

Chapter 2: A Game of Tag

Lightning showed up to the game late. The first quarter was almost over by the time she cobbled together enough tufts of cloud to build a comfortable vantage point. Even then, the unexpectedly clear skies yielded little more than a fluffy white lawn chair. The game was entertaining enough, but by the time the referee blew his whistle to announce the two minute warning, Gilda still hadn't showed up. The game had gotten very close, down the home stretch. A touchdown would tie it, and the extra point would win it. As the clock slowly winded down, the line of scrimmage marched down the field at a comparable pace. Finally, it was fourth and goal at the 4 yard line. Baltimore had just used its last timeout, and the next play would likely decide the outcome of the game.

"Think fast!" a raspy voice startled Lightning; she wheeled around just in time to see a hoofball hurtling towards her face. She flinched and reflexively threw her hooves out to catch it. The split-second warning was not enough time, and instead of catching it, she accidentally deflected it over her head, towards the players as they settled into a three point stance.

"Uh...oh." Gilda groaned apprehensively while the two watched the ball tumble towards the field.

Several hundred feet below them, the Baltimore quarterback called an audible: "GREEN 26, GREEN 26, HUT!" The center, an enormous buffalo, snapped the ball. With a loud '*poomf!*', Gilda's errant hoofball bounced off his massive helmet. Chaos engulfed the field as the defenders grappled for Gilda's ball, thinking it was a botched pass attempt. Meanwhile, the quarter launched the actual hoofball over the mass of bucking and brawling players. It sailed past the end zone, overshot the straining hooves of its intended target, and pelted a photographer in the gut. Whistles screamed and penalty flags flew from every direction. A frantically waving line judge was bowled over by a hopelessly off-sides wide receiver. Lightning watched in sheer terror as the entire stadium jumped to their hooves, cheering, booing and shouting obscenities. The dust gradually settled, and the referee held up the smoking gun: a hoofball that was clearly not approved for league use. One by one the players, officials and fans turned their eyes skyward.

"Gil?" the pegasus whispered, her eyes wide in horror as she peered down at the unfolding spectacle.

"Yeah?" her equally horrified friend whispered back.

A bead of nervous sweat rolled down Lightning's nose and she crouched down in a vain effort to hide behind her tiny cloud. "Let's get the buck out of here!"

A full half hour later, Lightning's heart rate began to return to normal. The pair had probably

broken a record or two in their panicked flight away from the 60,000 furious sports fans. With Lightning hot on her trail, Gilda had instinctively flown to what was familiar: a rocky outcrop overlooking a bend in the river where she had been fishing in recent weeks. For several long moments, the two troublemakers tried to control their rapid breathing, and nervously watched the skies for any sign of a pursuing lynch mob.

"I think..." Gilda said between deep breaths. "I think we were too high up for any of them to get a good look at us."

Lightning looked at her, eyes wide in alarm. "What were you *thinking?!'*" she hissed. "Gravity. Ever heard of it?"

Gilda shrugged and preened one of her primary remiges, meticulously cleaning and straightening out one of the long, radiant feathers along the trailing edge of her wingtip. The griffon paused her grooming just long enough to absent-mindedly quip "I should do that again at the Superbowl...but only after making some kind of bet."

The pegasus groaned in exasperation and smacked her hoof against her forehead. In a moment of clarity, she felt a blaze of pride, followed immediately by a souring twinge of hypocrisy. *Is this how Dash felt when I was pushing her too hard, and for the wrong reasons?* She shook the thought away, sighed wearily, and looked around. The rocky outcrop provided shelter from the recent snowfall, and the two stood in what was probably the only bare patch of earth near the river bank. Near the back of the alcove there was a clump of charcoal and ash, circled by small stones. Near the campfire remains was a lean-to made of pine saplings, grass and the occasional brown feather. It wasn't much, but it looked like a cozy enough place to rest after a long day of fishing.

"I hope you weren't expecting the Mareyott" Gilda said, straightening the last of her feathers. "This is where I've been holed up for the past week. Nobody knows about it except me."

"You missed almost the entire game." Lightning mused, still looking around the camp site.

The griffon flapped her wings a few times, then folded them along her back. "I told you before, I have a lot of stuff going on." Lightning narrowed her eyes at her, not convinced. Gilda gestured to the river in front of them and continued. "The fishing is out of this world. You can see them right now." The annoyed pegasus shifted her gaze to the water, and was surprised to discover that she could plainly see a plethora of fish just below the surface. Peering down at the sparkling current, she shot a sideways glance over at the griffon. "So you were stuffing yourself all day?" she accused, only half jokingly

Gilda laughed and replied "No, dummy. I sell most of the fish I catch. Besides" -- she ran a clawed hand through the feathers on her head and struck a ridiculous runway model pose -- "I have a fabulous figure to maintain." At this, Lightning couldn't hold back a chuckle.

With a final glance to the peaceful, lynch-mob-free sky, the mare conceded “well, I guess the officials probably just had them redo the play, and no real harm was done.”

Lightning arched her back, stretched out her fore legs and splayed out her wings, getting in a good stretch after their exhausting departure from the hoofball game. Right in the middle of her stretch, Gilda darted to the edge of the outcrop. “Hey!” Gilda said, her eyes focused on a spot on the far river bank. Lightning froze, suddenly afraid that they hadn’t escape the mob after all.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a snack shack over there, and we’re not at it. That’s what’s wrong.”

Still frozen in the middle of her stretch, the pegasus’s ears drooped and her expression said *‘are you kidding me?’*

“Ugh.” Gilda groaned, leaning back against a large boulder. “I’m pretty sure funnel cakes only come in two sizes”

Lightning chuckled and offered “Huge and grotesque?”

The pair laughed and looked down at the paper plate between them, which was covered in powdered sugar and streaks of whipped cream.

“C’mon, let’s see what else is going on.” the mare suggested enthusiastically. With some effort, her friend followed her past a row of vendors. Gilda looked around, wondering how anypony had set up some kind of county fair going on so close to her fishing grounds without her noticing it sooner. Fairs weren’t really her thing, but Lightning really seemed to be enjoying it.

“Oh sweet!” Gilda looked over to see what her friend had found. A bored-looking mule was sitting at an equipment rental booth near the water’s edge. His name tag read ‘Earl’, and he barely looked up when the two customers arrived.

“Ever been snorkling?” the pegasus asked her friend.

Gilda flinched. “I, uh...even when I’m fishing, I’m more of an ‘above the water’ kind of gal.” Lightning continued to study the various goggles, snorkles and flippers. The griffon was about to lose interest entirely when she saw something that stopped her in her tracks.

“Did you hear me? I said I don’t think anypony sells lawn darts any...” the pegasus trailed off when she saw what had captivated Gilda’s attention.

In a flat monotone, Earl the cashier muddled through his standard, management-dictated sales pitch: "so, all equipment deposits will be returned to the renter if they return all equipment in its original working condition, before 5 PM on the day of rental, weather notwithsta--"

"Yeah, yeah, got it" Gilda cut him off. "Let's go!" she called to Lightning, as the two grabbed their newly rented goods and darted into the air. "This is how we do this: golden bullet rules."

Lightning narrowed her eyes, and her lips curled into a fierce grin. "You mean *real* golden bullet rules: the first one with even a drop of water on them is the loser." Gilda cackled maniacally and double-checked the water levels on her pair of plastic water-shooting pistols. She relaxed and then tightened her claws, trigger fingers resting on the edge of the trigger guards. What they lacked in range and firepower, they made up for in speed, rate of fire and unpredictability. She narrowed her eyes at her foe.

The fiercely competitive pegasus met her nemesis's defiant gaze, and slowly brought to bear the formidable device she had picked out: the Mondo-Blaster. It was a massive cannon with a barrel nearly as long as her leg, a water reservoir topped off with 2 liters of frigid river water, and a pressure accumulator to give a tremendously long reach to her shots. Brute force, volume and range would be her asset in this contest.

The sun glinted off a single water droplet as it fell from the business end of the Mondo-Blaster. A gentle breeze rustled through the feathers along the back of the griffon's neck. The two warriors hovered before each other, their weapons primed and their thirst for victory palpable.

"Let's do this." Lightning snarled through a smile she couldn't suppress. In the distance, an eagle screeched, its battle cry echoing through some vast canyon. As if on cue, the fearsome pair erupted into a flurry of dives, rolls, loops and strafing runs. Feathers, hooves, claws and teeth tore through the air. Like lasers, the bursts of firepower cut through the air in a ravenous hunt for warm flesh. As the two combatants closed in on each other, Lightning sensed that they would be too close for her massive weapon to be as effective. Rapidly closing the gap, she rammed her shoulder into the griffon's chest. With an angry grunt, Gilda lost her balance and fell into a spin. Using this momentary distraction, the pegasus darted behind the cover of a small cloud nearby.

Splaying her wings out, the griffon halted the spinning, then pulled up hard to recover from the dive. With her eyes practically burning across the skies, she sought out her prey. It was to no avail, but her powerful prey drive was not deterred. Seizing the opportunity to reload, she darted behind a boulder near the water's edge. Keeping her eyes peeled for her adversary, Gilda refilled her pistols, sealed the cap and crawled behind some more rocks for better cover.

Hunkered down behind a tiny cumulus, Lightning forced her breathing to slow, and listened for any hint of her target's movement. Nothing. She slowly rolled towards the edge and peeked down at the riverbank below. Her timing appeared to be perfect, and she just caught the fleeting glimpse of a lioness' tail disappear behind some rocks. Gritting her teeth in determination, she took up a position behind the bulkiest part of the cloud and cocked the pump-action handle on her massive weapon. With each pump, more and more air filled the accumulator, lending a staggering range to her next shot. Once she was satisfied that she could hit her target, she rolled back over to the edge and prepared to take aim.

Like bits of shrapnel, tiny shards of water tore through Lightning's cloud. Instantly realizing that she'd been flanked, the pegasus forced every bit of energy to mounting a tactical retreat. Diving through her own cloud, she shot straight down towards the water. Her plan worked remarkably well: by diving as fast as she could, she actually accelerated to a speed faster than the ammunition pursuing her. Just before impacting the surface, she pulled up as hard as she could. G-force strained her every feather, and exacted agonizing pain from her bones and tendons. She cried out in defiance, pulling straight and level just above the icy current. Behind her, Gilda's volley splashed down with a harmless pattering sound.

The sports equipment mule and the funnel cake stallion stared skyward, dumbfounded.

"Earl?"

"Yup?"

Each of them raised a hoof to shield their eyes from the afternoon sun. A teal pegasus wailed melodramatically as she flew in circles, dodging little squirts of water. Above her, the griffon seemed more interested in perfecting her cartoon villain laugh than actually hitting her target.

"Are they on drugs, Earl?"

"Buck if I know."

Silence.

"Hey, want some leftover funnel cake?"

"Ooh, you know it!"

With that, they forgot all about the aerobatic goofiness unfolding above.

Gilda held her pistols at chest-level, her back pressed against a cloud. Her attempt to plan the next move was cut short as a furious stream of firepower tore her fortress in half. It missed her head by mere inches, and forced her to abandon that vantage point. Firing blindly over her shoulder, she circled back around to outflank her attacker.

Screaming bloody murder, and pumping the handle on the Mondo-Blaster, Lightning sent a continuous stream of liquid vengeance at her rapidly maneuvering foe. Losing her behind another cloud bank, the pegasus took the opportunity to set up for another sniping attempt. Finding the highest cloud in the area, she quickly secured a nest with a 360 degree view.

Silence.

Lightning swallowed hard, her eyes darting from cloud to cloud, and rock to rock, searching for any sign of movement. Finally, her patience paid off. At a distance of nearly a hoofball field, she spotted a single brown feather tip and the muzzle of a water pistol poking out from behind a cloud. Slowly pumping the handle for maximum range, she took aim at a spot on the cloud where her target's head would be concealed. She took a deep breath, slowly let it out, steadied her grip and listened to her own heartbeat. With the discipline and focus of a trained assassin, she willed her respiration and heart rate down to an optimal level. She exhaled one more time and squinted down the bore sight of her weapon. At that perfect instant between heart beats, she squeezed the trigger.