

# In Her Majesty's Royal Service

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# Chapter 1

At midday, an open air market of Canterlot bustled with activity as ponies meandered between vendor carts laden with silks and jewelry, and loitered in front of irritated shopkeepers' entranceways. Actually, to say 'activity' in such a context inspires an image of an exchange of goods and services, a changing between hooves of bits, and a healthy economy in full swing. If one were to assume such a definition of activity, then what was happening in the swollen markets of Canterlot would be better called its antithesis. Rather than the dynamics of free trade, there was inertia and dormancy as the throngs of ponies in the shopping district made a herculean effort to avoid spending a bit, perusing rather than purchasing despite the protests and pitches of the distressed merchants. The fact of the matter was that at midday, particularly on a weekday, the ponies that would have spare bits to spend on luxury goods would be working diligently at jobs of their own just like the shopkeepers. So the streets of Canterlot were essentially a glut of their bratty kids who either had nothing more productive to do on a lazy day of summer break, or more likely had \*many\* productive things to do but not the avidity to match. That is, save for a single ochre pegasus with a chocolate mane rambling aimlessly down the main avenue, a red and white checkered bindle supported by a roughly hewn wooden stick clamped securely in his mouth.

Thoroughly lost for the better part of the day and just now deciding to admit it, it was with an exasperated sigh that Storm Stunner resigned himself to the fact that he needed directions. Eyes leveled just above the spectrum of manes mixing about the street, he scanned the colorful signposts and banners for an ideal location to find guidance. Above a humble storefront he spotted a wooden sign with an icon of a book carved into its enameled surface and he figured that would be a good place to start. After all, the employees at a bookstore were likely an educated lot, and if anything they had to sell maps at the least. He struggled to squeeze past a trio of earth ponies choking the entrance to the store who appeared to be engaged in

an absent-minded banter, unaware of the obstacle they were creating. Storm managed a muffled ahem around the obstruction in his mouth, but the ponies either did not notice, or did not care. Carefully attempting to step between them, he managed to catch one of them in the snout with the end of his stick. That caught their attention.

“Ow! Jeez dude, watch it with that thing! Haven’t you ever heard of saddlebags?” complained the injured colt as he rubbed the spot where he was struck.

“Mmmforry abou’ ‘at!” Storm Stunner mumbled around the bindle stick what was presumably an apology and made his way inside.

Stepping into the store, the pegasus realized that the small facade visible from the main thoroughfare belied an interior that ran much deeper than he would have expected. Although the establishment may have been narrow, the length of it was impressive. Rows of oak bookshelves extended into the depths of the shop, crowded with books and periodicals of a number of different genres. Storm noticed sections marked horror, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, and fiction. He could never understand why so many book stores included that last one. In the dim light of an assortment of firefly lanterns arranged around the store, a number of ponies sat in front of the shelves, casually skimming through novels before replacing them, not always in their original locations.

Just to the left of the entranceway a very disinterested looking white unicorn sat behind an oak counter, absentmindedly watching the pages of a hardcover turn in the glow of her horn. Through half-lidded eyes and with no shortage of disdain, she glanced up at the latest invader to her sanctuary. The colt took notice of her glare and gave her a friendly smile, which just caused her to groan rather audibly. She figured that she was obligated by etiquette to give some sort of acknowledgment to this newest intruder.

“Restroom’s at the back and to the right, do me a favor and don’t drag one of the romance novels in with you.”

Storm was taken aback by the unicorn's words and their implication, dropping the bindle stick with a noisy clatter as his mouth momentarily went agape. Recomposing himself he replied, "Er, I'm alright, but thank you. I'll just have a look around a bit if that's ok?"

The pegasus attempted another grin, though it was rather awkward and lacked its earlier charm. The unicorn just rolled her eyes before returning to her book. To his surprise, after a cursory search of the store Storm could find nothing in the way of maps. He did manage to find a brightly colored miniature globe, which he decided was a bit too general in its treatment of landmarks and locales. Still, he figured the irritable shopkeeper might be willing to assist him if he patronized her establishment. Leaving his bindle near the counter, he trotted to a nearby rack at the right of the entrance, where a magazine cover caught his eye. Titled *Equestria Weekly*, in bright turquoise letters it advertised an exclusive interview with one of Princess Celestia's royal guards, just beneath a graciously smiling picture of the princess herself. He took the magazine between his lips and returned to the checkout counter to make his purchase, flopping it in front of the ivory unicorn who looked more than a little surprised to be actually making a sale.

"How much do I owe you for this?" the pegasus asked as he undid his checkered bindle, nosing aside a few personal effects and fishing out a hemp coin purse.

"U-um, five bits will cover it," the unicorn responded, shocked that somepony wasn't just using her store as a more au courant library.

Storm Stunner emptied enough for the purchase from his purse, tightened its drawstrings, and gingerly placed it along with the magazine into his bindle before refolding it and securing it to the stick. Lifting his face back towards the unicorn, he tried the disarming smile he had attempted earlier. This time around he met with much more success, as the unicorn gave a hint of a smile of her own. Third time's the charm.

"Say, I'm pretty unfamiliar with this area. Would it be alright if I troubled you for some directions?" he ventured, his voice cloying with as much

charm as he could muster, "I've been trying since the earlier part of this morning to find the Canterlot Royal Guard recruitment center and have had no luck whatsoever. I heard it was in the area?"

At the question, the unicorn's smile evened into a straight line as her countenance leveled into a blank stare. He stared back. At some point in time she blinked. Maybe this was some kind of code?

"Whoa," she answered. Alright, using words, that was a step up.

She continued, "When you say 'it's in the area,' are you referring to Canterlot, or Equestria in general?"

The pegasus grimaced, "I take it I might've made a detour somewhere along the line...?"

"You must have," the unicorn sighed, "The only recruitment center I can think of is about an hour's trot away."

Storm bit his lip at that unexpected bit of news. Admittedly his interpretations of others' directions could at times be considered *creative* at best, but he didn't think he was that far off track this time around. His head sunk as he let out an exasperated gasp. Seeing the pegasus suddenly look so downtrodden, the unicorn mare couldn't help but empathize.

"Tell you what... How about I walk you over there? You'll probably find it a lot quicker than stopping for directions every other block," she offered, a commiserate smile forming at the corners of her mouth.

Storm looked towards the back of the store, where ponies continued hoofing through various bodies of text.

"That's very kind of you, but what if one of those ponies wants to make a purchase?" he questioned as his brow arched in concern.

"They won't," the unicorn answered flatly. To her left a large earthy pony sneezed into the paperback novel he was reading, before replacing it and moving on to another shelf.

“But what if somepony tries to rob this place while you’re gone?!” Storm continued, scarcely believing that the unicorn was willing to abandon her shop to help some random stranger.

“Magical security system,” she replied as she tapped a hoof against her horn, “Only I can open the register, and not a single novella is leaving this place without getting rung up.”

“Wow... Unicorn magic is something isn’t it?” Storm mused before continuing, “But I’ll admit, I’m surprised you’d go so far to assist somepony you don’t know.”

From the back of the shop the sound of a number of books toppling from one of the shelves could be heard followed by a raucous snort of laughter.

“Anything for my best customer,” the unicorn dryly replied. Storm wasn’t sure if she was being serious or not.

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Storm found himself being led by the unicorn he came to know as Nomde Plume through narrow alleyways where brightly colored swaths of fabric hung from clotheslines overhead, and down serpentine cobblestone paths lined with vibrant flower beds. He had thought to make a mental map of the Canterlot area while being lead to the Royal Guard recruitment office, but that is no easy task on hoof when one is used to the bird’s eye view. Any hopes of making sense of the area were summarily dashed by the innumerable turns and bends he and his guide had taken. Furthermore, much of the architecture seemed to be repetitions of a style of multistoried residences identical in most ways but color and minor detailing, confusing the brown pegasus even more. Giving up on any ambitions of cartography, Storm instead attempted conversation.

“Sho aye ‘oo you ‘ork ah a ook shore?”

“Excuse me?” Nomde paused and turned back towards the pegasus, quirking an eyebrow.

As Storm spat out the bindle stick, his eyes shot open and he immediately began rubbing his right cheek, "Yeowch, I think I got a splinter..."

While the pegasus' cheek deformed as he tried to remove the offending sliver with his tongue, Nomde's eyebrow descended as the other rose in turn, maintaining her puzzled expression. After a few seconds of the awkward display, Storm spat out a small shaving of wood.

"I asked, 'Why do you work at a book store?' If it's not too personal of course." the brown pegasus continued, ignoring the amused look that the unicorn was giving him.

Nomde's countenance softened into a simple smirk and she answered, "Inspiration. As a writer," she nodded towards her flank where a quill and ink well contrasted conspicuously against the white of her fur, "it is invaluable to have at hoof an abundance of classic and contemporary literature, historical and geographical references, etcetera."

Storm thought the unicorn's shop could stand to have more of that last item, but he considered her reasoning for a moment. It wasn't a bad idea, but it seemed like a big hassle when there might be easier solutions available. Cocking his head to the side, he voiced his contemplation, "Wouldn't it be easier just to go to the library?"

"Perhaps, but this way I don't have to worry about finding that a book I want is out of stock, unavailable, or that the pages have been ripped out," Nomde answered with the practice of one who had been asked that very same question many times before. She then added with a conspiratorial wink, "Plus this way, I can guarantee anything that I write doesn't end up hidden away in the corner of some bottom shelf."

"Hm. Very pragmatic."

"And how about you, what business do you have at the recruitment offices?"

"What else but to join Her Majesty's Royal Guard?" Storm preened, puffing out his chest in what he hoped was a masculine display.



“Huh. Wouldn’t have pegged you as the military type.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Storm’s masculinity deflated.

“Well... On so many ponies you see cutie marks of bows and arrows, of swords and shields, of any number of martial instruments. Ponies like that I could see joining the Guard,” Nomde craned her head to the side to bring the pegasus’ flank and the object of her scrutiny into view, “But a pair of shoes?”

Prominently on Storm’s side were two baby blue sneakers, their laces undone and hanging sloppily to their sides. To the pegasus’ longtime ire, they were simply adorable.

“Shoes can mean tough! Like I’m ready to stomp trouble where it starts!” Storm contended, the flush on his cheeks just barely visible beneath his dark pelt.

“They’ve got twinkling stars and moons on the side.” Nomde gestured nonchalantly with a hoof towards the pegasus’ flank.

Sure enough an astral scene played across each of the shoes. On the left shoe, two particularly bright stars and a tilted crescent moon formed a crude smiling face.

“W-well what’s in a cutie mark, anyways?!” Storm was feeling flustered, a slight quaver building in his voice, “It’s all a matter of interpretation!”

“I suppose you have a point,” the unicorn relented. She had a feeling that the poor pegasus was taking her ribbing a little harder than she had hoped, and decided to shift the tone, “How did you get your cutie mark, anyways?”

Storm bit his lip.

“Actually, I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember one of the most important moments in a pony’s life?” Nomde was incredulous.

“All I know is that whatever I did ended with a blow to my head. I just remember waking up in a hospital bed with bandages wrapped around my brow, and these bad boys on my flank.”

*Did he really just call them bad boys?* Nomde bit her tongue to stifle the laugh that so desperately wanted to escape her lips. It managed to sneak out diplomatically enough in the form of a cough.

“And nopony witnessed the event?”

“I’m afraid not,” the pegasus sighed.

“\*Ahem\* Well, I suppose it could mean a number of things. I’ve met ponies with the most abstract of cutie marks to represent their special talents.” Nomde offered with a slight shrug.

“See, that’s what I like to think!” Storm leapt at Nomde’s concession, “Maybe the stars mean that I should reach for the heavens, like joining the Royal Guard in service to the princesses!”

“Or maybe they mean you have bad taste in fashion,” Nomde teased as she pointed a hoof towards the checkered bindle stick lying next to the pegasus.

At this Storm harumphed and once more clenched his bindle stick between his teeth, effectively ending the conversation. Nomde openly giggled at that; although it might’ve been a bit cruel, she couldn’t resist shooting off the quip. Besides, she could tell by the twinkle in the pegasus’ eyes that he found it at least a little bit funny.

Eventually the two ponies reached their destination. Out of place in a line of spire-tipped ivory towers and gold domed minarets, stood a small square building of grey painted brick which had the emblems of the royal sisters painted above its entranceway. Close to the road and away from any potential offending shadows, an orange marble sundial with copper corona flourishes in the shape of Princess Celestia’s cutie mark announced the time. A small brass placard to the right of the door confirmed it as the recruitment center for the Royal Guard. To most ponies, the ascetic facade

might have seemed unmemorable and unimpressive, but to Storm it looked efficient. Of course, that may have been bias on his part.

Remembering to set down the bindle stick this time around, Storm turned to face Nomde.

“Thank you very much for your assistance. There is no way I would’ve found this place on my own.”

“As I said, anything for my best customer. Good luck with the guard, and maybe I’ll see you around once you get your uniform,” the unicorn gave a friendly pat on the earthen pegasus’ shoulder, “Although I might not recognize you.”

“Will you be alright making the return trip to your store?” the pegasus inquired, concerned by the length of the trip it took to get them here. Although he didn’t relish the idea of nullifying his progress, the idea of making the unicorn travel that distance alone didn’t sit well with him. Maybe he could pay for her taxi fare at the least.

In response, Nomde simply tapped her horn with a hoof, smiled a final time, and blinked out of sight in a flash of white. Rubbing his eyes to rid them of the spots from the sudden blinding display, he had to chuckle. Unicorn magic was something else.

# Chapter 2

The interior of the recruitment center was just as Spartan as its exterior, if not more so. At least the outside of the center had the surrounding towers spearing into the sky to draw the eye away from its austerity. Whoever had designed the place had apparently taken inspiration from the inside of a cinder block. They had not bothered to install tile or carpeting, instead opting for a polished concrete that felt cool beneath Storm's hooves. The walls were made of the same finished concrete, though they did have some manner of color. On the left wall the cutie mark of Princess Celestia was stenciled in blocks of orange and yellow; on the right Princess Luna's waxing moon stood out from the wash of navy in which it was centered. There were no windows, so the only source of light was a single fluorescent lamp the length of the ceiling which cast everything in the room in pale chartreuse. In the center of the room stood a plain wooden table with metal legs that was being used as a makeshift desk, three neat stacks of papers on one corner of it and a plastic cup of pencils, many of which were covered in tooth marks, on another. All of these details went unnoticed by Storm however, who was being harangued by a burly white pegasus clad in lustrous golden armor standing behind the desk.

"ALRIGHT MAGGOT! WHAT MAKES A WORM LIKE YOU THINK YOU'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO SERVE IN HER MAJESTY'S ROYAL GUARD?!"

The recruiter had been calling Storm a number of different insects and pests since he had stepped into the door. He thought that recruiters were supposed to sweet talk you into joining, and that the verbal assault would come during basic training. If this was how the armored pony treated visitors, Storm felt pity for whoever had to deliver the mail.

"To serve Equestria, and to see to it that its citizens are protected from any threat," Storm answered honestly, although listening to himself say it, it

sounded a little canned. However, the alabaster pegasus across from him didn't seem to think so, or at the least showed no indication otherwise.

"GOOD ANSWER," the military pony barked before biting sheets of paper from each of the stacks on the desk and sliding them towards Storm, "HOWEVER, WE DON'T JUST TAKE ANY GERM OFF THE STREET. WE PERFORM A SERIES OF THOROUGH EVALUATIONS TO ASSESS YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL STABILITY AND MENTAL PROWESS. YOU'VE GOT 30 MINUTES TO FILL OUT THESE SHEETS, AND NOT A SECOND MORE. HOP TO IT, FLEA!"

Storm wondered to himself if the recruiter was capable of speaking at a volume below blaring, but wisely decided not to ask. Taking one of the newer pencils from the cup on the desk, he nervously turned to the three papers sitting innocuously in front of him. He had done well in school and tended to get good marks on tests; however, his answers to the questions on the evaluation before him would determine the course of his career. They would decide whether his life would follow the path he had dreamed so often about, or veer off into the banks. He looked at the top sheet, the psychological assessment, to see what moral quandary the first question would address.

*Question 1: What is your name?*

Storm balked. Did they really dedicate the first question to asking for his name? He, of course, wrote down his name.

*Question 2: Do you think bullying is wrong?*

*Not at all   Not really   Maybe                      A little                      Yes*

Storm circled yes.

The questions continued in this vein, no more thought provoking than the first two. To Storm's surprise, there was even an extra credit section that asked what he thought about the princesses; he never would have imagined there'd be a chance for bonus points on a psych evaluation. Completing the first assessment, he pondered over whether or not it was

some elaborate trick devised to probe its recipient through its simple queries. He had his doubts about that. Setting the psychological test to the side, he looked at the next two evaluations. Seeing numbers and arithmetic symbols, he thought that he might get a bit more of a challenge through some mathematic exercises, something to differentiate himself from other potential recruits. He looked at the first question.

*Question 1: How many letters are in your name?*

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Even after double checking his answers and finding that yes, he did put 12 for the answer to Question 1 on the second sheet, Storm Stunner turned his test over to the armor clad pegasus with more than 20 minutes to spare.

“HMM, THAT WAS AWFUL QUICK,” the soldier bellowed as he eyed Storm, “LET’S SEE IF YOU’RE CLEVER AS WELL, YOU MOTH.”

*Moth? Now he’s just reaching.* Storm mulled, a quick arch in his eyebrows only momentarily betraying his thoughts. Yet even though the tests were disturbingly simple, watching the large pegasus scrutinize his work made him feel that inkling of self-doubt known to anypony who’d just turned in a life changing test. That nagging fear that insisted that despite the test taker acing every single answer, somehow they had written the response down incorrectly or misinterpreted a question. ‘Storm Stunner’ did have 12 letters in it right? A quick mental calculation confirmed that it did. Storm’s thoughts were broken by a clearing of the recruiter’s throat.

“NOT BAD, NOT BAD AT ALL,” the recruiter commended with a curt nod of his head. Storm beamed at the approbation.

“HOWEVER,” and with a single word Storm dimmed, “QUESTION 4, PAGE 3. IT ASKS ‘WHAT IS 48 DIVIDED BY 2 TIMES 9 PLUS 3?’ YOU PUT 219 WHEN THE ANSWER IS CLEARLY 2.”

Storm considered the debate the problem could instigate regarding the order of operations, and opted to remain silent.

“STILL, COMMENDABLE WORK. TOOK ME A WHILE TO COME UP WITH THOSE QUESTIONS, AND YOU NAILED ALL BUT ONE. I THINK YOU’D BE A FINE CANDIDATE FOR THE GUARD.”

As the recruiter extended a giant foreleg over the desk to shake Storm’s hoof, the ochre pegasus couldn’t prevent the wide smile that crept onto his face, even if the white pegasus might’ve squeezed a bit harder in his hoofshake than was necessary.

“Thank you very much sir! I promise you I won’t let you down!”

“GOOD TO HEAR IT. INDUCTION FOR RECRUITS WILL BE TWO DAYS FROM NOW. MEET HERE AT 0700 HOURS AND YOU’LL BE LED TO THE ROYAL ACADEMY FOR YOUR INITIATION. UNTIL THEN ROACH, DISMISSED!”

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Exiting the small grey building, Storm was struck by how quiet the outside world was in comparison to the bellow of the Guard recruiter. Well, quiet save for an omnipresent ringing in his ears. Nevertheless, the recruitment process was a lot easier than the pegasus had imagined it would be. Perhaps it was a little too easy. Truth be told the pegasus still felt uncertain about the process. It wasn’t as if members of the Royal Guard were terribly common, yet the qualifying examinations were shockingly simple. There had to be some catch that he had yet to encounter, maybe a surprise elimination round at the induction. With a flap of his wings, Storm took to the air with his bindle stick firmly clamped within his jaws. A flight around the area would help him find lodging in the meantime, as well as clear his thoughts.

Ascending beyond the reach of the nearby towers into the deep azure above, Storm relished the coolness of the air at the greater altitude. As the entirety of the city below collapsed into his view, the farrago of alleyways, buildings, and gardens seemed to fall into order as the minute details were lost and they merged into distinct sections divided by large thoroughfares. Although the gilded towers below scintillated in the light of the sun, the

recruitment center was just a grey speck that could only be spotted if one knew where to look, and even then its cool slate hid it in the shadows of its taller neighbors. Still, the towers themselves would serve well enough as landmarks for the pegasus drifting lazily overhead.

As he flew over the sprawling metropolis, Storm spotted a lone cloud slowly floating by just below him and descended towards it. A full day of walking on stone roads could really take a toll on the hooves of a pony accustomed to traveling in the skies, and the cottony texture of a cumulus cloud was at that moment very appealing.

Touching down on the soft surface, Storm let his body relax completely. His mind clear of all thoughts, he lay down and gently placed his bindle stick before him, where it gently sank through the condensed vapor. He gently let slip an expletive before diving over the side of the cloud after it. Maybe the earth pony he had whacked earlier had a good point about the saddlebags.

The bindle stick had a head start as it spun wildly in its freefall, but pegasi are notoriously excellent divers. Within a matter of seconds Storm had pulled up within biting grasp of his impedimenta and snatched the center of it within his teeth, resisting the urge to drop it as he felt another splinter jab him in the lip. However, when it comes to a free fall a few seconds can cover a lot of distance; the paved surface beneath the pegasus was rocketing towards him, and he only had moments to react before leaving a particularly nasty imprint on it. Flaring his wings in an attempt to deflect his downward momentum, Storm managed to pull out of his descent just feet above the ground into an erratic flight parallel to the road below him. Still, an erratic flight trumped a literal dead stop. Fanning his wings into a planar surface to break the rush of air against him, he regained enough control to finally touch down on the hard pavement in an easy trot. As he breathed a sigh of relief, a sudden percussion caught his ears. Turning towards the source, he saw a family of unicorns; a mare and colt stomping the pavement in applause while their filly took a number of snapshots with a pastel colored camera. Apparently they thought his brush with death was



some sort of aerial performance. With reddening cheeks, Storm took an uneasy bow as the snaps from the filly's camera continued.

Surveying his surroundings, Storm noticed a number of carts and kiosks selling all manner of novelties; a nearby stand featured a number of gaudy saddles with the phrases like '♥ Canterlot' and 'I saw Celestia raise the sun and all I got was this nasty burn!' It seemed the pegasus had plummeted auspiciously right into a tourist district, and that meant there had to be inns nearby. Sure enough, a quick scan of the awnings and signs suspended over the street revealed a number of potential lodgings. Storm decided to take his chances at the Maretel 6, recognizing it as one of the cheaper chains in Equestria.

Trotting through the doorway of the motel, Storm was abruptly reminded of the bindle stick in his mouth as each end of it caught the sides of the door's frame, causing the pegasus' head to jerk back violently and send him sprawling onto his haunches. The staccato shutter snapping of the young unicorn's camera behind him caused his cheeks to flush even brighter than before. He was really starting to dislike his troublesome piece of paraphernalia.

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Renting a room for a couple of nights was thankfully an uneventful affair. For 20 bits Storm was able to get an economy sized room, along with what the pegasus proprietor advertised as a 'complimentary shower.' Furthermore, should he find himself hungry, Storm was directed towards the in-house dining area which he soon discovered comprised a row of vending machines with a few snack food items he could've sworn had been discontinued years ago. With his mouth occupied with the bindle stick, the innkeeper proposed following Storm to his room and unlocking it, and with a nod the ochre pegasus accepted the offer. Following the hall from the reception area, the room was located two doors down on the left. The innkeeper inserted the key into the door handle and let Storm inside.

Aware that many hotel rooms place the closet area conveniently by the entrance, Storm pondered if the Maretel 6 followed the same design. A

glance to his left revealed a bed crammed into the corner near the door and a small shower with a floral patterned curtain catty-corner to it. The floor of the tiny room was paved entirely in bathroom tiles. Perhaps going cheap wasn't the best option. A cough from behind him prompted Storm to turn towards the innkeeper who held out a hoof expectantly. With a groan, Storm fetched a couple of bits from his bindle and dropped them into the other pegasus' outstretched hoof, hoping it'd be enough to placate him and make him go away. Satisfied, the hotelier gave his thanks and returned to the lobby.

With a thud Storm collapsed face-first onto his bed, which he learned was almost as soft as the tile it stood on; the pegasus rubbed his bruised chin and hoped that it wouldn't swell. To take his mind off the earlier succession of unpleasantness, Storm fetched the magazine he'd purchased from the witty writer Nomde earlier in the day. Hopefully it'd provide a telling glance into the life of a member of the Royal Guard. Skimming past articles speculating about long lost nephews of the royal sisters and an explosion of weapon-based fashion in Manehattan, Storm found the tell-all article.

*Snappy Scoop: So what can you tell our readers about life in the Royal Guard?*

*Guard: Pardon me sir, but this area of the castle is off limits. I must politely ask you to return to the guided tour.*

*Snappy Scoop: Why are all of the pegasus guards white? Is discrimination rampant in the Guard?*

*Guard: Again, I request that you rejoin the tour group. I do not wish to have to eject you from the premises.*

*Snappy Scoop: You got any juicy gossip on the princesses?*

*Guard: Very well, sir you leave me no choice but to forcibly remove you from this area.*

*Snappy Scoop: Whoa, hey! Don't get fresh with me! Police brutality!*

*Guard: Grr, stop struggling you little—*

After a minute of staring at the page, Storm folded the magazine and set it on the floor. He hadn't learned anything from the interview and was left with only more questions. Like why the interviewer had decided to include those embarrassing last few lines. However, the interviewer's second question had been one that he himself had often wondered about. It did seem like each of the princess' unicorn guards were charcoal and their pegasus knights alabaster, just like the loud mouth recruiter from earlier in the afternoon. Storm had heard that their armor was enchanted and he was inclined to believe it; there was just no way that the kindhearted rulers of Equestria could allow for bigotry in their hearts.

Or for there to be that many pegasi with blue manes, blue eyes, and white pelts.

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The two days preceding the induction passed without incident. Storm purchased a set of cloth saddlebags decaled with the phrase 'Canterlot: Land of the Rising Sun.' and after transferring his possessions to them, unceremoniously chucked the bundle stick into a pond. This earned him a ticket for littering from a policemare who happened to witness the act, one last bit of spite from the blasted thing. Early the morning of the Guard initiation he checked out of the motel with his bags slung over his back. After taking a moment to admire Celestia's sun creep from beneath the eastern horizon, its radiance casting the ashen cobblestone road in rich hues of gold, he beat his ochre wings and joined it in its ascent.

Spotting the glint of light reflected off of the sharp tower spires that marked the location of the recruitment center, Storm began an easy glide through the crisp morning air towards his destination. Although he did not have a timepiece, the position of the summer sun assured the pegasus that he was making good time. Within minutes he alighted near the sun-shaped dial near the recruitment center. Checking the line of the shadow from its gnomon revealed the time to be approximately 10 minutes before 6:00. That left the pegasus with more than an hour to kill, but he didn't mind. It was better to arrive early and make a good impression after all.

While admiring the odd designs of the nearby towers, Storm was distracted by a fluttering of wings to his side. Glancing towards the noise, he found that rather than an escort, at his side was a cream colored pegasus with an orange shock of a mane and two red concentric circles as a cutie mark. The newcomer lifted a hoof in greeting.

“Sup buddy! You joinin’ up with the Guard too?” the yellow pegasus had a guileless grin and eyes that bled friendliness. Storm found himself warming to the stranger instantly.

“Well, that’s the plan, anyways,” Storm returned the smile.

“Ha, right on. Name’s Crack Shot by the way,” Crack Shot extended a hoof towards Storm, who now understood the significance of the other pegasus’ cutie mark. As Storm attempted to meet the yellow hoof with his own for a shake, the pale pegasus tapped it in a hoof bump instead, “What do you go by?”

“I’m Storm Stunner, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Storm Stunner, huh? Wicked name, I take it you did weather work before?” Crack Shot posited, putting a hoof to his chin in consideration.

“What pegasus hasn’t?” Storm chuckled.

“True that.”

“Still, I was just mediocre at it at best,” the ochre pegasus admitted, which caused his newfound friend to arch his eyebrows in surprise.

“Really? I woulda figured you’d rock it, kickin’ down hurricanes like nopony’s business!” Crack Shot reasoned as he nodded towards the shoes on Storm’s flank.

That was one thing that had always bugged Storm. Most ponies had names that accurately described some talent or other characteristic about them, along with cutie marks to match. It was as if they were destined from the moment they received their given name to fulfill some specific role. Yet

here he was stuck with a pair of shoes on his rear and no idea what they meant. It made him feel like a blank flank all over again.

"I take it you're super accurate or something?" Storm asked, deciding to test his theory on the significance of titles.

"You know it buddy! Hold on a sec and check this out."

Storm knew he shouldn't have been so surprised at the cream pegasus' enthusiastic affirmation.

Crack Shot scanned the street for something and spotting what he was searching for, he flew next to two small, loose cobble stones. Taking one between his teeth and the other in his right hoof, he aimed his head towards the sky. In one fluid motion he spat the first stone from his mouth far into the air in front of him, tossed the second a short distance above his head, spun around and reared onto his forelegs, and with a sharp kick sent it streaking into the first with a loud clack.

"Pretty sweet, huh?!" Crack Shot exclaimed with a smug grin plastered across his face.

Storm reply came as a low guttural noise, his slacken jaw rendering him incapable of intelligible speech.

"Haha! I'll take that as a 'Heck Yeah!'" Crack Shot clapped the dazed pegasus on the shoulder, then looking just beyond him said, "Oh sup, dude?"

"Um, hello," came a meek reply.

Storm recovered from his stupor with a rapid shake of his mane, and followed Crack Shot's gaze. A few yards away stood a pastel pink unicorn colt with a powder blue shaggy mane; his face was bunched as he bit his lower lip in a timid smile, while he rubbed the back of his head in a nervous display. *How the heck do these ponies keep sneaking up on me?* Storm pondered. Crack Shot trotted towards the newcomer and Storm followed.

“No need to look so freaked, we ain’t gonna bite ya,” the cream pegasus gave the likable smile from earlier, and the unicorn relaxed a little.

“I apologize, I’ll admit to being a bit nervous around strangers,” the pink unicorn conceded, “I did not mean any offense.”

“Hehe, none taken. I’m Crack Shot, dude over there is Storm Stunner. You?” Crack Shot extended a hoof and to Storm’s surprise the unicorn bumped it. Storm offered his own and received a firm shake.

“My name is Check Mate. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintances,” this time the pastel unicorn’s smile was sincere, free of its previous reticence.

“Check Mate, eh? Take it your talent is chess?” Crack Shot guessed. Sure enough, on Check Mate’s flank was a light blue pegasus knight piece.

“Although it would be immodest, I won’t deny an aptitude for the sport,” the unicorn chuckled, “However, I would consider that only one application of my ability.”

The two pegasi tilted their heads to the side in confusion.

“Perhaps an example would be in order. Crack Shot right? That stunt you performed earlier, could you do it once more?”

The cream pegasus shrugged and trotted off in search of two more pebbles. Check Mate turned to face Storm.

“And if you would, follow my sight and watch the ground carefully.”

Curious, Storm did as the unicorn asked, not sure what to be looking for. Through the corner of his eye, Check Mate watched Crack Shot carefully as he balanced a pebble in one hoof, another hidden between his teeth. As soon as the pegasus initiated his trick, a small beam of light began to discharge from the unicorn’s horn, creating a small glimmering spot on the cobblestone some distance away. With a snap of his back legs Crack Shot once more struck the stone from the air with a precision shot, sending it arcing errantly into the sky. The rock wobbled and turned in the air, before

colliding with the road and after a few bounces finally coming to rest directly in the middle of the unmoving light projected by the unicorn.

"I suppose you could say that my special talent is an affinity for probability."

Storm was getting tired of being rendered speechless. Crack Shot just howled with laughter.

"That was amazing, colt! I bet you could make a KILLIN' at roulette!" the exuberant pegasus applauded as he ruffled the unicorn's blue mane.

"That is probably true," the unicorn's smile softened, "but it wouldn't be very scrupulous."

"Aw, I'm just messin' with ya. Still, that is a wicked trick for sure," Crack Shot's head suddenly swiveled towards Storm's, causing the pegasus to unwittingly start back in surprise, "That reminds me pal, I never did find out what your talent is, 'cept that it ain't cloud kickin'."

*Oh boy, here it comes.*

"I... Actually have no idea. I lost all memory of the day I got my cutie mark," Storm whispered as his lips pursed in embarrassment.

The eyes of both Crack Shot and Check Mate went wide in disbelief; the unicorn apparently didn't see that one coming. Storm wished ponies would stop giving him that look. Crack Shot was the first to break the silence.

"Huh, that ain't that big a deal I guess. I know! Why don't we get Check here to use his freaky deaky psychic powers to figure out how you got it?" Crack Shot gave the unicorn a hearty slap on the back, causing him to gasp as the air was knocked out of him.

"I'm afraid my talent doesn't quite function like that. It's most reliable over a narrow window of time within a limited field of space. Furthermore, although I may be able to accurately determine outcomes, I'm unable to divine the antecedents to events that have already occurred," Check Mate explained.

"So you're saying you can't read the past?" Storm translated.

“Precisely.”

“Well ain’t that a boot to the flank. Sorry ‘bout that Storm, guess those kicks on your rear are gonna stay a riddle for now.”

“Eh, it’s alright. I’ll figure them out someday,” Storm shrugged, then looking back towards the sundial he asked “What time is it, anyways? Are you here for the induction as well, Check Mate?”

“Indeed I am,” the pink unicorn answered as he trotted towards the sundial, frowning as he read the shadow lining its surface, “And apparently it’s a little past 7:15. It would seem as if our chaperone is truant.”

As if on cue, a white pegasus in golden armor crashed into the ground between the trio. Concerned looks on their faces, the three surrounded the pegasus sprawled with limbs going at awkward angles. With a groan, the pegasus stood uneasily and gave a full body shake, seemingly recovered. Recognizing the pony that must’ve been their guide to the initiation ceremony, Check Mate stepped back and gave a clumsy salute; the other two pegasi quickly joined him in a misaligned file. Looking over the three, the armored pegasus gave a casual wave.

“Heh, that’ll wake you up,” the pegasus cracked his neck as he addressed the baffled ponies before him, “I’ve got no idea why they have to do these things so damn early in the morning.”

The eyes of the three ponies darted between each other, unsure of how to react and unwilling to break their salute.

“Huh? Oh! Uh, at ease or whatever,” the trio relaxed a bit but maintained some formality in their posture, “So you guys stoked to see Princess Celly? She’ll probably be addressing you if she isn’t conked out from texting her BFF in Ponyville through dragon fire all night. Come on, follow me!”

The gilded pegasus began trotting north down the cobblestone street, and after a second’s pause the three ponies quickly fell in behind him.

“He’s rather casual, isn’t he?” Storm whispered to the other two with a look of concern.



“Yeah, he seems pretty chill,” Crack Shot mused as content as ever.

“He *is* a rather disparate character compared to the recruiter I met with earlier this week,” Check Mate shuddered at the recollection. Speaking up to catch the attention of their guide he asked, “If I may inquire, sir, I had thought that the gentlecolt in charge of the recruitment center would be leading us to the ceremony.”

“You mean old Sergeant Cacopony? Yeah, he’ll be there. He just wanted to make sure everything was in perfect order, he’s kinda prissy like that. Speaking of which, we better get moving if we wanna make it on time.”

And so the new trio of friends hurried on their way towards the royal academy for their inception into the Guard and the start of a new life, each of them feeling less and less certain about what to expect.

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The auditorium of the royal academy buzzed with the voices of the modest group of recruits that awaited the start of the ceremony. Storm had never been in such an extravagant hall, and could barely take it all in. The great maple doors entering into the auditorium extended several yards toward the vaulted ceiling, and were covered in carvings of intricate filigrees. Within the hall, along the length of the walls on either side of the doors colorful panes of stained glass depicted images of Equestria’s history, the eastern face shining brilliantly as the sun’s rays filtered through. At the opposite end of the corridor stood a grand stage, its heavy crimson curtains drawn to reveal a detailed painting of the sun and the moon on the back wall which expertly depicted both the perfections and the peccadillos of the celestial bodies. A familiar burly white pegasus entered on to the stage from the right. Even without the aid of a microphone, his voice sounded clearly throughout the hall.

“FALL IN, VERMIN!”

The din of the auditorium ceased as groups of ponies quickly formed lines in front of the stage at Sergeant Cacopony’s command.

“EACH OF YOU GNATS SHOULD BE FEELING DAMN PROUD RIGHT NOW. THROUGH CAREFUL EVALUATION YOU’VE ALL SHOWN THE POTENTIAL TO SERVE AMONG EQUESTRIA’S FINEST.”

Storm wasn’t sure if he bought that line, and wondered if the ponies that had tested at the other recruitment centers across Equestria had undergone the laughable assessment that he had.

“BUT POTENTIAL ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH. YOU MUST PROVE YOURSELF WORTHY OF THE ARMOR YOU WEAR, REALIZE THAT IT REPRESENTS NOT ONLY YOU, BUT THE GUARD AS A WHOLE, SUCH THAT YOU MAY WEAR IT WITH PRIDE!”

The auditorium erupted in applause as the assembled ponies stamped the ground in agreement.

“IT IS NOW MY GREAT HONOR TO INTRODUCE OUR GLORIOUS **PRINCESS CELESTIA!**”

Sergeant Cacopony and the pony recruits fell into low bows as the Princess of the Sun stepped gracefully onto the stage. Although all heads were to the ground, there was not a pair of eyes that did not strain to catch a glimpse of the regal alicorn. Even in the cool shade of the stage she radiated the gentle warmth of spring’s sunlight. Billowing in an ethereal wind unfelt by the attending ponies, her tail and mane danced enchantingly around her. Several hushed gasps could be heard among the recruits. However, Storm noticed what looked to be dark circles beneath her coral eyes, and her ears seemed to flit about as from some irritation.

“Thank you Sergeant Cacopony, for that truly... Passionate introduction,” Celestia crooned in her melodic voice, “And to you, my honorable ponies, I would ask that you rise.”

Everypony stood proudly to face the princess.

“As I am sure you all realize, as members of the Royal Guard, your duties will not extend solely to the protection of my sister and I, nor that of the citizens of our beautiful land. The aegis you provide must secure not only

the physical well-being of your charges, but their moral and emotional eudemonia as well.”

“*Psst, what’s eudemonia mean?*” Crack Shot whispered to his companion, who silenced him with a sharp shush. Celestia’s eyes briefly twinkled towards the trio as she continued her address.

“As members of the Royal Guard, realize that you will be paragons, and realize the responsibility that carries. You must be exemplars of not only strength and courage, but of kindness and compassion. I ask that you not view yourselves as the sword arm of my sister and I, for in wildly trying to trim the rot you will inadvertently cleave the good as well, and our rule is not one of despotism.

“Although any pony may err, any pony may also atone, if just shown a bit of empathy.”

The princess paused for the briefest of moments after speaking that sentence.

“So as you begin your noble service I have a simple request: that you remember where you came from, that you will remember who you serve.”

As Celestia concluded her speech, the sounds of fervent stomping and cheers resounded through the auditorium for minutes. Despite their brevity, or perhaps due to it, the princess’ words had resonated deeply in the hearts of all those present. Bowing humbly to her loyal Guard, Celestia retreated into the recesses behind the stage. Probably to catch up on the sleep she had missed the night before, and didn’t have a chance to make up after raising the sun. These things really did take place too early.

The ponies once more broke into groups to discuss and cheer their induction into the Royal Guard. Although the rigors of basic training and many other trials awaited them in the days to come, they had this moment to celebrate.

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The following day Storm was somehow even more excited than when he had the chance to see the princess speak. This was the day he would be fitted with the signature golden armor of the pegasus troops and truly become a member of the Royal Guard. Although he had barely gotten a wink of sleep due to his excitement the night before, the ochre pegasus was invigorated. Arriving at the royal academy hours early, and entrusting his belongings to two of the guards stationed outside of the entrance, he ensured that he would be the first to be clad in the magical plate.

A line of the recruits had formed behind Storm as the fated hour approached, his two new friends Check Mate and Crack Shot next in line.

The fated hour came.

The fated hour went.

“So is this like a thing with the Royal Guard or what?” Crack Shot asked. Check Mate shrugged in response.

Finally with a rush of air a familiar armor clad pegasus landed roughly between Storm and the entranceway. The ochre pegasus pondered over the fact that despite the same white coat, blue mane, and gold armor these ponies could be so immediately recognizable.

“Ha, sorry about that guys! Rooster forgot to crow. Name’s Kickstart. Or Corporal Kickstart if you want to get all formal,” the guide from the day before halfheartedly apologized. Recognizing the three ponies he had escorted, the pegasus shot them a lopsided grin, “Oh sup again! Come on, I’ll get y’all suited up.”

While the line of ponies began to filter in, Kickstart led Storm and the others through a series of hallways and a down a winding staircase towards the armory. Firefly lanterns cast soft light in the dim basement corridors, painting quadruped shadows on the walls as the ponies passed by. Finally the armored pegasus came to a stop before a sturdy cast iron door secured with a large dead bolt lock. The pegasus had a moment of panic, followed by one of relieved realization as he reached into the hair of his tail and

produced an iron wrought key. Turning it in the keyhole produced a heavy clang, and the door slowly opened as its hinges creaked in protest.

“Come on in pal, let’s get you decked out,” Kickstart beckoned Storm into the armory.

Storm was amazed by the sight before him. Endless rows of pristine gilded armor scintillated in the firefly light, more than his eyes could take in. He never would’ve imagined so much gold existed buried beneath all of the mountains of Equestria, let alone within a vault underneath the city of Canterlot. The alabaster pegasus trotted towards a rack and pulled off a set of plate mail, along with a small case and jar balanced precariously on his back.

As Kickstart fit the armor onto Storm, the brown pegasus was surprised by how comfortable it was. It seemed to have some sort of pliable backing that molded against his haunches. Despite its size, the legionnaire helmet he wore did nothing to hamper his vision. However, looking himself over Storm was surprised to see that he was still a brown pegasus. It wasn’t that he minded the color of his pelt, but he was curious to see how the magic of his armor functioned. Did it need an additional incantation? He called over to the gilded pegasus who was fidgeting with the jar.

“Hey, I had heard that our armor was supposed to be enchanted to make each of us look similar, why hasn’t my coat changed color?”

“Oh yeah, just gimme a sec!” the white pegasus trotted next to Storm and without warning gave him a series of firm whacks across the armor.

As the pegasus struck his armor, Storm felt its backing rupture and he was suddenly covered in an unpleasant wet coolness. Trying to shake off the offending fluid, Storm only succeeded in saturating the rest of his coat and feathers with it. Then the smell hit him, an acrid odor that he vaguely recognized from the infrequent times he had gotten his mane trimmed.

“Wait a minute, the secret behind our enchanted armor is BLEACH?!” the light brown pegasus exclaimed.

“Yep,” Kickstart tossed Storm the small case. Snapping it open the beige pegasus found a pair of blue contact lenses.

“Careful not to jab your eye while putting those in,” the corporal warned as he dipped a brush into the jar he was fiddling with earlier, “Now hold still, I’ve gotta get your tail.”

# Chapter 3

After receiving their peytrals, shaffrons, and an unexpected high pressure shampooing, Storm Stunner, Crack Shot, Check Mate and the rest of the Royal Guard recruits were led by Corporal Kickstart back through the dank subterranean passageways beneath the academy, leaving a soggy trail in their wake. Returning up the large spiral staircase, the group proceeded towards the main auditorium to recover the belongings they had stored prior to receiving their armor. Although most of the accoutrements had been strewn in a clutter by the guards that had taken them, finding his saddlebags proved to be a hassle-free affair for Storm; much like Check Mate and Crack Shot, few ponies had actually brought any items with them, and those that did had apparently carried them in simple hemp and cloth bags with little to no adornment. By comparison, Storm's kitschy tourist sacks with their brightly colored print looked like something poisonous. With a sigh the pegasus hefted the bags onto his haunches; though he got more than a few raised eyebrows, thankfully it seemed the rest of the recruits were keeping their mouths shut.

"So are you here for the Guard, or the guided tour?"

"Shut up Crack Shot."

--

As Kickstart and the Royal Guard recruits made their way through the royal academy's training grounds, Storm wordlessly took in the numerous obstacles and training instruments scattered about the fields. For the pegasi, a turquoise line of pillars marked an aerial slalom, for the unicorns, a series of erratically placed azure platforms allowed for teleportation practice, for strength training, a fleet of navy plows were arranged on blue tracks of torn earth.

Storm felt the sneaking suspicion that he might have put his contacts in incorrectly.

In short order the ponies had crossed the exercise fields and approached a row of lime colored single story barracks which Storm assumed correctly were in actuality yellow. Kickstart came to a stop in front of the line of buildings and circled to address the recruits. The cohort fell into line; after a quick glance to his sides Crack Shot hurriedly shuffled backwards into it.

“Alright guys, welcome to your new home away from home. As you can see, we’ve got a ton of barracks with a ton of beds, so grab the one that looks comfiest and don’t fight over who gets top bunk. I’ll be back in 30 to take you to the mess hall. Later!”

Before the ponies had a chance to maybe utter a ‘*Yes sir!*’, or more likely a ‘*Beg pardon?*’, Kickstart had propelled himself into the air with a mighty flap of his wings, streaking back towards the main halls of the royal academy. The recruits scanned each other’s faces for any trace of understanding of what had just happened. Finding nothing, there followed a general shrugging of shoulders and rolling of eyes as the group started to make its way to their new lodgings, save for Check Mate who remained in formation. Without warning, Kickstart landed heavily in front of the recruits, startling them backwards into a sloppy file alongside the unicorn.

“*Ha*, I keep forgetting to say this: Dismissed!” and once more the Corporal took to the air, leaving a number of hearts hammering a staccato percussion behind.

“He- Wha-? DAAH!” the spectacle had left Storm incapable of speech. He covered his face in a hoof, dragging it down with an aggravated groan before continuing with actual words, “How in Equestria has a pony like THAT made it in the military?!”

Crack Shot tilted his head in thought, “Maybe he married into it?”

Storm stared blankly at the other pegasus in response. Thinking that something behind him must’ve caught Storm’s attention, Crack Shot turned his head to try to see just what it was.



Check Mate attempted an explanation, "It may be that though the Corporal eschews-

"Gesundheit."

"Errm, thank you Crack Shot. Yes, it may be that though the Corporal *disregards* what we assume to be traditional military decorum, he nevertheless possesses a particular acumen necessary in excelling at a particular Guard function."

"...I guess that may be the case..." Storm sighed, "Still, I've got to admit I was expecting the Guard to be a bit more... Disciplined."

"Aw, I wouldn't worry about," Crack Shot dismissed Storm's complaint with a wave of his hoof, "'Sides, don't tell me you'd prefer somepony like Cacopony, always calling us centipedes or termites or whatever. More than a day of him, and I don't think I'd be able to hear the morning reveille!"

Storm's ears twitched involuntarily at the memory of the loudmouthed Royal Guard recruiter.

"Ok, *that* would be a bit much," Storm let Crack Shot have that one, but he wasn't finished yet, "But think about it: if we *are* going to be groomed to be the best Equestria has to offer, it *\*might\** be nice to have an instructor that can show up to training on time."

"Ehh, Check's got a good point though, you know. Kickstart might just surprise us," Crack Shot mused as he started to follow the rest of the recruits into one of the barracks.

Before turning to follow Crack Shot, the unicorn offered, "At the heart of it, yes, it *is* speculation, but I have a feeling that there's a side to the Corporal that we have yet to see."

What more could Storm say to that? Pushing his doubts and concerns to the back of his mind, he followed his friends inside.

--

Kickstart had not exaggerated when he said there was no shortage of beds. The cadet cohort was no more than 30 ponies, and each of the dormitories easily matched that number in bunks, with personal trunks placed at their ends. Wary from his experiences earlier that week, Storm poked a hoof against one of the mattresses. He was pleased to feel the cushion flex in response; heck, he was pleased that it actually *\*was\** a cushion. It would be a pleasant change from the Maretel 6; if the place wasn't such a dive, the pegasus would have sworn the beds had diamond stuffings.

Crack Shot had chosen one of the bunks closest to the entrance and had thrown himself unceremoniously onto the top mattress. As a pegasus, Storm of course grabbed the upper bunk on the bed next to him, to be closer to the sky. As a pony not wanting to be the odd one out, Check Mate of course grabbed the upper bunk to Storm's side, to *\*not\** be underneath one of his friend's snoring forms. In fact, there were enough beds for each of the recruits to take the top bunk, and of course that was exactly what they all did; it is a natural law that if one is given the choice, they will without fail select the elevated bed, despite the only difference being an extra two meter fall should they turn too much in their sleep.

Storm turned his saddlebags over his neck and onto his mattress, dumping out what little contents they contained. Besides his bit pouch and the copy of Equestria Weekly with the Royal Guard non-interview, there were only the contact case he had received from Kickstart and a couple of photographs. One of the photos showed an older pegasi couple: a sky blue mare with a demure smile, and an indigo stallion with a wide grin.

With a frustrated grunt, a curse, and a bit of a struggle, Storm managed to remove the contacts from his eyes and replace them in their case. He looked once more at the photo.

One of the photos showed an older pegasi couple: a snowy mare with a demure smile, and a ruddy stallion with a wide grin.

Much better.

Turning the photo over in his hoof, Storm read the ink smudged across its glossy backing.

My little pegasus,

I guess you're not so little anymore, but you'll always be my baby boy. I'm so proud of the stallion you've become. I don't have the slightest doubt that you will succeed in whatever you attempt, as long as you put your heart into it.

With my eternal love,

Mom

P.S. Always have confidence should things get hard.

And written just below it:

**That's what she said! Give 'em hell, son!**

The corners of Storm's lips curved into a smile as he read his parents' encouragements. He delicately placed the photo to his side and picked up the second. It was an image of a small brown colt bouncing around a pegasus in golden armor. The colt had a bizarre expression on his face; his tongue was hanging from a large scowl and his were eyes crossed in a manner every mother warns against, promising the onset of a permanent strabismus.

Storm thought back to that day. He had done everything he could to get a rise out of the soldier, but the alabaster pegasus had remained impassive. His father had managed to snap the photograph before his mother discovered what they were doing and dragged the two off in embarrassment. Storm chuckled at the memory as he stared at the picture. The gilded pony's mouth was fixed in a straight, inscrutable line; the only thing that betrayed his stoicism was the softness of his eyes.

After awkwardly putting his contacts back in, Storm gathered his remaining items into his saddlebags, hopped off of his bed, and placed them into the metal chest at the foot of it.

“How much longer do we have until dinner?” the pegasus asked his two friends.

“Beats me, I ain’t got a watch,” Crack Shot answered from over his bed. Though the pony was out of view, Storm could hear the shrug in his voice, “Hey Check, can’t you use your crazy space/time voodoo and conjure up a clock or somethin’?”

Check Mate’s sigh rose over the top of his bed, “As convenient an application of my special talent as that would be, I regret saying that such a feat is beyond my capabilities. However,” the unicorn leapt from his perch and trotted alongside Storm, “it would probably be a good idea for us to wait for the Corporal outside.”

Crack Shot rolled over the side of his bed, landing easily on his hooves, “Sounds good to me!”

The three ponies proceeded out of the barracks into the fading sunlight outdoors. There was no sign of Corporal Kickstart, but the three did not mind; the summer air had cooled with the approaching twilight, and they were content enough to enjoy the pleasant weather. Hoping to fill the void of silence, Storm decided to ask his newfound friends a question that he himself had been asked a number of times before, but never had an answer to.

“So how did \*you\* guys get your cutie marks?”

Check Mate bit his bottom lip in apprehension.

“I doubt that mine is a story worth telling...,” he whispered as he averted his eyes from those of the two pegasi.

“I’m telling you, you don’t have to be so shy around us!” Crack Shot said with a grin, as he forced his face into the unicorn’s view, “Tell you what, I’ll go first! Prepare your bodies for a tragic tale...”

With a theatrical clearing of his throat, Crack Shot commenced the telling of his cutie mark origin story.

“It was a dark and stormy night...

Ok, not really, it was more of a hot and humid summer, but that doesn't sound nearly as cool. Anyways, my bro was darting around the sky like crazy, doing backflips, barrel rolls, every trick in the book. He's always been super serious about that kinda stuff, hopin' to get into the Wonderbolts someday. Typical pegasus, right?

So yeah, right as he's zigzagging back and forth, **POW!** I nailed him *right* in the face with a water balloon! It was a *sick* shot. Next thing I know my flank starts glowing, and *\*bam\** I've got my cutie mark.”

As he finished his story, Crack Shot held his head high. With his eyes closed in a proud expression he was blissfully unaware of the blank stares he was receiving from the two other ponies.

“So... That's it, huh?” Storm ventured.

“Yep!”

Check Mate tilted his head to the side, “If I may inquire... What in particular about that tale makes it tragic?”

“Oh!” Crack Shot's eyes widened as his mouth formed, well, an 'o', “After I hit him with that balloon, my brother beat the CRAP outta me!”

Though not quite what the other two ponies expected, the nature of Crack Shot's explanation wasn't entirely *\*unexpected\**, and so they shrugged it off.

“So how about you Check? I bet you've got some epic tale about those chess pieces,” Crack Shot asked as he ruffled the panache sticking from the unicorn's helm.

An uneasy look once more crossed Check Mate's face.

“It's.. Well, it's-,” the unicorn stammered, trying to avoid broaching the topic of the pegasus knight pieces hidden beneath his crupper plates. He was rescued by the sudden rough landing of Corporal Kickstart beside him.

“Whoa, sorry I’m-,” Kickstart paused in his apology as he looked at the three recruits: none of them were wearing hoofwatches. Furthermore, all of the others were still inside. Maybe...

“Wait. Do you guys know long it’s been since I left?”

The three ponies looked between each other before shaking their heads.

“Haha, well then! Sorry I’m *right on time*! Come on, let’s get the others and go grab some grub.”

--

The mess hall was enormous. It had obviously been designed to accommodate the number of ponies it would’ve taken to fill the barracks, and it was conspicuously barren with only the small cohort of recruits to fill it. Long tables were methodically arranged over the entirety of the cafeteria with benches bolted to each side. There were windows spaced along most of the walls, but little light filtered in as the sun began to settle beneath the western horizon. Just to the left of the entrance, there was a serving area where tables were cluttered with trays and dishes.

“Dig in guys and take as much as you want, you’re going to need the energy tomorrow!” Kickstart warned as he approached the food and snatched an apple slice from one of the platters.

The rest of the cadets followed suit, taking plates and loading them up with what the Royal Guard cafeteria had to offer, which was a lot more than any of them had expected. There were trays of hay fries toasted to golden perfection; in large crystalline bowls, wedges of fresh fruit gave off enticing aromas; arranged on tiered silver platters were lady finger sandwiches overloaded with daisy and clover; in a burnt steel pot was a thick, viscous sludge of boiled oats, the grey quagmire congealing as it cooled to room temperature. Not every dish could be a winner.

As Storm Stunner took his seat with the others, he thought about Check Mate’s odd reaction earlier. There seemed to be some reason for his reticence that went beyond simple modesty. As he looked across the table

towards the unicorn, he was met with a resigned gaze, as if Check Mate knew what the pegasus was going to say next.

“Listen Check Mate. I’m sorry if Crack Shot and I made you uncomfortable with our questioning. It’s cool if you don’t want to talk about the past,” the pegasus said quietly.

“Yeah dude, everypony’s got their secrets right?” Crack Shot offered as he bumped the unicorn’s shoulder with a hoof.

Check Mate looked down towards his dinner and exhaled heavily. It was an unpleasant chain of memories, but perhaps talking about them would be cathartic. His friends... -Yes, they were his friends weren’t they?- Had sincere concern in their voices. The unicorn lifted his head and found the same concern in their eyes.

“Very well then. Let me tell you the story of how I got my cutie mark.

As you discovered upon our first meeting, the process of befriending new ponies has often been a crucible of sorts for me. I’ve always been somewhat timid in that regard, and events in my past have not been instrumental in remedying that aspect of my personality.”

Check Mate paused to gauge the reaction of the two pegasi. Though they had looks of curiosity, they remained silent, waiting for the unicorn to continue.

“Early in my youth, my colors were often a source of great derision. Bright pink and pastel blue, I was a prime target for those seeking to bolster their own sense of self-worth via attacks on others.”

Check Mate lifted a gold shod hoof and observed the charcoal color of his recently dyed pelt. No trace of the original coral color remained.

“Whenever my peers would gather into teams to play sports during our free period, my perceived dearth of masculinity would effectively exclude me from the games. If there was an even number of ponies, I would be the last picked; if there were an odd number, I would be outright excluded. Even if I were to somehow find my place on the sports field, my allies would treat

me as an inconvenience and attempt to work around my presence, effectively excluding me once more.

Unable to play, I was thus unable to grow in ability like the others, and soon my reality matched their schemata; I was the weakling they all decided I was meant to be.”

Crack Shot and Storm Stunner leaned forward intently as Check Mate carried on.

“Then at the start of a new term, when one of my instructors informed the class of the clubs available during the semester, one of them caught my ear. The chess club was open to all interested parties, regardless of previous experience or ability. Although I had never played the game, I was desperate to be a part of something, and I attended the very first meeting of the semester.

The senior members of the club were patient in their explanation of the various pieces and their roles, and the concept was not difficult to grasp. However, one can learn a game in minutes and take years to master it. I was paired with another newcomer in order to hone my skills and it was then that I played my very first game, and earned my very first victory.”

Check Mate’s eyes twinkled at the memory and a faint smile appeared on his lips.

“I challenged another newcomer and again I won. I challenged an experienced player and again I won. So early in the game, I could not have named the Fillydor or Petrot’s Defense, but I could read them instinctively. No matter what strategies my opponents employed, I was able to see 10 moves ahead. At the end of the first meeting I was undefeated, and had bested every other player in attendance. I was ecstatic! I had found a niche after having been ostracized so long. You can only imagine my elation upon discovering those two bright blue pieces contrasting against the pink of my fur. Yet despite my newfound power of foresight, I could not predict what would happen in the days to come.



Although my opponents had been gracious at the moments of their defeat, they were cold in my later interactions with them, refusing to play chess and avoiding conversation altogether. Although their scorn for me was not as overt as that of those who forbade my participation in athletics, it stung much, much more. That which made me special also made impossible any chance of friendship.”

Check Mate finished his reminiscence with a distant look in his eyes. Although the pivotal moments of discovering his special talent and earning his cutie mark had taken place years ago, remembering them made the wounds feel just as fresh.

He was suddenly roused from his despondency by a gentle pat on his back. Turning towards the source he saw that Crack Shot’s cheerful smile had been replaced by a more commiserate one.

“Yeah, kids can be a bunch of jerks.”

“Heh... Indeed they can,” Check Mate returned the smile.

“Anyways, don’t worry about us ditchin’ ya,” the pegasus said, his smile becoming more mischevious, “Who knows when I’ll need a buddy at poker table.”

The rest of the dinner was spent in idle conversation. The topics of discussion were meaningless, but the unicorn was happy for them all the same.

--

The following morning the recruits were stirred from their slumber by the sound of trumpet fanfare. With a deep yawn, Storm stretched his hooves and rolled out of bed. Any ponies that weren’t awoken by the soft reveille outside were jostled into consciousness by a dull thud from near the dormitory entrance.

The ponies quickly equipped their armor, put in their contacts, and rushed out of the barracks to begin the exercises for the day. Waiting outside for the recruits were Corporal Kickstart, who had somehow managed to pass

out while standing up, and an onyx unicorn mare that was busy attaching a trumpet to the back of her armor. Spotting the exiting recruits, she gave Kickstart a rough shove, shaking him from his sleep. The unicorn waited for the ponies to fall into rank before addressing them.

“Good morning soldiers, and welcome to Day One of Basic Training! You will address me as Staff Sergeant!” she announced in a powerful voice. The recruits straightened up immediately; whoever this unicorn was, she was a lot more serious than the pegasus who was fighting to keep his eyes open.

“Yes, *Staff Sergeant!*” they replied in unison.

“We will begin this morning, the same way that we will begin every morning, with a run around the perimeter of the Royal Academy! An hour will be allotted for the completion of the run and breakfast to follow. I fully expect all of you to finish in an acceptable time, but if you lag behind, know that you risk forfeiting your first meal of the day!

Pegasi, there will be no use of wings allowed for this exercise; unicorns, I don’t need to tell you that teleportation is strictly prohibited. Any recruit that violates these conditions will meet the business end of my trumpet. Alright recruits, move out!”

The Staff Sergeant took off in a swift gallop with the recruits keeping step behind her. Realizing that they were starting, Kickstart stifled a yawn before racing to catch up with the unicorn.

“Glad you decided to join us on this jog, Corporal!” the unicorn chided.

“Eh, the exercise oughta do me some good.”

“Well, if you want to strengthen your lungs, why don’t you lead us on cadence?”

“Heh, alright, I’ve got a good one,” Kickstart looked back towards the recruits, catching their attention, “Alright guys, you know how this goes! / *don’t know what I’ve been told!*”

***“I don’t know what I’ve been told!”*** the ponies sang back.

*“But Princess Celestia’s mighty old!”*

The recruits wisely elected not to echo that last line, cringing as the Staff Sergeant nearly bucked Kickstart off of the trail in response.

--

Although some ponies like Check Mate found themselves struggling for breath, they all finished the run with more than 20 minutes to spare. They organized within the mess hall in celebration of successful start to basic training. Many of the dishes from the dinner before made a reappearance, and once more the boiled oats went untouched.

“Good job out there guys!” Storm congratulated his friends, “it’s nice to actually get into it, isn’t it?”

“I’ll inform you once my hooves register a sensation beyond inflammation,” Check Mate replied as he nursed the blisters on his fore hooves, “Though yes, I do believe I will appreciate this new level of discipline, once the rest of me acclimates to it.”

“How about the Staff Sergeant , huh?” Crack Shot asked, shifting the conversation, “Hey, do you think that’s her actual name?”

Storm shook his head, “I doubt it, she probably uses her title to command respect. She seemed like the polar opposite of Corporal Kickstart.”

“Heh, like black and white... Or grey and white I guess. I like it, you think she’s single?”

“I think,” Check Mate interjected between a bite of an orange slice, “that is a very dangerous question to ask.”

--

After breakfast, the ponies reconvened in the training grounds outside of the Royal Academy, forming rows in front of Corporal Kickstart; the Staff

Sergeant was conspicuously absent. Once everypony was in place, he addressed the recruits.

“Ok, listen up. This next skill we’re going to teach you is one of the most important in a Guard pony’s arsenal. Heck, you might consider it the hallmark of the Royal Guard!” the recruits bristled with excitement at the prospect of learning an exotic new trick, before the pegasus continued, “Today, you’re gonna learn how to pull off a poker face!”

Kickstart snorted with laughter as the cadets balked in disbelief.

“HA! Once you get this down, you won’t do that anymore when I say things like that! Ok, let me show you how this works,” as the words left his mouth, his countenance immediately became sterner, “Alright, try to make me laugh.”

The recruits didn’t react at first, uncertain if the pegasus was serious or not. Crack Shot was the first to approach, blowing raspberries and waving his tail sultrily in the face of the Corporal. There were a few stifled chuckles from the others, but Kickstart remained unfazed. Other ponies followed, dancing and strutting and doing whatever they could to get a rise out of the pegasus, but had no luck in getting Kickstart to react. Only after the last pony had attempted and failed did he relax.

“Alright, it’s important to know how to keep a serious expression, because it looks rad and everypony goes nuts for it.”

Storm thought that Kickstart could have come up with a better reason than that, but he chalked it off to the eccentricities of the Corporal.

Kickstart continued, “Well as they say, practice makes better, soooo... Go for it!”

Not knowing what else to do, the recruits adopted their most serious expressions. Storm thought back to the photo he had carried with him, the image of him harassing a pegasus guard. Despite the annoyance of a hyperactive colt clambering around him, the pony had held himself with a reserved pride, and Storm found inspiration in that fact. That inspiration

allowed him to approach the exercise earnestly, and his eyes flared with the dignity of that Royal Guard from so many years ago.

However, the same couldn't be said of all of the cadets, and a number of faces were contorted into tightly pursed lips with wild eyes. Crack Shot, who might have never had anything but a smile on his face for the whole of his life, had somehow managed to seal off his nostrils as well, having taken the word 'serious' a bit too seriously. If not for its recent blanching, his face would have been losing color. Kickstart shrugged it off; they still had weeks of basic training, and a few of them seemed to be getting it down.

Crack Shot went belly up from a lack of oxygen.

Maybe 'weeks' wouldn't be a long enough measure of time.

After about a half hour and a few more crashes by Crack Shot, the Staff Sergeant finally rejoined the group. Kickstart stepped aside to allow her to take over.

"Alright soldiers, at ease!"

The cadets relished the chance to finally relax and stretch out their jaws; Crack Shot took a few desperate gulps of air.

"For the remainder of the day you shall be instructed in your respective duties as pegasus and unicorn guards. Unicorns will be working with me; pegasi will be working with Corporal Kickstart," The Staff Sergeant turned in the direction of the royal academy before shouting, "Alright soldiers, hop to it!"

As Kickstart and the Staff Sergeant led the ponies back towards the royal academy, Storm hazarded a glance towards Check Mate. The unicorn's face was unreadable, his eyes gazing forward neutrally. At first, Storm felt concerned for his friend who would be going off alone; however, that concern dissipated as he made the realization that Check Mate had gone through the majority of the recruitment process alone. In spite of an unpleasant colthood and pronounced introversion, the pony definitely had a lot of inner strength. Storm just hoped he could keep up physically as well.

Upon nearing the royal academy the two groups split up; the Staff Sergeant led her entourage of unicorns inside, while Kickstart took his group around the perimeter of the building. On the side opposite to the main entrance, there was a large steel structure with a rounded roof and a wide tin shutter, the cutie marks of the royal sisters emblazoned across the corrugated metal. The pegasus disappeared through a door cut into the building's side, and with a series of echoing grunts the shutter lifted to reveal a fleet gilded ivory chariots. Kickstart stepped from the gaping portal and gestured towards the carts with a wing.

"As Royal Guards, you're gonna be pulling these things around a lot, so it's best to get used to 'em now. Everypony buddy up, grab a cart," Kickstart directed as he vanished into a small supply closet within the hangar, "I'm gonna grab somethin' real quick."

Storm Stunner and Crack Shot paired up and selected an empty chariot, as the rest of the pegasus recruits did the same.

"I wonder what Check Mate and the others are doing right now?" Storm inquired as he shifted the yoke of their chariot into a more comfortable position.

"Probably some sick combat spells, something cooler than this," Crack Shot suggested as he finagled the yoke out of the awkward position Storm had put it in.

--

Meanwhile in the main auditorium, Check Mate found himself with a brass instrument in his right hoof, repeating the words being bellowed by the Staff Sergeant to the unicorn cadets.

"THIS IS MY TRUMPET. THERE ARE MANY LIKE IT, BUT THIS ONE IS MINE!"

--

Kickstart returned from the supply closet with stacks of cardboard cutouts balanced precariously on top of his outstretched wings, and began placing

them in the back of the chariots. When the pegasus reached Storm Stunner and Crack Shot, they found that the cutouts were images of Princess Celestia herself. Something about them seemed off, but Storm wasn't sure if he should blame it on his contacts or not. Kickstart answered the unspoken question for him.

"Don't mind the funky pink color, problem with the printers I guess."

# Chapter 4

The rest of the first week of basic training flew by for most of the Royal Guard cadets. For others like Check Mate, it limped by on blistered hooves. Nevertheless, in the short span of time the ponies had shown a marked increase in ability thanks to their rigorous training: Crack Shot was staying conscious while maintaining a neutral expression, and Check Mate had learned a number of basic songs on his trumpet. Somehow they had also managed to squeeze some time in for more traditional physical training, between all of the important bits. Though their bodies were exhausted, the recruits were still fresh of mind and in high spirits, ready for their first day off.

After receiving a modest, but by no means insubstantial payment for their time, the trainees had been addressed by Corporal Kickstart before being allowed to enjoy their holiday. The pegasus had shown a sober look at that moment, one out of place on the face of the typically lackadaisical pony, and one that had set the recruits on edge. With a grim grit in his eyes, he had warned them about the repercussions they would face should any of them go AWOL.

“If you forget to show up on Monday, they *will* dock your pay.”

The words had been spoken with the solemn voice of experience.

The cadets broke off into smaller groups, making plans that they would probably regret early the following morning. Storm Stunner, Crack Shot, and Check Mate gathered as well to discuss what kind of trouble they could get into together.

“You guys go on ahead, I’ve got some stuff I want to do,” Storm contradicted the author.

“Aww, what?! “ Crack Shot exclaimed, “What could you possibly have going on already?”



"It's nothing really," Storm answered, the slightest hint of a blush catching Crack Shot's eye, "When I first arrived in Canterlot, somepony lent me a hoof in getting around the city. I just want to try to find and thank them."

"So let's find 'em and take them with us! The more the merrier, right?"

"Perhaps we should leave Storm be," Check Mate interjected, "It wouldn't be polite to nose into his personal affairs."

Upon hearing Check Mate's argument, Crack Shot paused in thought. The other pegasus seemed reticent in talking about his plans, giving only the vaguest details. Crack Shot pondered on the unicorn's words, Storm's reaction, and both of their implications. After thoughtful consideration of the details, he knew just what to say in response.

"Oh, *snap!* It's a *girl*, isn't it?!"

The pink on Storm's cheeks flared into a bright rouge as Crack Shot doubled over onto the floor in peals of laughter. A few of the other cadets in the barrack glanced over in curiosity, before turning back to discuss the details of their upcoming day of debauchery.

"Are you finished yet?!" Storm seethed through clenched teeth.

Crack Shot took a few deep breaths to steady himself before answering. He glanced up from his prostrate position, and his eyes shot open upon seeing how red Storm's face had become. The pegasus shook his head vigorously in denial to Storm's question and again burst into paroxysms of laughter.

Check Mate decided to try to cheer up the furiously blushing Storm, while Crack Shot unsuccessfully tried to calm down between his rolling and snorting.

"Do not worry about him, and do not worry about us," the unicorn comforted, "If you wish for privacy while courting your inamorata, what kind of friends would we be to impede you?"

“My *what?!*” Storm balked at the way the conversation was going, “I’m not in *amor* with anypony, and I have no idea where you two are getting this from!”

“Hehe, chill dude...,” Crack Shot stood up shakily and grinned, “We’re just giving you a hard time.”

He glanced towards Check Mate, who had a look on his face that implied anything but.

“Ok, *I’m* just giving you a hard time,” he corrected, “Still, do what you’ve got to do and don’t break the poor girl’s heart, alright? Me and Check can figure out something to kill the time with.”

“I appreciate the uh... kind words,” Storm replied, a confused frown bending the corner of his lips, “Maybe I’ll catch you guys later on, alright?”

Storm began digging through the metal chest at the foot of his bunk, fetching his saddlebags from beneath his armor. As proud as he was to wear the gilded plate, it would be nice to fly around without the additional weight. While he secured the bags on his haunches and made his way for the door, Crack Shot and Check Mate discussed their itinerary for the day.

“So I imagine Canterlot is a pretty happenin’ place on the weekend, what is there to do?” Crack Shot asked as he and the unicorn followed Storm into the morning air.

Check Mate pondered on the question, thinking of a number of potentially stimulating activities.

“Well... There’s the Metroponitan Museum of Art. As I understand it, they’ve recently acquired a collection of porcelain urns from Neighpon... There’s also the Canterlot Philharmonic, they have got a cellist, ...or was she a contrabassist...? Who is an absolute master of her craft! Oh!-“

Check Mate paused in his raving when he noticed Crack Shot gnawing his bottom lip with a widened stare. The unicorn studied the pegasus’ expression, and after thoughtful consideration he decided he had no idea

exactly which emotion it was meant to convey. Still, he was certain that it wasn't enthusiasm. He tried another direction.

"...Or, if it's more in line with your interests, we could check out the Del Mare Racetrack...?"

The pegasus' eyes lit up with a much more recognizable vivacity.

"Now that sounds like a plan!"

---

As Storm flew over the expanse of Canterlot, he allowed himself a moment to truly appreciate the spectacle. Although he had been vaguely familiar with the look of the city from his training exercises, at those times had had been predominantly focused on lugging around a shoddy likeness of the Sun Princess in an awkwardly constructed chariot. Now though, he could fully take it all in.

It was a view that never got old. Below him stretched a kaleidoscopic panorama of efflorescent gardens and diverse architecture, segmented by a spider web of labyrinthine cobblestone roads. The product of centuries' worth of development, the city was a living thing that continually grew and expanded; even with all of the time in the world, Storm doubted that he could ever truly take it all in. At the periphery of the city, the royal castle erupted out of the mountainside, bleeding crystalline cascades that scintillated in the morning light. At the end of their training, it would be the responsibility of every cadet to protect and preserve all of it. Storm hoped that he would be prepared for that duty.

The market where he had met the unicorn Nomde Plume soon came into view, and Storm began a gentle glide towards its streets. The scene before him was decidedly different from the one he had first encountered a number of days back. All of the vendor carts remained in their original spots, and they featured the same goods as they had before; the main difference was that the goods were actually being purchased. With the day off and bits burning holes in their pouches, ponies were merrily blowing their paychecks on whatever impractical luxury happened to catch their

eye. He noticed a unicorn and earth pony couple nearby being taken in by a fevered pitch for a contraption that could dice any fruit or vegetable with a slap of the hoof. He had always wondered what kind of ponies bought that junk.

Storm began to notice a number of salesponies eyeing him greedily, and he realized that his saddlebags with their gaudy tourist text must have made him look to them like a gemstone looks to a dragon. He picked up the pace in his trot, as he scanned overhead for the enameled wooden sign that marked Nomde's book store.

"Hey there, friend! Have you ever had a problem with cereal spilling out of your bowl?" came the voice of a unicorn brandishing a malformed blue and orange contrivance.

"Not interested!" Storm shouted as he quickly retreated.

A few blocks and many more sales pitches later, Storm finally spotted the familiar carved sign identifying Nomde's shop. Giving a quick scan of the nearby carts lining the crowded street, Storm spotted a stand selling flowers. In charge of the stand was an enormous earth pony stallion with deep verdant fur; he looked like he should have been felling trees instead of pruning petals. Storm approached the emerald florist who gave him an impassive stare.

"Say, how much for one of those roses?" Storm asked.

"Ten bits," the stallion replied tersely.

"Ten bits?!" Storm could not believe the exorbitant price the vendor had placed on a single flower. He attempted to haggle, "I'll give you nine."

The earth pony thought on it, "Nine and a half bits."

"Our currency doesn't come in halves!" Storm exclaimed.

"Hmm... you're right. Let's round it up to ten bits."

Storm grumbled and fished his bit pouch out of his saddle bags, grudgingly dumping ten coins before the merchant and snatching his flower. He

prayed that the payment he had received from the Royal Guard would last into the afternoon. He made his way through the crowds of ponies roaming the street towards the book store and stepped inside. Looking to his left, he saw a pegasus with a couple of books on the oak checkout counter, talking to an increasingly frustrated Nomde.

“How long can I check out a book for, and what are the late fees?”

“THIS IS BOOKSTORE, NOT A LIBRARY!”

The pegasus started back and retreated to the rear of the store with his books, opting to finish his reading out of sight of the maddened unicorn. Storm had hoped to catch Nomde in a better mood, but as luck would have it that would not be the case. The blanched pegasus could never grasp the idea of Lady Luck; sure he understood the idea of her, but with the way she treated him he could never think of her as anything close to ladylike. He tentatively approached the counter where the alabaster unicorn had begun reading a small book with a slight scowl on her face.

“Um, hi Nomde,” Storm squeaked, attempting the disarming smile he had used the first time he met her; the unicorn looked up with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Hi. Do I, uh, know you?” Nomde questioned, uncertain of the identity of the white pegasus with the blue mane in front of her, but a little creeped out by his sudden awkward grinning.

“Ah right, the dyes and all... I’m Storm Stunner,” the pegasus explained, “The pony that you led to the Royal Guard recruitment center the other day?”

“Oh. *Oh!* The one with the *adorable* cutie mark,” Nomde’s recollection caused Storm to wince, “What happened to the bindle stick?”

“It’s a long story,” Storm tried brush the topic aside, “Anyways, I just, uh, wanted to thank you for your help. I probably would’ve spent a week trying to find the place if it weren’t for you.”

The pegasus dipped his nose into his saddlebags and retrieved the rose, setting it on the counter before Nomde, "Err, if it's not too forward."

"Oh wow," Nomde levitated the rose beneath her nose and breathed in its sweet scent, then took a delicate bite out of one of its petals, "Thank you! It's delicious."

Storm was glad to see Nomde's mood brighten and to know that he was the cause, though he felt that with the price he had paid for the flower he should have also gotten a salad to go along with it.

"Say, do you want to grab something to drink?" Nomde asked, "I wouldn't mind learning about life in the Royal Guard if you've got the time."

Remembering his first encounter with the ivory unicorn, Storm didn't bother questioning Nomde's willingness to leave her store unattended, and nodded his approval of the idea.

"And the first thing I'd like to know," Nomde said as they walked out of the store, "is if those saddlebags are standard issue."

"No... I just needed something to replace the bindle," the pegasus admitted.

"Wow, I was right about your cutie mark," Nomde smirked, "You really need to get somepony to help you shop."

---

While the Royal Castle of Canterlot may have been the premiere piece of architecture in the city, the Del Mare Racetrack came in a close second, and that was only because it didn't have two alicorns who could manipulate the heavens calling it home. The multi-tiered stadium was surrounded by a score of flags from each of the different cities in Equestria; for every one that Crack Shot recognized, there were nine that were completely new to him. Of course, that meant he only recognized two of the flags, that of Canterlot itself and his native Manehattan, but nopony would claim that he was the best at geography.

Near the main entrance was a great torch that burned with centuries-old dragon flame; a tribute to all of the athletes who had bled and sweat in the name of competition. Near the dragon flame was the most successful postcard kiosk in Equestria's history. Its customers could toss the colorful missives into the smoldering green fires and save on the postage of more traditional means of delivery.

Throngs of rabid fans clambered over each other for a chance to catch the athletes as they entered the stadium, blocking the way as the two Royal Guard cadets tried to fight their way through to the ticket stand. They purchased the cheapest tickets available, and after climbing more flights of stairs than Check Mate's hooves could ever feel necessary, the two took their seats. Through a layer of stratocumulus, a group of multicolored dots could just barely be seen filtering onto the field.

"Maybe we oughta upgrade to a closer section," Crack Shot suggested.

A downstairs trek and fifty bits later, Crack Shot and Check Mate were afforded a position that wouldn't cause the unicorn altitude sickness. Behind the starting gates of the track were eight ponies: six earth ponies, a pegasus, and a black unicorn. Each of them was wearing a body suit plastered with advertisements for popular sarsaparilla brands and mane care products.

"So, who do you think's gonna win this one?" Crack Shot asked.

Check Mate's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the athletes. Not an avid sports fan, the unicorn didn't have much to go on, but the pre-race fidgeting of the ponies was all that he needed. The blue earth pony third from the gate seemed to lean heavily to one side, possibly due to an injury on the other; the pegasus had a lean build, but the frays in his feathers would cause him to lag. However, the inky unicorn stared straight ahead with a sharp focus. Check Mate's instinct told him that the black pony would be the dark horse, so to speak.

"If I were to speculate...", Check Mate said thoughtfully, "I would say the unicorn at the end there will be the victor."

“The unicorn, huh? Never woulda guessed,” Crack Shot shrugged, “I’ll take your word for it though.”

Suddenly the voice of the announcer boomed through the stadium, “Welcome fillies and gentlecolts to the Del Mare Racetrack! Get ready for some fleet footed, hasty hooved racing that will make your eyes *spin!* You may’ve paid for the full seat, but you’re only going to need the *EDGE!*

We’ve got a few fan favorites this race, along with a couple of newcomers! Starting from the number one position we’ve got *Tail On Fire*. Next, it’s *Luna Little’s Helper*, followed by *Ninety-Nine Problems But A Mare Ain’t One...*”

The audience stomped the stands in varying degrees of applause each time another name was listed. Finally, the announcer came to the final pony, the black unicorn that Check Mate had predicted to win the race.

“...And last but not least, we have another newcomer to the racing circuit, *Sea Cracker!*”

As the unicorn was named, the audience’s applause was notably more subdued. Check Mate noticed an increase in determination on the racer’s face. The starting horn blared, the gates flung open, and the ponies sprung onto the track in a full gallop. A few steps into the race, the blue earth pony that Check Mate had noticed lost his footing and tumbled to the ground, nursing a wounded foreleg. A pair of unicorns in scrubs rushed onto the track and levitated the injured pony onto a stretcher.

“Looks like one of those ninety-nine problems was a *sprain, HEYO!*” the announcer’s voice echoed, the crowd responding with boos and jeers.

The seven remaining racers charged ahead, rapidly approaching the finish line. Sea Cracker was ahead of most of the pack, but remained just behind the lead pony, an earth pony called Mind The Manticore. As the final 100 yards approached, all of the ponies lowered their heads and broke out into a sprint. Mind The Manticore was fast, but Sea Cracker steadily gained on him as they sped towards the finish line. The two were neck and neck as they tore through the ribbon at the end of the track.



“And just by a horn, Sea Cracker *wins the first race!*”

The stands thundered with hoof falls for the black unicorn, whose face was a mixture of pride, relief, and sweat.

“Ha, as if there was any surprise!” Crack Shot raised his foreleg to Check Mate for a hoof bump, “Not when you can call em like that!”

Check Mate gently tapped the pegasus’ hoof, mindful of the blisters on his own.

“It’s all a matter of observation,” he preened.

The two friends watched more of the races, Check Mate naming the winner every single time. However, neither of them was aware that the unicorn had garnered quite a bit of attention from others in the audience.

“I don’t know about you Check, but all of this sitting works up an appetite,” Crack Shot stood with a stretch, “I’m gonna stop by the concession stand, you want me to grab you somethin’?”

“Don’t worry about me; I think I will be alright, though I do appreciate the offer.”

“Heh. I’ll get you something anyways, catch you in a bit,” the pegasus took flight towards the exit of the stands.

Check Mate chuckled as Crack Shot disappeared into the crowds. The fact that his friend was willing to pay stadium prices to get him a snack was impressive. However, he didn’t feel like waiting in the crowded stands for the pegasus’ return. The din of the spectators was proving to be a bit much for the introverted unicorn, so despite the protest of his hooves he made his way from the stands in search of a quieter area to relax in.

Moving from the main thoroughfares between the spectator area and the concession stands, Check Mate managed to find a quiet corridor that terminated in a dead end. He took a seat on the cool concrete floor, closed his eyes, and let his mind wander. His thoughts frequently returned to the grueling week of training he had completed. The exercises had worked

muscles that he was only aware of in the academic sense, and he had developed a profound appreciation for ice packs. Still, as early as it was into basic training, he knew that he was getting stronger, and he was glad for the chance to actually \*get\* stronger. All of the cadets encouraged and cheered each other on, even the stragglers.

The sound of hoof falls broke Check Mate from his musings. Looking up, he saw a pony approaching him, and even without his unique knack for deduction he could tell that he was bad news. The pony, a pegasus with golden eyes and a coat the color of blood, had a cruel smirk and eyed the unicorn like a predator. Check Mate stood and watched the pegasus warily, his worn body tensing up slightly.

“So, how’d you do it?” the crimson pegasus broke the silence.

Check Mate, nonplussed by the greeting, responded shakily, “P-Pardon?”

“I overheard you those last few races. You called the winner, every. Single. Time. So, how’d you do it? Is there a fix in? Are any of the ponies doping?”

The pegasus stepped towards Check Mate. Check Mate, irked by the implications of his assailant, lost all timidity and held his ground, “I will have you know that I would have no part in such iniquitous activities, and I would thank you to refrain from insinuating otherwise. My naming of those winners stemmed from nothing more than a talent for observation.”

The golden eyes of the pegasus widened, “You’re telling me that you could tell which pony would win, just by looking at them?”

“In so many words, yes.”

The pegasus’ smirk widened into an unsettling grin, “That’s even better. How would you like to go into business?”

Check Mate could see where the pegasus was going with this, and he didn’t want any part of it, “If you are thinking of involving me in some manner of illicit betting ring, then I must disappoint you. I have no desire of abusing my talents for unscrupulous gains.”

“Well, that’s a shame, isn’t it?”

The red pegasus whistled sharply, and an enormous clay colored earth pony stepped into the corridor. Check Mate saw that the beast of a pony was armed to the teeth.

That is to say he had an empty sarsaparilla bottle clenched in his jaw, but it was nevertheless a menacing sight.

“Knockout, see if you can convince this unicorn to look at things our way,” the pegasus commanded.

The earth pony grunted an affirmative and lumbered towards Check Mate. The unicorn was in a tight spot, with no obvious exit from the corridor except straight past the two ponies cornering him. His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, processing and identifying the best methods for surviving the encounter, as he determined the different sequences of actions his opponents would make. Knockout closed the distance, and Check Mate lowered into a defensive stance. In a practiced movement, the earth pony whipped his head around, swinging the bottle in a deadly arc towards the unicorn’s head. Of course Check Mate saw the attack coming a mile away. His horn began to scintillate as he readied his counter, and as he ducked the blow it erupted in a coruscation of blinding white.

Knockout staggered backwards, shielding his eyes and dropping his bottle with a shatter. His vision distorted from the unexpected flash, he braced himself for the slate unicorn’s reprisal. To his surprise, no strikes belted into him. Tentatively opening an eye, he discovered that his foe was nowhere in sight.

“Where’d he go boss?” the earth pony asked of the golden eyed pegasus, who only shook his head angrily in response.

With a burst of light, Check Mate reappeared at his seat in the stands. Even if they didn’t have his analytical ability, he was surprised his attackers hadn’t seen that one coming.

“Hey buddy, I got you a veggie dog! And they friggin’ charged extra for the bun...,” Crack Shot alighted next to the unicorn with a plastic bag hung from one hoof, “Anything exciting happen when I was gone?”

Check Mate levitated the dog from the bag and took an appreciative bite; the teleportation had taken it out of him.

“Two ponies attempted to shanghai me, and force me into their gambling ring’s service,” he responded, surprised by his own nonchalance about the whole episode.

“Really?” Crack Shot scratched his chin in thought, “...How much did they offer you?”

“Not enough to cover the pain of the head trauma, or the expense of a hospital stay. Perhaps we should abscond to some other location before those ruffians return?”

“Sure thing. It was getting kinda boring knowing who was gonna win each race anyways,” Crack Shot paused as his eyes brightened, “In case they do show up again though, I think I’ve got an idea for how we can handle it.”

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As a pegasus who never made it a point to drink coffee, Storm Stunner felt out of place in the Starbucks bistro. He kept staring at the menu in the coffee shop, waiting for it to make sense. It vehemently refused to do so. He tried to listen to how the other customers ordered their drinks. That just made things worse. Everypony in the establishment seemed to be wearing thick rimmed glasses, many of which didn’t have lenses, and with his bags he looked like a tourist, which he supposed wasn’t too far off. There were cappuccinos and frappuccinos, lattes and cafes au lait; each drink came tall, grande, or venti, but to Storm those all meant ‘big.’ He was at a loss as to how to order. Soon Nomde and he were next in line, and he realized an easy solution to his dilemma.

“What can I get you ma’am?” the barista asked.

“I’ll have an iced six shot soy venti cappuccino, dry please.”

“And for you sir?”

“Same for me, thanks.”

Storm didn't catch it, but Nomde's eyebrow arched in surprise. She didn't think any other pony took their coffee that strong. After paying for their beverages, Nomde and Storm trotted to the pickup counter to wait for them to be brewed.

“Sooo, um... Read anything interesting lately?”

Storm didn't think it was much of a conversation starter, but it would do. By the way Nomde's eyes lit up at the question, apparently it did better than he expected.

“Actually, yes,” the white unicorn smiled, “I've really gotten into the Twilight series as of late.”

“Twilight series?” it didn't ring any bells for the pegasus, “What's that about?”

“It's a collection of journal articles written by one of Princess Celestia's students who's currently residing outside of Canterlot,” Nomde explained, “They cover the benefits of interpersonal relationships, as well as a number of scientific topics including astronomy and the use of involuntary muscle spasms in some ponies as a means of propiscience. They've got quite the wide scope.”

“Wow, she sounds like quite the scholar,” Storm added, hoping he'd be able to keep up with the conversation.

“She absolutely is,” Nomde smirked surreptitiously, “You know, I'd be willing to play librarian *just once* if you wanted to borrow them.”

“I'd like that. It'd be nice to have something to read besides that copy of Equestria Weekly.”

Truth be told, Storm wasn't certain he'd grasp the material given Nomde's explanation of it. Still he'd probably learn at least something from it. More than he'd learn by rereading articles about Sapphire Shores' latest

scandals at the least; he wasn't sure how a pony could even have a wardrobe malfunction, it's not like they regularly wore clothes.

The barista arrived with their beverages, and Storm took an experimental taste of the cool beverage. It struck him as remarkably bitter, but he supposed that was to be expected with coffee. How it could be so popular when there were so many more palatable alternatives available was beyond his reasoning; it had to have been somepony's idea of a joke. The two ponies carried their drinks to an unoccupied table by a window.

Nomde took an appreciative sip of her cappuccino before asking, "So is life in the Royal Guard everything you expected?"

"Not in the least," the pegasus sighed.

Nomde quirked an eyebrow at the pegasus' answer.

"Really? How so?"

Storm carefully weighed his response before answering; he didn't want to turn the conversation into a one-sided rant.

"Well... it's not as disciplined as I thought it was going to be, and our training exercises are not at all what I expected," Storm replied before taking another sip of his strange brew. It tasted like it was meant to strip paint, but it was starting to grow on him.

"Care to elaborate?"

"It's a bit of a long story," Storm warned.

"Go ahead, I'm listening," Nomde pressed.

Storm had tried. Cue the rant.

"Alright, let's start with one of our instructors, Corporal Kickstart. The pony will never. Show up. On time. I think the reason he's \*called\* Kickstart is because a swift kick to the flank is the only way you could get him to do anything! Some ponies might say 'better late than never,' well then his

motto must be ‘better late than early!’ You could tell him to arrive at his own leisure and he’d *still* find a way to end up late!

And late for what you might ask? To taxi around a crudely cut cardboard misprint of Princess Celestia in an overly gilded aerial *rickshaw*!”

At the end of his outburst, Storm realized the spectacle he must have made. His cheeks reddened, and he turned away in embarrassment. He hadn’t meant to go off like that, but he was feeling more keyed up than usual for some reason. He took a large gulp of the cappuccino to wet his throat and cool his nerves, before glancing back towards Nomde. To his relief, the unicorn didn’t look put off at all; however, she had a hoof pressed to her lips, and she seemed to be going into some sort of shaking fits. Nomde coughed once and seemed to recover her composure.

“S-So have you done anything else besides give guided tours of Canterlot to cardboard cutouts of the royal sisters?” Nomde’s lips quavered.

“Well, there’s also this.”

The pegasus stood from his seat, and in a fluid motion quickly unfurled his wings. A sharp sound rang out, like that of metal being quickly dragged across metal.

“We spent all Friday afternoon working on that one,” he answered flatly.

“Very intimidating!” Nomde applauded, “Though I imagine drawing an actual blade would be even more so.”

“The unicorns get trumpets if that counts for anything.”

The two ponies continued their banter, the ice in their beverages melting long before they had the chance to finish them. Nevertheless, their cups eventually emptied, much to the disappointment of Storm; he was enjoying the conversation, and the taste of cappuccino really wasn’t all that bad once he got used to it.

“Well, I suppose I should be returning to my store,” Nomde stood from her seat, “If ponies want to read the product without paying for it, I should at least get to enjoy the chance to harass them about it.”

Storm stood as well, his hooves jittering a bit before he placed them down.

“Heh, I suppose you’ll be zapping back in the blink of an eye?” the pegasus chuckled.

“Probably,” Nomde smiled, “Unless you care to walk me back.”

---

Crack Shot and Check Mate found the outside of the Del Mare Racetrack much quieter than when they had arrived in the morning, the crowds from earlier now seated inside of the stadium to watch the rest of the races. Besides the proprietor of the postcard kiosk, there were only the two Royal Guard recruits, followed at a distance by dark red pegasus and light brown earth pony. Crack Shot managed a subtle glance back towards the two stalking ponies.

“Hehe, ready to teach these guys a lesson?” the pegasus whispered, barely able to contain his excitement.

“In this case, yes, a physical lesson may accomplish what words cannot. Do you feel prepared for the coming skirmish?”

“You just leave it to me,” Crack Shot answered with a nod to his sides, his wings folded tightly against his body.

The two cadets walked into a narrow alley, effectively baiting the trap. The quickening of hoof falls behind them let them know that it was sprung.

“You really embarrassed us back there, you realize?” spoke a threatening voice.

Crack Shot and Check Mate turned to face their antagonists. The unicorn noticed that the amber eyed pegasus had adopted his cruel grin once more, and Knockout had found another bottle to brandish. Crack Shot took a step forward.



“So you’re the jerks who’ve been buggin’ my friend here,” Crack Shot fixed the two assailants with a surprisingly fierce glare, “Back off.”

“Oh, bold aren’t you,” the crimson pegasus’ eyes narrowed, “And what, pray tell, do you think you can do to stop us?”

Crack Shot grinned, “Turn those gold eyes of yours black and blue, of course!”

The red pegasus cackled derisively before his face contorted into a sneer.

“Knockout, make them bleed.”

As the towering earth pony stomped towards the cadets, Check Mate’s horn began to glow softly.

“Planning to teleport again, you coward?!” the pegasus screamed, “We’ll just give your beating to your friend over there twofold!”

“I wouldn’t think of it...,” the unicorn whispered as circles of light began to flicker above the pegasus and to the earth pony’s right, just out of their view, “Crack Shot, if you’d care to do the honors?”

“With pleasure!”

The white pegasus’ wings unfurled, casting two empty sarsaparilla bottles into the air. In a lightning quick motion he swung his wings against them, sending them speeding towards the two other ponies. For their part, Knockout and the blood red pegasus reacted quickly to try to get out of the way. Unfortunately for them, their escape path only served to seal their fate, and they were both struck square in their foreheads as they leapt right into the bottles’ trajectories. With a pair of loud thuds, both ponies slumped to the ground unconscious.

“Wooo, that was *sick!*” Crack Shot bumped his hoof against Check Mate’s shoulder, “So what do we do with these two losers? Lock ‘em in jail and throw away the key? Read ‘em their rights?”

“Perhaps we should alert the proper authorities?” the unicorn suggested.

“Wait,” Check Mate froze, “I thought that was us.”

“We’ve yet to graduate,” Check Mate reasoned, “I’m not sure if performing an arrest is within our jurisdiction.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?!” Crack Shot was legitimately confused, “You know everything!”

“Well, I don’t know this! I’m not a copy of Wikiponia!”

As the two ponies argued, a loud gasp came from a window above them. Looking up, they saw the head of a pony quickly retreat inside. It was then that they realized just how the scene must have looked to the casual onlooker: two clearly conscious ponies looming over two clearly unconscious ponies that were lying in a pile of broken glass. It didn’t portray them in the best light. At that moment the two cadets quickly realized if not the best action to take, then definitely the most obvious one, and they hastily bolted from the scene of the crime.

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As Storm lay in bed, his mind drifted randomly between a number of different thoughts. He had thoroughly enjoyed his time conversing with Nomde again, and he was glad to be certain of another friend in Canterlot. The story that Crack Shot and Check Mate had told him had left the pegasus impressed by their teamwork, if not by its aftermath. He wondered if ponies did some actual normal shopping in the city, or if everything was overpriced like the open air market. However, the question that really plagued his thoughts was, ‘Why in Celestia’s name did I consume that damnable cappuccino?’ The sun was creeping over the eastern horizon, and he hadn’t managed to get a wink of sleep. Monday’s training was going to be brutal.

# Chapter 5

A pleasant coolness pervaded the afternoons in the transitory period between summer and autumn. In addition to a drop in temperature, the shorter days brought a number of seasonal changes: an explosion of fiery colors in the gardens littering Canterlot, an availability of fresh apples and roasted chestnuts in the marketplaces, and a few extra minutes to sleep in for the Princess of the Sun. Yet although Princess Celestia might have relished the extra beauty rest, the Royal Guard cadets still arose bright and early for the last days of basic training, even if it wasn't so bright outside.

Despite their rigors, the weeks of basic training had quickly settled into a comfortable rhythm for Storm Stunner, Check Mate, and Crack Shot. The training exercises remained consistent with those of the first week, albeit with a steady ramp up in difficulty. The only noteworthy addition to the routine was a touching up of the dyes in their coats and manes. Storm figured there must've been some truth to the claims of magical workings behind the Royal Guard coloring: that after repeated dying his fur wasn't reduced to a chemically burned mass of frizz was a sign of it if ever there was one.

In his periods of free time after a day's training, Storm had occupied himself with the writings of Twilight Sparkle that Nomde had lent him. He found that the scholar's observations were much more approachable than he had feared, and he was happy to be able to discuss them in some depth with the ivory writer during his days off. However, he still found a dictionary invaluable in comprehending the wordy journals, and Nomde was more than happy to provide one: a copy of the Mareiam Websteed with an added thesaurus. She had even been so kind as to have given him a discount. Also aiding in Storm's understanding of the academic topics was Check Mate, who eagerly dived into the scientific writings, although the pegasus felt that the dictionary garnered more usage in interpreting what his fellow

recruit called his 'sesquipedalian idiom', than the pages the unicorn attempted to explain.

As for Check Mate, the constant training had produced a profound effect on the bookish unicorn. He had long since stopped suffering from bruised hooves and cramped legs, and he now finished each morning's run much more easily. He no longer found himself completely short of breath before breakfast, though if asked, he would attribute the efficiency of his lungs to each afternoon's marathon trumpet sessions, rather than the jogs themselves. One had to be impressed with the Staff Sergeant and her ability to turn musical rehearsal into a high intensity cardiovascular workout. Although he wasn't at quite the same level physically as Storm and Crack Shot, he was certainly above the norm. Coupled with his intelligence, that made for quite the pony.

Even Crack Shot was demonstrating an increased level of discipline, though for the most part this was in spite of, rather than in thanks to, the unique instruction of Corporal Kickstart.

At last, the final day of basic training arrived, and although the cadets didn't know what to expect that didn't stop rumors from buzzing around the barracks. The Staff Sergeant and Kickstart had hinted that a crucible of some sort had to be surmounted in order to graduate, and it was the subject of a large amount of speculation. The cadets hadn't performed their usual run that morning and found themselves milling about in anticipation of the day's events. Crack Shot approached Storm and Check Mate with his own ideas on the matter.

"So do you guys think it'll be free response or multiple choice?"

"Huh?" Storm cocked an eyebrow. "Wait, you think our big, mysterious, final challenge is just going to be a written test?"

Crack Shot shrugged, "Eh, we had to take one to get in, right? I wouldn't put it past 'em."

Storm's eyes drifted upwards in thought. Thus far his experiences had been rather unpredictable; he couldn't rule out the possibility that Crack Shot was on to something.

"Although that's a possibility," Check Mate chimed in, "it seems more conceivable that we'll be requested to demonstrate proficiency in the skills we've been cultivating over our tenure as cadets."

Storm grinned, "Well whatever it is, I'm sure we're ready for it."

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Storm wasn't ready for it.

High in the azure skies above the royal academy, he and the rest of the pegasi recruits were pulling the gilded chariots piled in by their unicorn peers, who themselves were performing a brass rendition of Richoof Wagneigher's *Ride of the Hrosskyries*. It might have been an impressive sight if not for Corporal Kickstart who, while leading the cadets in a circuitous trek over the academy grounds, had decided to belt out an off-key rendition of the piece in accompaniment to the unicorns in his warbling tenor. At least there wasn't anypony to witness the spectacle outside of the participants themselves - thank Celestia for small favors.

As the piece's final dramatic crescendo was punctuated by a flourish from the unicorn cadets and an off-key crowing by Kickstart, the Corporal led the pegasi back towards the hangar at the rear of the royal academy. The unicorns disembarked from the chariots and waited as the others positioned the carts inside of the airdock; once the pegasi returned, the cohort formed in front of Kickstart, awaiting his response.

"*Ahem!* Alright guys!" the Corporal said, his voice cracking slightly from his earlier crooning. "Unicorns, good job on the performance. Pegasi, good job on not dropping the unicorns. I'd call the first half of the test a success!"

Storm's ears perked at the words 'first half.' He wondered what the instructors had in mind that could possibly top the earlier fly-by opera.

Kickstart continued, "In about an hour and half the Staff Sergeant will meet ya outside of the barracks for round two. Go ahead and refuel at the mess hall, but I, uh... wouldn't recommend eating anything too heavy."

The pegasus began walking in the direction of the dining area with the cadets following close behind. After one more trial they'd no longer be cadets. Assuming, of course, that they succeeded. That was a big assumption to make. Unlike Corporal Kickstart, the Staff Sergeant was very no-nonsense; whatever challenge she had in store was not to be taken lightly. The ponies soon arrived at the mess hall and filtered into the large cafeteria. Although the usual spread of flavorful fruits and savory sandwiches awaited them, most of the ponies found little room in their stomachs for all of the butterflies.

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The sun hung directly overhead the cadets awaiting the appearance of the Staff Sergeant, erasing any trace of shade. Earlier in the year it would have created an oppressive heat, but accompanied by a cool fall breeze, it made for a comfortable ambiance. It was nice to know that despite whatever the Staff Sergeant threw at them, at least the weather would be on their side. Speaking of the charcoal unicorn, she was trotting across the training fields towards the barracks like an executioner to the gallows. The recruits quickly fell into formation as she approached.

"At ease, ponies," the Staff Sergeant commanded. The cadets settled into a more relaxed stance, one that still maintained a level of military decorum.

"As I am certain you are all aware, we did not perform our traditional morning run! I am sure the fact has been weighing heavily on you for the better part of the day!" the unicorn fixed the cadets with a faint smirk that set them on edge. It was the sort of smirk a cat might give to a cornered mouse.

"Well worry not!" The cadets, of course, began to worry. "As your final assessment, I plan to make up this morning's jog right now."

The cadets eased up just a bit; they had run hundreds of miles over the course of their training and they could definitely handle a few more. Imperceptibly, the Staff Sergeant's smirk widened and her eyes narrowed at the relief now showing on the faces of the recruits. She was by no means a sadistic pony, but she loved having the chance to knock their overconfidence down a peg.

"Before we begin, I want all of you to take note of the sun's current position in the sky." Each of the ponies glanced upwards, squinting against the glare of the bright beacon. "We are not going to *stop* running until that big burning ball is out of sight, and the moon has taken its place."

The cadets' pupils dilated and their jaws dropped. It was beautiful.

"Alright recruits, ***move out!***"

---

The Royal Guard cadets had no way of knowing what was going through the Staff Sergeant's mind as they neared the end of their hellish marathon, their breath steaming from their nostrils in the brisk fall night. Of course, after a dozen hours of running they could scarcely tell what was going through their own. She had been silent for the latter portion of the run, conserving her breath for the arduous trek, and only spared the briefest of glances backwards to make sure no pony had fallen behind. The sun had long since set, and the only sources of illumination emanating from the unicorn were the dull glow of the harvest moon off of her golden barding, and the faint flicker of her horn as she guided the recruits; it was not nearly enough light to discern her expression through the hazy vision of sweat stung eyes. So the cadets might have been surprised at the pleased look playing across her features.

The Staff Sergeant knew that the recruits would at first balk at the idea of a 12 hour run. She knew that they would immediately and silently resent her for even suggesting such an onerous ordeal. She knew that they would be worn past the point of exhaustion as they pushed their bodies at an hour when they'd normally be fast asleep. She also knew that they could do it.

Although there was no way she could differentiate between the cadets in the dimness of the night beyond unicorn and pegasus, she could certainly count heads well enough to find everypony present and accounted for, keeping pace behind her. In fact, one pegasus galloped just ahead of the pony peloton, strength still showing in steady and controlled hoof falls, his breath leaving him in slow, thin plumes of vapor. A look skyward for the Staff Sergeant confirmed the moon's place in the center of a sea of stars and she turned abruptly in the direction of the barracks, the cadets tracing the light of her horn. The ponies had completed their final test.

Settling into an easy trot, the ponies allowed the slow movement to relax their muscles and clear the lactic acid burning in their limbs; a number of them had gone into hacking fits, but nothing they wouldn't recover from after a half hour or so. Once they reached the dormitories, they found large coolers of iced juice and water to refresh themselves with. The Staff Sergeant turned to inspect the cadets. Actually, 'cadets' wasn't the right word anymore. The ponies before her had proven themselves worthy of the title of Royal Guard. Although the file they formed was made sloppy by their fatigue, and their normally stolid silence was broken by intermittent coughs, she was willing to turn a blind eye. It was impressive enough that they were still standing.

"Well done, soldiers!" the Staff Sergeant addressed the weary ponies, "I would love to give a long-winded speech commending your performance today, but I don't think many of you would remain conscious for its duration, and I don't think I have the wind to do so anyways.

"Corporal Kickstart and I will gather you at 0900 hours to lead you to Canterlot Castle where you will be familiarized with the duties you are to perform from here on out, so gather any items you'll be taking in the morning. Congratulations soldiers, you've earned your armor."

As the Staff Sergeant turned to leave her soldiers she overheard their cheers, boasts, and congratulations. A little bit of celebration was to be expected.



What wasn't to be expected was the sudden explosion of surprised exclamations and expletives, punctuated by a loud, dull clang. Looking back towards the others she eyed them curiously: the chaffron of one of the pegasi was sitting in a fresh depression of earth, and the other ponies had backed away from him considerably.

"Crack Shot, what the *hay* was that?!"

"What, we just graduated right? You're supposed to throw your hats in the air!"

"You mean mortarboards. Which are made of cloth, cardboard, and other *soft* things. Not solid chunks of *metal*!"

"Tch, what's the big deal? We're all wearing armor right? 'Sides you know me, I wouldn't nail anypony unless I meant to!"

The Staff Sergeant rolled her eyes and continued on her way. It was no worse than when she and Corporal Kickstart had finished basic training, and the pegasus had somehow managed to turn one of the coolers of chilled juice over their drill instructor.

"Not too shabby by the way, leadin' the pack out there," Crack Shot said to Storm as he flipped his helm back onto his head, getting a maneful of dirt. "Looks like you could've given the Staff Sergeant a run for her bits!"

Check Mate hacked in agreement.

Storm flushed and gave an embarrassed rub against the back of his helm, the pink of his cheeks undetectable in the dim light.

"Heh, I guess the run wasn't as hard as I thought it'd be..."

"Nah, it was a flank kicker. I thought I was gonna cough up a lung. Speaking of which, you alright there buddy?"

Crack Shot gave Check Mate a heavy pat on the back, causing the unicorn to double over in another paroxysm of coughing.

“Huh. I’ll take that as a probably...,” Crack Shot suddenly whipped around to face Storm once more and his eyes widened with a dawning realization, causing the other pegasus to start back, “Hey! Maybe that’s it!”

“Maybe what’s it?” Storm raised an eyebrow, trying not to capsize from the sudden meander in Crack Shot’s stream of consciousness.

“Your special talent!”

“...Coughing?”

“Nah, running! I mean, ya got the spacey kicks on your flank, maybe you’re like a natural born track pony! Wouldn’t that be-,” Crack Shot paused as he made another realization, “Kinda underwhelming actually. I mean, what with being a pegasus and all.” He flapped into the air to punctuate the point.

Storm frowned, “Thanks for the vote of confidence. Come on, let’s grab some water, clean up, and hit the sack, Check looks like he could use it. Heck, we all could.”

---

The following morning Storm and the others awoke for the last time to the Staff Sergeant’s reveille. It was a nice sound, certainly more pleasant to arise to than an alarm clock, and he hoped that it wouldn’t be the last time he got to listen to it. Hopping down from his bunk, the pegasus rounded it to the metal chest at its foot to retrieve his belongings. Books, barding, bits, bags, and... Storm hooved through his dictionary’s thesaurus for a synonym of photo that started with a ‘b’. He figured ‘blueprints’ might eke by if he considered an incorrect insertion of his contacts. Content with his wordplay, he donned his accoutrements and was met by Check Mate’s salutation.

“Good morning, Storm,” the unicorn waved, “I trust you slept well?”

Storm waved back, “Morning Check, like a foal. It’s nice to see you breathing normally again.”

The unicorn smiled sheepishly, "I suppose there are few greater remedies than a good night's repose... And it seems that Crack Shot would concur."

The pegasus groaned from his perch on the top of his bunk in response to hearing his name and tumbled gracelessly to the floor. Groggily blinking the drowsiness from his eyes, he gave a half nod in greeting to the others.

"Hmm, they gave us an extra three hours to sleep, maybe I could convince 'em to give us an extra five minutes?"

"I doubt the Staff Sergeant would go for that," Storm teased, "Maybe Kickstart. Anyways, we probably shouldn't keep them waiting."

The Staff Sergeant and Corporal Kickstart waited for the others to exit the barracks. Once everypony was accounted for the two began walking towards the royal academy hangar. As the others followed behind, the unicorn spoke up in her commanding timbre.

"Okay soldiers, here's the plan. We will be proceeding to Canterlot Castle by means of chariot. This means a bit of extra work for the pegasi, but it's nothing that you can't handle. You will be following the Corporal, but should some of you somehow fall behind, aim for the gigantic castle sticking out of a cliff. You can't miss it."

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It was an uneventful flight to Canterlot Castle, and one that was relatively quiet, save for the flapping of wings and the creaking of chariot yokes. Kickstart had attempted to start up a round of 'One Hundred Shakers of Salt on the Wall', but was promptly silenced by a light jolt of magic from the Staff Sergeant, who had taken a seat in one of the chariots near the front of the fleet. He questioned why she didn't just teleport back to the castle to save them both a bit of grief, earning another jolt. He wisely kept his mouth shut afterwards.

Storm had thought the royal palace an amazing sight from a distance, but as he touched down before its rear gates the only word to describe it was ineffable (he'd picked that one up from Check Mate a few weeks back).

Structures of impeccably cut marble grew in impossible angles from the precipice in which the castle was erected. Wide, rounded spires of star-painted gold topped many of the towers, accented with sidereal ornamentation that reflected the sunlight in a blinding display. A refreshing mist carried from the cascades thundering nearby, sowing ribbons of rainbow in its wake. However, what struck the pegasus the most was how pristine everything was up close. No doubt the castle had seen the traffic of countless ponies, yet even the posterior cobblestones showed no chips, cracks, or other signs of the countless hoof falls they had borne. Either powerful magic was at play, or the palace had a very dedicated maintenance staff.

"I'm going ahead to let staffing know we've arrived. Go ahead and show them around, Corporal," the Staff Sergeant ordered before vanishing in a bright flash.

"You know ya coulda done that in the first place...," Kickstart said to the empty spot where she had stood.

Two guard ponies appeared in the windows of the towers on either side of the ironwood drawbridge leading into the rear of the castle. Seeing the entourage awaiting entrance, they snapped a sharp salute.

**"Hail, brothers-in-arms under Her Majesty Princess Celestia's sovereignty!"** called the guard at the left window.

**"Hail, brothers-in-arms under Her Majesty Princess Luna's ascendancy!"** called the guard at the right window.

"Hey guys," called Kickstart, "Mind lettin' us in so we can park the chariots?"

The two guard ponies frowned before disappearing from sight. Moments later the drawbridge lowered with a wooden creaking and rattling of heavy chains. Kickstart led the way through the gates, where the two slightly miffed guard ponies were waiting.

“Dammit Kickstart, could you at least *try* to impress the newbies?” one of them whispered.

Kickstart laughed it off, “I wouldn’t worry about that, there’s plenty here that’ll do that for ya.”

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After they had deposited the chariots in a hangar similar to the one at the royal academy, Kickstart led the others through a corridor towards the castle’s antechamber to begin a brief tour of the interior of the castle. The antechamber itself did a remarkable job of setting the tone for the rest of the castle. Tall banners, rich in crimsons and blues, ran the lengths of the towering, lavender walls. The black and white checkered floor was polished to a mirror sheen. A patterned red velvet carpet branched towards the different halls leading out of the chamber, up a grand staircase railed with gilded banisters, and towards the main entrance where ponies in various states of dress crossed another drawbridge to enter.

“Hey, funny story,” Kickstart spoke, just quiet enough to go unheard by the civilian ponies, “Y’all have heard of the Grand Galloping Gala, right?”

The majority of the cohort nodded.

“Well get this: At the last one, right outside that gate, this group of mares just broke out into song, like with choreography and everything! *Just outta nowhere!* Even weirder, a bunch of other ponies showed up and joined in, dancing and singing like they’d been practicing for *weeks!* I thought it was like a flash mob or something at first, but apparently they were all strangers and didn’t talk for the rest of the night.”

Storm and the others gave each other confused glances.

“So, long story short, those mares totally *trashed* the grand ballroom. Princess Celestia was laughing it up for a week at least. The janitors, not so much.”

Kickstart chuckled at the memory.

“Anyways, enough about that! Let’s check out the rest of the castle.”

The Corporal took the group up the stairs and through the left hall, showing off the rest of the castle. He pointed out guest rooms, the Royal Guard housing where they took a moment to deposit their possessions, dining areas, and the Hall of Theology.

Now, the study of the Gods and Goddesses takes on a different bent when the deities in question are tangible, friendly enough to chat about non-topics like the weather, and located just a few doors down. The tasks of the Royal Theologians mainly entailed keeping tabs on things like shoe sizes, food preferences, and favorite colors. As the entourage passed by the Hall, one of its occupants stepped out.

Sister Marery Sue, an unfortunately named cobalt unicorn in a bright yellow habit and Keeper of Her Royal Divinity’s Day Planner, eyed the string of guard ponies passing by. She had heard that some new members of the Royal Guard were arriving, and she correctly assumed by the amount of gawking that this was them. Still, she was pressed for time, needed a couple of pegasi, and beggars couldn’t be choosers. She moved to the front of the group to address its pegasus leader.

“Pardon my intrusion, sir,” she spoke in a voice no louder than a whisper, “But Her Highness Princess Celestia will be requiring transit into the city today. May I humbly request your service in this matter?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, no sweat!” the pegasus replied, causing Sister Marery Sue to wince.

Although the Royal Guard ponies were unsettlingly similar in appearance, there were more than enough ways to distinguish them. The lopsided grin and unapologetic impropriety identified this one as Corporal Kickstart. Still, she was pressed for time. She silently cursed herself for losing herself in the Dead Sea Scrolls: a personal account of one of Princess Celestia’s surfing trips to the beach, where not a single wave had appeared thanks to some lunar mischief on the part of her younger sister.

“Err, thank you Corporal, and I must ask that you be hasty. She should be finishing this morning’s audience soon, and will be ready to depart any moment *now*,” she stressed the word ‘now’ so hard it might’ve snapped in two. She then added, “And *please* try to remember yourself in Her presence.”

“Heh, how could I forget? I’ll take one of these guys over and head on out,” Kickstart gave a quick salute. The theologian uneasily nodded her thanks retreated back into her study. Turning towards his group, the pegasus asked, “So, any volunteers?”

The pegasi in the group looked among each other to see who would step up, each decidedly convinced it would be somepony else. Kickstart decided to make the decision for them, pointing towards the pegasus closest to him. “How about you? Up for giving another chariot ride?”

Storm gulped. He couldn’t exactly say no, and responded the only way he could: “Yes sir.”

“Sweet! As for the rest of you,” Kickstart looked to the others, “sorry for cutting the tour short, but feel free to check out the rest of the castle on your own!”

One of the unicorns spoke up, “Um, is it really alright for us to just wander around?”

Kickstart brushed the unicorn’s concern off, “Yeah, it’s cool, just act like you know what you’re doing. If any important looking pony asks what you’re up to, just say, ‘I’m acting on royal orders!’ or ‘It’s my first day!’” The Corporal looked thoughtful for a moment. “Actually, those last four words oughta serve you well for the rest of your career. Alright, come on dude.”

Kickstart led Storm towards Princess Celestia’s audience chambers, the younger pegasus glancing back towards the others with a look of panic in his eyes and mouthing the words ‘Help me.’

As he watched his terrified friend being dragged off, Crack Shot gave Check Mate a sidelong glance and asked, "So you wanna check out the rest of this place?"

"We might as well," the unicorn replied.

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Multiple ponies were scattered about the audience chambers, some engaged in idle chatter, some waiting for a chance to speak with Princess Celestia. Many of them were nobles, Storm noted. At least, he assumed they were nobles. He couldn't imagine anypony else wearing powdered wigs, and the neck ruffs on some of the hoop skirts were of such a size that they made the mares that wore them look like they had just left a veterinarian's office, rather than a fashion boutique. The aristocratic ponies seemed to try for all the world to look important, but only managed to look uncomfortable. Storm wondered why they didn't just mimic the princesses and dress down a bit.

Perhaps the lack of the prominent ivory horn, grand and finely feathered wings, and prismatic mane billowing on an ethereal solar wind was the reason. It was a bit much to compete with. The Princess of the Sun currently had a look of tranquility on her face, a measure of patience more than a thousand years in the making, as two unicorn mares bickered in front of her.

"I'm telling you, she lies! The foal is mine!"

"*Balderdash!*" screamed the other unicorn, "I am the filly's true mother, and I will not have her claim otherwise!"

Celestia raised a perfect eyebrow. Two ponies with unknown intentions were claiming to be the mother of an absent filly, and they had sought her as an arbiter. It was a timeless dilemma, though not one that her ancient wisdom could not solve.

"You of course realize, my dear subjects, that many hospitals and clinics provide maternity tests?"



Both mares' lips sealed, and they quickly and silently left the chambers. Celestia didn't know what other solution they expected her to suggest. That they cut the foal in half? She softly shook the grisly notion from her head as the last of the morning's petitioners approached her, a slate grey pegasus who timidly knelt before her. She nodded for him to speak.

"Pardon my forthrightness Your Majesty, but I had wondered," he began, "Since her return, it seems that your sister Princess Luna has been conspicuously absent from the public light. If I may ask, is there a reason for this?"

The Princess smiled serenely at his concern.

"My sister has been working diligently to adapt to what is a new era for her," she answered, "However, I believe that she should be making more social appearances with the coming of this fall season."

This satisfied the pegasus, and he gave his thanks before taking his leave. Kickstart approached the princess, with Storm following hesitantly behind. Princess Celestia beamed at the two, tilting her head to one side to give Storm a cheerful glance. He reminded himself to breathe. Kickstart knelt and Storm quickly mimicked the action.

"Ah, Corporal Kickstart, what a pleasant surprise! I had thought that you were busy guiding the newest Guard members around the castle grounds?" Celestia asked in a conversational tone.

"Yeah, but one of the Sisters cut it short," Kickstart explained, "Still, they're good ponies; I don't think they'll get into too much trouble."

Celestia laughed. It was a pleasant sound, like the chiming of glass bells in a spring breeze.

"I'm certain they won't." She turned to Storm, who managed to keep his heart from leaping out of his throat. "And you must be one of the newcomers! May I ask your name?"

Storm thought for a second. He was sure he knew the answer to this. Suddenly a light bulb flickered to life above the pegasus' head.

*"Storm Stunner!"* he exclaimed with a greater sense of accomplishment than would ever be necessary in giving one's name. "Er, Your Highness," he added awkwardly.

There was that melodic laugh again, and Storm felt a bit more at ease.

"Well Storm Stunner, it is lovely to make your acquaintance. I have some business in the city, so I imagine that you and Kickstart will be accompanying me. I hope you don't mind flying around with a bit of extra weight," she said with a playful wink. "Well, shall we be off gentlecolts?"

Celestia stepped down from her throne and gracefully made her way to the exit of the chambers, with the two pegasi falling in to her sides. As the three made their way towards the hangars, the princess asked Storm about his family and about his reasons for joining the Royal Guard.

He told her about his mother and father, sparing some of the more colorful details about the latter, and about his first encounter with the stoic pegasus soldier so many years ago. He was surprised by the approachability of the Goddess of the Sun. He by no means expected her to be haughty or aloof, but he never expected her to be so inquisitive about the lives of her retinue.

Outside of the hangar they found a chariot set out. A jet black unicorn in aviator sunglasses and an orange vest was waiting for them.

"Mare Force One is prepped and ready for flight Your Majesty!" she announced.

The princess thanked her and settled into the seat of the chariot. Kickstart and Storm secured themselves in its yoke. Once the two pegasi were prepared, the unicorn's horn illuminated and she began to form a complex chain of signals with a pair of flickering balls of light. Storm's stomach dropped and he gave Kickstart a nervous glance.

"Err... I don't think you covered air marshalling in Basic, sir," he whispered, "What do those signals mean?"

Kickstart smirked back and replied, "Probably: 'Fly'," before starting a gallop with a flapping of wings, with Storm hastily trying to catch up,

---

So far Check Mate and Crack Shot had taken a very informative self-tour of Canterlot Castle, by virtue of Crack Shot trying every single door he had come across.

“Come on!” the pegasus groaned, “There’s gotta be a horseshoe court around here somewhere!”

Although he hadn’t found his horseshoe court, Crack Shot had found plenty of cleaning supply closets, pantries, and surprised ponies. In the case of the last, he simply proclaimed that he was acting in an official capacity and went on his way, as per Kickstart’s advice.

“For the multifarious facilities available, I would say that is a likely assumption. Though perhaps it’s more likely such a physical activity would be practiced in a more alfresco location?” Check Mate suggested.

“I’m not sure what pasta has to do with horseshoes, buddy. Let’s keep checking around!”

Check Mate sighed and was about to continue the mad search with Crack Shot when he was arrested by a regal sounding order of, “Halt! You there!”

Turning to face the source of the sudden commotion, Crack Shot saw Check Mate standing dutifully in place and a tall, white unicorn stallion approaching him. The stallion had a well styled amber mane and a pair of blue eyes that were as cool as ice. He reminded the pegasus of the covers of all of those novels his mom would read when she thought nopony was paying attention. The stallion stopped just to the side of the petrified Check Mate and peered intently in the direction of his flank.

*Huh. I figured one of the perks of joining the Royal Guard would be a bit of extra attention, but wow, I had **no** idea,* Crack Shot mused to himself.

“*Beautiful...*,” the stallion breathed. Check Mate’s cheeks reddened considerably. “Although, just a *bit* off...” the stallion brushed a hoof through the fringes of his mane. Satisfied with his reflection in the soldier’s armor,

he continued down the hallway, paying the two Royal Guard ponies no other attention.

Crack Shot approached his friend. "Heya Check, a little red in the face there."

The unicorn blinked in response. "Oh my, I don't recall seeing that in the job description."

The two shared a laugh and continued their trek through the castle.

Although the location of the elusive horseshoe courts remained an enigma to Crack Shot, he found a set of doors that particularly caught his interest. The doors extended high towards the ceiling, and were painted a deep indigo which in a lesser lighting would have passed for black. They were flanked on either side by two very bored looking unicorn guard ponies. Seeing their fellow soldiers approach, they gave an affable wave as relief washed over their faces. The one closest spoke up.

"Hey guys! Time for the changing of the guard already, is it." It was not so much a question as it was a statement.

"Um-," said Crack Shot.

"Actually-," said Check Mate.

"Great!" said the other guard, "Come on Wedge, let's go grab lunch!" The two left their posts with the sort of urgency that one might flee a house fire.

"Now hold on a moment!" Check Mate attempted to protest, but the two unicorns were just far enough away to pretend to be out of earshot.

"Huh, guess we're on guard duty," Crack Shot concluded as he eyed the entryway. On each door was a large engraving of a crescent moon, each respectively waxing and waning and surrounded by intricate carvings of constellations, "What do you think is in there?"

"Something of enough import as to warrant an extra measure of security, as remiss as it may be...," Check Mate grumbled as he watched the two other guards round a corner at the end of the hall, "Something-," his eyes

widened as he turned to find Crack Shot trying the door handle, “*that we should leave well enough alone!* **Crack Shot!**”

Too late. The pegasus swung the door open, causing it collide noisily with the wall on the other side, and startling the room’s sole occupant from her slumber. A dark navy mare leapt from her bed. She was wearing a star-patterned pair of blue pajamas and a light cerulean tail stuck out from the button flap in the back. From beneath a matching night cap, a long horn began to pulse with what would best be called an absence of light. A pair of wings flared menacingly at her sides. Crack Shot noted that she looked like a very important pony.

“*Fie!*” Princess Luna exclaimed, “Sirrah, wherefore dost thou find thyself in mine bower?! *Hie, speak anon!*”

“WHOA, SOR- Wait, what?” in the conflict of emotions raging in Crack Shot’s mind, confusion just barely managed to muscle out terror.

“Err, yes, new parlance...,” the alicorn cleared her throat and rubbed her tired eyes in annoyance. “What are you doing in my room?” she eyed the pegasus guard suspiciously, momentarily ignoring the unicorn guard that had gone into vapor lock beside him.

Crack Shot recalled the Corporal’s advice that had served him so well earlier in the day. Clearing his throat, it was with authority that he responded, “I’m acting on royal orders!”

Hold on, that wasn’t the right phrase.

“Really? Does my sister send for me?” Luna’s eyes glinted like sapphires as they softened. Any fatigue from her sudden awakening faded in an instant.

“Erm, sorry Your Honor, I’ve been using that one all day and it’s kinda stuck on my tongue. What I meant to say was, ‘It’s my first day!’” Crack Shot remembered his unwitting partner-in-crime. “Well, ‘ours’ actually.” Crack Shot’s trademark smile flashed across his face, although it flitted a bit at the

corners. Remembering the frozen unicorn beside him, he quickly stretched one across his friend's face with a hoof.

It was the Moon Princess' turn to be confused, and she tilted her head to the side to indicate just that. Nevertheless, the two ponies before her didn't radiate any ill intent. She relaxed her wings and her horn lost its umbra.

"Very well then, I'll take your word for it. May I ask your names?"

"Yes'm! I'm Crack Shot, at your service!"

Silence followed. Crack Shot jabbed Check Mate in the side.

"Oh- OH! Pardon my indiscretion Your Majesty!" Check Mate quickly knelt and averted his gaze from the princess. "My name is Check Mate," he answered.

"Check Mate,' you say?" Luna's eyes lit up like two newborn stars. "Would you happen to be a chess player then?" she asked.

The unicorn hazarded a glance up to meet the Princess's. "It has been some time since I've played a match, but I dabble."

"Well, how would you like a chance to make up for your intrusion?" the Princess of the Moon giggled airily, a soothing sound like a lullaby.

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Storm Stunner and Kickstart stood guard outside of 'Canterlot Novelties: A Novelty Shop'. Storm thought the subtitle could do without the extra '-ty'. Princess Celestia was currently inside picking up an order, though she had taken a moment to strike up a conversation with the earth pony proprietor. His face fixed in a stoic expression, Storm surveyed the various ponies passing by. Many tried to nonchalantly sneak glances through the store windows as they walked past, others blatantly gawked inside. Some took interest in the guard ponies themselves, and that was where things really got interesting.

Storm found himself the subject of more photographs than he ever had before in his life, with giddy mares and stallions alike flashing wide grins

next to him. Fillies and colts attempted to get a rise out of him and Kickstart, making amusing faces and adorable noises, and he had to struggle not to crack a smile. It was a strange experience, essentially becoming a living statue. Storm was surprised that the normally vivacious Kickstart did it so well.

For the duration of time that the two had stood outside of the novelty store, the other pegasus had shown a fixed countenance. Storm was thoroughly convinced the pony hadn't even blinked. No witty commentary, no customary verbal faux pas; Storm wondered if this was the same Corporal Kickstart he had trained under for so many weeks. Still, he was amazed: apparently there was more to the Corporal than he had thought. A bell chimed as the door behind the pair opened and Princess Celestia stepped out, levitating a small wrapped box in front of her.

"Alright boys, shall we be off?" she asked. Kickstart still stared forward fixedly with a stern look on his face. "Time to wake up, sleepy head," Princess Celestia crooned as she lightly tapped him against the back of the helmet, causing him to blink several times and shake his head.

Storm told himself not to be impressed, that he shouldn't be impressed, but a part of him couldn't help it. He wondered if one had to practice sleeping with their eyes open.

---

Crack Shot had been watching for the better part of an hour as Princess Luna and Check Mate continued their match. He watched each attack and defense, each exchange, each gambit as the two players tried to ensnare each other. As the two plied their wits against each other, avoiding traps set up multiple moves in advance, the pegasus stared on in amazement. He couldn't understand how anypony couldn't be bored to tears. He occupied the rest of his time by trying to touch the tip of his snout with his tongue.

For his part, Check Mate was enthralled. For the first time in his life, he had met his match. Although the unicorn may've had a natural affinity for

strategy, the princess had lifetimes of experience. Only a few pieces remained on the board. On Check Mate's side in frosted crystal remained a parasprite pawn near one corner, a pegasus knight in another, and two earth pony rooks guarding an alicorn king. On Princess Luna's side in black hematite remained three pawns which presented no threat, and her alicorn king and queen. The black queen and white king danced in step, but no other move could be made. The match was a stalemate.

"Very impressive, Check Mate! I haven't enjoyed a match like that in, well, ages!" Luna applauded, causing the unicorn to look away bashfully.

"It was honestly a pleasure, Your Highness," the unicorn managed, "Thank you for the wonderful match."

"Well, we will have to play another round sometime. I-" she was interrupted by a knocking against her bedroom door. "Yes, come in!"

The door opened to reveal two pegasi guards, one of them carrying a wrapped package by its strings in his teeth. Crack Shot put his tongue back in his mouth and waved to Storm and Kickstart.

"Shpethial Delifery!" the Corporal said through clenched teeth. Luna relieved the pegasus of the package with her telekinesis.

"Oh? What could this be?" she mused as she inspected the parcel. With a bit more magic, she began to undue its paper wrappings.

What lay inside left her speechless: floating before her was an ornately carved jewelry box, wrought in pure silver. The different phases of the lunar cycle marched across its sides in expertly cut white diamonds. On the lid of the box was set an obsidian carving of an alicorn, with sapphires shaping her tail and mane. Princess Luna gasped. Storm silently wondered just what kind of novelty store Princess Celestia had stopped at.

Luna carefully undid the clasp of the jewelry box, and then everything went to hell. As the lid of the box suddenly sprung open, there was a blur of dark brown, an exclamation of '*Fie!*', and in an instant the face of the Princess of the Moon was obscured by a flaky splatter of graham cracker, chocolate,



and creme, two bright, sapphire eyes blinking out of the sugary mess. Kickstart and Crack Shot burst out laughing, Storm and Check bit their lips. A small piece of paper drifted to the floor. Luna shook the confectionery from her mane and floated the missive before her eyes, reading it out loud.

“To my Dearest Sister,

Your favorite flavor: Moon Pie.

Love,

Celly”

With a tinkle of laugh she placed the note down, declaring, “Well, I suppose now I need to get her back...” She faced the four guards, bits of marshmallow dropping to the floor, and asked, “Any suggestions?”

Kickstart spoke up, “Actually, I might have a pretty good idea...”

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Later that night, Corporal Kickstart rounded up the Royal Guard newcomers to celebrate the completion of their first day on the job. He had decided to take them to a well-known donut shop located close to the castle.

“Joe?” one of the recruits had asked in regards to its proprietor, “Kind of an exotic name, isn’t it?”

Kickstart shrugged. “From what I heard, his folks were really into fantasy and tabletop RPGs.”

The guards gathered around the tables, knocking back donuts with no thoughts about the inevitable sugar crash to follow. It was a party, and the Royal Guard partied hard. Storm stepped away from Check Mate and Crack Shot to join Corporal Kickstart at the counter. He had a few questions he wanted to ask the pegasus.

“Um, hello sir,” he began, catching Kickstart’s attention.

“Oh hey, buddy! What’s up?” the Corporal flashed a smile and gestured for Storm to sit beside him.

“I was just wondering... What the hay happened today?”

“Hmm, care to specify?”

“Primarily Her Highness Princess Luna of the Moon getting a face full of some cheap dessert,” Storm deadpanned.

Kickstart guffawed. “Ha! Yeeaah, that was classic. What about it?”

“I guess it just caught me by surprise. And Princess Luna too, of course. I suppose I just wouldn’t have expected that from Princess Celestia.”

The Corporal leaned back and pursed his lips in thought.

“There’s something you oughta know about the two royal sisters,” Kickstart began, causing Storm’s ears to perk. “As I’m sure you know, the two of ‘em have been around for a long time; heck, I wouldn’t be surprised if their yearbook photos were carved into a cave wall somewhere. Anyways, they’ve been around long enough to have seen the majority of Equestria’s history play out, and to have a hoof in the bulk of it.

“So you have two immortal sisters who have been manipulating the cosmos and ruling a kingdom together for as long as anypony can remember, save for a millennium when one of them suffered a nasty case of possession. They perform a ton of feats that your average pony could never dream of, and they do it on a day-to-day basis.

“But when it comes right down to it, when you look past the immortality, the power, and the titles; they’re still sisters. They’re gonna have a bit of fun at each other’s expense from time to time.”

“Heh, is that how you’re able to get away with so much around them?” Storm figured he might’ve been out of line in addressing a superior officer in such a way, but he also figured Corporal Kickstart wouldn’t care. He didn’t.

“Haha, probably!” Kickstart took a sip of coffee. “If you think about it, it’s gotta be a kinda lonely life in some ways, having everypony kowtowing to you all the time. Sure, everypony loves ‘em, but you gotta admit there’s a bit of fear in there too.” Kickstart shot Storm a knowing smile.

Storm sat in silence as he weighed the Corporal’s words. At first the idea of actually performing for the Princess earlier that day had terrified him. Not because he had feared her to be a tyrant, but because he didn’t want to inadvertently offend her somehow. He imagined how it must have felt to have just about everypony else acting the same way. It had to be just that: lonely.

“I suppose you’re right...” Storm decided to shift the conversation, “So, is there any more to the Royal Guard than standing around like gargoyles and playing pranks?”

“Well, in the case of an emergency we’re the first line of defense.” Kickstart chuckled in remembrance of something, “Heh, except in that incident with Nightmare Moon, those guys got their flanks *kicked*. Still, how often does anything like that happen? There aren’t any wars, not that that’s a bad thing of course. Most ponies get along with each other just fine.”

Storm thought back to the first week of basic training so long ago. He recalled the story his friends had told him about their encounter with the amber eyed pegasus and his lumbering companion. The pegasus wondered how many others there were like that in the world. The sliding of plate in front of him broke him from his rumination. Looking down he saw a bright pink donut covered in sprinkles.

“Give it a taste!” Kickstart encouraged. “Just don’t blame me for your headache in the morning.”

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From her marble dais Princess Celestia prepared herself for her daily task, manipulating the ancient magic that suffused her body. She didn’t have to reach out for the sun, for the connection was always there. Rather she flexed the connection, stretching it and contracting it and allowing it to flow

with ichor. She engaged it, stimulating it like a numb appendage, for in many ways that was what it was. She felt a tingle, like blood rushing to one's hooves or the flaring of a corona. Satisfied, Princess Celestia began to raise the sun.

As she felt the sun ascend above the eastern horizon, something struck her as odd. It felt like there was some impedance between her and the star, like a tourniquet had been tightened around the link between the two of them. Even odder was the color of the sky. It should've been painted in oranges and bluish grays, yet it was still the same dark violet as when she had begun. An investigative glance behind her explained the phenomenon.

Drifting lazily in front of Celestia's sun was Luna's moon, mirroring its path and creating a solar eclipse. Princess Celestia had to laugh - Lulu had got her back good. Of course, now Celestia would have to come up with something even better. A surreptitious grin crossed her face as she imagined all of the possibilities.

# Chapter 6

In a typical grocery in the heart of Canterlot's market district, a young unicorn stallion was growing increasingly frustrated trying to make a series of atypical purchases. Trade Secret, a presently puzzled pegasus peddler, looked up from the shopping list unfolded on the counter in front of her, to the cherry red unicorn that had placed it there. He had a well-practiced look of apology on his face, the product of earlier shopping trips, hidden behind an unruly mop of brown bangs. She looked at the list again in the subtle hopes that its contents had been kind enough to make sense of themselves on the second reading.

"So um, the 'sound of a cat's footstep'... Is that, like, a new album or something?" she ventured in regards to the first item on the list. The colt let out a heavy sigh.

"I *really* don't know, my mentor just gave me the list. Says he needs this stuff to make an unbreakable dog leash or something. Read about it in a book of ancient Scandineighvian mythology," the unicorn eyed an item on the yellowed paper incredulously, "Like, who the heck has ever heard of 'the root of a mountain' anyways?"

"I've got some potatoes that were grown in the hills nearby," the merchant offered, smoothly attempting to wrangle a sale out of the odd encounter.

The colt shrugged, "Eh, sure. I don't suppose you'd happen to have any fish breath or bird spit as well, would ya?"

"You might want to try a pet store for those."

"Hm, good idea. How much do I owe you for the potatoes?"

"Four bits should cover it," the pegasus answered with a professional smile.

The unicorn retrieved the bits from his saddlebags and placed them on the counter. After a moment's thought, he put an additional four down.

"Mind throwing in a cup of noodles as well? Shiokarasugi if you've got it."

"Sure thing, I'm just going to need to see some I.D."

The unicorn removed a laminated card from his saddlebags. After checking the date and photo, Trade Secret unlocked a glass cabinet behind her, producing a small, polystyrene cup.

"Neighpon's finest, with 1800 milligrams of sodium per serving," the merchant grinned, "Are you sure you can handle it?"

"Don't worry," the unicorn answered, "It's not for me."

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In a dimly lit chamber beneath the surface of the earth, strange and potent magics suffused the air. From within haphazardly arranged, unmarked vessels, muted flickers of octarine could be observed filtering through their tinted glass, their contents a mystery only discernible by their eccentric owner. In one darkened corner lay an ancient pile of discarded noodle containers, the heady scent of vegetable broth wafting from its heart. As he lurked in the lair's center, Gray Mane, the wizened unicorn that had fashioned it, allowed himself a moment of pride at the ambience he had fostered. It had taken a considerable amount of effort to convert the humble basement apartment into a proper workshop of the arcane. He knew from the onset that the deposit on the place would be forfeit.

A knocking on the entranceway echoed through the room, before a young, cherry red unicorn stepped through with a pair of loaded saddlebags over his withers.

"Ye made me wait, lad!" the old unicorn croaked in a raspy voice, "Did ye find the reagents?!"

‘Eh, I found something,” the young stallion unloaded the contents of one of his bags on the stained floor in front of his mentor. Out poured a few russet potatoes, a vial of a frothy clear liquid, and a plastic bag containing a bright orange guppy that stared intently at nothing at all.

“Pah! What rubbish is this?! I see no beard o’ mare,” the relic fumed, “And ye would call yerself an assistant, Febre!”

“Not a lot of barbershops are too keen on strangers hoofing through their clippings,” Febre responded flatly.

“Hmph, I don’t see any bear sinew in here either...”

Febre rolled his eyes, before retrieving the cup of noodles from his other bag and tossing it over.

“Here. I got ya something better.”

The wrinkled eyes of the grumbling unicorn narrowed as he scrutinized the styrofoam package. Then they widened in approval.

“Ach, not a bad brand!” he complimented, “Looks like ye’ve at least got *some* eye fer quality!”

“It’s not too hard when it’s the only thing you eat,” Febre sighed.

“Still, bloody shame about those spell components...” the old pony’s dusty face bunched up in thought as he rubbed his chin. It gave his countenance the appearance of a prune that had fallen asleep in the bath. It was an appearance he was actually rather fond of. He had gone from Black, to Salt-and-Pepper, to Gray Mane with an uncommon alacrity for the process of aging. To the crazed curmudgeon, youth was just that inconvenient transitory period between birth and EARP discounts. He rasped, “Ah, what the hell! What say we try to cast the spell with what we got anyways?”

“Mmm, I don’t know if that’s such a *good idea*...” Febre warned. “I mean, you’ve seen all those reports about magic gone wrong. All those

botched group teleportations that keep showing up in the news? What if we get sent to some other dimension? Or turned into mares?”

“Haw! Then we pick up a pair of dresses! Quit yer worryin’!”

Gray Mane’s nonchalance did nothing to allay Febre’s concerns. The old coot, although eccentric as anything and ornery as hell, had an amicable side buried somewhere beneath the strata; it was one of the reasons that the younger unicorn stuck around. However, when it came to magical experimentation, it was as if somepony had taken his moral compass and firmly stuck a magnet to it. For Gray Mane, the end justified the means, regardless of what the end or the means happened to be. If he turned a mare into a frog, it just meant a chance for her to brush up on her breast stroke before meeting her Prince Charming. Febre knew his mentor would not be deterred by any argument, and resigned himself to simply going along for the ride. If he was lucky, nothing too eventful would happen and they’d get to eat the potatoes afterwards.

Gray Mane skulked towards a warped cherry wood bookcase, and plucked out a heavy tome with a flicker of magic. With the text suspended in front of him, he fanned through the pages before finally settling on a passage.

“Lessee here... the focus of this spell is to create a binding. To borrow of the essence of the ingredients in order to manipulate the material planes, and form an anchor in the aether...” the old magician spoke.

“Ah,” Febre added with a nod in the tone of one who had no idea what was going on, but wasn’t about to admit it.

What color that was left in Gray Mane’s ancient eyes faded into white as he began to form the spell, his horn radiating an ashen light which cast sharp shadows in the aphotic chamber. Before him, the items brought by Febre began to tremble, before lifting a hair’s breadth above the ground, the guppy frantically swimming to and fro within its plastic prison. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the light faded and the items dropped unceremoniously to the floor.



“Gaha! Well that was a bust!” Gray Mane guffawed, “Oh well, nothing ventured nothing gained, eh?!”

“If you say so,” Febre said as he moved to gather the components up, and to hopefully find a sanitary vessel for the poor guppy to call home. However, he stopped midtrot as once more the items began to stir.

Many times in history, the only thing preventing a momentous discovery has been serendipity. Two good examples would be the discovery of penicillin in a dirtied petri dish, or the discovery of dipping hay fries in a chocolate shake, in a dirtied roadside diner.

Another prime example would be Tabun.

Whether by the guiding hoof of fate, the intervention of some otherworldly consciousness, or simple coincidence, Gray Mane’s exploratory attempt caused something to happen. Something which, given the commonality of the items used, had no right to happen. A spell was born.

However, it was nothing like the spell that Gray Mane had intended to cast. No, it was something different, something original, something not to be found referenced in a leather bound compendium or weather damaged vade mecum. And it was a doozy.

Miasmic tendrils of colorless wisp bled from the objects, which had begun to pulse with a cold, gray glow, their forms lost in the haze. The coils of vapor whipped around blindly until contacting their neighbors, whereupon they seized together, forming an amorphous mass. As the reagents came together, the extensions of wisp receded and left a brilliant, melon-sized singularity floating in the center of the room, flaring like a lump of magnesium. The coruscation hovered uncertainly for a moment, as if deciding its next course of action, then shot straight up, phasing harmlessly through the ceiling, and leaving the two unicorns rubbing their eyes in the sudden darkness. Febre despondently eyed the spot where the light had disappeared.

*Well, I guess we won’t be having hash browns for lunch.*

---

Storm Stunner entered into the castle atrium to find Crack Shot trying to coax a flame-colored bird out of a tree.

"Aww, come down, already! Do you want a treat or something? I could get ya a treat!" the pegasus entreated the bird, "Polly want a, uh... lump of charcoal? Or some lighter fluid?"

The bird cawed disapprovingly before flying to a higher bough.

"Huh. Woulda thought those'd be hits among phoenixes..." Crack Shot muttered to himself.

"I imagine bird seed might be more popular," Storm quipped as he stepped alongside his friend.

"Oh hey buddy!" Crack Shot flashed a grin, "Get that dragon back to Ponyville in one piece?"

"Yeah, he seemed pretty eager to get back too. Apparently every time he gets sent to Canterlot, the pony he's living with goes off on some crazy adventure without him. I guess he's tired of missing out whenever something exciting happens."

"Huh, is that the same pony that wrote those books you were readin' to impress that mare back in Basic?"

Storm flushed, causing the phoenix to tilt her head in curiosity.

"I'll have you know I learned a lot from those books! About buffalo traditions, parasprite lifecycles, um... slumber parties..." he finished lamely. "So where's Check Mate?" he added in an attempt to steer the conversation from its precipitous path downhill.

"Last I saw he was messin' around with this old school calculator that Princess Luna showed him," Crack Shot answered. "Ever heard of something called a difference engine?"

"Um, can't say that I have."

“Yeah, neither had I.”

The two pegasi were interrupted by a surprised squawk from the phoenix. Following the bird’s startled gaze, what they saw made their jaws drop. One couldn’t blame them: anypony that saw what they did would have reacted the same way, and in fact anypony that saw it did. In the skies above Canterlot, the azure was slowly being scored by a swath of night. It bled what might have been starlight from tinsel points gathered into unknown constellations; the inky nothingness in between peered chillily at the world below. It was as if some overzealous tailor had taken a seam ripper to the fabric of reality.

After a moment’s silence, Crack Shot casually asked, “So uh... Twilight’s books say anything about something like that?”

Storm Stunner could only shake his head in response.

---

The average pony has a predisposition to panic at the sight of the abnormal or unfamiliar (and even the normal *and* familiar if it sneaks up at just the right angle). Indeed, in response to the odd fissure splitting the sky overhead, the streets of Canterlot had been evacuated, and the curtains in its houses and apartments had been drawn, save for the imperceptible gap in the fabric from which the occupants could watch the scene unfolding. The sidereal slash continued its slow expansion, looming ominously like a blackened eye. The citizens of Canterlot weren’t sure what to make of it. Some speculated that it heralded the return of Nightmare Moon.

Then that big, black eye began to weep. It wept tiny pinpricks of light which spread themselves like motes of pollen across Canterlot, across the surrounding lands, and then even farther than that.

Ponyanna, a perpetually chipper earth pony and inveterate optimist, was being walked by her corgi, Newton, when the whole business in the sky had begun. While other ponies had hastily fled the streets, she had remained, content in the belief that whatever was happening was probably

supposed to be happening, and if not, then it'd be sorted out quickly enough by whichever department was in charge of such things.

Hers was an enviable sort of blissful stupidity.

As she waited for Newton to finish hydrating a lamp post, one of the falling lights came streaking down in front of her, revealing itself to be much larger, and much brighter than she would have anticipated. In defense of his charge, Newton tried to startle the effulgence away by yapping excitedly. When that failed, he rolled over a twice in the most intimidating manner he could muster, inadvertently tangling himself in his leash. The light remained in place; the corgi had to grudgingly admit to himself that he had been bested.

The flaring figure slowly dimmed, leaving only a dark blotch in the center of the mare's vision, and a pony standing behind it. At least it seemed to be a pony. Ponyanna had to rub her eyes to make sure.

The mare (was it a mare?) standing before her had all the right parts. There were four legs, attached to four hooves, each pointing the right way. There were violet eyes and cyan ears, a rainbow mane, a rainbow tail, and a rainbow cutie mark to match, all in generally the right spots. Just none of it looked *right*. For one thing, her almond shaped eyes were unsettlingly small and set too far apart, and her muzzle was abnormally large. Ponyanna got the feeling that she wasn't from around the area.

"Hello there! Interesting weather we're having here, aren't we?" she greeted with the understatement of the year. The other pony furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. Ponyanna took that to mean that she didn't understand her, and proceeded with the logical course of action when dealing with somepony who might not have been fluent in the language.

She, of course, spoke louder.

***"I SAID, 'HELLOOOO THEEEERE! IN-TER-EST-ING-"***

The rainbow mare cut her off, "Yes, yes, I understood you the first time, darling. You wouldn't be able to tell me where 'here' is, exactly?"

“Colton Avenue,” she answered matter-of-factly.

“Err, thank you,” the mare tried to stifle a frown, “Perhaps though you could tell me what *city*, Colton Avenue is located in? That would be simply dashing.”

“Why Canterlot, of course! Capital of Equestria? You’re really not from around here, are you?”

A disapproving look found its way onto the mare’s face. She replied, “No darling, I fear that I’m really not...”

---

Princess Celestia knew something was wrong before her eyes confirmed it. It was an electric sensation, one that sent a shock through her entirety, both the corporeal and the incorporeal. It was the feeling one felt before the coming of a storm. There was a break in the world, like a small, insidious fracture in a dam, threatening to rupture at any moment from the pressure.

First, she quickly penned a letter, and sent it off in a gout of magic. Then she left her chambers to go stir her sister, who she found to already be wide awake, bright eyed and bushy tailed.

She hadn’t bothered to brush it.

---

Ponyanna and Newton continued their walk down what the earth pony was increasingly less certain to be Colton Avenue. From the looks of things, a number of new buildings and structures had sprung up since her last walk down the street two days ago. Newton whined a high-pitched curse for wasting himself on the fire hydrant: here were all these brand new pieces of property, and he had no way to add them to his kingdom.

And it seemed that they were still springing up. In the center of the cobblestone road a few yards ahead of her, a gazebo suddenly erupted in a flash of light. It was a blindingly pink construct, with a roof thatched in

dark purple slats. Stylized red hearts ran up its supports. Ponyanna shrugged and took a seat beneath the gaudy shelter, watching as a garishly colored city rose up around her, like painted forest of bamboo.

---

At Princess Celestia's request, all of the members of the Royal Guard had begun to convene in the courtyard to await her orders. The more senior members lined up somberly towards the front of the group, leaving the younger soldiers to whisper their theories in the back. It was then that Storm noticed, *really* noticed, just how few of them there were. He recalled Basic Training, and all of the empty beds and empty tables. He had thought theirs a small graduating class, but it seemed the ponies he had joined with made up just under a third of the group waiting in the courtyard. Corporal Kickstart had told him that there weren't any more real crises; that might've affected enlistment. Now that there actually was one, the pegasus hoped that he and his cohorts would be able to handle it.

After a pregnant moment, the Goddess of the Sun finally stepped into the court, joined by her sister, the Princess of the Moon. The guardsponies knelt into an appreciative bow for their rulers-cum-commanders. One felt a certain sense of relief from knowing that millennia of experience and the power to move the heavens were on one's side. Like having the big guys on your team in a game of hoofball.

"Please stand, everypony," Celestia requested. The Royal Guard rose anxiously. "I shall be as succinct as possible. As each of you are aware, a magical disturbance has appeared over Canterlot. My sister and I have consulted with each other on this matter, and we are resigned to the fact that neither of us is entirely certain of its cause. This is the first time we've seen anything like this."

That wasn't exactly what the Royal Guard ponies were expecting to hear. It was hard to imagine there were many things that could take a pair of goddesses by surprise.

She continued, "However, we do have our thoughts on the matter. Whether it has been created deliberately or accidentally, we believe that an errant form of dimensional thaumaturgy is responsible."

Princess Celestia took a deep breath.

"As strange as it may sound, it appears that another world is beginning to merge with our own."

Many of the guardsponies gasped in shock. Crack Shot gasped because everypony else was doing so. He thought the whole thing sounded kind of cool.

"My sister and I intend to dedicate ourselves to researching a solution to this matter, and I have requested the assistance of the brightest ponies in Equestria. However, this leaves us unable to personally perform a duty of the utmost importance: ensuring the safety of the citizenry.

That is why we leave it to you, the brave ponies of the Royal Guard, to make sure no harm befalls anypony under your aegis. I have no doubt that you will succeed in this task."

At that, the two princesses turned and departed from the courtyard.

Out of view and out of earshot of the guardsponies, Princess Luna looked sidelong at her sister, the corner of her mouth bent into the slightest of scowls.

"Was my presence *absolutely* necessary, Tia?" she asked, as they continued their hastened walk down the castle corridors, "I probably could have pored over a book or two while you performed your address."

"Oh, come now," Celestia pouted, "I thought I kept my speech short."

"It was. I'm just a quick reader," Luna stuck out her tongue.

"Still, thank you for being there," Celestia said quietly, "You may not realize it, but your presence has just as much of an effect as mine."

They walked in silence for a period, their hooves clicking on marble, sending echoes down the halls of the lower castle.

“You’re wrong, you know,” Luna spoke, drawing a concerned look from her sister. She quickly followed, “About requesting the brightest ponies I mean. One of the unicorns in Guard, Check Mate? He has a keen wit about him, a natural strategist.”

“That’s reassuring; we will need clever ponies not only in the libraries, but on the streets as well,” Celestia smiled as the two rounded a corner towards the royal archives, “And it’s nice to hear that you’ve made another friend.”

Luna huffed, “Please, you make it sound as if I were some dour old harri-dan.”

“Of course not, Lulu,” Celestia embraced her sister with a wing. “Though I believe with speech patterns like that, ponies will forget which of us is the oldest. Now, let’s get to work, shall we?”

The two alicorns stepped through ancient mahogany doors into the castle stacks, to hunt for answers they weren’t entirely sure were there.

---

“WELL I SAY WE OUGHTA GET DOWN THERE AND KICK SOME **FLANK! OO-RAH!**”

“For Celestia’s sake, Cacopony! Can you turn it down?!” the Staff Sergeant grimaced and flicked her ears back, “And kick *whose* flank? What exactly is going on down there?”

“FROM THE LOOKS OF THINGS,” Sergeant Cacopony bellowed in a voice devoid of humor, “WE GOT ON OUR HOOVES AN ALIEN INVASION.”

“Heh, you mean like little green ponies?” Corporal Kickstart chimed in, “Nothing against green ponies of course, little or otherwise.”

The Staff Sergeant shot him a dangerous look.



*“Not now, Corporal,”* she turned to Cacopony, “Sergeant, can you clarify?”

“YES MA’AM. ALL ACROSS THE CITY THERE ARE SOME *WEIRD* LOOKING BUILDINGS POPPING UP. PINK AND PURPLE AND COVERED IN PICTURES OF RAINBOWS AND ICE CREAM. DURING MY FLIGHT TO THE CASTLE, I SAW THESE ODDBALL PEGASI WITH THESE FUBAR BUTTERFLY WINGS IN CANTERLOT AIRSPACE. WHEN I FLEW TOWARDS THEM TO ASK WHAT IN THE **SAM HILL** THEY WERE UP TO, THEY STARTED FLAPPING THOSE WINGS LIKE MAD, AND DAMN NEAR BLEW ME OUT OF THE AIR!”

“I don’t know if I blame them,” a pegasus whispered near the periphery of the group, out of earshot of the speakers, and in fact out of earshot of the ponies right next to him, thanks to the Sergeant’s bluster.

The Staff Sergeant weighed Cacopony’s words carefully.

“So we can’t rule out potential hostility. Alright, we need to plan our next course of action, and swiftly.”

The Royal Guard ponies fell into a hasty discussion, deciding who of them should go into the city, how best to disperse their scant number over such a wide area, and which ponies should stay behind to secure the castle. The Staff Sergeant’s words had sent a sickly chill down Storm’s spine, and he quickly volunteered to help secure the market district. If there was an imminent danger threatening the city, he wouldn’t forgive himself if a certain unicorn came to harm.

---

Nomde Plume dragged a hoof down the center of her face. When the sky had split, many of the shoppers walking the market had come to the conclusion that her bookstore would be the perfect sanctuary from whatever was going on outside. Now her store was packed to the brim with terror-stricken ponies, huddled and trembling against the shelves, and knocking books to the floor. They were desperately trying to keep out of

the sight of two oddly shaped earth ponies who had just appeared right in the entranceway.

Nomde said, "Hello," because there was really little else she could have said at the moment.

"Hi!" responded the pastel pink one with white spots on her flank, "What are you?"

Nomde's felt her train of thought skip on the tracks. She supposed the question was fair enough.

"I'm a pony," she answered. The two creatures stared at her blankly. She wasn't certain if they wanted more detail, but opted to provide it nevertheless, "More specifically, a unicorn." She then added, "And a writer, if that matters."

"Really? But your nose is so small!" commented the blue one with bright yellow ribbons tied to her tail and mane, "I think you look more like a pig!"

Nomde groaned. She found herself in sudden need of a strong coffee. She asked, "You wouldn't happen to know what's going on outside, would you? Or why you're here... in my shop..."

The pink earth pony spoke up again, "Well, me and Bow Tie were chasing waterfalls in Dream Valley, when all of a sudden there was this big, bright light!"

"It was really bright!" Bow Tie punctuated.

"And *then*?" Nomde prodded.

"*And then we were here!*" the two earth ponies answered in unison.

"Well, I suppose that's as good an answer as I'm going to get..." the unicorn grumbled.

Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden flash outside, and a sonorous outcry which rattled the storefront windows. The two ponies

turned towards the outburst, and then began to back into the shop in fear of what they had seen, causing the other ponies to retreat inside even further.

“What is it now?!” Nomde had long since had enough. Just outside of her shop towered a slate gray quadrupedal creature with a blood red face, and blood red arms: a centaur.

“I-it’s Tirek!” Bow Tie cried, “What do we do?!”

“Who?”

The centaur looked into the shop at the sound of the pony’s whimper, and a cruel grin split his face.

“Ahh, yes. I recognize you two,” he drawled as he stared past Nomde at the two earth ponies, “Because of your friends, I was robbed of my Rainbow of Darkness, and imprisoned by that cursed Rainbow of Light! But now it would seem I have a whole new world to conquer...”

The beast advanced into the bookstore, splitting the floorboards with his heavy hoof falls, and cracking the door frame with his bulk.

Nomde made a decision then and there. She had no idea who this newest intruder was, why, of all places, he had appeared outside of her bookstore, or why he was currently wrecking it. She had no idea what those capital ‘R’ Rainbows were, Light, Dark, or otherwise. However, she reasoned that they were probably weapons, and she figured she could do them one better. Whenever Nomde had faced a problem or puzzle in her life, she had always been able to find an answer in literature. She pushed through the shivering ponies towards the heart of her store, where she hoped to find a solution in just the right book.

Preferably one that was thick and heavy and with very sharp corners.

---

Check Mate and Crack Shot had insisted on accompanying Storm Stunner, and the three of them sped through the air towards the open air market of Canterlot. A surreal scene spread out beneath them: colorful

buildings choked the roads, as if an impossibly large circus had decided to set up in all of the empty spaces. Vendor carts lay overturned and abandoned, and the entranceways of many structures were inadvertently blocked off, no doubt sealing their occupants inside. Strange ponies, no doubt Cacopony's aliens, milled about pell-mell on the streets and in the air, no doubt feeling just as out of place as they looked. Storm had no idea how he or the others could hope to fix such a mess; everywhere he looked was bedlam. The only thing he knew was they had to do something, to start somewhere, to try to mend what was broken, even without a clear end in sight. It was their duty. Storm began to beat his wings furiously, and Crack Shot fought to keep up.

A strange sight caught Storm's eye as a familiar bookstore came into view. A white unicorn, a unicorn he had come to know very well, was looming over of a huddled figure just outside of her shop. She seemed to be pummeling it with a blunt, rectangular object, while two other ponies cheered her on. As the trio neared, they began to make out her words.

"I - do - NOT - make - enough - for - you - to - come - in - and – start - trashing – my - **STORE!**" each of Nomde's words was punctuated by another blow from a hardcover encyclopedia. Curled into a ball beneath her, a gray and red centaur had tears streaming from the corners of his black and blue eyes.

"Wow, miss unicorn pig, that was amazing!"

"Yeah! Oh, Megan would absolutely *love* to meet you! Ooh, it just makes me want to *sing!*"

"*Back inside!*" Nomde screamed, startling the two ponies back into her store.

"Nomde!" Storm yanked himself from the chariot yoke, and galloped towards the unicorn.

"Whoa, Storm's done well for himself!" Crack Shot whispered to Check Mate after catching his breath.

“Storm?” Nomde dropped her book and ran to meet the pegasus, pulling him into an embrace. “What in Equestria is going on?”

“I have no idea,” Storm admitted, “Apparently some rip in the space/time whatever. We’re here to try to help out, though-“

Storm watched as the centaur hastily limped away, his tail tucked firmly between his legs, and all thoughts of conquest streaming in rivulets down his cheeks.

“-You seem to be doing a pretty good job on your own.”

A rare flush appeared on Nomde’s cheeks. “Well, you should have seen what the brute did to my poor little shop,” she contended.

“Heh, well, whatever happened, I’m glad that you’re safe.”

Check Mate and Crack Shot stood a few yards away, allowing the two their moment. When Storm took notice of them, he waved them over.

“Nomde, this is Crack Shot and Check Mate,” the pegasus pointed at his friends in turn, “Guys, this is Nomde Plume.”

Check Mate bowed his head in greeting, “It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Nomde, though I wish I could have done so under more auspicious circumstances. The journals that you provided to Storm were a delightfully epistemic diversion during our time in Basic Training.”

“Charmed,” Nomde smiled.

“Nice to meet ya!” Crack Shot waved a hoof, “Glad to finally get a chance to meet one of Storm’s *closest* friends!” The pegasus winked in a way that didn’t even try to be conspiratorial.

Nomde cocked her head to the side and arched an eyebrow. Storm began to say something to shift the topic of conversation, but that was quickly taken care of by a cherry red unicorn with messy bangs racing towards the group. He was slowly trailed in the distance by what appeared to be a mummy.

“Oh Luna be praised, the Guard!” he exclaimed, “You’ve got to come help! Quickly!”

The three guardsponies scrutinized the suspicious figure plodding after the youth. Crack Shot scanned the street for any stones or other aerodynamic pieces of debris, just in case it came to that.

“What is that thing?” Storm asked, looking over his shoulder.

Following the pegasus’s glance, the unicorn responded, “My boss.”

As the decrepit unicorn neared, it became obvious that he wasn’t actually a mummy, though the only distinction to be made might have been the presence of a pulse and slightly drier skin. When he spotted the golden barding of Storm and the others, the creases in his face deepened into a scowl.

“Pah! I don’t see why we need to be getting the law involved in all this!” he spat.

“Do you really think we have the time to find anypony else?!” the younger unicorn snapped back. The scowl on his mentor’s face lessened just a bit. After a moment he spoke.

“Blast it all... I can’t say I like it, but I suppose yer right...” the dusty pony sighed in resignation. It was a sound like sandpaper on wood.

“We’d be happy to help ya out,” Crack Shot offered, “What seems to be the problem?”

“Is it just clouds inside that tin can on yer head, colt?! Look up, that’s the problem right there!” the old unicorn gestured violently towards the starry strip in the sky, with a fire burning in his ancient eyes.

“Whoa, you don’t gotta bite my head off!” Crack Shot took a step back, then a surreptitious grin crept onto his face, “Or should I say, ‘gum it off?’”

“Impudent whelp!” the unicorn’s horn began to glow, before his younger companion intervened.

“Gray Mane, I think we may have more pressing matters at hoof than you getting yourself thrown in jail. Perhaps you should explain things to them?”

“Explain what, exactly?” Storm felt the sinking suspicion that there was more to the pair than appearances let on, “Just who are you?”

“Ach...” the unicorn called Gray Mane gave in, “The one that needs a haircut is Febre.

“As for me, I’m the one responsible for this mess.”

The other ponies stared at him in disbelief; even Check Mate seemed taken aback, and he voiced his doubts.

“Pardon me sir, and by no means do I wish to label what you’ve said as a prevarication of any sort, but given the sheer scope of this calamity, it seems that an individual of your, er, *senescence* wouldn’t possess the magical reserves to sustain it.”

The old unicorn smiled a crooked smile, “That’s the thing lad, magic is one of the most mysterious forces in the universe, and this spell seems to have a life of its own. Sometimes ye’d be best off not tryin’ to explain it.”

Check Mate looked unconvinced.

“Anyways, I’m goin’ to be needin’ to borrow one of yer winged friends. We just may be able to put a stop to this before it spreads any further.”

---

After a short walk from Nomde’s bookstore, the guardsponies found themselves in what might have been called an apartment at a happier point in its existence. A single firefly fluttered languidly in its lamp, its listless glow doing little as a source of lighting. The stained carpet seemed to fidget in protest when they stepped on it, and the air smelled like rancid soup. Storm tried not to breathe in.

Gray Mane and Febre led them into a room which, judging by the color and lack of sentience of the flooring, apparently saw much less traffic

than the rest of the apartment. On one wall hung a painting; it was the type of colorful, unmemorable wall art that one might find in a hotel lobby, and the kind that any burglar with a shred of experience would instantly know to look behind. Gray Mane levitated the pastoral scene to reveal a wall safe painted in runic wards. They appeared to be burnt out. Before opening the safe, the unicorn turned towards the guardsponies and considered them with narrow eyes.

“Alright, before I open this safe, know that yer only goin’ to get see its contents as a matter of necessity. I don’t want to hear any complaints about trifling matters like legality, understand?!”

Storm, Check Mate, and Crack Shot exchanged glances then nodded in approval. Satisfied, Gray Mane spun the dial of the safe, and it fell open noiselessly. Immediately the unicorns in the room flinched, and the contents of many of the bottles lost their color.

“What- What manner of contraband do you have stored?” Check Mate asked with a shiver. Gray Mane retrieved a pair of tongs from a nearby shelf, and deftly plucked the safe’s contents, an innocuous jar of dark metals, and set it down.

“It’s my own personal recipe,” the old unicorn preened, “A mixture of primium and nanominium gloss, with just an accent of negatively polarized octiron.”

The well-oiled gears in Check Mate’s mind instantly clicked into place.

“So an amalgam of magic neutralizing agents, and rather illicit ones at that,” he deduced. “How did you come to procure them?”

“Fell out of the back of a trailer,” Gray Mane answered plainly. Check Mate decided not to press the issue.

“But that’s gettin’ away from the point,” Gray Mane continued, “They’re useful for when a spell goes south on ye. Assumin’ of course that ye can get close enough to use ‘em.”



Crack Shot eyed the jar skeptically.

“Wait a tic... You’re tellin’ me a hoof full of metal is gonna fix up whatever the heck is going on out there? You might wanna call up that trailer of yours and get an extra shipment.”

Gray Mane let out a laugh, which quickly turned into a cough, “Ah, that’s the thing, lad! Yer problem is that ye think that what’s goin’ on out there as akin to a forest fire: each flame thoughtless, ubiquitous, and uniformly hot, not carin’ if its neighbor gets put it out, and quick to take its place. Think of the spell as like a beast: a beast with a beatin’ heart, one that can be stilled.”

“Are you certain of that?” Storm asked, Gray Mane’s gravelly voice sparking a bit of hope.

“Err, well I wouldn’t be surprised if that were the case...”

And the spark was snuffed; the guardsponies collectively groaned.

“But ye can’t be givin’ up now! Yer young, yer spirits should be filled with spit and vinegar! If ye got a chance, ye oughta take it!”

“I guess you’ve got a point,” Storm conceded, “You said that you needed a pegasus, right? What exactly do you want us to do?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a tall order. One of ye is gonna have to fly into the eye of the storm with those metals. I can’t tell ye what to expect up there, but it gonna be a fine mess whatever it is, and ye might not make it back. I’ll let the two of ye figure out who’ll go.”

Storm was the first to speak, “I’ll go.” Before Crack Shot could argue, Storm looked him in the eyes and continued, “You and Check Mate work well together if that story about your fight with those two ponies is any indication. I think you guys would be a better defense if any other characters like that weird centaur show up and start causing trouble.”

“Ha, are you sure you just don’t want to be the hero, hotshot?” Crack Shot laughed, causing Storm to fluster. He nudged Check Mate in the

shoulder, "Alright Check, let's let him have his moment. You and me can handle things down here."

"Then it's settled!" Gray Mane said, "However, this is nasty stuff yer gonna be carryin', and even as a pegasus yer not gonna want it in close contact. Let's see if I can't throw somethin' together..."

Gray Mane hobbled out of the room, and then returned a moment later carrying an old and abused mop handle and a square of worn linen. Laying the two together, he carefully used his tongs to dump the metals into the cloth, and then tie the fabric to the end of the mop handle.

"Oh no..." Storm uttered, looking at the makeshift bindle and feeling a surge of unpleasant memories. "**NO!**"

---

Storm muttered poorly vocalized curses around the mop handle as he took to the air. The wood had an unpleasant chemical taste, and he could already feel a couple of splinters poking into his lips. He bit down and pumped his wings as hard as he could, eager to get the ordeal over with as quickly as possible.

"There he goes..." Crack Shot observed, "You think he'll be alright up there?"

"Mmm, I believe so," Check Mate answered.

"Oh yeah? " the pegasus turned to the unicorn, "Is that your talent talkin'?"

The unicorn was silent for a moment.

"No... Not in this case," Check Mate admitted.

"Heh, good enough for me," Crack Shot smiled, "What say we go patrol the streets?"

Check Mate nodded and the two ponies took off in a gallop from the apartment, ready to face whatever challenges awaited them, and waiting for their friend's safe return.

---

As he raced towards his task, the gravity of it weighed on Storm Stunner's withers. Below him, society was in disarray. Ponies, both native and alien, were displaced, confused, and terrified. Menacing creatures from strange worlds were stalking the streets. That kind of chaos was the focus of many midday fantasies of his when he was a colt, the kind where when things were at their worst, he'd leap in and singlehoofedly save the day.

He realized then just what a silly, selfish dream it was.

To rise up against a threat meant that first other ponies had to be pushed down. To fix things, something first had to be broken. If this was the cost of being a hero, the price of glory, Storm would be just as content to pull chariots, guard doors, and keep out of the limelight. However, if he wished to bring back the halcyon doldrums that had thus far defined his experience in the Royal Guard, he had a job to do. He silently prayed that he would succeed.

Climbing higher and higher towards the dark, yawning maw, Storm learned just how far away and enormous it was. He felt his ascent slow, his wings fighting for purchase as the air grew thinner and colder. Flecks of frost formed on his lips and in the corners of his eyes, forcing him to constantly blink to maintain his sight. Each frigid draw of air tickled his throat. The world below him disappeared in a verdigris haze, and in some dim corner of his mind he noted that he had long ago soared above the point where lungs start to oversaturate with blood, where brains start to swell, where ponies start to die. He continued his climb, feeling a strange sense of familiarity.

Then, he was swallowed.

---

Storm was acutely aware that something felt different. It wasn't necessarily an unpleasant feeling; it was just an odd sensation of something missing. He was floating inexplicably, gravity conspicuously absent, though that wasn't what troubled him. On all sides he was beset by what looked to be stars; however, they didn't behave like stars. They darted, danced, disappeared; they did things that stars don't do. He suspected that they were related to the lights he had seen pouring into Canterlot, if not one in the same. In the corners of his eyes he could catch fuzzy glimpses color: ghosts of greens, blues, and puffy whites, but they forever remained on the periphery.

Storm realized what was missing. He hadn't taken a breath since he found himself in the strange, astral milieu, and he found that he had no need to. He briefly considered whether or not he was dead.

Then a splinter jabbed his upper lip.

"Son of a-!" Storm surprised himself when the words came out clearly and echoed about him with no obvious means to do so. He then noticed an odd taste in his mouth beyond that of the mop handle.

Although one is not always aware of it, air has a texture, and it has a taste. It might be soupy and thick with humidity, or dry and chafing. It could be hot, cold, warm, cool, any temperature in between. It might be sweet with pollen, or rancid from smoke and dust. What Storm felt was something heavily charged, though it ran through him and over him, albeit without any of the unpleasant charring and loss of muscle control that would typically accompany a voltaic shock. It had a citric aftertaste, something like pineapple. Storm correctly assumed it not to be air, but rather a medium much more familiar to unicorns.

Storm attempted to maneuver through the aether in an awkward combination of flying, swimming, and trotting. The scenery around him shifted in turn, and he wasn't certain if it was he that was moving, or everything else. He couldn't make heads or tails of up or down, and his internal compass was reading north by southeast.

“Huh,” he said, and heard it repeated.

“Echo!” he added to the chorus of his voice. He suddenly felt very alone.

He didn’t know what he had expected to find. The pragmatist in him knew that it was ridiculous to expect bright, flashing signs pointing out his target, but he would have appreciated some kind of hint as to what he was looking for.

*Well, it’s kinda hard to identify a big, glowing target when so many of them are zipping around you on all sides,* Storm thought to himself, and then inspiration struck. He wasn’t sure if he was on the right track, or if there even was a track, but he swiveled his head around regardless, scanning for something out of place, something- *Aha!*

Perfectly stationary in the distance sat a single, faint, grey glimmer; Storm began to tread towards it.

It was an innocuous little thing, no bigger than a pumpkin. Storm could hardly believe that such an innocent flicker of light could be responsible for so much trouble, but he was willing to take the gamble. He cocked his head back, grit his teeth, and thrust the bindle like a spear into its center, scattering its contents. The metals hissed violently, letting off high pitched peals as they greedily absorbed the magic of the rapidly dimming mass of...

*Potatoes?*

Storm blinked. Before him floated a hoof full of potatoes, accompanied by a vial of what looked like spit, and one very agitated fish. He started to say something, and then realized he had no words to do justice to his confusion. He wished somepony else was there to witness it, so he wouldn’t sound like a nutcase when he raved about it later.

That was assuming that ‘later’ came.

Nothing happened for an uncomfortably long moment, and Storm worried that he might’ve botched it. Then those worries were replaced by

many of another sort as the void began to softly tremble, an intensely palpable act that seemed impossible for all of the empty space. The tremble evolved into a rumble, and then into long, jarring quakes as cracks of bright blue began to vein across arbitrary planes in the aether. As Storm struggled to stable himself in a world with nothing to hold on to, he was staggered by a violent eruption of color and a deafening rush of air as the cracks united and everything around him ruptured inward like a duck's eggshell. When he recovered he was made aware of the return of his sense of equilibrium, particularly the down direction.

Down was where the ground was, and it was coming up to meet him alarmingly fast.

The pegasus quickly twisted his body, turning his erratic plummet into a dive towards what he gratefully identified as Canterlot. At the edge of his vision he noticed a small, glossy shape to his side as it rippled and warped in its descent, and he aimed his flight to coincide with its path. As the city's towers stabbed towards them like spear tips, he deftly plucked it from the sky and fanned his wings, transitioning into a smooth glide. Storm landed into an easy trot and set the small plastic bag down, wiping a bead of nervous sweat from his brow.

The little guppy blinked up at him with big, expressionless eyes.

---

Princess Luna abruptly dropped the book she was reading, a copy of Pony Wheeler's Lonely Multiverse, with a dull thud, startling her sister.

"Is something wrong, Lulu?" Celestia asked, looking up from her own text.

"Do you feel that?"

Celestia set down her book, "What do you mean? I don't feel anything!"

"Exactly!" Luna's eyes lit up.

Somehow, and without Celestia noticing it, the omnipresent buzz of the rift had tapered away, like the quieting of a thunderstorm.

“But that seems strange, we haven’t done anything yet...” Celestia mused.

“Well, perhaps we didn’t need to.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to Princess Celestia that the incident could have resolved itself without their intervention, but she couldn’t deny the possibility.

“Hm, you may very well be correct... How about we go take a look for ourselves?”

The two alicorns hastily made their way through the halls leading from the archives, and stepped out into the daylight. Gazing into the sky, they were greeted by a vast expanse blue, mottled intermittently with knots of cotton, and not a thing out of place.

---

*“Shoop bee doo, shoop shoop bee doo...”* Ponyanna sang tunelessly.

The melody had been stuck in her head since an odd meeting with a bizarre pony found swimming in the wishing fountain on the way back to her home. Although she had been disappointed to see the limbless pony leave so suddenly, she was rather impressed with the way she did so. Apparently sea ponies, as they called themselves, didn’t swim away, but instead vanished in a burst of sparks. Ponyanna probed her memory for any recollection of a horn, but didn’t recall seeing one. She shrugged; she had long ago learned that her memory was best taken with a grain of salt (though no more than that if she wanted to remember anything at all in the morning).

Although Newton was dejected by the loss of a potential expansion of his empire, the earth pony was pleased to see each of the poorly colored structures disappearing from the streets. She was not looking forward to figuring out a whole new set of landmarks, and apparently some other

ponies must have agreed. She was surprised that they were able to get such an expeditious response.

They had probably written an angry letter.

Ponyanna merrily stepped through her apartment door (she always left it unlocked), content that everything in the world was just as it should be, just like it had always been.

*“Shoop bee doo, shoop shoop bee doo...”*

---

Storm knew that he should report in on his actions back at the castle, but he had a few stops he wanted beforehand. First, he dropped off the guppy in a nice, algae-rich pond; he figured it deserved at least that much after its ordeal.

Then, landing outside of the book shop, he was surprised to find not only Nomde Plume, but Crack Shot and Check Mate waiting for him. They gathered around him in an instant.

“Hey, took ya long enough!” Crack Shot clapped him on the shoulder, “Nice job, buddy!”

“Storm!” Nomde stepped forward and brushed his cheek with her own, causing his to pinken, “Your friends told me all about your exploit; I’m so glad you made it back one piece...”

“Oh, ah, hehe,” Storm stammered, bowing his head, “It really wasn’t that big of a deal...”

“You’re too modest,” Nomde whispered as she softly kissed Storm between his eyes. His already pink cheeks flared bright red at the gesture.

He smiled at Nomde, and she smiled back.

“Dude. What’s up with your face,” Crack Shot inquired, adroitly spoiling the mood, “Oh snap, are you blushing?! Hah, oh jeez! Haven’t you two been dating for, like, months now?”



“Damn it, Crack Shot! Could you just- gah!” Storm sputtered; Nomde herself had turned a hint of rouge at that point. “Check Mate, help!”

“Err, ah, yes- Um, Crack Shot, maybe there is some byway that we’ve yet to thoroughly safeguard?” Check Mate suggested, “Perhaps another patrol would be in order?”

“Yeah, yeah, I gotcha,” Crack Shot snickered, “We’ll be around when you finish up here, Romeo.”

Nomde and Storm watched the two other guardsponies trot off and round a corner. After a moment, the unicorn spoke, “Subtlety is a word lost on your friend, isn’t it?”

“Yep...” Storm agreed, “But that’s what makes him a pleasure to hang around... Most of the time.”

“What about that older unicorn?” Nomde quirked an eyebrow, “Was he really responsible for everything that happened?”

Storm sighed, “Apparently he was. He definitely had a big hoof in fixing all of it, but... I guess when it comes right down to it, he was the cause in the first place.” The pegasus took a step forward and looked uncertainly at Nomde, “I suppose I’d better catch up with the others so we can figure out just what we need to do about that. Will you be alright here?”

The unicorn smirked, “You saw what I did to that centaur; I’ll be fine. Go on ahead; I know you’ll do the right thing.”

“Thank you, Nomde,” Storm said, and then feeling just a bit daring, he gave her a peck on the cheek, “I hope you’re right.”

Storm galloped in the direction that Crack Shot and Check Mate had travelled, and found them waiting right by the corner at which they had turned.

“Don’t tell me you were watching the whole time...” he moaned.

“I, myself, would never conspire to partake in such an ungracious-“

“Yes.”

“Whatever,” Storm expected both of their responses, “What do you guys think we should do about Gray Mane?”

“That old geezer?” Crack Shot shrugged, “What about ‘em?”

“I believe Storm is referring to his role in everything that has transpired today,” Check Mate explained, “Primarily his culpability. Inadvertent as they may have been, his actions placed the city in peril. And there is the matter of his possession of those materials.”

“But in the end, if he hadn’t-a helped, none of us woulda been able to fix this mess, right?” Crack Shot looked at the others with uncertain eyes. He didn’t like where the conversation was going.

“Be that as it may, it was by a stroke of luck that he found us,” Storm rationalized, as much for his fellow pegasus as for himself, “Who’s to say something like this won’t happen again?”

Crack Shot was outnumbered two-to-one, but he felt he needed to come to the defense of the cantankerous old buzzard. Everypony made mistakes at some point in their lives (the pegasus knew he had made more than his fair share), it was just that some of them were bigger than others.

“That’s just a what-if though, isn’t it?” Crack Shot argued, “Why do we need to go and bug that old fossil now that everything’s said and done?”

Storm let out a long, solemn breath.

“Because it’s our job.”

Crack Shot slumped in resignation. Check Mate didn’t say a word; he simply patted his friend on the back softly. The trio retrieved their chariot from the front of Nomde’s bookstore and began the short walk to Gray Mane’s flat. A walk which, despite their slow hoof falls, went much quicker than any of them would have liked.

“You think the princesses will go easy on ‘em?” Crack Shot asked as they stood outside of the door to the apartment.

"I believe they will be just and fair," Check Mate answered.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," the pegasus said as Storm rapped on the door, "Hopefully he'll get to keep on shootin' for his eudemonia at the end of it all."

The door opened to reveal the young, cherry red unicorn, Febre.

"Oh, it's you guys again! ... I think? You all kinda look the same," the unicorn furrowed his brow in thought.

"Yeah... it's us again," Storm replied, "Would Gray Mane still happen to be around?"

"Yeah, he's inside," Febre noticed the forlorn looks on the guardsponies' faces, "Why, is something wrong? It looked like you guys got everything cleared up."

"Could we speak to him?" Storm asked, trying to avoid the young unicorn's gaze.

Febre stepped into the doorway in an attempt to block it with his small frame, "Now hold on a second. Quit dodging my questions, what's wrong?"

"It's alright, lad, I know why they're here," came a gritty voice from within the flat; its wrinkled owner soon followed, "Step aside."

"Damn it, why won't anypony tell me what's going on?!" Febre shouted.

"Heh, I wouldna expect my assistant to be so daft," Gray Mane laughed in his raspy way, "They're here to take me away."

"What?!" Febre's eyes went wide, "They can't! I mean, if not for you they wouldn't have been able to do a thing!"

"And if not fer me, they wouldna had to. Ye may not be able to tell by lookin' at me, but I'm old enough to recognize and own up to my mistakes. Now step aside before I have to introduce ye to the business end of my horn, lad."

Febre stepped out of the way miserably, allowing Gray Mane to exit and meet the Royal Guard.

“We’ll be sure to let the princesses know everything you did to avert this crisis,” Storm spoke as the aged unicorn stepped outside.

“Hah, I’m certain that ye will, and I appreciate it,” Gray Mane brayed as he stepped into the chariot, “Alright ye gilded lilies, shall we be off?”

---

Princess Celestia and Princess Luna stared in curiosity at the hoary unicorn kneeling before them. The guardsponies that had brought him in had said little about the unicorn, only that he had a hoof in ending the earlier chaos that had threatened Equestria. They explained that they wished to allow him the honor of detailing the rest of his story.

The three of them stood near the entrance to the audience chamber, watching the unicorn’s actions anxiously. After a long moment in which the unicorn did not stir, Princess Celestia finally spoke.

“Please feel free to rise. Would you be so kind as to tell us who you are?”

“It would be my honor, Yer Majesties, and thank ye for taking the time from yer duties, both celestial and political, to hear my words. I am Gray Mane, a practitioner of the arcane arts, and I consider it to be a privilege to be under yer auspices,” the ancient unicorn kneeled once more.

“Oh my! So formal!” Princess Luna giggled.

“I was taught at a young age to always respect my elders,” Gray Mane explained.

“Well,” Princess Celestia continued with a radiant smile, “Would you please tell us what circumstances bring you here? We understand that it was in thanks to you that a crisis was averted today.”

“Most of the avertin’ was done by one of yer tin soldiers over there Yer Majesty. I was just tryin’ to fix what I broke.”

The two alicorn sisters exchanged glances for just moment, before turning back towards Gray Mane.

“What you broke?” Luna asked as she scrutinized the unicorn with narrowed eyes, “Do you mean to say that you, yourself, were the cause of a rip in reality?”

“Guilty, Yer Majesty- though I reckon I may regret that choice of wordin’... It was more of a slip up in an experiment of mine-”

“Fascinating,” Princess Luna stood up and eyed the unicorn in curiosity, “To think that a single unicorn could conceive such an original spell- My sister and I couldn’t find a single related incantation in our library! You say you did this by accident; what components did you use? What were you originally trying to do?”

“Heh, well believe it or not Yer Majesty, I was actually tryin’ to create a new type of dog leash...”

---

Storm Stunner sat in a restaurant whose name he couldn’t quite pronounce. It had waiters dressed better than he was, and more than once they had pointed out the fact. The cost of each item on the menu was either printed crisply in two to three digits, or simply listed forebodingly as ‘Market Price.’ The pegasus had tried to mentally list the function of each utensil sitting in front of him, and had given up somewhere near the middle. He wouldn’t have chosen to be anywhere else in the world.

“So instead of imprisoning him, or banishing him, or any combination of the two, they gave him a *job*?” asked Nomde Plume from across the table. A soft flicker of orange candlelight from its center played over the green of her eyes.

“Not only him, but that apprentice of his as well,” Storm answered as he took a sip of his coffee: a decaf, “My guess is that they figured if he wanted to do his crazy experiments, he might as well do it close by where

they can keep a handle on it. You should've seen what they did to the laboratory they were given; there's styrofoam everywhere."

"Hmm," Nomde smiled, and her half lidded eyes twinkled as a light gust blew over the table, causing the candle's flame to shudder, "I suppose I can't fault the princesses' logic."

Their waiter approached with dishes supported in a cloud of his magic. The serving ware alighted in front of the two ponies, and the covers rose to reveal a salad of imported orchids for Nomde, and a plate of black truffles for Storm.

Uncertain of which fork to use, Storm reached for the one farthest to the left. Then he realized he had no way of using it, and simply leaned forward and took a careful nibble of the mushroom. He didn't think it was worth its price tag.

"So, I have to ask," Nomde began, after tasting her orchid salad and concluding that it'd be improved by decidedly less orchid, "With all of the strange and multifarious activities you've participated in with the Guard, did you ever find your special talent among them?"

Storm thought about that day filled with odd occurrences, and his part in ending them. He answered, "Yeah, I think I've figured it out. And I think it doesn't really matter much. As special as a talent and a cutie mark may be, they're only a small part of what makes a pony unique."

"Well said," Nomde complimented as she picked a crouton out of her salad, "You know, if it were alright with you, I'd love to write about your experiences. What you've seen, what you've done... Everything about your life in the Guard so far."

Storm began to laugh, causing Nomde to frown slightly. "Hehe, sorry about that, I appreciate the thought, really," Storm apologized. "It's just, a story about some grunt in the Royal Guard..."

"And just what's so funny about?" she asked, plucking one of the truffles from his plate.

“I was just wondering: who would want to read it?”

~~THE END~~