

They didn't go home right away, or even that month.

As it turned out, liberating a nation from years of occupation was a messy affair, with an awful lot of loose ends and rough edges. Kidnapped or not, none of Golden's fellow players were quite mad enough to demand someone help them instead of feeding starving people, rebuilding critical water supply, or getting the power back on.

There were fires to extinguish, prisons to empty, and the guilty to punish. With the princesses occupied on such important tasks, they had no choice but to try and make themselves useful in the meantime.

At Golden's encouragement, most of his fellow players volunteered to help with the rebuilding effort—hauling relief supplies one moment, and transporting captured prisoners the next.

Equestria had its fair share of ogres now—creatures that would need to be dealt with. Ultimately, the decision was made to expel them, exiling the occupiers to the land they'd come from. Equestrian collaborators, meanwhile, would all face trials for their crimes, and imprisonment where required.

But organizing a barn animal version of a Trust and Reconciliation Committee wasn't exactly Golden Wind's idea of a good time, so he stayed as far away as possible from all of that. Besides, he could offer concrete help in simpler ways, usually by flying some critical message or pack of supplies to far towns and remote villages.

There were still parts of Equestria where the Storm King's soldiers held out, and removing them without bloodshed would take time. But thanks to Golden and other ponies like him, at least Equestrians in those areas would have hope.

After the second week, he traveled down to Ponyville beside the other members of his team, where Princess Twilight was already re-occupying the shuttered castle. While she prepared to send them home, that was where they would live, and in the meantime, they gave what help they could along the way.

Golden Wind watched beside Starlight Glimmer as the town came back to life. Boards came off of windows, soldiers no longer appeared in the streets, and ponies gathered to meet with their friends in the market and public square. Shops selling gruel and merchandise of the Storm King were refilled with fruits and vegetables, which were no longer sent exclusively to the Storm King's own troops.

He even saw a class of young fillies and colts gathering in the park, where a mare taught them their makeshift lessons.

Starlight had a little more time now that they were back in Ponyville. She had her own role to play in the reconstruction—casting spells to fix things, find things and treat the wounded. But for an hour each day, they spent time together.

"Cheerilee is one tough mare. Managed to put her class back together, even after all that's happened. Not as big as it used to be." She looked away as she said it, sounding wistful.

"Were you thinking of giving her more students?" he asked, as casually as he could. So relaxed, she didn't even notice at first.

"A few families got sent to other towns—working the Storm King's factories, mostly. If they made it through the occupation, they'll probably want to come back. But they might have put down roots where they ended up. Can't ask them to break up their new families."

He nodded solemnly. "I know. I didn't mean like that. I meant, where did you want to live, when things settle down? Here in Ponyville?"

"Probably. Princess Twilight says I've graduated from being a student, and I can go out on my own if I like. Did kinda save the country."

"With help," he said, nudging her with his wing. "You did have to kidnap my team first. And get some help with a few secret missions."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." She pushed him away again, though she was still grinning. "Point is, I like Ponyville. It's close to Canterlot, but not too close. We have our own castle, our own princess. The Elements of Harmony are here, too. It's perfect."

"Kinda like the town I grew up in, like it used to be. You don't have the cars here, but... you have the main street. The farms outside of town. People all know each others' names. I like that."

She leaned up against him, and they walked a little further—past construction sites and huge carts of supplies surrounded by royal guards in gold armor. They were most of the way back to the castle already.

"What about you?" she continued, a few minutes later. "You wanted to stay. What will you do?"

"Wonderbolts," he answered, without missing a beat. "When they get started again, I mean. Rainbow Dash says she can get me some catchup flying lessons and a tryout. Feels like that's where I belong, in your world. Performing, pushing myself."

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "And when I'm not doing that... it's like you said. Shame about Cheerilee's class. Maybe we could give her another student. Or more?" He shrugged, then rested one wing around her shoulder.

"Oh. Well." She flushed, her tail whipping sharply back and forth. She could fight an army and cast an impossible spell, but she still looked as shy as a schoolgirl. "That might be fun. I'd want at least one

unicorn... somepony to pass on my magic. And I'm sure you would like a Pegasus to fly with you. That means two, at least."

"At least," he agreed.

There was plenty of time to get started over the next few weeks.

But his teammates wouldn't be in Equestria long enough to see the outcome. Princess Twilight Sparkle eventually finished preparing their return, using the same magical map that had originally brought them into Equestria as its focus.

Golden Wind met them for one last meal, then settled near the back to watch as Sky Beak made his way down the group, touching the pearl to each one in turn. A few asked for slight changes, such as fixing bald spots, and healing old wounds from earlier in their lives. This was magic, and it left them younger, healthier, and better-looking than they'd been to start with.

Somehow, they still looked small to Golden's eyes. Humans were positively tiny compared to ponies, even if they were about the same height. That was still true even of the largest, strongest humans around, national level football stars.

Rarity had clothes prepared for them, but they still looked a little baggy, like kids dressing for Halloween in outfits that didn't quite fit.

"Equestria offers each of you these," Princess Twilight said, holding up one of six cloth pouches. She opened it, exposing the glittering gemstones within. "I understand they're quite scarce in your world, while they're highly abundant in ours. Some small way to compensate you for the... inconvenience... of your travel here, and the danger of combat. I hope you'll accept it, with our thanks."

Each of Golden's fellow players took them, some with thanks, and others with muttered unhappiness. Equestria had kidnapped them, and no matter how desperate the country really was, Golden understood that anger, even if he no longer shared it.

"Wait," said Carlos, who was the last to take a pouch. He turned it over in his hand, then found where Golden lingered near the wall. "You're still on four legs, Phil. Can't tell me the Eagles are gonna lose their best wide receiver!"

This might be the last time he ever saw these people. Maybe one day he would visit Earth again, but there was no knowing that for sure. If he was brave enough to face the Storm King, he could face his fellow humans one last time.

They looked even stranger up close—tiny eyes, flat faces, and strange smells. But he made his way over regardless, looming down on Carlos. "'Fraid so. Coach will be furious, but I've probably been replaced by now anyway. The game moves on, but I'm not quite ready to leave Equestria."

"Not quite?" Harvey asked. "Does that mean you're coming behind us? You know the media isn't going to be as interested in the story in a few months. We'll get all the best interviews."

"The best book deals," Danny added. "And movie rights. Don't wanna be a movie star? Worked pretty well for Terry Crews."

He opened both of his wings. "That all sounds great, but they can't give me these." He stretched them to full size, easily large enough to completely envelop several of his teammates at once. "You can keep the movie deals. Here, I can fly. You're the ones who are missing out."

"Agree to disagree," Danny said. "But hey, if it works for you... guess that's your decision."

"It won't be the last time you see me," Golden Wind added. "I still have family on Earth. And as soon as Starlight can perfect a temporary transformation, I'll stop by. Preferably *without* telling any of the media that I've returned. But I'll be around then, if you want to get together for a beer."

"Now that I can do!" Danny said, with renewed enthusiasm. "Sure you don't want to go back with us now? We could definitely use your help to explain what happened to us during our disappearance."

Golden shook his head emphatically. "You get to have fun with that adventure. If anyone asks about me, tell them I'm still alive, and that I'll be back eventually. I'll miss you guys, but I wanted to stay; it was my decision. I'm not a hostage."

Princess Twilight cleared her throat. She stood across the room, where a mirror shaped like a horseshoe rested against the wall. Several thick wires connected it to the map, all surrounded by detailed spells written on the walls, floor, and even parts of the ceiling. Starlight Glimmer's own hoofwriting was there, too.

"The spell is nearly ready. If everypony could form a single file line—it will not remain open for long. Also, do we have a volunteer? I need one of you to bring a little magic."

"What for?" Carlos asked. "I thought this was it. We don't have to be horses ever again."

"You don't have to be *ponies* ever again," she corrected. "But Starlight told me there was a sixth... victim. He did not make the trip from Earth with you." She levitated something into the air—a necklace ending in a little shard of crystal. "Bring him this, and put it around his neck. It will return him to his original form. But ensure nopony wears it until then. There is only enough magic for one."

Harvey raised his hand. "I'll take it. We were drinking buddies. Hope they don't have him locked in some... government camp, or something."

The princess shifted uneasily on her hooves. "If there's some concern for your safety, you could elect to stay instead. Equestria would be more than willing to make you full citizens, just as we have to Golden Wind. Only here can we guarantee your safety."

The group shared a few nervous glances, as they muttered to each other. It was Carlos who stepped forward first. "I'm willing to take the chance. Got a life to go back to, and I think there are people who miss me. Not ready to say goodbye just yet, if it's all the same to you."

The others joined him one by one, taking their tiny, barefoot steps across the room.

Golden Wind followed them to the doorway. He waited beside it, holding out a hoof to each of them in turn. "You did good work," he said to all of them, his voice low. He had to speak slowly, or else his confidence might falter. They were more than just his teammates now; they were his friends—friends he might never see again.

"When we were up against the wall, you all fought. Equestria probably would not still be here without you."

Light filled the mirror, turning it into a doorway. One by one, his friends left Equestria behind, as they vanished through it. He saw an empty stadium beyond, its lights out, and a full moon high in the sky. It was night on Earth. The place wasn't bulldozed, so that was a good sign.

As quickly as it appeared, the door closed behind them, leaving only a flat mirror, and a laboratory full of ponies.

"We're grateful you decided to stay," Princess Twilight said. Her eyes lingered on Starlight, and a small smile appeared in the corner of her mouth. "Whatever your reasons. Equestria might be a little... dented right now, a little bruised. But give us a few years, and you'll get to see and experience the way it used to be."

"I'm looking forward to it," he said. Then Starlight met him for a kiss, not nearly as brief or chaste as last time.

There was no need to rush. Golden Wind didn't have any traveling to do, and probably wouldn't be going anywhere for months to come. He was already home.