easily dealt with, but not when it came as a complete surprise. Alpacas expected so little from humans—and were so often proved right—that they rarely concerned themselves with what the two-legs were doing.

The humans honked back and forth to each other, and the one with the leash opened the inside door of her stall and came in. Why did it have to be Buttersby? When the rest of the alpacas saw the humans only seemed to be interested in the head alpaca, they settled down a bit. The barn had open stalls with walls that only



came up to an alpaca's neck, giving them all a perfect view of what happened next.

Buttersby wedged herself into the corner of her stall and kept humming. She could feel the rough wood pressing into her skin through her fiber. The human was coming straight for her. The one with the leash thrust out a paw to grab her, and she darted her neck out of reach. Up close, the human smelled of Smokebutt and roasted meat. It caught it with its other paw, and Buttersby stopped cold. Getting free of a human was one thing. Injuring her fiber (and her chances to win at competitions) was quite another.

The human honked in satisfaction, its voice quickly swallowed by the buzz of the fans and the height of the ceiling. It put a halter on her.

“What are you doing, Buttersby?” Floral Vale was the one to speak up.

Buttersby did her best to keep calm. “I’m sure this isn’t anything too important,” she said over her shoulder as she was dragged away. “Probably it’s a checkup.” Humans were known to habitually poke alpacas with long, fine sticks, something the alpacas endured more out of pity than anything else.

Before Buttersby could say another word, she was led out the door and into the sunshine. Of course she knew it wasn’t a checkup. Checkups happened inside the barn, unless an alpaca was very ill. Buttersby wasn’t ill, but she was cross for being disturbed, and more than a little scared, because at the back of her mind, two words were repeating themselves over and over.

Feral humans.

Alpacas were usually good at getting humans to do what they wanted. Leading alpaca theorists believed it had something to do



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with subliminal messages the humans picked up on. While they weren't capable of speech, most animals believed humans had some rudimentary form of logic. It was the only explanation for how they created such curious things. That and a whole lot of luck, of course.

But sometimes perhaps the subliminal messages the humans followed got mixed up. Even the most domesticated human wasn't wholly free of the chance to go feral. They started doing whatever entered into their heads, and when that happened, disaster almost always followed. Humans were capable of some pretty silly ideas.

However, the two humans leading Buttersby didn't seem feral. They were honking contentedly and leading her across the pasture. There had to be a logical explanation for all of this; Buttersby just didn't know what it was.

Then, as quickly as they had caught her, the humans let her go. She was in a different pasture, but it was a big one. Spacious. They closed the gate behind her and wandered off. Buttersby turned to see what was happening back at her stall.

Different humans had arrived, these with some tools. Big, heavy-looking things that had long thin tails were attached to the barn. When they started up, they made a fierce roar, bashing their heads into the floor of Buttersby's stall and throwing stone and dust into the air. The alpacas fled from the noise, and Buttersby could only watch from a distance, horrified, as her perfectly fine stall was slowly removed of its floor.

At last she turned away, not having the heart to see the carnage anymore. They must have gone feral—what else could explain it? And why *her* stall—why not Floral Vale's? At least they hadn't



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abandoned her in a barren field. She collapsed to the grass, totally dejected, and focused on calming herself down. If she got too worried, she might lose some of her award-winning crimp, and without that, where would she be?

But after a while, her surroundings started to break through her panic. The biggest problem was that she was hot. The sun was right above her, and with no shade to rest in and no fan to cool her off, she began to be quite uncomfortable. And so she did what any sensible alpaca would have done in her situation: she went to find shelter.

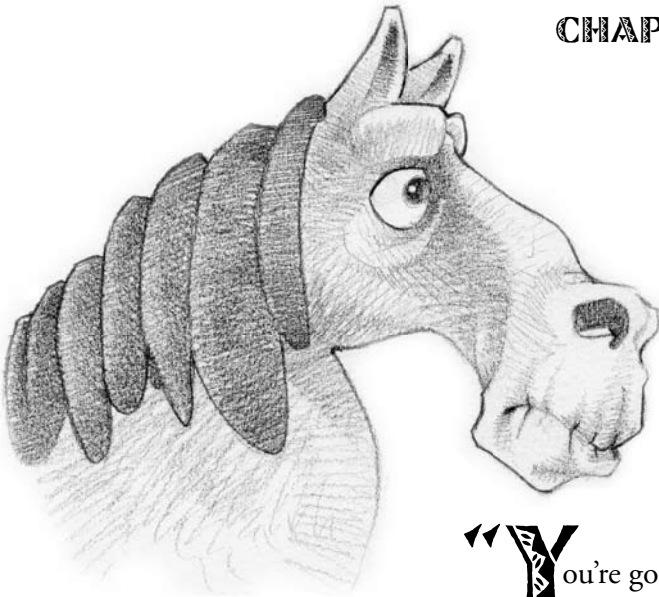
The only problem was, the pasture she was in now didn't have any way into her barn—not even into a different stall. There was only one place she could get to: the new barn.



Alpacas are herd animals, but that doesn't mean they get along well with others. They prefer their own kind, although in a pinch a llama will do for a short-term solution. Placed among other species, alpacas typically become skittish and ill-tempered for a while.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FARM



“You’re going to spit on me.”

“I won’t,” Buttersby said. Getting up the humility to go up to the horse had been difficult enough. He didn’t have to make it worse by being ignorant.

The horse stomped a hoof and snorted. “Will, too—I know your type. Stupid llama.”

Buttersby groaned. “I already told you,” she said. “I’m an alpaca.”

“Nalpaca? I don’t know what they are, and if I did, I don’t believe they exist.” He still hadn’t come within spitting distance—no matter what Buttersby said. She had seen the phenomenon before. Once an animal had been hit with llama spit, they knew better than to put themselves in harm’s way. Once spit, twice shy.

“Not *nalpaca*. *Alpaca*. We don’t spit. We hum.” Buttersby hummed a G flat to show the horse. “See?” She had always been proud of her perfect pitch.

The horse stared at her and if anything, backed further up against his stall door. Buttersby didn’t know why he was in such a



hurry to get inside. It was hot and stuffy in there, without proper lighting or even a proper fan. She was pleased to note the humans hadn't done as fine a job with this barn as they had with the alpaca quarters, even if she was temporarily outcast to this inferior place. Not that horses cared. Buttersby kept humming, congratulating herself at being so tolerant.

"How do I know you're not just gearing up for a really big spit?" the horse asked.

Now it was Buttersby's turn to snort. "Are you blind? Would a llama have such an expensive coat?" She turned to show off her fleece. It had been growing for almost seven months, and was a fine and fluffy tawny, even in the poor light streaming in through the stall windows.

The horse took a step forward and studied her fiber for a moment. "Well—it does seem rather high class fur."

"Fiber. Not fur. Fiber." Buttersby wanted to lash out at the horse, but it wasn't his fault his species was ignorant. She took a deep breath and made another argument. "And would a llama be able to string more than three words together and still make sense?"

"No," said the horse, after another long think. Llamas were typically animals of few syllables.

Buttersby shrugged. "Then—I'm an alpaca. Now can you answer some of *my* questions for a change?"

"You can ask, but I'm not coming any closer." The horse backed up another foot or two.

"Have it your way," Buttersby said. "What are you doing here?"

"Standing, talking to you."

This was only getting worse. "I don't mean just you. What are all of you doing here?" She gestured with her head at the rest of the



animals which were milling around in their stalls and pastures, still shaking out the kinks of the Smokebutt journey.

The horse laughed, a shrieking, neighing sort of a sound with a bit of snuffle thrown in. “Well we’re not *all* standing here talking to you. You’re not that interesting.”

“Where do you come from?” she asked, changing tactics.

“The farm.”

“Which farm?”

“Duh,” said the horse. “*The* farm.”

Buttersby rolled her eyes. This horse wasn’t much brighter than most llamas, come to think of it. “Why did you come here?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. I’m not fond of messes, and if I’m stuck next to you for the next ever, it’s going to be awful. You’ll spit all over the place. I met some of you at a state fair once. Stupid llamas.”

“Al-pac-a!” This was getting to be too much. However, he was the only new animal so far who would come near her despite all her best efforts, and that was just because he was penned there, right next to her pasture. She looked back at the barn—her barn. The other alpacas were resting inside, a couple per stall, cooled by the fans and every now and then peeking their heads out from their stall doors to glance at her. Floral Vale looked far too content.

But she noticed something else. The humans had started to do something different in her stall. She left the horse and ran up to the edge of her pasture, as close to the real barn as she could get. For the past few hours, a whole team of humans had been carrying the broken up floor of her stall away. Now, they were pouring rock. Buttersby had watched them do it when they were making the new barn.



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She hummed and wanted to dance for joy. Everything made sense again! Her humans hadn't gone feral—they had just moved her temporarily so that they could *improve* her stall. Of course, it would have been nicer if they had made Floral Vale come out to the new barn and given Buttersby her stall instead, but humans weren't always the most colorful flowers in the patch. It didn't matter. They would make her stall the best in the barn, as befitted her rank of most decorated alpaca on the ranch. Then, she would move back in and all the other alpacas would see how superior she was.

It was a much happier Buttersby that went back to the horse.

"Have you gone crazy?" the horse asked.

That put a bit of a damper on Buttersby's good mood. No one likes to be called crazy. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? You say 'al-pac-a,' then whip your head around to stare off in space, run through the pasture and come back humming so much you're practically whistling. All of this right in the middle of our conversation, and then you wonder that I think you might be goosey? Probably liable to go on a spitting spree any second."

Buttersby almost gave up, but she decided to try one more approach. "What if I promise not to spit?"

The horse thought this over for a long while. "Can you do that?" he asked at last.

She nodded.

He edged a bit closer to Buttersby. "Because I thought it was a sort of compulsion. Llamas have to spit or they go mad. That sort of thing."

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.



The horse took a full step toward her. “I mean, I thought that’s what happened to you right then. You had been trying not to spit, and then you went goosey.”

Buttersby kept shaking her head.

“Say something,” the horse said.

“I’m not goosey, and I won’t spit.”

“Well why didn’t you say so earlier?” The horse came the rest of the way to meet Buttersby by the fence that separated their pastures.

“What do you want to know?”

She stared at the horse, forcing herself to keep from saying that she’d been telling the fool beast all along that she wouldn’t spit. It would have been counterproductive at this point. So she thought about something else. What *did* she want to know? He wasn’t the brightest, clearly, but it was just nice to talk to someone. Even a horse. “Tell me about yourself,” she said.

The horse could talk. And talk. Two hours later, Buttersby wished she had never approached him in the first place. She heard all about where the horse was from—where all the new animals were from, apparently. They had been moved as a group, all at once, which just enforced the fact that humans were strange. The horse talked about what the weather was like there, what the trees looked like, how the grass tasted, and on and on. She never dared ask him for his name, too afraid of the stories that would result.

But then a human came and took the horse away, and Buttersby regretted her decision. The longer she was alone, the more she wished she could hear every family story the horse could think of. What was worse was the fact that she could see the other alpacas having a good time and enjoying themselves. They all seemed to



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think her current plight very amusing, and none of them would come over to talk to her, no matter how much she threatened them. So she was alone.

And alone.

The sun made its way through the sky and finally settled behind the hills. Being alone in the dark, Buttersby decided, was even worse than being alone in the daylight. That night, Buttersby looked around her pen. It had been easier to deal with being alone when it was brighter outside. But now at night, under a cloudy sky, surrounded by strange animals, she really missed her friends. Even Floral Vale. What was the use of being superior if no one was there to boss around? Buttersby had won awards. Buttersby had credentials. Buttersby was a champion.

But all those awards and ribbons and credentials didn't seem to matter much now that she was alone. She would have traded them even for a guard llama. Well—maybe not *all* of them, but at least some of the lesser ribbons. Llamas might be smelly, but they meant protection, and someone to talk to who didn't think you were going to spit on them. (Even if you might get spit on yourself in turn.)

Outside came the rumble of a Smokebutt.

“Hello?” she said. Maybe it was the human bringing the horse back. “Is anyone out there? Horse?” She wished she had asked for the horse's name. It felt silly calling him by his species.

A sound came from inside the barn, and she whirled to face it. It hadn't been an animal sound—she didn't think so, at least. It had a distinctly artificial feel to it, and that meant human. Maybe one of them had come to check on her. She craned her neck out



and sniffed the air. Buttersby felt a hum coming on, and she tried to keep it down. The human would have turned on the lights if he wanted to see her. Humans did that. Ones that weren't feral.

This was silly. She had already decided her humans hadn't gone feral. But thinking that in the day and thinking that at night, alone, were very different.

She caught a glimpse of movement from inside the barn. Or did she? It might have been a human. Wearing a dark skin that blended in with the night. Maybe. Buttersby wished she could change colors as easily as a human. She would pick a midnight black, and crouch in the shadows where no one would find her.

She couldn't help it anymore—she started humming, and tapped her toes against the wall behind her.

“What's the ruckus?” A crotchety voice spoke up from behind her.

Buttersby practically cried in relief. She hadn't known there was a stall on the other side of her, as well. “Oh—you. You. Whoever you are. There's a human outside our barn or maybe inside it. Or—I don't know. I'm afraid. Help!”

She heard stirrings from next door, and a brown and gray head appeared over the side. It was another stallion. “What was that? Ground cumin and a side of corn? What's that supposed to mean?”

“No.” Buttersby spoke louder. “A person outside our barn. A human. Listen.” She turned her neck to look at the corridor outside her stall again. No sounds. No movements. Now that she had someone else to talk to, she wondered if she had imagined it. It hadn't been that obvious of a movement, or a sound for that matter.



The horse laughed after a moment. “I don’t hear a thing. Except for that crazy tapping you were putting out a second ago. I’m a light sleeper when it comes to being tapped. Who are you, anyway?” He tried to focus on her more closely. “Too small for a llama, thank goodness.”

Buttersby took one last look at the barn. It was quiet and still; she must have been imagining things. No wonder, after the stress she had been put through. She rushed over to the horse. “Oh you can tell! That’s wonderful. Will you tell the others tomorrow?”

“Will I yell at the mothers tomorrow? What do you take me for—a nag?”

“Tell the others,” Buttersby shouted. “About me being an alpaca—not a llama.” She didn’t care that the conversation was stupid. It was still conversation.

“You’re seeing an old packer? What’s that?”

“Never mind,” Buttersby said. She looked back around the barn. It must have been her imagination, after all. “What’s your name?”

“My game? I don’t play games.”

“No—your name.”

“Oh. Red,” the horse said. “I used to be a fine red. I’ve faded since, but the name remains.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Buttersby.”

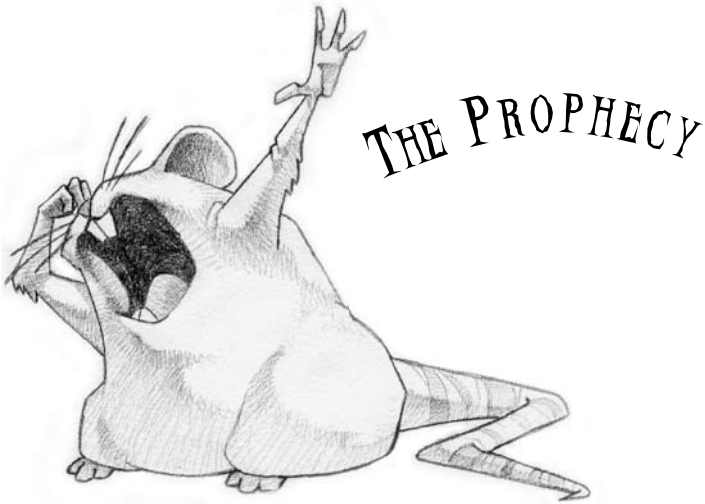
“A butter bee? What’s that?”

Buttersby tried to laugh, and sat back to the more enjoyable task of trying to get Red to understand what she was saying. But even after she had talked with the horse for a while and said good night again, it was a long time before she could fall asleep.



Most alpacas are raised on ranches that only have alpacas and llamas. Thus, they don't have the typical "barnyard" experience most people associate with rural living. No chickens, no pigs, no horses, no cows—just camelids.

CHAPTER THREE



The next day started off just as poorly, but it quickly improved. Before sunrise, there were humans in the barn, honking to each other and generally puttering around the way only humans could do. Buttersby kept her eyes closed and did her best to ignore them. It worked: after a while, they went away.

Once it was time to really wake up, things went much better. With Red to introduce her, the other animals were far less wary of Buttersby, and she quickly became quite popular, which was the rightful place of any alpaca, particularly one with Buttersby's breeding and show record. Of course, it helped that she had lived at Sleepyvale all her life and could tell the others what they could expect. They all wanted to know about her and about alpacas, and found the simplest things fascinating. That she had two padded toes on each foot instead of hooves, for example. Or that she had more than one stomach.



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“Three shtomachs?” Shtella, a cow, was the one to ask the question. She had been let out to graze in the field next to the barn, and had come over to see what was happening. Buttersby was doing her best to fit in, but it was hard when she had to try and understand other dialects. Cow was particularly troublesome—it sounded like Shtella had her mouth full when she talked.

“Are you skinning deaf, or just plain inbred?” a voice came from across the way. A hush fell over the group. Even without knowing all the ins and outs of the dialect, Buttersby could tell swearing when she heard it. The pig, Swogger, was yelling over to them from his pen. He was short, fat and solid, with a deep black hide and less tact than it took to squash a gnat. From what Buttersby had been told, pigs were notorious for their foul language, and Swogger did his best to live up to the reputation. “That’s what she said,” he continued. “Three stomachs. What’s so sweating surprising about that, you big chunk of meat? Cows have like fifty.”

“Four. We have four shtomachs, not fifty,” Shtella said.

Swogger snorted. “Whatever. Beef eater.”

The other animals (two cats and a goat that was penned to a stake outside the barn) seemed stunned. Calling a cow a beef eater seemed to be bad taste, even for a pig. Seeing the expression on Shtella’s face, Buttersby felt it would be a good time to intervene.

“Listen here, pork chop,” she said, doing her best to keep her tone level, but loud enough to be heard. She was guessing at half the words, but the swears didn’t seem that hard to figure out. “There are certain things you don’t say when ladies are present, no matter what species you are. So if you want to stay as far away from becoming bacon as I think you do, you’ll apologize right now, you mushroom grubbing little pile of hamhock.”



If anything, the animals grew quieter. Except for Swogger. He laughed. “For a prissy, you swear almost as good as a boar. Are all alpacas like you?”

Buttersby ignored the question and only said, “Apologize.”

The pig continued to chortle. “Fine, fine. I’m sorry, meat head,” he said, looking over at Shtella, then he walked off back to the far side of his pen to plop down in the mud again.

The remaining animals did their best to pretend the whole thing hadn’t happened, but the conversation never really got started up again, and the cats and Shtella wandered off. The goat was rather crazy to begin with—he had just listened to most of the conversation, offering little in return except the odd bleat now and then and the suggestion that they try eating wood. Buttersby finally gave up and went back inside to relax through the heat of the day. She did her best to ignore the other alpacas, off by themselves in the nicer barn. They were ignoring her, after all. She wouldn’t forget it when she met them again, but for now, it was easier to pretend they didn’t exist.

At lunchtime, Shtella came back, and Buttersby and Red struck up a conversation with the cow. They were laughing, talking about the silly geese that often made a stop at the animals’ former farm on their way south for winter.

“I have no idea how they managed to find their way year after year,” Shtella said. She was practically yelling, to make sure Red could understand. “Whenever they show up, they seem to have trouble finding the beaksh on their faces, let alone an entire direction.”

Red laughed. “And always honking like a crowd of humans. Avian is the dumbest language ever, no doubt about it.”



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Buttersby shook her head. Geese had never come to visit her farm, and it was an interesting thing to discuss. “Why do they go south each year then?” she asked.

“What are you talking about?” Red asked. “Hay grows in the south? We were talking about geese, as I recall. Poor things.” Red sighed. “Obsessive compulsive—the entire breed. They can’t bear *not* going south. Don’t bother trying to stop them. I tried talking sense into one once—talking loudly, of course, so that the bird might have a chance of understanding me—and he got all shaky and twitchy on me.”

Shtella winked at Buttersby and tried to hide a smile. Buttersby had learned that most of the farm animals tried not to show they knew Red had a hearing problem. “Well,” Shtella said, “I’m beat. I have to be up early for the milking, sho I’d better turn in for the evening.”

“Do the humans do that every morning?” Buttersby asked.

Shtella nodded. “Like clockwork. Humans are jusht as bad as geeshe. But it helpsh me feel better. It hurtsh if they don’t do it on time, and they’ve been milking me sho long, I think I’d really missh it if it shtopped. Though I do wish I could have shome late evenings now and then. Night.”

Red and Buttersby ducked their heads back inside the barn, and Red lay down on his hay and was asleep within moments.

Buttersby settled into the straw on the floor of her stall. At least the humans kept this barn in nice condition, even if there were no fans and it was a bit cramped. Even so, she was glad she’d be back in her old barn soon. Sure, she had endured one day, and it was true that—contrary to what she had thought in her life before—it



was possible to carry on a conversation with an animal of another species. But she would never want to do this for the rest of her life.

The more she thought about it, the more she thought that humans had to go, feral or not. She never wanted to have to face that fear again. Alpacas didn't need them—alpacas should be stronger. More independent. After all, what else were inferior alpacas for? Yes, they could take the place of the humans readily enough, with maybe some llamas to help out and do the heavy lifting. She could see it all: an entire ranch where no humans interfered with alpacas. Where alpacas could arrange things the way they ought to be, with no other species to muck it up. If she had a place like that to live, Buttersby was sure she'd never be persecuted again. But the first step would be to have her old stall back, and Floral Vale to boss around.

“Beware! Beware the coming doom!”

Buttersby was startled out of her hopes and dreams by a high, quick voice that still managed to sound like it was trying to be ominous. She looked up to see the sun had set, and twilight was well on its way to sleep, too. Buttersby was annoyed, but reminded herself of her commitment to be more tolerant of lesser species. If word got out that she was bigoted, she might not have anyone to talk to until she got her stall back.

She looked around for where the voice had come from.

“Down here.”

That helped. She looked down to see a mouse so white it seemed to glow in the dark. Buttersby put her head down next to the mouse so that they were practically looking eye to eye. Or they would have, except for the fact that it seemed the mouse was blind. It was



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hard to tell in the little light she had, but both its eyes were glazed over with some sort of white film. Poor thing. “What did you say?” she asked.

The mouse cleared its pipy throat and repeated, “Beware! Beware the coming doom!”

So it was one of *those* mice, Buttersby thought. But she decided to humor it, if for no other reason than the fact that when the other animals heard about it, they would be even more impressed with how compassionate she was. “Is this a coming doom for me, or more of a general sort of gloom over everyone?”

“Fools mock, but they shall mourn,” the mouse said. It seemed to think it was a prophet, the way it was going on with that sort of archaic language. The rodent made that impression even bigger when it shot its hand to its head and closed its eyes, as if going into a trance. “The silver goose shall come and take you to your destiny. Prepare now, for only the pure shall pass.”

This was getting ridiculous. But the more the light faded, the brighter the mouse seemed to become. Buttersby knew it was just a trick of the light, but it had a tendency to make the mouse seem more dramatic, and thereby somehow believable. For a mouse. Besides, from what she’d heard of geese, they wouldn’t be able to pick her up, let alone carry her off to some destiny. And they weren’t silver.

“That’s nice,” Buttersby said. No need to be rude to the little deluded beast. “Thanks for the warning. I’ll keep an eye out and—uh—be pure and all that.”

If anything, the mouse became more agitated. It opened its eyes and glared in Buttersby’s direction. “The Cavern of Babel. You must find it, and find it quickly.”



THE PROPHECY



No doubt about it, the mouse had lost it. Cavern of what? “Why?” Buttersby asked.

The mouse ignored her question. “The Cavern of Babel or doom. Doom or the Cavern of Babel! It is your only choice.”

“Whose doom?” Buttersby asked. “What are you—”

The mouse was gone. She was sure it had been there a moment before. That was the thing with mice—they were always scurrying somewhere, sometimes fast enough to make them seem to disappear. Though usually there was a tell-tale streak that happened when they did it. The night must have swallowed up the streak this time.

Buttersby tried to settle back down, but it wasn't easy. The words of the mouse kept running through her head, darting back and forth and scampering around when all she wanted to do was sleep. The problem was that she thought one of the things the mouse had said was familiar. She could have sworn she had heard about Babel before, but she couldn't place it. No matter how much she tried to dismiss the rodent's insane warning, it was (for the second night in a row) a long time before she fell asleep.