

The world came crashing into focus around Phil—light and color and shadow all in a single instant. Ponies surrounded him, the same group of desperate captives he had saved from the Storm King's prison, snatched from the hooves of its awful warden.

This felt worse than any of Starlight's teleports so far—his world tumbled upside-down and his stomach twisted in knots. His wings opened reflexively, and that helped orient him. Those stone walls on either side weren't the cruel bricks of his prison—this was the rebellion's hidden shelter, tucked into a ruined castle.

The floor under his hooves was a twisting pattern of arcane glyphs, still glowing faintly with Starlight's magic.

"Not exactly my... preferred method of travel," Rarity said, from somewhere to his right. "But the timing couldn't be better. Another second, and we might have never seen the sun again."

Finally, the last of the disorientation faded, and Phil saw where he was standing—less than an inch from Starlight as it turned out, close enough that he'd nearly smacked into her face.

The unicorn looked worse than he'd ever seen her—eyes bloodshot, bags on her face, and an expression barely even looking forward anymore. She didn't meet his eyes so much as look past him at the wall, overcome with powerful confusion. "Welcome... to the rebellion," she said, before tumbling sideways.

Phil jerked forward with an athlete's reflexes, slipping under Starlight before she could hit the ground. The unicorn wasn't exactly light, but she still barely strained his muscles. He stood up, nudging her to one side so she wouldn't slip off his back.

"She must have been watching for us," Fluttershy whispered, pawing timidly at the stone floor. "Maybe the whole time you were gone."

Rarity nodded her agreement. "She would have to be. I've never seen a portable teleportation enchantment, but even if such a thing could be done, it would radiate power like Celestia's own horn. Our escape had to be compact enough to reach us. If it wasn't for that near-disaster with Phil's capture, we would've returned a day earlier."

"She should really see a doctor," Pinkie Pie said. She bounded past Phil towards the door, her mane now fully inflated. Curls of bright pink cascaded down her shoulders, and she didn't walk so much as bounce. "You too, Eagles. You're bleeding all over."

He was—he had only partially healed from the interrogation, and he knew it. But he wasn't in enough pain to miss the nickname. "That isn't my name, Pinkie. It's Phil."

"Phil," she stopped by the door, her hoof resting on the knob. "Ph-ill. Eh, no. Maybe you could have a strange name before, but not anymore. You're a proper pony now. Saving the day, fighting evil... Eagle! See?"

"No." He approached slowly, careful not to dislodge the mare on his back. Now that she mentioned it, the idea of seeing a real doctor *did* seem appealing. The last thing Phil needed was to die of

an infection before they even finished saving Equestria. "A local nickname seems fine, but not that one. Maybe Starlight can come up with one."

He glanced over his shoulder, and found the mare's eyes closed, her head resting up against his back. She was already snoring. Phil opened both of his wings a little, using them to hold her steady. He'd almost forgotten what that warmth had felt like...

"Perhaps after she's seen a doctor. And you too, dear. We did what we could to sew you back together, but we *were* three starving mares in a dirty hole."

"Agreed," said Moire. She'd remained silent near the back of the room, her eyes fixed on the floor—almost like she was trying to make them forget she was there. "I'm ready for some real food. A fat, juicy moth, right out of the air. Then I'll wash it down with a fresh mango, and..."

Fluttershy hurried past Pinkie, nudging her until she opened the door. Of course, Phil recognized the castle outside—this was Starlight's study, located in the heart of the rebellion's headquarters. His rescued ponies immediately set off down the hall the wrong direction, towards a bend sealed with bricks. But they walked with such confidence.

"Not the way," he said—but he felt almost as exhausted as Starlight, and his words didn't quite reach them.

"They'll figure it out," Moire said, slipping into place beside him. She matched his pace, though kept far enough away that she wouldn't accidentally dislodge Starlight. "Can't believe we actually made it out. Feels like a dream, you know? Vivid enough to take some of the pain away, but then you wake up and you're back in that... awful place."

He nodded weakly. In Phil's short stay undercover, he had already started to feel some of that dread. What would life be like if he had *never* found a way out? "I know what you mean."

"I'd... appreciate it if you kept what I said between us," Moire continued. "But I can't stop you."

Behind them, the others' hooves hurried to catch up, trotting back towards Phil. They'd found the dead end and would only take another moment to catch up.

"Won't say a word," he whispered back. "I never would've made it out without your help, Moire. I still don't know what makes them special, but Starlight thinks these *Elements of Harmony* are key to saving Equestria. Getting them out is kinda like saving the country yourself. Whoever you were before, now you're a hero."

She nudged his shoulder with a wing. Her eyes were so big, overcome with emotion. She was crying. "Looks like you've got your hooves full with that mare. But maybe I'll see you in the sky anyway... if I still remember how to fly."

She slowed, letting the kidnapped Elements catch up with him. She trailed along behind, just as they passed through the heavy doors into the common room.

Ponies were just gathering for breakfast, packing in tight for their share of meager rations, but a little less meager this morning, judging by the stacks of pastries and number of bubbling pots. Maybe his teammates had been helping while he was away after all!

He wasn't sure who started it, but a cheer rose through the hall, joined by stomping hooves. Their words blended together—a mixture of names, joy, and the chanting refrain of “Equestria! Equestria!” The joy wasn't for him—the ponies he rescued spread out into the crowd, meeting many friends with hugs and desperate tears.

He crossed the hall, passing trays of delicious food and heading for the infirmary doors. Even when the Elements weren't following him anymore, the cheering continued. Ponies waved and did their best at his name, but many of them stumbled over the pronunciation. Pinkie was probably right about getting a new one.

Harvey caught up with him. He looked like he might slam into him for one of their field-side greetings, but then he saw the mare on Phil's back and stopped short. "Wondered if we'd see you again, Phil! *Undercover agent*, really? Looks like they weren't excited about your performance."

Phil shrugged one wing, which was about what he could manage without risking dislodging his passenger. "Definitely not." He grinned back, despite the pain. "Too bad I wanted the win more than they did. I think the prisoners might actually take the prison now, and send those trolls running."

"Damn." Harvey whistled. "You can tell us the whole story when you're not bleeding so much. Can't wait to hear it."

Phil stumbled into the infirmary a few seconds later. All the beds inside were empty today, thankfully. He picked the nearest, lowering Starlight down carefully.

One eye fluttered open as he did so, briefly meeting his. "Glad... you..." and she was out again, nestling up against the pillow.

He straightened, facing the doctor as he hurried from an open office nearby. Phil started to explain what had happened, but the doctor pressed his mouth closed with a little unicorn magic. "Back from the prison mission. You don't need to explain. I already know how it went; my ears are working fine." He pointed at the bed beside Starlight's. "Lie down. You can try to sleep, but you probably won't get much. Not too many healing potions left anymore—mostly hydrogen peroxide and thread. This will hurt."

Phil stretched out on the horse-sized bed. "Can't be worse than what Tempest did to me."

Starlight's eyes shot open, and she turned her head towards him in bed, looking suddenly alert. Or maybe “panicked” was the right word. "Tempest Shadow was at the prison?"

"Warden," Phil said. A nurse came rushing towards them, pushing a cart of medical supplies along ahead of her. From the looks of it, Phil knew the doctor was right—this *would* hurt.

"The Storm King made her a prison warden." Starlight lay back against the pillow, though she was still facing him, and one eye remained open. "He wouldn't have won without her help. That's the thanks she gets for betraying Equestria."

Something harsh burned into his side, followed by something sticking through his skin. Not just once, but repeatedly, back and forth. The doctor wasn't standing right over him, but he didn't have to. He was using unicorn magic!

"I guess." Phil stiffened, fighting to keep still against the pain. He needed treatment; someone had to sew him up. But part of him wanted to get up and flee. "Thanks for pulling us out. Were you sitting awake in that room the whole time?"

"Since I got back," Starlight muttered. "No other way. No other unicorns here have the skill. If I missed when you used the crystal, you'd be trapped."

"Saved my life," he whispered. His words were briefly strangled by another harsh burn of pain against a different wound, and more stitches. But if being a pony had one advantage, at least he didn't have to watch them work.

"You're the hero," Starlight said. "I could've gone down there myself, but I wasn't brave enough. You were. Thanks to you, Equestria has a chance."

"Relax there, Miss Glimmer," the doctor chided. "I know exhaustion when I see it. Either rest, or I'll have you sedated." How he could still talk while stabbing Phil repeatedly with a needle, Phil figured he might never know.

Maybe he should keep quiet and let Starlight finally sleep. But one thought gnawed at him, demanding attention. Plans for the salvation of Equestria would still be there the next day, once they were all recovered, and the parties were over.

But at least one question couldn't wait. "Pinkie said something when we got back. I was a 'real' pony now, and needed a real name. But I didn't like what she came up with."

"She's... something else." Starlight cracked open one eye this time, watching him. "But she's right. You've done as much for Equestria as any pony. More than most. You do... deserve... a proper name. Even if you don't want to use it much. The history books will just invent one otherwise."

He turned that over for a few seconds, considering. "Maybe you can come up with something."

"Golden Wind." She didn't hesitate, not even for a split second. Almost like she'd had it picked out for days, maybe since he first arrived. Only now she finally had the chance to share it. "I mean, that's how you look. You seem like a Golden Wind to me. Like those feathers on the underside."

He lifted one wing reflexively, turning to look. Of course, he already knew what was there—but at that moment, those feathers caught the light of the glowing crystals on the walls, reflecting onto Starlight. "Golden Wind. I could work with that."

"Delightful," the doctor said, annoyed. "Now put that wing back down, Golden Wind. Unless you don't plan on keeping it. A few of these feathers are showing early signs of infection. I'm afraid healing spells hurt more than hydrogen peroxide. Hold still and let me work."

The doctor was right of course—it burned, worse than Tempest Shadow's electrocution. But Golden Wind hardly felt it. His undercover mission was over, and he was a hero to the rebellion.

And much more importantly—he was a hero to one specific mare. The rest was just gravy.