

I stepped off the airship on to Serenity's dockyard. The docks reeked of coal and oil, and the walls were stained with grime, so far from the more luxurious docking stations for passenger ships. I looked around, blinking in the light of high-powered work lamps; it was still early in the morning and the sun hadn't quite yet made its way up to the city.

"Last stop, kid," the blimp's captain said with an Appleoosan drawl. His brown duster, a few shades darker than he was, flapped in the wind as he stepped off his ship. "You got the bits?"

"Not exactly..." I said. Before he could object, I added, "But I *do* have them, just not on me." I'd convinced the captain to let me ride in his cargo bay up to Serenity in return for a generous sum of money; which I now had to convince him would be given to him on the *Chronicler's* account. I hadn't really had much of a choice at the time: his ship had been the last one in dock and the passenger blimps didn't start running for hours.

"Is that so?" he said. "Then just how am I supposed to get paid if I let you off my ship?"

I looked around before grabbing a clipboard that was hanging from a nearby wooden post. On it was the schedule for incoming and outgoing cargo dirigibles. I held a grubby pencil attached to the clipboard in my mouth and quickly scribbled down the *Chronicler's* address.

I spat out the pencil. "Here," I said, hoofing the clipboard to him. "Go to that address and ask to speak to Mr. Vision: he'll have your money."

A burly, gray stallion ambled up beside the captain. "We're not getting paid?". He stepped forward menacingly. "Do you need me to 'persuade' her, Mal?"

Mal shoved the stallion with one hoof and said, "We're not having any of that, not on my ship." The blue-maned stallion just rolled his eyes and walked off. "And call me Captain around the passengers!" Mal shouted after him.

He turned back to me. "Here's how it is," he said, tucking the slip of paper into one of many pockets on his duster. "I don't want to cause any trouble, so I'll hold you to your word." Mal turned around and walked back into his ship. "Don't make me regret it," he called back.

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I looked back one last time at the rickety airship before walking into the dockyard proper. At such an early hour, most of the ships coming and going from Serenity were the smaller, private boats. The crews, with nothing better to do while the dockworkers unloaded their cargo, concentrated around a group of buildings haphazardly built in the middle of the landing platforms.

The perimeter of the larger buildings were clogged with ponies hawking their goods from a

variety of stalls. I hadn't spotted any signs that could point me in the direction I needed to go, so I tried asking some of the vendors. The ones with customers brushed me off when it was clear I wasn't going to buy anything.

I groaned and rubbed my head in frustration: my plan wasn't going to work if I couldn't find where I was supposed to go. I looked around the shops one more time, and spotted a carrot stand that was empty except for its owner. I trotted over, hoping that I could get directions without her being distracted with customers.

"Hi," I said.

The bright-orange mare running the stand had been laying her head on one hoof, but sat up quickly as I approached. "Why hello there," she said brightly. "Would you like to buy anything?"

I coughed and shook my head. "Well, uh, no," I said. "I was actually wondering if you could give me directions?"

Her face fell, and she sighed wearily. "Where to?" she said.

"The Weather Corps Barracks," I said.

While riding in the damp, dark cargo bay of an airship on my way to Serenity, I had realized that I had no idea what I was going to do. My plan up to that point had consisted of confronting Lightning, a griffin twice my size, alone, and over charges of bribery and treason: not the best idea in the world. So, I had decided to recruit Starshine to my cause.

The mare with the carrot stand turned around and pointed across the marketplace square, down one of the larger side streets. "The Barracks are near the end of that street; it's the building with the clouds around it, you can't miss it."

"Thanks," I said. I turned and started to walk off, but she stopped me.

"Wait!" she said. "Would you like a carrot for the road?" She held up one of the vegetables to my face.

I looked down at the carrot in her hoof, and recoiled at the sight. The vegetables were obviously past their prime, and already starting to rot. "Where did you get these?" I asked.

"A deliverypony comes by every morning," she said. "Why? Is something wrong?"

For once, it was my turn to look at somepony else funny. "They're too ripe," I said. To prove my point, I took the carrot and dropped it onto the stand's counter, where it splattered into orange goo across the wooden surface. "Whoever is selling you these is ripping you off."

The mare looked darkly at the bins of vegetables stacked behind her. "Well business has been slow..." she said. She poked at the remains of the carrot I dropped. "But how do you know for sure?"

I shrugged. "I grew up on a farm; we mostly grew oats, but we planted carrots from time to time." I looked back at her. "Why does somepony selling carrots know so little about them?"

She blushed and rubbed the back of her neck. "I used to work in downtown Serenity, but the last owner was selling this stand for so cheap..." The mare chuckled. "I guess I know why, now."

I smiled. I remembered days back home spent trotting around Derbyshire's marketplace, learning how to sell our farm's goods. "Well if you want the best produce, go to the deliverers instead of waiting for them to come to you," I said. "We used to do the same thing all the time."

"Thank you," she said enthusiastically. "I'll make sure to remember that."

"No problem," I said. I trotted off, leaving the carrot seller looking curiously at her unsold stock.

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I picked up my pace as I entered Serenity City to make up for lost time. Despite her distracting me, it had felt good to talk to somepony about vegetables; for a second I had almost felt at home.

The further away from the dockyards I got, the darker the city became. I gulped. The unlit windows of the houses and businesses lining the street made the buildings look like skeletons: just empty husks.

I shook my head and increased my speed once again. Don't think about dark, about death, or about Pullmare. I had just one goal: find Lightning Sprint and expose her for taking bribes. Then, everypony would know I wasn't the weakest link.

A shuddering moan derailed my train of thought. I started and looked around me, up and down the empty street. Another moan, louder this time, brought my attention to a small, dark alleyway. I was afraid to investigate, but my own curiosity won me over and I cautiously approached the source of the noise.

The shadows spread across the alley kept me from seeing anything. Well, almost anything; I could see a faint metallic sheen coming from one side. My stomach sank as I drew closer; I had seen the way light hit that special kind of metal before.

I increased my speed as the details began to grow sharper. A teal body, spiky, pink mane, and

big metal wings materialized out of the darkness. “Starshine!” I cried as I reached where she lay. She wasn’t moving. “Starshine, Starshine, are you okay?” I said, shaking her. Her eyes fluttered open, and she coughed.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she said hoarsely. She tried to raise herself up on one hoof, but her leg gave out and she collapsed back to the ground. She coughed and sputtered again. “Okay, maybe not.”

“What happened?” I asked, but before she could answer I shook my head. “No, never mind, we need to get you out of here.” Starshine didn’t protest. Her eyes were closed again, and her breathing was raspy.

With no better option, I marehandled Starshine onto my back and slowly made my way out of the alley and back onto the street. It was slow-going through the city. Not only was I already trying to go slow so I wouldn’t drop or jostle her, but with the weight of her wings Starshine had to be at least as heavy as I was, despite being so much smaller.

I had wanted to take her back to her house, but she had lapsed out of consciousness almost as soon as she was on my back. Not that it mattered; I had realized that with her injuries, there was only one place on Serenity to go. I looked down the road in front of me to the building at the very center of the city: the Weather Corps building.

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The sun was just starting to peek over the clouds by the time we reached the front door to the Weather Corps tower. Around the city square, some of the more colorful shops and galleries were starting to come alive. Still, there weren’t many ponies out on the streets.

The interior of the tower was lit, and the doors were unlocked. I shoved open one glass-paned door and spilled myself inside, almost falling to the ground. On my back, Starshine remained quiet except for her faint breathing. I pressed a hoof to her chest to make sure she wasn’t in danger of falling off before looking around.

The secretary’s desk was empty, and the doors leading to the upper levels were closed and, presumably, locked. I breathed a sigh of relief; Lightning Sprint must have still been at home.

I continued to look around, and saw that the back hallway was brightly-lit and very much open. A sign on the wall with an arrow pointing in that direction read, “Clinic.” Not that I needed directions; I clearly remembered my stay in the ward just a couple days before.

“Come on,” I said to Starshine, who couldn’t hear me. “We’re going to get you to a doctor.”

I plodded down the stark-white hallway and through a large pair of swinging doors into the

hospital area of the Weather Corps building. The front desk in the waiting room was as empty as the other, save for a shiny, silver bell on top.

I mashed my hoof down on the bell as Starshine's breathing become more and more labored. "Hello, is there anypony here?" I called.

"Hold on a second," a familiar, gruff voice called. Doors marked with a red sun symbol swung open as the owner of the voice stepped into the room. My heart almost stopped when I realized why the voice had sounded so familiar; out into the room stepped Lightning Sprint.

"Wha- ?" I sputtered. Lightning, however, didn't pay any attention to me for the moment. Her focus was solely on Starshine.

"What happened?" she asked in a low voice. She walked over to where I stood and used one of her claws to lift Starshine off my back.

"I found her that way," I said. Once she was off of me, I got a better look at Starshine in the light. When I saw the condition she was in, I almost wish I hadn't. Huge purple welts covered her face and the forelegs that she must have tried to defend herself with. One of her eyes was swollen shut.

Lightning didn't say anything more, and instead gingerly scooped Starshine up in one arm and walked back into the room she had come from. With no better choice, I followed her.

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The interior of the Intensive Care Unit looked exactly as I had last seen it: clean, white, and lined with empty hospital beds. I guess I was supposed to be creeped out by how sterile it was, but hospitals had never really bothered me; maybe because a place so clean was nice after growing up in a dirty farmhouse.

Lightning gently laid Starshine on a vacant bed before springing up and running over to a nearby cabinet.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I trotted over to Starshine's side.

In response, Lightning began pulling out beakers with different-colored liquids inside. She held several of them up to the light before deciding on one with a purple liquid inside, and another that was green.

She arrived at Starshine's bedside and ordered, "Hold her mouth open." I complied out of necessity, deciding that my dispute with her could wait until Starshine was better.

Lightning took care to pour the entirety of both beakers down Starshine's throat, and made sure she swallowed every last drop. The effect of the medicine was immediate: the areas around Starshine's injuries began to glow with healing light.

"What were in those?" I asked.

"Healing potions, stronger than most," Lightning answered. "It's only a temporary measure, though. She will require real healing magic once the doctor returns." She touched one of the glowing spots and sighed.

"Is your doctor ever in?" I asked. First he couldn't help me, and now he was gone when Starshine needed him most: it was getting kind of ridiculous, really.

"There was a large fire in the union headquarters earlier this morning," Lightning said. "Every available doctor in Fillydelphia and Serenity was called in to treat the victims."

"Okay..." I said. "So why are you here?"

"I fill in for the doctor sometimes," Lightning said. "If somebody gets hurt during a major storm, there isn't always time to get them to a professional doctor." She looked away. "I've had to learn how to fix many injuries."

Lightning reached over me and grabbed a clipboard that was attached to the bed. Her eyes flicked back and forth between the form on the clipboard and Starshine as she began to write with a pencil taken from a nearby table.

"So tell me, Minty Flower," she said, carefully examining one of Starshine's hooves and scribbling down what she saw. "What brought you to Serenity?" She looked at me. "Judging from your condition, you were neither in the fight that did this to her, nor do you seem to have known what happened before arriving."

I paused. Could I risk saying anything? With Starshine in her condition, she was vulnerable to whatever Lightning could do if the mood struck her. Then again, she might not even know what had happened between me and her boss; she'd seemed nice enough, but it could be just an act.

"Well...?" Lightning said.

"I know you're working for Ms. Pullmare," I said slowly. I decided that I might as well tell her; if she didn't have orders from Pullmare about me already, she would soon enough. I closed my eyes and waited for what she would say.

To my surprise, she answered with a flat, "Yes, I know, but what does that have to do with why

you're up here?"

I blinked. "You mean, you don't see anything wrong with that?"

Lightning tilted her head to the side like she was speaking to a particularly dense student. "Why would I? The mayor of Fillydelphia is in charge of the Weather Corps: you'll be working for her too if you pass flight training."

I smacked my forehead with one hoof. "No, no, I didn't mean it like that."

Lightning's eyes narrowed. "So how did you mean it?"

"Uh, well-" I stuttered. "I meant like help her out with extra jobs...and stuff," I said shakily. For some unexplainable reason, I found it difficult to talk to a griffin whose forelegs ended in razor sharp talons that could tear me in half.

"You mean, you meant to ask me if I sold my dignity and respect for extra bits on the side," she said icily. While she spoke, her gaze didn't waver from my eyes.

I gulped. "Maybe..."

Lightning sighed. "I would have thought Grapevine would teach you better." She held up a claw to my face before I could speak. "Tell me, Minty," she said. "If Pullmare needed someone to, presumably, do her bidding in the Corps, who would she choose? Would she choose the non-equine leader whose every action is scrutinized, and has to periodically report to the City Council and hold meetings with the Corps officers...or would she choose a pony who holds no rank other than trainer, a position which allows them to go as they please inside this building with impunity, and requires frequent trips from Serenity down to Fillydelphia?"

"Wait, are you trying to tell me *Starshine* is working for Ms. Pullmare?" I growled. I expected her to be angry from my accusations, but not for her to insult me and my friends.

Lightning shrugged and reattached the clipboard to front of the bed. "Ask her yourself."

I looked down in time to see Starshine peaking at me through one half-open eye. "Oh, look, I'm awake," she said weakly. She tried to smile, but ended up coughing instead.

"Is it true?" I said evenly. I wanted so badly for her to say no and denounce Lightning Sprint as a liar, but I could see her answer telegraphed across her face before she opened her mouth.

When she answered as expected, I didn't hear her. Instead, all I heard was Pullmare's voice in my head, repeating over and over, "...*don't delude yourself into thinking you have friends.*"

Starshine gave a hoarse cough, and looked away. "Don't look at me like that," she grumbled.

"I just want to know why," I said slowly.

Starshine tried to sit up, but had to settle for leaning on her forelegs after a gentle push back from Lightning. "For the money," she answered simply. She rolled her eyes when she saw me staring at her, open mouthed. "What? Not everypony has a deep, dark reason behind everything they do; I just wanted extra cash without having to put in the extra effort."

I turned to Lightning. "And did you know about this?"

"I'd started to suspect something was going on," Lightning said her face as blank and unreadable as a concrete slab, "But I wasn't sure until yesterday."

"So you saw nothing wrong with working for Pullmare?" I said, turning back to Starshine.

She shrugged. "She told me to keep the skies clear where she wanted, and I made it happen. No big deal." Starshine met Lightning's death glare. "Oh like downtown needs so much rain; what are we watering, concrete?"

"That's not the point!" I said. *That* got her attention. "Pullmare's doing something big and terrible and...and you helped her!"

"Geez, Minty, you make it sound like I'm the bad guy here," Starshine said. "Sure, maybe it was 'illegal' and 'immoral', but all I did was move some clouds; it's not like anypony got hurt."

Oh, she did *not* just say that. "You think nopony got hurt?" I yelled. I rose on my hindlegs so she could get a full view of the area around my ribs that was still covered in slowly-healing bruises and scars. "While you were doing whatever idiotic thing it was that got yourself hurt so bad, I was sharing a cell with Pullmare, who was trying to finish off the job that *you* started!" I even surprised myself with the amount of venom in my voice.

Starshine's eyes widened in surprise, then moved through betrayal and hurt before settling on indignation. Without another word, she rolled over on her side until she was facing away from me. I saw her wince when she had to balance herself with one of her injured hooves, but she didn't complain.

I sighed. "Did you want to add anything?" I asked Lightning bitterly.

"No," Lightning said, "I think you did a fine job stepping into that mess all by yourself."

I huffed in her general direction and walked out of the ICU and back into the waiting room. I sat down on a hard-backed, wooden chair to think. Well, to mope, really. Moping was easy. I'd been

through enough in the past twenty-four hours to give me enough supply to open up my very own angst shop.

I growled and rubbed my temples. *Focus*, I told myself. *What would Grapevine do?* I tried to put myself in her horseshoes. My plan to confront Lightning had backfired horribly, and I hadn't really thought of any backups. *Grapevine would probably go talk to her friends*, a nagging voice in my head told me. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't disagree. Instead of listening to the voice, though, I just tuned it out.

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Morning started at some point, and the clinic's doctor returned. He looked calm, despite the fact that his doctor's coat was covered in burn marks. The doctor didn't say a word to me, and instead walked straight into the ICU. Nurses and orderlies trickled in while I stayed glued to my seat. A few patients arrived later in the morning as well.

I passed the time by coming up with ever-more ridiculous plans on how to get at Pullmare. My latest plan was to commandeer the entire city of Serenity and ram it into her mansion; *that* would certainly get her attention.

"I thought you could use this," Lightning said, startling me out of my reverie. I looked up to see her holding out a steaming cup of tea.

"Thanks," I said, taking the drink. Now that I noticed it, my stomach was whining for me to put something in it. I took a sip before asking, "Is Starshine going to-?"

Lightning nodded. "She's going to be fine."

"Oh," I said. I looked down at the cup in my hooves. "That's good. Great, really."

"You look worried." Lightning observed. I didn't answer. She opened her mouth to speak, but stopped as two giggling nurses, just arriving for their shifts, walked past us. She looked around and asked, "Perhaps you would like to talk somewhere else?" I nodded and gulped down the tea before throwing it in the general direction of the trash can.

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Lightning led me out of the clinic and up through the Corps tower, unlocking doors as we went with a large, gold key. The office workers hadn't arrived yet, so we had the rest of the building to ourselves. I was led up, past the third floor and her office, and out through a plain door onto the building's roof.

I gasped when I emerged onto the top of the tower. The Weather Corps building was the tallest

in the city, giving me a striking view of the entirety of Serenity and beyond. The floating city had just broken through a cloud bank, and I could see the whole of Fillydelphia, just starting to come alive in the mid-morning light, spread out below me.

“That’s...amazing,” I said. With my hooves still firmly on the roof, I forgot that I was supposed to be scared of heights, if only for a moment.

Lightning chuckled. “I thought you would enjoy the view,” she said. She closed and locked the access door behind us. “I also believed it might be more comfortable to talk up here, away from prying ears.”

“Right, that,” I said. I tore my eyes away from the view and focused on Lightning.

“What Starshine said still troubles you?” she asked, though she was really just framing her statement as a question.

I shrugged. “I guess it shouldn’t,” I said, “But I just thought of her as a...you know...”

“A friend,” Lightning finished.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“And who said that she isn’t?” Lightning said. “Certainly not myself, and I don’t believe Starshine ever said anything on that topic.”

I tried to tell if Lightning was joking or not, but I didn’t know enough about griffin expressions to figure it out. “Did you not hear her in there?” I asked, incredulous. “Not only was she working for the mayor, the mare who used me as her own personal bucking bag last night, but she didn’t even feel bad about it!”

“Was working for,” Lightning corrected.

“Huh?” I said.

“Why do you think Starshine’s down in the clinic, laying unconscious on a hospital bed? She told the mayor’s henchmares she was quitting, and they wanted to make sure she would regret her decision,” Lightning said, a mix of regret and venom in her voice.

“Why’d she quit?” I asked. “She sure didn’t seem too shaken up about taking the money.”

Lightning began to pace near the edge of the roof, but kept her eyes trained on me as she spoke. “Did it ever occur to you that she was lying?”

“Well...no,” I said. “But why would she? She didn’t really have a reason to.”

“Pride,” Lightning answered simply. “She’s far too proud to admit she was ashamed of what she was doing.”

“Oh, and how would you know?” I asked. “Maybe she’s lying to you, too.” My words came out bitter, but only because I felt insulted that Lightning could so easily judge me and somepony who was supposed to be my friend.

Lightning turned away and looked out over Serenity. “I only know because it was that same pride that kept her from telling me what had happened until yesterday.” She sighed. “And again, it was why she refused to let me accompany her to meet with Pullmare’s contact.”

“Oh,” I said. I joined Lightning where she stood, leaning on the brass rail that ran around the perimeter of the roof. “So is she still in the Weather Corps?”

“No,” Lightning said. “She quit the Corps as well.”

“How come?” I asked. A commotion down by the docks drew my attention; a massive zeppelin painted in the official black, white, and red of the German Empire was coming into port.

When Lightning didn’t answer for a few seconds, I thought she was watching the docking as well, but when I looked up at her, her eyes were instead focused beyond the city: somewhere on the horizon. Just when I was about to ask my question again, she spoke up. “That question is one that you will need to ask Starshine for yourself,” she said.

I sighed. “Alright.” I wanted to press the issue, but from the look in her eyes it wouldn’t have been a good idea.

Instead, I stood next to her in silence, for how long I didn’t know. I looked over the edge and tried to see what Lightning saw. Puffy, white clouds floated lazily above and below us, and a light breeze blew through my mane. From up high, Serenity and Fillydelphia looked so...peaceful. It was easy to forget about the conspiracies, the hurt, and the loss from the top of the Weather Corps tower. The only noise between us was the gentle thrum of the city’s engines from far below.

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“So, what are you going to do now?” Lightning asked finally. The little quiet time had softened her expression a bit, and her voice had lost some of its edge. I realized that I was seeing for the first time what she looked like when she was in a good mood.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought I was coming up here to confront you about working for

Pullmare, but, well, that didn't turn out like I expected."

Lightning, still in her jovial mood, snorted. "Grapevine must have taught you her *legendary* skills of deduction." She drummed her talons against the tower's railing, making a loud clinking sound. "I don't suppose you've told her of your meeting with the mayor yet?"

I kicked a pebble off the roof, and watched it tumble down to the street below, narrowly missing an oblivious businessmare. "Maybe..." I said.

Lightning laughed. "If you had told her, there wouldn't be a chance in a thousand years that she would have let you come up here alone." I nodded; she was right, of course. "So, why?" Lightning said.

"Why what?" I said.

"Why haven't you told her yet?" Lightning asked. "You're partners, are you not?"

I shrugged. "After my meeting with Pullmare last night, I don't know any more."

"Got under your skin, did she?" Lightning said. She smiled. "Did she use the 'weakest link' speech again?"

I stared at her. "How did you know?"

Lightning puffed up her chest and said proudly, "Because you are talking to the weakest link in the chain between Serenity and Fillydelphia." She chuckled. "Pullmare uses that speech on everyone she doesn't like; the trick is to not let it affect you."

"But what if she's right?" I blurted out. I wanted so bad to believe Lightning, but part of me still held on to Pullmare's arguments like they were a lifeboat from the *Hindentanic*. "What if I'm just being used?"

"So what if she is right?" Lightning said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "It doesn't change the fact that you need to talk to Grapevine about it, instead of running away to Serenity to tell me about it." Lightning leaned in close to me. "Pullmare only wins if you and your friends stay divided."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I know; friendship is magic and all that. I've listened to Trixie's seminars too, you know."

"Well if you do know," Lightning said, "Then you also know what you need to do next."

I looked down one last time at Fillydelphia; my eyes found the Scullyhoof River and traced their

way to the road on which Joya's shop lay. "Yeah, I do," I said.

"Good," Lightning said with a smile. She walked over to the roof's access door and took out her golden key. "I'll phone one of our airship captains; they'll be able to take you back to Fillydelphia."

She unlocked the door and stepped inside. I wanted to let her go, but something still nagged at me. "Wait," I said. The door stopped closing and Lightning poked her head out. "What if it ends up like last time and I lose my nerve?" It only occurred to me after I'd spoken that Lightning had no idea what I was talking about.

She walked back onto the roof, deep in thought. She kept looking between me and the clouds below, which was a bit disconcerting, to say the least.

"I have an idea," she said at last.

"Uh, good...what is it?" I said.

Rather than give me a straightforward answer, she instead cryptically asked, "Do you trust me?"

I tilted my head to the side. "Yeah, I guess-" I never got a chance to finish my sentence.

Before I knew what was happening, Lightning had tucked me under one arm and leapt off the roof. She unfurled her wings, caught an updraft from the streets below, and soared above the city.

"What are you doing?!" I screamed. I held onto her for dear life as I watched Serenity fly by beneath us.

"Taking the direct route," Lightning called back, having to yell to be heard above the wind. She dropped lower and glided between some of Serenity's buildings before reaching the edge of the city platform. She buzzed the Germane zeppelin, and soared away from the floating city.

"Why are you doing this?" I yelled, refusing to open my eyes.

"You said that you weren't sure if you could work up the nerve to talk to Grapevine," Lightning said calmly. "So I figured it would be best to accompany you."

"You could have accompanied me on an airship!" I shouted.

"Why use an airship when you have wings?" Lightning said, laughing. "Besides, it's *fun*." I had to admit, peaking through one half-closed eyelid, Lightning *did* look the best she had since I had first seen her; almost like some heavy burden had been lifted off of her, and now she was free.

“So unprofessional,” I muttered, though only half-heartedly. With no better choice, I clung to Lightning as hard as I could and opened my eyes. Hanging below her, all I could see were clouds in every direction. Off in the distance, a few Pegasi were guiding a few darker-looking ones into a set position.

“Hey, this isn’t so bad,” I said. *In fact*, I thought, *I could get used to this*.

Lightning clutched me tighter to her barrel chest. “Hang on!” she said, and dove through the cloud layer, me screaming the whole way.

We emerged over West Fillydelphia, the view somewhat obscured by the pollution in the air. Even the air smelled like oil and steel, which didn’t help my stomach that was already doing flip-flops from seeing how high up we were. I closed my eyes again and tried to bury my face in Lightning’s chest.

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad,” she said. “You’re a Pegasus, heights come natural to you.”

“Not if you grow up around earth ponies and unicorns,” I said, my voice muffled by her feathers.

We soared on for a few minutes before Lightning tapped me on the head. “I know you don’t want to, but I’m going to need you to look down and give me directions; I don’t actually know where we’re going.” She laughed, while I growled in return.

Still, I complied and hesitantly leaned my head down to try to spot Joya’s shop. My eyes scanned the city for a minute before finding the familiar landmarks. Focusing all my attention on the task also helped my stomach. “The street’s about two blocks north of the road we’re over!” I called up to Lightning.

She nodded and began to glide down at a sickening speed while I tried not to lose my lunch. Gradually, the vague shapes of buildings became more detailed and I could make out figures of ponies on the sidewalks, which helped my fear somewhat. By the time I had guided her to Joya’s street, I didn’t have as much of a problem watching the city fly by.

“That’s the shop,” I said, pointing at the building. Lightning didn’t say anything in reply, but instead eased up on her descent until we were gliding smoothly towards the building, finally landing on the sidewalk with a loud thump. Bewildered ponies gathering around looked from us to the sky and back again.

I jumped from Lightning’s grip and hugged the ground. “Land!” I cried.

She rolled her eyes and walked across the sidewalk to Joya’s front door. I picked myself off the ground and followed her, if a bit reluctantly. Then, moving too quickly for me to protest or have

second thoughts, she reached out and knocked on the door.

“Yeeeeees?” Joya said, swinging open the door. My heart leapt a little in my chest; it felt like it had been forever since I had seen her last. As usual, she had measuring tape strung around her neck and a random piece of ribbon stuck in her hair; she must have been working on a project.

The sight of Lightning towering above her gave her pause, but only for a second. “Oh, I don’t get many griffins,” she chirped. “But I bet I could find something just perfect for you!”

Lightning coughed and stepped aside so Joya could see me.

I waved and smiled sheepishly. “Hey.”

“Minty!” Joya yelled, galloping up to me. She wrapped me in a hug so tight, I had to fight to breathe. “You’re okay!”

“Yes, yes, I’m okay!” I gasped. “But I won’t be if you keep squeezing!”

Joya let go, though she didn’t start smiling. “Wait right here!” she said, before galloping back inside. A few seconds later, she emerged with Marshmallow and Grapevine in tow.

Marshmallow, a batter-stained apron tied around her neck, smiled and waved to me. “We were getting worried!” she said. “Grapevine told us how you left her at the factory to visit Serenity.” My eyes widened at the statement; apparently Grapevine had decided to keep everypony but Rainbow Remedy out of the loop.

When Grapevine moved out from behind the significantly-taller Marshmallow, I almost gasped. Her mane was matted and clumped to her head, and there were heavy bags under her eyes. If I didn’t know her better, I would say she had been crying. “You’re okay?” she asked wearily.

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Then, she did the last thing I would have expected her to do; she ran up to me before I could say another word and gave me a tight hug.

“You’re back,” she whispered into my mane, though it sounded like it was more for her benefit than mine. After a second of hesitation, I returned the hug.

“I’m back,” I said.