Chapter 14

General Storm looked up and down the long line of young ponies. They all looked at her, nervous, like they'd arrived for a test they hadn't studied for. She smirked; she liked it when they got nervous. It gave her a sense of pride and solidified a feeling of authority. She liked that feeling.

The ponies were all lined up at the edge of the cloud, peering down nervously at the water below. Storm flapped her wings, hovering over the open space, her light-blue mane too short to move with the wing. She went down the line, eyeing the young ponies with a cold gaze that matched her grey coat.

"Today," she said, with a cold, cutting voice, "we find out which of you are fit to serve on my Stormcloud." The young ponies shuffled their hooves nervously. "I don't think it's too difficult. It's very simple. You just have to fly back here. If you can, then you've passed. If not..." she gestured to the open water below.

She looked down the line again. She spotted one little pony - a pink colt with a cloud for a cutie mark. She flew up to him.

"How about you, pinko?" she asked. The colt's head jerked up sharply. General Storm got a better look at the cutie mark. It wasn't just a cloud, it was a cloud with a smiley face on it. "You feel up to it?" She sneered.

"Y-yes!" said the pink colt.

"Yes *what?*"

"Yes sir..." the pink colt said. He'd forgotten to address the general by her proper title. His peers snickered, and his head sank, completely mortified.

"I hope so for your sake," said the general. "Now!" she announced to the rest of the ponies, "The instruction is to fall freely for five seconds, and then recover. Once you make it back to the Stormcloud, congratulations! That means you deserve to survive this long."

The pink colt looked behind them. There were the soldiers, all standing impassively by. Well, most of them were impassive - one young orange stallion seemed to be smiling in a manner that unsettled the colt.

“Well?” barked the general. “Do it!”

Immediately, a cocky filly jumped off of the edge of the cloud. Everypony watched with baited breath as she fell. Then, extending her wings, she soared up into the air again, before landing back onto the cloud. The general smiled. Nervously, a few more foals jumped off. They, too, all made it back. The air was filled with elated shouts as the ponies passed their tests and got a grip on their flying.

The general smiled. It shouldn’t have been a surprise that everypony was passing; it was a stupidly simple task, but it always filled her with disgust when a foal wasn’t able to perform the simple task of flapping its damn wings. As far as she was concerned, if the little snots couldn’t fly, they deserved to drown. Or better yet, she thought, what would happen if they washed up on Earthquake Island?

The test was going remarkably well. Every single foal had passed. Well, that wasn’t true. There was a single foal that hadn’t gone: the little pink colt. He was standing there, staring down at the edge, one hoof raised tentatively.

“What are you waiting for?” Storm barked. The pink colt cringed.

“I... I...”

“JUMP!” shouted the general. The little pink colt, however, couldn’t do it. He was too frightened and he knew that he wasn’t the strongest flier. “If you won’t jump,” Storm said coldly, “we’ll throw you off.”

One of the soldiers moved. It was the orange one with the black mane who’d been grinning the entire time.

“Eagle,” said the general.

“Yes, sir!” Eagle responded eagerly.

General Storm nodded her head. The pink colt turned his head, frozen in fear as he watched the soldier march up to him.

“Well, squirt?” Eagle said, lowering his head. “What’s the matter? Scared? You know we don’t like cowards...”

“Eagle, just do it,” sighed the general, who really wanted this whole boring test to finish. Eagle lowered his head and put his teeth around the back of the colt’s neck, lifting him off the surface of the cloud. The colt flailed his legs, terrified and struggling to get free as the soldier jerked his head and tossed him over the side of the cloud.

The colt didn’t bother waiting for five seconds. Not like it mattered. He flailed his legs and his wings, but he couldn’t catch the air. He couldn’t recover. He couldn’t fly. Helplessly, he fell down into the cold, uncaring sea.

Clip woke up with a start. He’d had a bad dream. He peered around, clutching at the covers of his bed, peering through the darkness. Everything was silent, save for the sound of breathing.

Cautiously, Clip crept over to the ladder, and carefully climbed down. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw Brother White and Brother Scroll sleeping soundly in the lower bunk. His back hoof touched the floor, and he stood at the side of their bed. Scroll was closest to him.

“Scroll?” he whispered. “Scroll, are you awake?”

“Wuh?” mumbled Scroll as he was prematurely roused from his sleep. “Uhh...” he mumbled, “Clip?”

“I had a bad dream,” said the pink colt. “Can I have a glass of water?”

“Oh...” Scroll yawned, “alright.” With some effort, he sat up. Putting on his glasses and lighting a candle, he got out of bed, and headed for the kitchen. He was still a little groggy, so he found himself in the storage room before he got to the kitchen, but the two ponies got there without any real incident.

Scroll went to the cupboard and got a glass while Clip climbed up onto the counter. Despite the fact that he’d lost his wings, he still showed a proclivity for high places: roofs, the top bunk, etc.

Scroll went to the sink and filled the glass with water. He gave it to the little colt, who, taking it in his hooves, slowly drank from it.

“Feeling better?” asked Scroll.

Clip nodded, his mouth being too full of water to speak.

“Alright, then,” said Scroll, “now...”

“Can I stay up?” asked Clip.

Scroll stopped mid-sentence. “Umm...”

“I mean, if it’s okay...”

Scroll looked around. The room was dim, illuminated only by a single candle. “You know what? Sure,” he said, “just let me get some more candles.”

Clip sat there, drinking his water as Scroll scurried off. A few minutes later, he walked back into the room with several candles in holders, balanced along his head and spine.

Scroll carefully placed the candles along the counter. “Hey, you wanna see something cool?” he asked. Clip nodded. “Okay, gimme the cup,” said Scroll, taking the cup. “Can you get the sugar out of the cupboard?”

“Okay,” said Clip, walking along the counter while Scroll filled the glass with more water. Clip opened the cupboard, quickly finding the bag of sugar and carrying it down to the counter, though not without some difficulty.

“Alright then,” said Scroll, taking a spoon out of the drawer as Clip opened the back of sugar. “Time for a chemistry lesson.”

Scroll began scooping large spoonfuls of sugar into the glass of water. When he was satisfied that there was enough, he stirred the water. “Now,” he said, “sugar dissolves in water, right?”

“Uh-huh,” said Clip.

“When the sugar dissolves in the water, we get what’s called a ‘solution.’” He placed the spoon down, and motioned for Clip to look at the mixture. “You see that?” he said, tapping the bottom of the glass, where there was still some undissolved sugar. “It can’t dissolve that. The solution is *saturated.*”

Clip watched this, interested. He didn’t really know anything about science.

“However,” said Scroll, taking the glass over to the stove and placing it on a pan, “if we heat it up...” He flipped the switch.

“Then what?”

“Well,” said Scroll with an eager grin, “then we wait.” He looked at the colt. “Is there anything you’d like to do? We could play a game, or I could cook something, or I could read to you...”

“Do you have a lot of books?” asked Clip.

“You bet I do!” said Scroll. “Brought a bunch from home. Hopefully my parents send more. Wanna see them?”

“Yeah!” said Clip, climbing down from the counter, as Scroll led back into the bunk room. The two were careful not to wake White, who was still sleeping soundly. Scroll carefully stuck his head under the bunk, and took out a box.

“Let’s go read this in the main room,” he whispered.

Scroll hauled the trunk into the main room, while Clip carried a candle. Scroll gingerly lifted the lid of the trunk as Clip peered inside, seeing all kinds of books.

“Let’s see here...” said Scroll, sorting through the books. “When I got into the Fraternity, I started reading a whole lot of their literature - *The Everlasting Friend, The Rotclop Letters, The*-” He cut himself off, seeing a book that probably shouldn’t have been in there and *definitely* wasn’t something he wanted Clip or anypony else to see. “That’s nothing...” he said, hastily hiding it. Thankfully, the candlelight was so dim it was almost impossible to see his face turning red.

Clip’s eyes, however, fell on something else entirely - rather than the bland, seldom-illustrated covers of books that expounded on philosophy or poetry, he found himself drawn to some smaller books that had much brighter colors depicting exciting scenes. “What’re those?” he asked.

“Huh?” Scroll asked, still hastily putting his other questionable book somewhere out of site. “Oh, those? Those are my comic books.”

“They look cool.”

“They *are* cool,” said a grinning Scroll. He never had anyone to share them with before. “There are a bunch of them. This is *Tales from the Wasteland*, though they’re a bit too violent for-” he stopped, looking at Clip, with his scars and burned flanks. “Well, they’re kinda depressing,” he

said, changing his reasoning. He picked up another comic. “This one is *Picturesque Picaresques*, these ones are funny, this is *Alfred Hitch-Hock Presents, The Incredible Gigatrot*...”

“What’s that?” Clip asked, looking at another one. This one caught his eye - it was a bright, flashy cover that was crowded with about a dozen ponies, but there was one giant pony in the background - a bright gold stallion with both wings and a horn.

STAR HORSE was the title. ***Who*** *is the amazing stallion? You absolutely* ***can not*** *miss this* ***shocking*** *issue in which, for the* ***very first time****, the* ***true identity*** *of this great hero* ***will be revealed!!!***

Scroll smiled. “This is *Star Horse*,” he said, “my favorite superhero.” He took the comic and placed it in front of them, opening it to the first page... which was an advertisement for glow-in-the-dark horseshoes.

“Alright,” said Scroll, turning to the first page of the actual story. “So, a star fell from the sky one day, but this wasn’t an ordinary star - this fallen star contained powerful magic.”

“What did the magic do?” asked Clip. Scroll turned the page, showing the two princesses standing in front of a tiny star.

“Oh, it held the power of a star. It was too powerful to just let anypony take it. They decided they had to guard it and make sure that only the right pony got it.”

“And who was the right pony?”

Scroll turned the page again, and Clip gasped.

“This is Big Scoop. He’s a reporter,” said Scroll, but Clip was amazed - the pony in the comic book had a dark blue coat, a black mane, glasses, a rolled-up Scroll as a cutie mark...

“He looks just like you!”

“Heh...” Scroll laughed. “It’s a funny story, really. Ponies at school, they told me that I looked just like Big Scoop from this comic, so I decided to read an issue, and, well... now I’m a fan.”

“You must have a lot of friends back in Equestria, right?” Clip asked.

Scroll was quiet for a minute, thinking. He thought back to his days in school. He thought about

how bullies made fun of him and stole his lunch money. He thought about how he never got a date to any of the school dances. He thought about how he was always picked last on every team, even for games he wasn't bad at. He looked back at Clip, who looked back up at him, wide-eyed.

"Yes," said Scroll. He took a deep breath. "Hold on," he said, getting up, "I'm gonna check on that glass of water." He left, carrying a candle. Clip sat there, paging through the comic. He couldn't read it, but he saw the bright, colorful pictures of Star Horse bucking out scary-looking bad guys and shooting lasers from his horn. But there was more to it than beating other ponies up - at other points he was talking with an attractive mare, taking her flying.

Scroll returned from the kitchen, carefully balancing the glass of water on his head. "Okay," he said, setting it down. "Now, what do you notice about the water that's different?"

Clip looked at it, tilting his head. "Uhhh..."

"The sugar in the bottom," said Scroll, "has completely dissolved. You see, when the liquid gets hotter, it can dissolve more before it's saturated. Now, we'll leave it to cool down for awhile..."

They returned to the comic book, and Scroll explained what was going on.

There was a simple earth pony, a reporter named Big Scoop. His peers picked on him and teased him, and the one mare he had affections for, Letterary the columnist, regarded him as little more than a dweeb with a crush.

Big Scoop, however, won an award for his investigative journalism that uncovered the criminal activities of a unicorn named Willpower. For this, the princesses chose him to receive the power of the fallen star. Through his journalism, he proved that he was devoted to truth and justice - he had exposed political corruption, crime, vindicated the innocent, and spread truth. This was the pony that could be trusted with the power of the star, and with it, he became Star Horse, tasked with defending Equestria from evil-doers within and without.

But for all the fighting he did, he was never *violent.* He never used dangerous weapons, he never killed anypony, and whenever possible, he'd try to talk down the bad guy before fighting.

Then the next page was an advertisement for *Blooming Balloon Bubble Gum*, which purportedly allowed its chewers to blow bubbles so big they could use them to float.

"Okay," said Scroll, bringing attention back to the glass of sugar-water. "Now, as I mentioned, as the temperature goes up, the water can dissolve more sugar. However, now it's cooled down, but

the sugar is still dissolved."

"Huh," said Clip. "So..."

"The solution is *supersaturated.* That means that it isn't very stable." Scroll lifted a hoof. "So, if it's jostled..." he tapped the glass with his hoof, and in a flash, the suspended sugar crystalized. Clip backed up, startled.

"Woah..." said the colt.

"Cool, right?" asked Scroll, grinning like he'd just gotten a high pinball score.

"If it's unstable, does that mean it's dangerous?"

"Oh, nah," said Scroll, going back to the comic.

Sure enough, Willpower the unicorn was jealous of Star Horse. Will had been a powerful sorcerer, but Star Horse seemed to be getting all the glory. Deciding that Star Horse was the cause of all of his problems, Will swore to bring him down. That was where the issue ended.

"Next issue?" asked Scroll.

"Yeah!" Clip nodded eagerly. He watched as Scroll took out the next issue. "Y'know, you really do look just like him."

"Weeeeeelll," said Scroll, chuckling, "maybe I am Big Scoop." He grinned. "Maybe I secretly *am* Star Horse, and the only reason I let other ponies beat me up is so that Willpower doesn't find who I am. And when you're not looking I'm flying across the stars, fighting to defend Equestria!"

Clip chuckled. Of course, he knew Scroll wasn't really Big Scoop or Star Horse. He knew that couldn't be. Big Scoop was in love with some dumb columnist, but Clip knew that Scroll was in love with Brother White.

"Well, what do we do?" the soldier had asked. "I mean, we can't just let him fly off..."

"Well, then make sure he *doesn't fucking fly off,*" another pony had said. "Now, if you'll kindly fucking excuse me, I have to go do *anything else*."

The colt was scared. He'd just been thrown out of his home, and he couldn't get back - even if he could get back, he wouldn't be welcome. Now he was on an island full of ponies he didn't know and who might've been happy to see him killed. Now he had absolutely no idea what was in his future.

Now he was chained to a table, unable to move. He watched out of the corner of his eye as the earth ponies did... whatever it was they were doing. He didn't know what they were doing, but he knew it wasn't good.

He'd been brought up to hate the "dirts," as the other pegasi had called them: the ponies who wallowed in the mud below. He was now fairly convinced that they were every bit as bad as he'd been told.

They'd found him washed up on the beach. At first they considered shooting him, but now they'd decided on something different. They'd taken him before another pony, a hulking stallion that the colt knew had to be General Quake. The general, however, didn't seem to care, and had just brushed them off.

The air was hot and musty, and the colt was sweating. "What... what are you going to do to me?" he asked timidly. The earth ponies didn't answer him.

"All right," said one of them from a furnace. "Hold him down, make sure he doesn't squirm too much."

The little pink colt was approached by two other ponies, who pressed down on him with their hooves. He wanted to struggle, but he couldn't move. He saw the other pony, the one at the furnace, turn around. In his mouth, he held an iron rod, the end of which was flat and glowing red-hot.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Well, you're a little winger," said the earth pony. "We're just gonna make you 'fit in' a little better."

The colt's eyes went wide as the pony circled around him. He tried harder to struggle, but the more he tried, the more the other two ponies pressed down. He couldn't move a muscle, but he couldn't stop trying; he was starting to panic. He knew something horrible was coming, something he couldn't bear to think was possible. He wasn't sure what he remembered first - the

vicious hiss or the searing pain - as the dirt pressed the red-hot iron against his flank.

“AAH!” the colt screamed. “NO! NO! PLEASE STOP!”

“Shut him up, will you!” barked the pony with the iron. Another pony grabbed the colt’s mouth and held it shut. That didn’t stop the screaming though, it just muffled it, as tears streamed down his face. The earth pony circled around to his other flank. The colt nearly choked on himself as the iron came down on his other flank.

He couldn’t see it, but he knew what was going on: they were burning off his cutie mark. They were erasing the one thing that made him special.

The iron was lifted from his flank, and the other earth ponies released him. He still couldn’t move, due to the chains, but he opened his mouth and gasped for air, crying.

“Oh, quit snivelling, you little shit-wing,” said one of the dirts. Another pony undid a chain around his midsection. “Spread out your wing.”

“Huh?” asked the colt, his eyes shifting.

“Spread out your fucking wing.”

Clip was shaking as he tried to comply, but part of him wanted to hold those wings as close to him as possible and never let go. “Oh, fucking...” the earth pony muttered. The dirt reached over and grabbed his wing, pulling it over so it extended.

“You there, ready?” he asked another earth pony. The colt’s eyes flickered as he saw a bright, silvery glint. Not waiting for him to start trying to struggle, the other earth ponies restrained him again. He saw the pony approaching, carrying a large knife. The colt clamped his eyes shut, wishing to himself that none of this was really happening. The steel blade came down, but it was like ice, unlike the burning iron. It cut right through the joints of his wing, severing it. He tensed up in pain, pulling the stub of the wing away from the knife. His captors forced him to spread his other wing, and the pony with the knife circled around. The colt didn’t even try to struggle any more. It was over. He’d lost one wing, and he’d never fly again. He just whimpered as the knife came down on his remaining wing. Blood was beginning to dry on the table.

One of the earth ponies looked at him. “Quit your snivelling,” he said. “You’re lucky we didn’t throw you right back into the ocean.”

The colt sniffled a little, before gasping again as the knife went into his back. They weren't finished, as there were still the stumps of the wings to remove.

That was what happened the day that Clip came to Earthquake Island. This was the nightmare that Clip had, back to the memory of the day the earth ponies took away his wings and his cutie mark. But this time, for once, the dream ended differently.

There was a loud banging on the door. The earth ponies turned to look in shock, as another bang knocked the door right off of its hinges, flooding the room with a blinding light. The pink colt, however, did not flinch. He saw a magnificent golden stallion regally step into the room, his majestic wings spread. Every step of his was a proud, powerful declamation. The earth ponies gazed at him, letting out a simultaneous shocked gasp. There, standing in the doorway, was Star Horse.

Star Horse looked upon them, his golden horn gleaming and his pristine mane draped flowingly over his neck. Suddenly, the earth pony with the knife charged at him. The stallion retaliated, shooting a spark from his horn that sent the knife flying out of the attacker's mouth and embedded it into a nearby wall. The earth pony looked around stupidly, before Star Horse's horn glowed again, lifting the earth pony into the air and chucking him out a window. He looked at the remaining earth ponies, smiling as though to say "your turn."

Deciding not to take him one at a time, two of the other earth ponies charged at him, armed with nothing. The unicorn's horn glowed again, and the two earth ponies were enveloped in a dull glow. They jerked towards each other, their heads colliding, before they resumed charging. However, the two charged right past him and crashed into the wall behind him.

"You two aren't right in the head," said Star Horse, before looking back at the chained-down colt. He slowly walked up to the table, where the last remaining earth pony was cowering. "Release him," the stallion said softly.

"Huh?" asked the cowering earth pony.

"I told you to let him go."

Trembling, the earth pony undid the chains that held Clip on the table.

"Now get out," said the stallion. The earth pony took the advice, running out a blubbering wreck. Star Horse looked at the pink colt, a kind smile on his face. "All right," he said, "let's get you out of here."

“I’m going with you?” The pink colt stood up slowly. He was weak, and his back was caked with blood.

“You sure are,” said Star Horse, turning around. “Climb on my back.” Timidly, the colt walked onto the stallion’s back. “Hold on...”

“Huh?”

A blast from the unicorn’s horn blew the roof clean off of the building, and he leaped into the air, his wings spread. The colt looked down as they left behind the awful building, and the filthy town and the whole miserable island seemed to shrink beneath them as they soared into the sky.

“Do I...” the colt asked, “do I have to go back to the Stormcloud?”

“No,” said Star Horse, “I’ll take you far away from here. I’ll take you up to Equestria, and there you’ll see Canterlot and the princesses. Then I’ll take you flying along the stars and you’ll see everything you’ve ever imagined. And then when we’re all done with that, I’ll take you home and you can meet my husband.”