

Brotherhood of the Moon

Chapter 17

As dim streaks of sunlight pierced through the window of the hazy room, Firefly's mind slowly awakened back into the world. It was eager to move, go explore and inquire, but her body was still accustomed to sleep, and refused to budge. The best it could do was to slowly wave her eyelids open and try to at least get a glimpse of where she was. To her surprise, she was no longer outside on the Trottingham battlefield, but instead in a small room with limited lighting from the outside. She was currently lying down in a very comfortable bed, though she could feel some wet spots where her wounds had bled slightly into the covers. Beside her was a small table with a roll of bandage tape and a glass of water, and there was also a chair in the far right corner of the room, though something that she couldn't quite make out in the low light atmosphere was occupying it.

The thing was yellow, draped over the chair like a coat, but seemed to have some substance to it, like the coat had been flung over on top of something in the chair to cover it. Firefly thought she even saw a glimpse of grey under the yellow covering. She sat up in her bed to try and get a better look at the thing, but she still had no idea what it was. She almost thought she could see the thing pulsate up and down like a heartbeat, but she decided that must just be her tired eyes playing tricks on her.

And then it moved.

At the sight of Firefly's awakening, the yellow and grey mass flung itself at her and began to sob horribly. It took Firefly a few moments to realize the enigma was a pony, but she didn't recognize her at all. Or did she...

"Oh Firefly..." the pony cried. "I can't believe it, it's horrible! The worst thing ever!"

There was no way, the voice was similar, but this pony looked nothing like her.

"...Sur...prise?" Firefly sleepily muttered. The pegasus did have a white coat and yellow mane, and her leather armor was identical to the mercenary she knew, but there was *no way* this pony was the giddy white pegasus assassin. He coat was a dull grey, and her mane a lifeless and muted yellow. Both her tail and her mane had no substance to them, and drooped over her head like a boring and pathetic drape. How could this be Surprise? What happened to the pony that made her entire being look so...sad?

"Now, now, calm down." Firefly comforted the pony as she continually poured a sea of depression onto her lap. The melancholy pony gradually reduced her weeping in response and wiped her nose a bit to speak more clearly, though it was obvious she was biting back tears.

"Oh Firefly...it's just...just awful!" she sniffed. "The doctor said... they told me you...h-he...." As her sentences grew more and more broken, she finally broke out into a river of tears once again.

Now Firefly was worried. She was very tired of course, but it had only now occurred to her that she might have sustained an injury from the explosion, and Surprise's dramatic change in mood led her to believe it may be quite serious. She thought to stretch out her limbs, try to see what parts she could still feel, but doing so might make her injury even worse. She reached under her bed sheets to pull them up and inspect herself for any large wounds, but her forelegs refused to remove the covering out of fear for what she might see.

"Surprise!" Firefly yelled, shaking the weeping pony into coherence. "What did the doctor say?" Panic filled her voice as she shouted. Surprise tried her best to speak, but she found it hard to speak through her uncontrollable tears.

"He said...said...."

"What did he say!?" Firefly demanded, expecting the worst.

"It's...your wing!" she sniffled. "It was hurt really badly. The doctor said...he said you might never fly again!"

Firefly released a heavy sigh of relief. Calm embraced her mind once again.

All the while, Surprise bit back tears, though her face turned from one of mourning to one of utter confusion at the sign of Firefly's relief. She was taking the news pretty well; Surprise might as well have just told a unicorn he'd lost his horn, or a zebra they were now forbidden from speaking rhyming pentameter.

"B-But...your wing...." Surprise began.

"Oh don't worry about that." Firefly said, waving away her worries. "My wing has been like that for a long time, I've come to terms with it already." a hint of longing lingered on the edge of her tone as she finished.

"So...you're okay?" Surprise whimpered.

"Yes, I'm perfectly okay." Firefly asserted.

Tears welled up in the white ponies eyes once again, but as her smile grew larger it became clear these were tears of joy and relief. As her happiness reached its climax, her coat suddenly washed itself clean of any greyness and her mane exploded into the golden bundle Firefly had grown accustomed too, reverting the party pegasus back into the energetic mercenary she was before. She locked Firefly into a deathly grip of a hug and let out all her depression in a tight squeeze.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so happy you're okay then! You were almost hit back there, and then we found you sleeping, but you weren't sleeping! And you wouldn't wake up when we blew the loudest horns we had and yelled and shouted, but you still would move, it was like you were asleep forever or..." The gush of emotion hit Firefly like a waterfall, and came out of the white pony's mouth just as quickly. She mashed all her relief into one continuous thought as she spewed her stream of consciousness without restriction.

Firefly winced in pain. "Ok...ay...Surprise...you can...loosen...up!" she said through grunts of breath as she tried to push oxygen into her lungs through the choke point.

Once her welling flow of rejoice had run dry, Surprise finally released her friend from her embrace and picked up something from the chair she'd been sitting on. She placed Firefly's hidden blade on the table beside her and laid out her white and crimson robes, freshly washed and tailored free of any rips or tears. She delightfully encouraged the pegasus to get herself dressed and show everyone her stable condition. Though getting out of bed was a bit painful at first, a quick sniff of some medicinal salts and Firefly was numb enough to put on her attire. She stretched out her legs and wings a bit, checking for any sore areas that hadn't been silenced by the salts, and proceeded to follow her bubbly companion out the door.

"You know, I'm still really confused by yesterday." Surprise said casually as they walked. "Almost all of the soldiers on the front lines were ponies. But the Griffons are the bad guys! Why would all those ponies be helping them?" The whole situation clearly puzzled and distressed her.

"Maybe they were paid?" Firefly suggested. She felt like she should have been more surprised by the prospect of ponies aiding foreign invaders, but after all she'd been through it honestly didn't surprise her much.

"But that's the weirdest thing!" Surprise exclaimed. "These weren't just any ponies; these were League of Pegasai members!"

Now that *was* surprising. It would have taken a whole lot of convincing to make them kill their own allies, and of all the ponies to betray their kind, Firefly would have suspected her assassin brothers last.

"So, I guess we found all those lost soldiers huh." Firefly said as she processed the information. "Did you guys manage to capture any of these traitors?" Surprise shook her head no.

"We have no idea why they're like that, no idea how many more there are, and no idea when they'll strike next. I just don't know what we should do!" the mercenary cried solemnly.

"Good. 'Cuz I do." Firefly said as she opened the door in front of her and walked inside the tactical offices of the League of Pegasai. Surprise hadn't even noticed they had been walking toward them, or more specifically, that Firefly had been leading her towards them.

Inside the office was a massacre of papers. Sheets and tables and records were stuffed and stacked on every surface available, including a good portion of the floor. Lines and grids of battle tactics and war strategies cluttered the pages, and sketchy lines of a long-broken quill pen vandalized the pages with crude notes and thoughts not fully legible. The sound of papers shifting filled whatever space was left in the room, as Pip flipped through a packet on his desk with one hoof holding his forehead and a scowl on his face.

Firefly approached as gently as she could, she quietly closed the door behind Surprise as she entered, and stepped carefully up to the desk. She muddled over in her mind to find the best way to approach the obviously work-abused stallion, before finally opening her mouth to speak, and-

"Buck!" The spotted colt shouted, tossing his handful of papers into the air and burying his face in his hooves. Firefly and Surprise jumped back at the sudden interjection, and for a moment the pink pegasus considered leaving and returning at a later time. But no, this matter was too important. It couldn't wait.

"Look, Pip," she began.

"I can't believe it; it just doesn't make any bloody sense!" Pip proclaimed, suddenly on his hooves. "As if it weren't bad enough that we're fighting ponies now, they're all ponies we've known! All of them League members, still have their patch an' everything. How do you expect me to stab a guy I had drinks with last week?" His face was wild; the matter had obviously stressed him to his breaking point.

"Pip," Firefly consoled. "I get it, but you have to-"

"And that's not even the best part, oh no, the buckin' fellas still know our tactics an' everythin'!" Pip interrupted. "It's already a buckin' pain in the flank to fight these griffon wankers, now they know how to counter everything we do that wasn't taught in the last six weeks!"

"Pip, just let me-" Firefly attempted again, to no avail.

"And to top it all off like lemon frosting on an open wound," Surprise began to water at the mouth at the mention of pastry sweets. "As far as we can tell every single one of 'em just snapped, or really buckin' hates us!" He emphasized the point as far as his tone would allow. "We've had every single able bodied unicorn sweep the bastards full over, and there's absolutely no sign of magic-induced influence at all, no drugs in their system, absolutely no type of control at all. From what we can tell they all betrayed us on their own buckin' merit." His fiery energy seemed to suddenly extinguish, and Pip fell back to his seat with his head rested on his under-hooves. "I just...don't get it." he whimpered.

"Alright look, Pip," Firefly finally asserted. "What happened on the battlefield was a tactical disaster and a mystery. You don't have much time to fight back, but I can help you fix this if you just trust me!" Pip gave Firefly a puzzled look before it dawned on him.

"Oh no, I already told you-"

"Pip, you have no idea how to fight back, you lose tons of soldiers when you face these guys, they know all your weaknesses, and don't show any mercy at all. This isn't just the League or Trottingham at stake anymore! If these griffons have all this power, all of Equestria could be in danger! You have to let me do this, it's the only way we're gonna finish this favorably."

For a long time, no one spoke. Firefly and Pip simply stared into each other's eyes, their minds assaulting each other with subliminal arguments. Surprise began to feel very out of place in the room; no one was speaking, or moving, or doing much of anything at all. The two ponies simply glared each other down, with no clear indication of who was winning the silent debate.

After what seemed like hours, Pip broke away with a heavy sigh. Firefly had to keep herself from smiling in victory.

"You're right Firefly...I really, *really* don't want to admit it, but this is our only chance." Pip admitted.

"So you're going to send me in to spy?" Firefly asked.

"Yes, I guess I am." Pip confirmed.

"Wait what? Spying?!" Surprise added, lost in regards to what was going on.

Pip groggily got up from his chair, massaged his temples a bit, cursed once more under his breath, and made his way out from behind the door.

"Follow me." was all he said, and he led the two pegasai out of his office.

The League of Pegasai had a huge arsenal, contrary to their small size. A huge basement lied buried underneath the building, and nearly all of its space was occupied by some sort of blade, firearm, arcane medium, or explosive. The walls were lined with racks of various rifles, claymores, rapiers, staffs, and halberds. At times it almost seemed like the interior designer of the room had run out of wallpaper and had tried to use spare weapons instead.

Firefly was amazed by all the firepower in the room; it was enough to supply an army many times over. She even encountered weapons she'd never seen before, such as a group of what looked like golden buzz saws tied to string.

"Oh, those are something we picked up from an Elk merchant from the Far East." Pip explained. "They're called 'chakras', unicorns can float them around and use them to defend like a shield, or attack like a yo-yo." Pip explained another weapon, a pair of boots, with sharp metal claws on the front so that pegasai could attack like griffons. The intricacies of some of the weapons seemed almost unreal.

"Ah, here it is." Pip said. He took a small chest off a shelf on the wall and stuffed it in a sack on his belt. Curious, Firefly removed another, similar chest and opened it up.

Inside the velvet lined box was a familiar device: an Assassin Brotherhood hidden blade & hoof brace. The polished metal face of the weapon was engraved with beautifully intricate waves and curves surrounding a stylized assassin insignia. On the inside of the brace, Firefly could see small springs, latches, and other such mechanisms for retracting and extending the knife at the users will. The blade's inner pieces looked too small for even magic

to handle with. She suddenly was struck with a realization of just how fragile her signature weapon really was.

"Heh, you think *that's* something," Pip said, taking note of Firefly's interest. "Just wait 'till you see *this*." The stallion motioned to the sack he'd just collected, but gave no further insight, successfully piquing the mare's curiosity to high degrees.

Later on, Pip and Firefly went out behind the League building to a small shed far away from anything else. An interestingly green smoke periodically puffed out of its chimney, and it generally looked out of place. Regardless, the assassin followed her guide as he approached the shack.

Pip knocked on the door as he reached the shed. The door, free of any visible latch besides a currently unfastened padlock, swung creakily open as his hoof struck its surface.

"Hello? You in here Skyswirl?" Pip announced as he stood in the doorway.

"Ah! Just the pony I wanted to see!" A hunched over unicorn called back at the sound of his voice. He lifted away from a cauldron of sickly and slightly glowing green liquid and levitated a box bound in brown paper and twine over to the stallion's waiting back. "I assume you're here for this?" he asked rhetorically.

"Thank you Sky, I'll be sure to pay you back at some point." Pip replied.

"Oh, don't think about!" The unicorn said waving his hoof. "Consider this one 'on the house'."

"Well I'll be seeing you then." Pip said, leaving.

"Have a good day Pip!" the pony called back, returning to his brew.

"So...what's in the box?" Firefly asked as Pip returned.

"This is just the last thing you'll need for your mission: a disguise potion." As Pip said this, he walked over to a low tree stump and laid the box on it. Carefully prying open the lid, he reached into the thick cloud of wood shavings and straw and pulled out a fragile looking glass flask filled with a swirling blue liquid. It was a deep, almost black color, and flowed with the consistency of water. He swished the flask around a bit and observed the miniature whirlpools and tides that spun inside while holding it up to the light. When it seemed he was satisfied with the liquid's inspection, he passed the concoction to Firefly's waiting hooves.

"This is called a 'Form-Fake Potion'." Pip explained as his companion viewed the brew from every angle she could. "It's not actually done yet, but I purposefully asked that alchemist friend of mine to leave it unfinished. What you're going to want to do is find a griffon guard, any guard really, and get one of his feathers. Dip the feather into the potion until it changes color, and *then* you drink it."

"A feather?" Firefly asked. "It'll be kinda hard to do that without them noticing, don't you think?"

"Well, ideally you should kill them first." Pip said. "Without anyone else noticing, and then do that. I for assume an assassin like you that's no problem at all, right?" he chuckled a bit.

"You kidding?" She retorted, now confident in her usage of the potion. "I could do it in my sleep."

"Maybe if you're lucky, you can do it in *their* sleep, but that's for later." Pip said, returning to his previous topic. "Once you drink it, an illusion spell should be cast that will make you look exactly like the griffon whose feather you took. Just his naked body, but you can take his armor after that. If no one finds the body, you'll be good."

Firefly smiled, at the thought. This was going to be too simple.

"Now, about the potion," Pip explained further. "It will only hide your appearance, so you'll still have to act the part; you can't just go wherever and do whatever you feel. Don't raise any suspicions; griffons aren't beyond suspecting their own."

"Got it." Firefly replied with a nod. Pip returned the gesture of understanding and reached to his side for the bag he'd collected earlier.

"Now, you obviously won't be able to bring any weapons besides the one the guard had, so your hidden blade will have to stay behind." he said as he fumbled with the pull string of the bag.

"Wait, I can't bring my blade?" Firefly asked.

"No, it will be *way* too obvious, but I figured you might want to be able to dispatch enemies in a way you're so familiar with. Luckily, I had this sitting around."

As Pip pulled the object out of the bag, Firefly's eyes widened in awe. It was an intricate piece of metal working, looked like some sort of short tube, and shaped to look like it was made of bronze feathers. Its detail was extraordinary, so much so the assassin second guessed herself numerous times as to whether or not the brace was made of metal, or just elegantly colored feathers.

"Wha...what is that?" Firefly wondered.

"This used to be a ceremonial brace used in 'rite of passage' rituals for griffons. A beautiful piece of work, but I had it equipped with something special a while back.

Pip donned the brace quickly and stretched it out to Firefly. Without warning he shifted his wrist, ejecting a spring loaded piece of metal that also looked suspiciously like a feather. Firefly was stunned with the surprise she'd felt the first time she'd seen a hidden blade work.

"..Is that-"

"Yes it is." Pip finished. "It's nowhere near as durable as your blade, so don't even think about using it in battle, but I figured it was better than nothing. It should blend in on your new griffon talons just perfectly."

Firefly excitedly took the blade and strapped it on. She tried extending and retracting a few times, the blade wasn't as smooth as hers and made very scratchy noises as if it didn't fit correctly, but it was an ample price to pay for it's marvelous beauty and devious subtly.

"This is amazing! Thank you!" Firefly said excitedly.

"Ha, you should see some of the other fun toys we have down here." Pip said with a laugh. However, his expression suddenly took a grim turn and he wore a stern frown. "There is one more thing," he said simply. "It's something I've been saving for a bad day, but I hope you don't have to use it." He reached into his saddlebags once more and pulled out a small vial or smoky liquid on a string.

Cautiously he gave the item to Firefly to hold, careful to secure it in her grasp before letting go. "It's a potion called 'Windigoe's Breath'," he said before she could ask anything. "It's a splash type potion, meaning you pour it on yourself instead of drinking it. It grants a limited period of invisibility and intangibility to anything less than a foot thick. Should things begin to turn sour, this should be your last way out."

Firefly inspected the vial carefully before instinctively hanging it around her neck. It made a nice accessory, but Pip's attitude gave her a sense if something wrong.

"So, why-"

"Now listen to me carefully Firefly, because this is very important." He said preemptively. "This potion has a very powerful usage, but it also has dangerous side effects. At all costs, you must stay away from getting wet while using it. Water, mud, fruit juice, it doesn't matter what; if it's liquid, stay *away* from it.

"Why?" Firefly asked, a bit worried at the finality of his tone of voice.

"I don't know exactly why, I just bought the potion, didn't make it. But I can assure you of this, if you do get wet, the results will be *fatal*."

Fatal. The word echoed in her mind. Firefly was a courageous mare, she always had been, but this was a relatively new fear to her. She'd felt it before, but never in a situation like this where she could properly ponder its meaning. This mission, this potion, was fatal. They could kill her. She could die, never to come back, never to see anyone again, never to finish all that she had started.

She could be gone. Forever.

Usually it helped to run. Something about the act of breaking the boundaries, overcoming the obstacles, disregarding the guards' cries for her to cease and continuing to go where common ponies didn't tread, it usually helped relieve Firefly from any negative feelings she had. She'd forget the world, forget everything, her consciousness would be reduced to just her and the roof tiles. But today, as the fallen pegasus jumped along the top of

Trottingham in a blur of white pink and red, there was just too much to handle. It didn't help.

Firefly forced herself to stop on a perch at the top of a temple. Her mind was drowned in thoughts: the foreboding of Golden Shield's dying words, the mystery behind the Templars' plot, the pain of abandoning Twilight time and time again, the reality of her possible death in the upcoming mission. She felt lost, alone in a world of questions without answers.

It was a feeling Dash could easily relate to.

There was however something that wasn't there, something missing from her usual array of emotions. She'd taken the chance to kill Gilded Sword, and she'd failed. She didn't avenge her parents like she wished to. She'd messed up a prime opportunity, and the worst of it all was, there was no one to comfort her. The Apples had provided adequate moral support in Canterlot, but at this moment her friends were either occupied elsewhere or too far away. She felt down and she didn't have anyone to turn to and rely on like before, no Applejack, no Posey, no Surprise, no Nightingale....

She realized now, that for the first time since her parents' death...she missed them. Really missed them. A lot.

She began to reminisce about younger days, charting constellations on a hill, baking pies with her mother, learning how to fly for the first time. Before the memories got too vivid, a reflex of emotional pain cut her off, thrusting her attention elsewhere.

Once the sun set she'd leave Trottingham and venture out into the wilderness of Griffon territory. She had all day to spend until then, but what was she to do? Just another question to add to her ever expanding collection.

She felt a small sound strike her ears, and momentarily snapped out of her muddle. A trumpet had been blown from a large estate a bit away. It was a large estate, a really large one. Larger enough that it had to be important, or perhaps, house someone important.

Like, the Chancellor.

Her mind flicked back to the scroll and the Templars. She was too afraid to approach before due to the pink unicorn, but it was unlikely she'd run into her inside the large manor. And she had all day to waste anyway....

Yes, that's what she would do. The answers were out there, and if they didn't turn up by chance, then she was going to go find them. Perhaps the scroll would reveal everything, perhaps it would only spawn more questions, perhaps it wouldn't be relevant at all. She wouldn't know until she tried, and she was tired of not knowing.

She was going to enter the manor, sneak her way to its inner chambers, and find out for herself what really was going on.

With a flap of wind and a swift movement, the pony could no longer be seen.