

Golden Wind spent the next few days in recovery and celebration with the other ponies. Equestria might've still been enslaved, and the Storm King still sat on his throne, but for the first time, they had a major victory under their belts.

Even from a hospital bed, watching it felt like seeing the ponies of Equestria finally come alive again after so long as sleepwalking zombies, going lifelessly from one kind of suffering to the next.

His teammates all came to visit—even Danny, who had refused to leave the ruined castle and do anything more than safe work from behind the lines.

They had more or less the same thing to say. "No one's gonna believe this when we get back," Harvey said, about three days later. Phil still had a few bits of bandage where the worst burns were healing, but most of the damage was already gone. He was tough, and healing magic worked fast. "Helping the locals is one thing, but getting tortured in prison? Damn, Phil."

He didn't correct Harvey, of course. None of his teammates had adjusted as well. They weren't "going native." But maybe they had fewer reasons to adjust like he did.

"Someone had to," he said. He glanced to Starlight's empty bed before continuing. She hadn't been injured, only exhausted, so she was already released.

But admitting she had anything to do with Phil's motivations—they'd never let him live that down. "We don't go home until we save them. We're already into the fourth quarter for this rebellion. They needed a Hail Mary."

"And you're the one to give it." He clasped Phil's shoulder for a second, laughing loudly. "You think they'll let us go home now? We won?"

Phil winced, and not just from the pain under his bandages. "Equestria's not safe yet. Not until the Storm King is gone. You'd have to ask Starlight what's next."

Harvey shrugged. "You do that, Phil. You're around her often enough." He turned and vanished out the door before Golden Wind could retort.

Still, his stomach sunk in his chest with grim suspicion. *He knows.*

The next day brought his official release, along with a brief lecture from the doctor about medication and changing his bandages.

"But so long as you don't get into any battles for another two weeks, you should heal up fine."

"What about flying?" He opened both wings, stretching them to full size. A few feathers were still missing, and others were scorched by dark magic. Yet if he squinted, he could make out their replacements emerging from the downy fluff underneath. "Rainbow Dash wants to keep up my training. Get into advanced maneuvers, weather magic..."

"Flying, yes," the doctor said. "Weather magic, absolutely not. The last thing you need is more *lightning*. Come back in a week and we'll see. Those damaged feathers are going to keep falling out,

but sometimes they need a little help." He looked away. "I wouldn't say anything, but I'm told wings are new to you. You don't have a lifetime of preening experience."

Golden Wind shook his head once. "I've never had any of my own before, no." But now he did. They weren't awkward grafts onto his body anymore, alien limbs he couldn't control. He folded them against his sides as easily as he might move his legs. Shame he couldn't bring them back to Earth after they finally defeated the Storm King.

"I'll keep it simple. If a feather looks damaged and starts to itch, pull it out. Usually, a Pegasus will lose all their feathers and grow new ones in about a year. The potions you've been drinking sped up that process. Unfortunately, that means you'll go through a whole set of new feathers in the next month or so. Talk to another Pegasus if you need help; I can't get more specific than that."

The doctor tapped one hoof against his horn, matter-of-factly. "I've never had wings either. Just try not to burn yours again next time you're saving the world."

"I'll see what I can do."

Of course, the first pony he went to see wasn't one of his teammates. They had their own tasks in the rebellion now—a few were away on supply missions, or helping smuggle ponies out of nearby towns.

It was Starlight he went to find. Fortunately, that wasn't a difficult task—the mare was only a short distance down the hall, barely around the corner from the makeshift hospital.

She had several pads of paper floating around her, along with a quill and pen. Somehow, the unicorn could hold them all and still find the concentration to pace nervously back and forth. She was so absorbed in her task, that she didn't look up as Golden approached.

"Trying to dig through the floor?"

She squealed in surprise, dropping several pages from her notebooks to the floor in a clatter of magic. Her ears tucked back and her tail whipped rapidly as she avoided his eyes.

"Golden! You're... doctor let you out? That's great!" She levitated the fallen sheets of paper up off the ground, stacking them all haphazardly in the air in front of her. "I was hoping to talk to... How are you feeling?"

It wasn't just his wings that felt more natural. Ponies couldn't help but show their feelings—be that eagerness for their mission, or their social anxiety about talking to a pony they were interested in.

The unfortunate implication of that truth, of course, was that he was as easy to read as everypony else.

"Good. Only lightly singed. Doctor says it's nothing that won't grow back, so long as I'm careful about it."

"Great!" Starlight beamed back at him, brushing one awkward hoof through her mane. "Great! We've been planning... the Elements and I, since you rescued them—what we need to do next."

She settled abruptly onto her haunches, then turned one of the floating notebooks towards him in the air. "See? This is what we're missing."

He looked. Phil had seen diagrams this complex before, back in college. Granted, none of those gave him magical powers. "I can't read spells, Starlight. Not a unicorn, remember?"

"Right, right!" She spun it around, then went back to her pacing—around him this time, rather than just in a straight line. It seemed to help her think, so Phil said nothing. "Getting the Elements of Harmony back was a key step to freeing Equestria. But we'll never win against the Storm King directly, not unless we can free the Alicorns. With all the princesses and the Elements working together, we might stand a chance."

"Okay." He spun slowly in place, watching her walk back and forth. She did know ponies didn't wear anything, right? Every time she flicked her tail like that... "You think I can help with that?"

"Not... directly. I've worked on a counter spell since he took over, without success. Princess Twilight would be able to find a way, but she's trapped in crystal. If she could get herself out, she would've done it already." She flicked through the pages, blurring several magical diagrams, until she settled on something much more familiar—a map of Equestria, seen from high above.

It wasn't Phil's home, but even so, he found the view almost familiar—the shape of the continent, what would've been the Rocky Mountains in the west, and the plains in the middle. It might be a parallel world, but it seemed to share the same shape. Maybe he could use that. "I'm not sure there's a pony smarter than you out there," he said. "If you can't figure it out..."

She flushed. "Yes, well... I've always been more of a sorcerer than a wizard. Let my emotions guide my magic, trust my instincts. It means a lot of power, but... not great when you're going up against somepony with more raw strength. I need a pony like Twilight. Lucky for us, there's one out there." She tapped the map, near a little town on the west coast.

"One of Equestria's wisest Unicorns—Starswirl the Bearded. While you were in prison, we heard somepony had seen him down there. Guess he's been in hiding since the Storm King took over."

Golden Wind squinted down at the map. Unfortunately, that view gave him very little information to work with. Towns and cities were little dots, sometimes not even with a name. "If he's so wise, why isn't he helping with this rebellion? Is he a collaborator or something?"

Starlight giggled. "Not likely. Ponies who work for him don't need to hide—they can be in his court, drowning in luxury. Starswirl is a dangerous pony, but he's not omnipotent. I'm sure he would help if he knew we were out here."

"And if you're telling me about this..." Golden continued. "It means you're sending me to get him?"

"Us," Starlight corrected. "With a few illusions. After that whole 'jailbreak' thing, you're not a nopony to the Storm King anymore. Neither am I." Her horn glowed for a second, but he felt no spell. Just for demonstration, maybe. "You're a warrior, not a wizard. I have to be there to explain our problem. And you're there to keep us both safe if anypony finds us."

He glanced down the hall, but nopony else was coming. They were alone, at least for that moment. "Compared to my last mission, I think I like this one much better. No prison, no torture. And I can't think of another pony I'd rather have at my side."

Suddenly, Starlight was staring.

Golden flushed, though of course Starlight wouldn't see that. She would see him nervously shuffle his wings, though. "For a secret mission, obviously. Because you're so pr—powerful. The most powerful unicorn I know."

She touched her forehead up against his, so close her scent overwhelmed him. "You're not a very good liar either, Golden Wind."

He shrugged his wings. "Maybe not. But are you really any better? You could just send me and teleport us back. You didn't have to come."

She brushed up against his cheek, then straightened. "I still need to work out the details with the others, but we should be able to leave tomorrow. Just waiting on Rarity to craft a few illusions for us to wear while we're out there, now that the Storm King probably wants to execute us both. Meeting room, tomorrow morning. I'll be ready to teleport us by then."

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Golden Wind had a few of his own preparations to make before then, albeit none with any magical ramifications. He wanted advice on wing-care from Rainbow, and a chance to write a few notes for his teammates.

Given the danger he kept putting himself in, the chance he might not come back seemed to be growing every day, so he borrowed a pen and paper, and took a few hours to write his goodbyes. His family and friends back home deserved to know what had happened to him, even if he wasn't around when Equestria was saved and his teammates could go home.

He kept the details vague, of course. No need to tell them about ponies and wings and magic. Far better if their last image of him *wasn't* as a crazed lunatic.

He finished with a simple pronouncement, more or less the same with each letter.

*"There's something here worth fighting for—more than my season record, more than the playoffs or a title. This was worth fighting for.*

*-Phil"*

Now he'd seen Stormgate, so he knew what Equestria's enemy was capable of. He wouldn't let the Storm King throw Starlight into that place—or anyone else.

He addressed each letter, though of course he couldn't stamp them. He found Danny and left the bundle with him. "If you make it back and I don't, please. Send those for me when you're on the other side."

He nodded. "You planning another suicide mission, Phil?"

"No. Just wanted to be prepared."

Then he was off to the meeting, where he met with the Elements of Harmony for one final briefing. Rarity was there, with another magical crystal for him.

"Tuck this anywhere. Into a hoof, behind your ear... like so." She levitated a mirror as she said it, turning it to face him. "Just like that. Golden Wind is no more! Behold... whoever you are now."

He looked at the illusion reflected back at him. Perhaps Rarity could've done a little more to hide him—he had a slightly different color in his coat, a different mane style, and most importantly, his wings vanished. Instead, he had a horn, as though he too had transformed into a unicorn upon arrival in Equestria.

"I should stress, this is only an illusion, dear," she said. She pulled the crystal free, and his reflection returned to what he expected. "You are still a Pegasus. You'll still walk on clouds, still have wings, and that horn isn't real. This isn't about changing you into another tribe, or we could just use the Pearl. It's only meant to conceal your identity long enough for a mission."

He nodded along. "What if I try to fly?"

"You can," she answered, without thinking. "And it will look as unnatural as you can imagine—a unicorn manipulating powerful muscles he should not have, guiding himself through the air. Any creature who sees will likely identify the trick in an instant."

"I'll keep that in mind." He nodded appreciatively, then hurried out to meet Starlight Glimmer.