

It was a strange feeling to wake up as another species. When Phil woke, his memory of the day before returned only slowly at first. His limbs didn't make sense and his world was sideways. He tried to sit up, but only flailed around with his wings. Then he remembered. There was the end zone, victory within his reach—when suddenly, his humanity was stolen before a crowd of thousands.

He looked down and found the strange body he'd been given—a Pegasus instead of a person. *So much for the last day being a bad dream.* He groaned, then rolled out of bed.

Phil woke up in the bedroom they'd given him last night. The rebellion might have been ragtag and underequipped, but having a whole *castle* meant they had plenty of space. They'd given him a sizable room to sleep in, even if it was only a sleeping bag on a cot.

He stretched, shaking out the discomfort of his poor sleeping arrangement. How was he supposed to get comfortable with a wing pinned under his body? He still felt groggy, like he'd been tossing and turning all night. He would need to ask Starlight Glimmer about it—or better yet, someone with wings. Having a horn was probably less inconvenient to deal with.

Unfortunately, the rebellion's desperate circumstances also meant they didn't have running water, assuming ponies even had that level of technology to begin with. Their washroom had no shower, only a cloth, a barrel of water, and a basin.

Phil did his best, but not having hands didn't exactly make the task *easy*. In the end, he still smelled a little like a barnyard. But so did everyone else, so at least he would be in good company.

The other doors in his hall were all shut, meaning his fellow former humans were all still asleep. Phil wished he could still be sleeping—but there was light in the window, and he felt trapped inside. He had to move, had to stretch—not to mention scratch that awful itch from his wings he couldn't quite reach.

They'd been brought to win a war—now it was time to learn what the war *was*. There was no point hiding away in this broken castle, no matter how long they could make it last. The locals seemed to think a handful of people could make a difference. It was time to put that theory to the test.

He found a single pony lingering at the end of the hallway, scribbling away with a pencil in her mouth. She was easily the most athletic pony Phil had seen so far, with a lean and still muscular build. Strange that he could already tell the difference.

She was also quite a bit shorter than he was, a full head at least. But that mane—did it really grow in a natural rainbow like that? She wrote on a little pad of paper, occasionally looking up in his direction with an impatient, annoyed expression.

Until she saw him. She snapped the pad shut, tucking the pencil under her ear. "You're finally awake. I assume you're one of the alien warriors Starlight brought?"

She stood up, making her way over. She was so fast; he barely even saw her cross the distance between them—had she *flown*? So, there were some advantages to smaller wings after all—she could better handle herself in tight spaces.

"I'm not sure what's so special about you. Muscular, sure—but being tough isn't going to win a war. Not sure you were worth the risk."

"I wish Starlight had agreed with you," he said. He matched her annoyed tone almost perfectly. "We were *kidnapped*. We didn't sign up to be soldiers in your war. But the hippogriff said he wouldn't change us back unless we did, so—here we are."

The pony stopped right in front of him, glaring up towards his face. "We're stuck with each other now, pony. You and your five friends. Guess they're sleeping in?"

He shrugged. Friends was one way to describe it. Four of them were at least on the same *team*, though to say he knew every player on the Eagles that closely would be a lie. But somehow, he didn't think the pony would either understand or appreciate the difference. "Probably. Heard some people moving around, I'm sure we'll see them soon. But not everybody was so eager to help after getting kidnapped."

The Pegasus retreated from him, lowering both wings. "If you're not willing to help, I understand. You can stay around the castle here. We'll put you to work—safe work, keeping things running. When we take Equestria back, we can send you home. I can't use ponies if their hearts aren't in it—you will only put the other ponies on missions with you at risk. It's better not to have somepony who doesn't want to be here."

Amazing how fast the horse could go from angry and hostile to almost pathetic. But he knew why—the evidence was all around him. They cowered in a ruined building, with whatever supplies they could scavenge from the occupied territory or risk harvesting from a dangerous forest.

"Well?"

He sighed. "I can't speak for the others. I was—I guess I *was* their leader back home, most of them. But that was a professional relationship, not the kind where we risked our lives. They might turn you down."

"I'm starting with you," she said. "Are you in or not? If that means you're the leader, then your decision matters even more. In or out?"

He had already made up his mind. "I don't know if my help will make a difference or not. But I don't like the idea of a country getting occupied and its people enslaved."

"Its *ponies*," she corrected.

He rolled his eyes. Was she trying to talk him out of it? "It's ponies. So, I'll help. The kidnappers who came for us promised a sizable reward if we won. Is that still on the table?"

She nodded. "So long as you don't bring it up until after we win, yes."

He stuck out one hoof. "Then you've got me, anyway. You can call me Phil."

She seemed to recognize the gesture, because she lifted up one of her own, touching against it briefly. But she was smiling. "I'm not sure I could pronounce that. I'm Rainbow Dash. Basically, the leader around here, on account of being the only Element of Harmony fast enough to get out."

She looked away, her ears folding flat. "We might have to come up with something else to call you, Ph... Phil. We do names differently in Equestria."

Part of him wanted to argue the subject. It was his name; ponies were in no position to demand he go by something else! But they needed their country rescued, and that basically meant they were to do what they were told.

Nevertheless, there was something more important on his mind. Up close, it was even more obvious how athletic Rainbow was. She could fly so fast she left a little rainbow blur behind her, take off without a running start, and maneuver *inside*. "I want to learn how to fly. You used it to get away; I'm sure I could too. Who do I talk to about lessons?"

Rainbow seemed to perk up again at his question, and whatever shame had weighed on her shoulders vanished in a flash. "That's the smartest thing a pony like you could say. Flight is one of our key advantages—the Storm King's soldiers can't do it. He has some traitors and conquered griffons—but they're nothing in the air compared to an Equestrian with harmony in their heart."

*Whatever that means.*

She circled around him again, appraising. It was enough to remind him of how naked ponies always were. She clearly didn't think anything of it, but Phil tucked his tail in anyway. For whatever good it would do.

Then she was in front of him again and nodded her approval. "You're built like a Wonderbolt. That's good—it means we can skip all the strength and endurance stuff and get right into the technique and the magic. Are there any other Pegasi from your world?"

"One," he answered. "As strong as I am, he was in the same position as I was. Then there's Harvey, he has bat wings. Starlight called him a thestral."

She nodded. "I see. So, no weather magic, but he can still fly. But his wings are different from ours. I'll need to find him a bat to teach him."

She turned her back on him, tucking her clipboard under one wing. "Get your friends up, then meet me downstairs. Once I know who wants to help, we can move forward. I have some ideas about how to put your skills to use."

Phil ground one hoof against the floor. "Starlight made it sound like we would be leading this. Didn't you recruit us because we know how to fight?"

She giggled and didn't turn around. "I'm not trusting you with any of my ponies until I see what you can do. Prove what she said about your world, then you can start picking our missions. Buck being in charge, you can have it." She left him there, vanishing down the stairs.

It took him about half an hour to get everyone rounded up and back in the common room. The desperate urgency of the night before had kept everyone moving so quickly that they didn't have time to second-guess their predicament. But now that the reality of their situation had set in, he saw a great deal more resentment from the kidnapped players.

Phil shared it. At that moment he should still be celebrating a victory, maybe sitting in interviews, and planning where their team would go next in the season. All that had been taken away from him, leaving only the grim reality of the conquered kingdom of Equestria with a handful of football players to help liberate it.

"It's insane," Danny said, once they were down in the common room with Rainbow Dash. There were plenty of others up for a late breakfast, though most gave them a wide berth. There was no sign of the unicorn Starlight Glimmer from the night before. "I didn't sign up for this, and it's nuts that you think you could just press-gang strangers into fighting for you. I'll stay here in your castle. I'll...work, I guess."

He turned on Phil then, glaring. "You're the one who said we should come here. You can be the one to win this war and get us home."

*Would you rather be at the mercy of whatever is happening to the one who stayed on Earth?* He kept his sarcasm to himself. "I think working with the Equestrians is our best chance for making it home again. But I understand not wanting to. There's no way to justify what they did to us."

Danny didn't back down. But one by one, each of the others committed to help, ending with Carlos himself.

"One day we'll be back on Earth, sitting for an interview over getting kidnapped and sent to an alien world. When that happens, I'm not going to let Phil say that I moved boxes and swept floors while he saved the world. I'm in."

Phil grinned back. He wasn't *friends* with Carlos; they had barely spoken before getting kidnapped. But having someone to compete with—it would keep him motivated as much as any promised reward.

Only when they were finished did Rainbow rise from her seat. "You four—come with me. I think I have the perfect mission for you to start with."

"What would that be?" he asked, trailing just behind her. "Don't forget, we only transformed yesterday."

The Pegasus didn't slow down. But given that 'dash' was in her name, Phil suspected she didn't know how. "We can't wait much longer. If the prisoners get moved, we might never find them again."

"Prisoners?" he repeated.

"How do you feel about a jailbreak?"