

Any second now, the shock would wear off, and Phil would be back in the United States. He'd wake up, obviously extremely hungover from whatever bender had resulted in him hallucinating a change in species and a conquered world to liberate.

But if Equestria was a dream, he didn't wake from it that afternoon, or see any other sign that its equine citizens were not truly suffering. It took until early evening for the horses to organize everything, leaving Phil free to get to know their rebellion a little more.

Flying lessons would've been better—at least that way he would be mastering the strange new abilities his form provided. That aspect of the transformation did excite him, even if it came with so much other baggage. *Flying* under his own power—how incredible would that be? And the obvious implication, buried only inches beneath it—what would the world be like if everyone could? He could only imagine the game he'd made his career transformed from two dimensions into three.

That would never happen, but maybe he could experience the next best thing. The natives probably had sports; he'd ask them if he could only coax them to talk.

Unfortunately, most of the ponies he spoke with were an exceptionally fearful, beaten-down bunch, giving only short answers. They referred to him and the other players as "Ancient Warriors" and looked on them with almost as much fear as a conquering enemy.

Phil had to add "earning their trust" to his growing list of impossible tasks. Maybe their first mission could do that.

They gathered in a private basement room just after dinner, with Rainbow, Starlight, and the other three players who were still willing to fight, along with Sky Beak. Only when the doors were locked tight and the windows covered did their strategic meeting finally begin.

"Obviously our ultimate goal has to be freeing Twilight Sparkle and the other princesses," Starlight began, gesturing nervously at the chalkboard behind her. She had several symbols drawn there, which Phil guessed were names. Strange, since he could read their other writing system. But that was not the first concern he had.

"Unfortunately, she's trapped in crystal in the Storm King's palace. If we could even get inside, we would never get out again. All the Alicorns fighting together couldn't beat him the first time."

The weight of that pronouncement settled on the room. Horse creatures or not, they radiated the same grim despair as any humans might have in the same awful position.

"And we're supposed to stop him?" Harvey asked, from his chair against the window. He kept peeking at the moonlight streaming in from outside, as though he might break into flight and flee. "I don't have a damn clue what an 'Alicorn' is, but you make it sound like they mattered. I don't think the Storm King is gonna face us on the gridiron. Unless... is this Space Jam? God, Phil, if you got us into a horse version of Space Jam..."

"We're not making jam!" Rainbow called, her voice overflowing with annoyance. "We're gonna get the other Elements free: Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie. That will mean we only have to replace one instead of four."

Phil's teammates were horses now, and they didn't show the same tells he was trained to recognize on the field or the locker room. Horses showed emotion with ears and tails, maybe smells too. He needed more time to master all that.

"It sounds like you already have a plan," Phil said, keeping his tone measured and polite. No matter how unjustified, the only way they would *ever* get home ultimately required the Equestrians to cooperate. The anger his teammates felt was legitimate, but following it to its conclusion would not get them home. "Where do we come in?"

"When the Storm King won, he shoved anypony he thought might be difficult into a special prison, Stormcage. It's not easy to get to, and the guards inside watch its occupants close for any signs of dissent."

Starlight levitated something off the table, a crude sketch. She held it high against the wall, showing off the detailed floor plan. "Turns out, there's a flaw in their system. They're incredibly strict on keeping ponies from getting out, but the guards barely do anything to make sure ponies can't get *in*. So that's step one—the right act, and we'll deliver you four right to the doors. You work your way in and find the three ponies captured there."

"We'd *like* to get everypony out," Rainbow Dash added. "But if we tried to take all the Storm King's least favorite prisoners, and took all of them into the same place, even *he* might send a real army in here. So those three are our mission—my friends."

She settled three photos onto the table between them. The pictures showed three separate mares, taken in far happier times. There was nothing beaten-down or exhausted about them.

Now if only Phil could repress whatever part of his brain insisted that the horses looked *cute*, maybe he could focus on their mission.

Carlos tapped one annoyed hoof on the desk between them. "I'm sure your plan is great and everything, don't get me wrong. One problem though... not sure you noticed—you want us to go to *prison*? If you think we know some magic to get through stone walls and armed guards, you're wrong. We're only human."

"Not anymore," Harvey said. "Still sounds impossible, but I've never met a human with bird wings... unless we're angels. Do angels have hooves?"

"There's a way out." Starlight set something else on the table between them—a shard of crystal about the same length as a pony hoof. "They won't search you going in, so you can bring this. Once you find the ponies we're looking for, I should be able to open a teleport and get you out. It's an anchor—they use intimate sympathy for several targets at once. I might not have her power, but I was even better at precision translocation than Princess Twilight."

"No point saying that's impossible." Phil leaned forward, inspecting the shard of rock under one careful eye. It looked like pink glass, and was covered in tiny etchings. To his eye, the rock sparkled and shifted, radiating internal light. "We smuggle this in, find your ponies, and teleport out again. Why do you need us for this? I thought you wanted us for fighting."

"Might be some fighting," Rainbow Dash said. "Not even her best plans go *exactly* how we expect. Besides, the Storm King knows all of us. They'd realize we're dangerous—search every inch of us, then

toss us in solitary. But *you*, you're just ponies to them. We forge some fake papers about how you disrespected the king's line of action figures or something, and you can go into low security. Find the Elements, Starlight busts you out, and everypony wins!"

Several unhappy murmurs passed through the room as Phil's teammates considered Starlight and Rainbow's suggestion. After a few seconds, Aaron broke the silence. "I don't like this. Get caught on purpose, go to prison... dumb idea. Besides, we don't need so many. One person could smuggle in your... crystal. We don't need four. Just one."

"Brave or stupid," Harvey added. "Not sure which. Both, probably. Phil, you're in charge here. Shouldn't it be you?"

*Yes, throw myself in danger to rescue their missing people. Fantastic idea.*

One by one, the others nodded their agreement—even Carlos, finally breaking his previous resistance to admitting any authority from Phil. But when it came time for personal risk, he was as insistent as the others.

"Phil's the best man for the job. Eagler's the best there is—if anyone could do it, he could."

*And if I never get out of that prison, wouldn't that be fantastic for you.*

Now they were all looking at him, a dozen different eyes all watching expectantly. He shifted uncomfortably on the floor, as though that would help. But ponies mostly sat on the floor, so he couldn't even take refuge in that.

"They may be right," Starlight Glimmer finally said. "It would only take one pony to carry the crystal. If I could make more, I would send one with each of you to improve our odds. But our resources are scarce; I could only scavenge enough thaumium for this single attempt. It would still be dangerous, but perhaps less so with only one of you. We could smuggle you into an existing prison transport."

*Except the risk that I never get out. I'm going into a magical prison in a country I don't understand in a world I don't know.* But how could he say any of that, with those expectant eyes on him?

Kidnapping aside, this mare faced the conquest of her country with remarkable grace, emotionally and otherwise. Could he disappoint her now? "It seems... extremely dangerous," he continued, as though he were about to change his mind. "I barely know this place. What am I supposed to do if something goes wrong?"

She slid the crystal across the desk towards him, smiling ruefully. "Break it. The whole plan will be ruined, and it might be months before we can try to get the Elements out again. But if you're still free, we can try something else."

Phil stood up, spreading his wings with a confidence he didn't really feel. Something about their size helped reassure him, though he couldn't say why.

With a little more practice, with a little skill, they would give him unparalleled freedom. "Before we go, I want a crash course in how to use these. If I could fly, I wouldn't have to worry about being

stranded as much. Those losers who fought us on the road didn't have wings, so—once I'm in the air, I win. Right?"

Starlight and Rainbow shared a look. Starlight muttered something unclear, and the mare answered a few seconds later in a quiet mutter. Finally, they turned back to him.

"It takes a lifetime to get as good as I am," Rainbow said, sliding around the table towards him. "But that's not what you're looking for, right? So long as you can get from A to B, that's good enough."

He nodded. Despite her smaller size, the mare advancing on him suddenly made him feel self-conscious. There was an effortless liquid in her movements, a streamlined grace in her feathers and face. She radiated prowess with every gesture, not just a show of attractiveness for the cameras. This was no horse cheerleader.

"I think I'd like to learn more than just going in a straight line. But as a place to start, yeah. That might be good enough. Teach me first, so I'm not going in helpless and blind. *Then* I'll run your undercover mission."

Rainbow nudged him in the chest with her wing. There was surprising force in the gesture, despite the softness of those blue feathers. "You're built like a Wonderbolt, Phil. But that doesn't mean you can fly like one. Let's see how you look in the air."

"I'll talk to the others about something for the rest of you to do in the meantime," Starlight said, returning her little shard of crystal to an insulated case. "Your strength could be useful for clearing more land, or maybe a few supply raids. Or do you object to any risk at all, no matter how small?"

"Supply raids sound safe," Carlos said. "At least compared to that other mess you suggested. Getting arrested on purpose, no thanks. Do we get flying lessons too?"

"Sure, probably," Rainbow said. "Just not from me. Phil here is going in to rescue my friends; that means he earned my personal attention. Everypony else here will have to wait until another pony's time opens up."

She waved them out, then exited into the hall. Phil followed, up one set of steps to the ground floor, then another much older staircase continuing further into the vast ruin.

"Best way to learn is to do," Rainbow explained. She didn't walk up the steps, but floated along ahead of him, just out of reach. "Hope you're not afraid of heights. If you didn't have wings before, this might be a little awkward."

"No, never. Helped replace a roof once."

She giggled. "Good, because that's where we're starting." The stairs continued, up and up in a spiral inside a narrow stone tower. Finally, they reached a doorway, and she nudged it open. The door cracked off its hinges, then tumbled away into empty air. Outside was night sky, hundreds of feet up.

"All foals start with a glide. Open your wings like this, then..."