

Phil perched precariously on the ledge of the castle tower, his heart hammering against his ribcage like a trapped bird. Rainbow Dash stood at his side, her wings flared out in a vivid array of blues and purples. He could smell the scent of the high altitude, the sweet smell of the Equestrian sky, a mix of fresh rain and the ozone of electricity from her mane.

"Alright, Phil, remember what I told ya," Rainbow Dash said, her tone as light and breezy as the wind. "Gliding first, then flying. You need to learn how to use your wings to steer and catch the air currents."

"I know, I know," Phil said, spreading his wings, feeling the unfamiliar weight and flex of strong Pegasus muscles. His wings were far less colorful than Rainbow's, but hopefully just as powerful. If they weren't, he was about to learn the hard way.

The view from the tower was breathtaking. Even in the desolate corners of the Everfree Forest, there was an abundance of life. Trees exploded with a thousand different shades of green and purple, clustered tightly together. Brown, skeletal limbs broke through the leaves at sharp angles, the spikes that would break and pierce his body if he failed here. It was so high that Phil could see where the perfect blue sky faded into the white of the clouds.

He wasn't afraid of heights, but this... this was different. He was about to step off the ledge and rely on wings he'd barely had a day to get used to. It felt crazy, even for a world like Equestria. "Rainbow, are you sure about this? I mean, I weigh a lot more than you. I spent my life getting smashed into by dudes who could knock over a wall. What if I'm too heavy?"

She rolled her eyes. "Hey, what you did in your spare time is none of my business. But right now, you learning to glide *is*." She flicked one wing over the edge, insistent. "You've got this, Phil. Just trust your wings."

Trust his wings. Right. Phil looked down again and found he now had an audience. There in the castle courtyard, where trees were trimmed away, a smattering of ponies had gathered to watch. Starlight Glimmer was standing in the center, her lavender coat gleaming in the sunlight. She was watching him. The other players were there too, with snacks. Were they there to watch him soar, or land in a broken heap?

But Starlight wasn't laughing. She squinted up in his direction, her eyes intense. Could she *care* about what may happen to him?

With a deep breath, he closed his eyes, imagining himself as one with the wind. He stretched his wings, letting the breeze flow between each feather. His human mind was unprepared for so many sensations, granting him total knowledge of every air current. Finally, he leaned forward, tilting over the edge. His hooves slipped on the old stone, taking him out over the void. He kicked out with his hind legs, flinging himself as far as he could.

For a split second, there was silence. Then, the wind was roaring in his ears, tugging at his mane and tail as gravity pulled him down. He was falling, plunging towards the ground at a dizzying speed! The horizon blurred into the clouds, and the trees came rushing up to meet him. For a moment, he was sure this was it. This was how he'd die—a human turned Pegasus, in a failed first flight. Too bad news of his death would never make it back to ESPN to report on.

But then, something incredible happened. His wings, previously flailing in panic, caught the wind, stretching out to their full span. Rainbow's instructions solidified in his mind—a slow progression of movements, the technique for holding wings extended. It took surprising strength, straining muscles along his back. But if there was one thing Phil had in abundance, it was strength.

He felt a strong upward pull, and suddenly, he wasn't falling anymore. He was *soaring*.

Euphoria swept over him as he spiraled upwards, riding on the tail of a gust of wind. He did it! He was flying! His heart pounded in exhilaration rather than fear, and he could hardly contain a triumphant shout.

It was everything he'd ever imagined—the rush of motion, balanced on a knife-edge of control and recklessness. He could ride those currents, stretching away into forever. He turned and twisted in the sky, the ground a dizzying mosaic of colors below. The wind in his feathers, the sun on his back, the limitless sky around him, all of it was intoxicating.

For the first time since his transformation, he felt hope. Maybe he could master being a pony after all!

"Not bad!" Rainbow appeared beside him, gliding along at a perfect match for his speed. It felt to him as though he was moving so fast that his whole body might come apart at the seams. Rainbow, though—she looked as though this was a relaxing cruise for her, no more than a breezy walk down the hallway.

"Just remember, you don't know how to go up yet. That thermal you rode might end any minute. Aim for the courtyard, and circle around it. You can descend slowly by tilting your wings like this..."

Whatever fear had beset him initially now was gone. If he could learn how to glide, then he could learn how to fly. If he could do that, then maybe he could save Equestria. It wasn't like he didn't know how to survive tons of pressure.

He managed a somewhat clumsy landing in the middle of the town square, his hooves skidding slightly as he touched the ground. But he didn't care about that. He had flown, and he was alive.

His teammates erupted into cheers. Starlight Glimmer trotted over, a look of surprise and admiration on her face. "Phil, that was... that was amazing!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with awe. "Was that your first try?"

Even Rainbow Dash was grinning, her eyes sparkling with approval. "Told ya you could do it, hotshot."

Phil felt a blush spread over his cheeks, but he couldn't keep the grin off his face. He had flown!

"But that was the easy part." Rainbow shoved him with her shoulder, hard enough that he lost his balance and nearly fell over. "You have to do more than glide. You need to master this."

"I'll have something ready when you're too tired to keep going," Starlight Glimmer promised. His teammates waved, retreating from him. It was almost as though they could sense the grueling hours of practice waiting for him, and they wanted to get away before they could get roped in.

He waved them off, his attention all on Starlight. "Yeah. Sounds good."

He watched her go, trying very hard not to stare. That was the trade-off of such rapid adaptation, he supposed. He could use his wings almost from the start, but his mind changed with them.

"Phil." Rainbow waved one wing in front of his face. When he didn't react, she shoved him again. "Phil, are you still with me?" She lowered her voice to an annoyed whisper. "Weren't you just talking about having huge stallions slam into you?"

Finally, he looked back, glaring in her direction. "That is not what I meant."

She shrugged both wings, then spread them wide. "Next thing we're gonna talk about is how to ascend. This one's important, at least if you ever want to get *away* from the Storm King's soldiers. Try to listen, okay?"

The next few hours went more or less how he predicted—exhausting practice, just as intense as anything he went through between seasons. But when he spent endless hours pumping iron in the gym or going over the various fundamentals on the field, at least he was doing something *familiar*. Flying was something else.

But the ache in every muscle, the smell of sweat and dirt surrounding him on all sides—those he knew. Despite the exhaustion, there was a bounce in his step that hadn't been there before. As he finally made his way back into their makeshift common room, he realized that he was famished.

True to her word, Starlight Glimmer was there waiting for him, her lavender mane tied back as she busied herself with a large pot on the stove. A mouthwatering aroma filled the air, the scent of stewed vegetables and herbs.

"Smells great," Phil said, settling himself at the long, wooden table that dominated the room.

Starlight turned, a warm smile on her face. "I hope you like it. It's a traditional Equestrian stew. And by that, I mean it's the same thing we make every night, so we can stretch our supplies as far as possible. But maybe while you're out on rescue duty, your friends can see about refilling the stockpile."

"They better." He stretched, shuddering involuntarily. It always hurt after a workout so intense, but it was also profoundly satisfying.

As they settled down to eat, Phil found himself stealing glances at Starlight. He had to admit, the soft candlelight did wonders for her. Her lavender eyes shone with a certain depth, her gaze warm and inviting. This was what hope looked like—the face of someone who finally saw a way out after watching everything they loved fade away.

Yet as the night wore on, Starlight seemed to become more open, more vulnerable. She shared stories of life under the Storm King's reign, her voice catching as she spoke of the brutal occupation, the loss of freedom, the constant fear.

Next to all that, there was so little he could say. Dramatic victories for his team, dramatic interviews and upsets on the field—those were just games! They didn't end with any country under brutal occupation.

"I'm sorry we kidnapped you, Phil," Starlight said, her gaze dropping to her hooves. "I just... I didn't know what else to do. We had already tried everything we could. The Storm King crushed everypony. There was nowhere else to go."

Phil stared back, his heart aching at the regret etched on her face. "I might've done the same thing in your place. No one deserves to see their nation get conquered. I didn't choose to be here. But now that I am, I'm going to do everything I can to help put your world back together."

Starlight looked at him, her eyes welling up with unshed tears. "If anypony can do it, Phil, I believe you can. If the others are half as strong and adaptable as you, the Storm King has no idea what's coming for him."

For a moment, Phil thought he saw something else in Starlight's gaze. But before he could even comprehend it, she stood up, her chair scraping against the wooden floor.

"I should get some sleep. You too—you've got another few days of practice ahead of you. Learn fast, so you can get our friends out of that prison. After that, maybe save Equestria."

He laughed. "So, no pressure then? Got it."

She smiled back over her shoulder at him. "Goodnight, Phil."

As she disappeared up the staircase, Phil was left alone with his thoughts and the flickering candlelight. His heart was a flurry of emotions—hope, determination, and something else, something he couldn't quite put his hoof on.

But for now, he had a mission to focus on. The promise of a new day and the hope of a brighter future for Equestria was all the motivation he needed. Still, as he blew out the candle and made his way to his own room, his mind kept drifting back to their conversation. Something had changed tonight, and Phil wasn't quite sure what it meant.

His next few days were every bit as exhausting as he expected. Rainbow Dash pushed him harder than any personal trainer the league ever provided. He flew so hard that he lost feathers, so hard his back bled and he had to spend hours soaking in a heated tub to recover afterwards.

But when it was over, Phil was different. Not just physically transformed anymore—those extra limbs sticking out of his sides actually meant something. Phil wasn't just an Eagle in name—now he could fly like one!