

# Chapter 1

## Our Town (fortunately, not *that* town)

It was through a trackless forest, with little grazing, for a full day (the pair crossed two streams though, and drank their fill there) before seeing a village in the foothills. Unfortunately for his plans the lack of vegetation meant the pair were spotted by two unicorns on their balconies, from some distance out.

And there was a shout, and suddenly four ponies, one winged, one without, and two horned, were running at full gallop towards them. *Nowhere to hide, either.*

Rock Paints ran anyway. "Screw those horned filth. Catch you on the flip side, amigo!"

If the welcoming party had split, or looked like it was going to split, Fred would have run the other way, and found a cave to hide in. But all four (and two more, just trotting from town) were dead set on his form. Forest Fred fervently hoped he was not the kind of freak that could expect trouble everywhere he went. Maybe he should have just taken a generic dice-rolling conversion, and run away as another earth pony.

Rock Paints was completely out of sight by the time, two full minutes later by his random and sweaty estimation, the six equines had arrived to greet him. They said some things, but true to his estimation, their language didn't sound like English any more than their writing looked like roman script. When not in Rome, the pega-corn estimated..."Hello. My name is Fred Soleman. I'm a newfoal, so ... do any of you speak a human tongue?"

The party jerked their collective heads up and stared, smiles briefly frozen. Then they whispered to each other before all kneeled, foreheads against the ground for those that could, the unicorns just put their nose to the ground, with the tip of the horn touching the ground also.

More than slightly unnerved, he stepped to his left, enough that the ponies, whose eyes were closed, were not abjectly worshipping him. They lifted their heads at about the same time, and readjusted so that they were again. "Okay. Uhm, hello I guess?"

They got up at that, and surrounded him, pointing hooves back at their log-home style buildings, and slyly looking down, saying words. Forest Fire walked carefully into town this way, until the unicorn ran off, shouting something. The other three, having been joined by another winged, and one without, laughed at the fleeing unicorn. Their voices sounded like the bubbling of a gentle creek in a forgotten corner of the woods, pleasant & soft.

The unicorn that had run off, pale orange with brilliant yellow and green striped mane, now came back with a silvery, tall unicorn mare with brilliant crimson mane, and deep mahogany forelock; her tail matched the forelock. The new unicorn bowed also, but did not wait for a response but after a breath, stood and spoke ... in what Forest Fire guessed to be German. "I'm sorry. I was American before. Only English."

The mare blinked several times, than nodded. "I can English. Before three years upon college did English learn me." *Well, her English is a heckuva lot better than my German.*

So, would his adopted self chosen name be any worse than his pre-“newfoal” name? “I’ve decided to give myself the pony name Forest Fire. I know how to write that but I can’t say it.” The mare repeated his words for the crowd, and he started to trace patterns in the dirt.

The earth pony mares cooed, more than ooh’d & ahh’d, he thought. The silver unicorn that spoke a little German looked down, slightly bewildered. “Can writing, but not anything Pony?”

*Yeah, well. I’ve always been a special case.* Aloud, he said “I had to teach myself to read your books, but there weren’t any ponies around to read them to me.” The green pegasus moved beside him to read his dirt writing, and read it aloud. Forest tried to repeat it, which drew an bewildered blinking stare from her. Forest pointed, and said it again, which drew chattering laughter from all the mares present. But on the fourth try, they all nodded in unison. *I guess the name change is permanent, then.* “Forest Fire” Fred mentally said to himself.

The gaggle of mares grew as he was escorted to the town restaurant, where seemingly giant, muscle bound earth pony stallions clapped his now diminutive frame on the shoulder heartily. The unicorn tried to explain, “They have seen beautiful as you never. Full of impression, they.”

Glad he wasn’t being ousted as a freak of nature, he graciously accepted the food brought, which seemed to be a pancake made from hay. The texture was like what he remembered hash browns as, but the flavor was more like fried rice. Fred, mentally cursing himself for not saying his new name inside his head again before he forgot, said as how he was new to town, and would need advice on where he should stay. While the silver unicorn tried to repeat that, a rust-red pegasus handed him a sheet of rough paper, and a feather. A pot of ink, surrounded by a pale blue glow levitated next to the paper.

Forest Fire had never tried manipulating anything with his mouth yet, but this crowd seemed pretty easy going of his failures so far ... he gripped the feather in the corner of his mouth, and tried to repeat himself in writing. The unicorn blurted out “Can not anything levitate you?”

Having just enough forethought to finish writing until the nib was dry enough to not fling ink everywhere, Forest then shook his head, no. The pegasus stallion, who seemed sometimes brown and sometimes red, took back his quill, and held it so the writing tip stuck almost straight out from the middle of his teeth, and pointed with a hoof, apparently needing to indicate the angle at which it left ... it wasn’t straight, or he’d have had to swallow the fluffy part of the feather first. But that was his intent, his pointing said, then he wrote neatly, “how long have you been a newfoal?”

Forest took the quill back, but left more sticking out the end so he could sort of see it, and tried to write as neatly, and failed badly, flinging drops of ink all over the page, and the wooden table. “One day.”

As the message was passed between ponies, they all gasped. Another unicorn mare took the quill, the aura this time a pink to match her coat, it seemed, and wrote “how did you get here, then?”

Forest rocked back against his tail, and lifted both fore-hooves, to use one to point at the other, then pantomimed something like a trot, or possibly typing on a typewriter. The pegasus stallion, looking aghast, used a fore-hoof to lift the edge of Forest’s left wing as he raised an eyebrow. Forest again tapped a hoof on his writing, “One day.”

Forest Fire’s presence was getting less and less inconspicuous. The entire village by now had assembled, and as they heard this was his first stop since conversion, they cheered loudly.

Someone even brought out a drink, in an all metal cup with some odd curves, that it was explained made it easier to grasp with fetlocks. This was a celebratory flagon used during festivals to remind the lowest farmers, they took turns writing for him, that in *this* town all tribes were held to be of equal value. Also it came out that they were located at the foothills to the Frozen North, far away from Canterlot & its politics. That, at least, held with Forest Fire’s intentions.

## 1.1 wait, do you offer that to all the newfoals?

While Forest Fire would have liked to stay with someone that spoke a little English, he decided to stay with the one who felt most skilled at teaching him to convert his written knowledge into spoken word. Oddly, and Forest couldn’t figure it out yet,

every pony there seemed to be offering to take on a former human with no ability to speak the language or knowledge of how to live the rustic lifestyle.

He was 'shacked up' with a pegasus mare with reddish-brown coat and pale blue mane, with some dark blue streaks. And her wings were a deep sea blue instead of the light sky blue of her coat.

Rather than go through a lot of their parchment, which surely must have been prohibitively expensive, someone whipped up a poor rendition of an etch-a-sketch. The wooden box was no deeper than a picture frame, but had been equipped with a sliding 'blade' to erase the sand, and a stylus of soft wood tied to it. Needing to write larger because of the lack of contrast, Forest had no troubles, but Autumn Breeze seemed frustrated by it, flapping her wings loudly and scowling at the box, stylus dangling from her mouth.

Until she looked at him, and a smile grew over her face, and she tried again. Likewise when he tried to say her name, it took more tries than his own had. Their writing system, at least what Forest knew of it, didn't have 'capital' letters, so there was no obvious way to indicate you meant the person Autumn Breeze, but context probably provided enough clarity on that front.

And while he knew little first hand (hoof; first hoof.) of "the rustic lifestyle" he doubted she was really done for the day. It had been late morning by his estimation, when he had arrived. But Breeze followed him from room to room, setting the etch-a-sketch down and explaining what he could find useful in this room. "The stairs we came up are for visitors. When you can fly, I always use this door." Then she pointed at a large skylight, which did indeed have a latch that could be operated from either side. And as rustic as this was, there were some things he had to ask about ... like, how ponies dealt with bodily waste. "How have you *been* doing that" she asked, her head tipped to the side, ears lolled farther to the side as she waited for him to pick up the stylus and respond.

"Just find a bush in the woods." Which earned a shrug, and Breeze wrote back that the woods weren't far; he could keep doing that. But her <word> didn't have any water since it would need to go uphill. So she flew outside and used a cloud, then kicked the cloud away from the town so it wouldn't rain pee over every pony. "What does <word> mean?" Breeze said the word, and help Forest Fire to say it, then wrote the word for 'house' and made sure Forest could say that word, too. Apparently that word meant condominium, or the like. This was the third floor of a stacked triplex, and he'd gathered the other two floors had separate occupants.

"Bottom <condo> has that equipment; I'll take you down to show you how to use it."

The bottom condo was occupied by a fairly young married earth pony couple, he had spring green coat, she had a darker coat that was long, heavy, hot looking considering it wasn't cold out yet. They both hugged him several times as he got a tour of their house, and offered him tea and crackers. He was pretty sure they were giving verbal advice on how to best use their toilet, but he couldn't tell, and Breeze didn't seem to think it needed translating. Back upstairs, Forest finally got around to asking if he was interfering with her workday. "I have seen enough to not break things. Do you need to go build or assemble for money?"

Breeze bit her lip, looking at the etch-a-sketch, and surreptitiously out the skylight / door. Finally she painfully drew the eraser blade across the sand, and wrote "if it is not a burden to you, there is <word> for me to do." But as soon as she lifted her head, she looked at him, and instead of breaking into a smile, she went back to writing "Do you need another pony to wait with you?" He wrote below her note, that he would be fine without company for a while. Breeze sighed, and wrote "I will send someone. Do you have any preference to who / man woman / wings horn not anything"

What were they trying to protect? Forest wondered. On the sand, he said "One who can write, and speaks clearly." Which drew a long hard stare; perhaps Breeze was trying to second guess what Forest really needed, and what he'd put up with. But after a moment, she embraced him in a careful hug, and then flew out the door, opened and shut as quick as if it had not been there.

Ten minutes later, a slender, middle aged earth pony mare knocked at the door, opening it at the same time to say Forest Fire's pony name. He had decided he wanted tea after all, and was trying to figure out how the water would have been heated.

The cup, tea jar of loose leaves, and what he thought was sugar, were laid next to each other on the counter. Forest took until the second or third time his name had been said to understand it was his name. The new pony wrote only "I here help" Then added, after she watched him read, "what"

He wrote the word 'tea' and waved her to the kitchenette area, where took stock of the counter's contents, put away the white powder, after setting a tiny amount on his tongue (it was salt) and pulling out the jar next to it, which had what Forest had taken to be rough-ground wheat, and put a spoonful of it in his cup. Forest held his tongue out, and she put a tiny amount of what was actually like 'sugar in the raw' on his tongue in response.

The water was boiled in what seemed to be a propane stove equivalent, which was fine but her stare was a little unnerving. It wasn't that she was staring intently, or as if he was doing something unthinkably newfoal-like. But she never took her eyes off him. Still, if she could read to him ... With his tea steeping, he wrote down "Help me learn to say these words. How is this said?"

Eventually it occurred to one of them, that she could simply read a book. Autumn Breeze didn't have any foals so she didn't have board books or even young-adult novels, but she had several books on farming practices, with diagrams and pronunciation guides for the formal names of things in addition to their common names. Forest was starting to get a feel of how their writing system worked, at least. It was phonetic, and the letters interacted to indicate when a less common syllable was needed. Since it was only the pony tongue, and there hadn't been the influx of conquests like the English language, it was much more consistent.

In order for the babysitter, whose name Forest didn't know, to read the words and point to them where he could see, she had to sit on her side, curled up against Forest's withers ... the point of his shoulders. And in fact she was pretty much pressing against his whole spine, which was pleasant but he wasn't sure if she was comfortable with it, or uncomfortable. Around sunset, perhaps two hours later, Breeze came home, and said something that made Forest's babysitter blush deeply, the short facial hairs actually straightening to reveal the flushed skin color beneath. But she didn't feel a desperate need to get up, it seemed, and Breeze just went into the kitchen to fix her dinner quietly. The earth pony mare just stared down at the farming book before sighing and going back to watching Forest.

She seemed neither interested in getting up, nor eager to cuddle with Forest, but content to wait for him to decide what they were doing. Breeze brought out three plates of food, and set them on the floor, sitting opposite Forest, and nibbled slowly on her plate. Forest looked back at his babysitter, who eventually tapped him on the shoulder, then pointed once to the book, than to his plate of food. Forest still didn't know why his being a freak earned him this level of attention, but he pulled his legs in as if to stand, and she stood first so he could. Reseated, everyone ate sitting on the floor while Fred tried to remind himself how the writing worked.

After dinner, Forest asked how much of this special treatment other newfoals got. "We've never had a newfoal out here. Not really certain Celestia knows this town is here." Forest asked if they paid taxes, but had to get creative explaining it, because he didn't know that word. "Taxes?" she wrote in response to his written hoop jumping. "No, not those either. Some pony would need to travel to Canterlot. Long ways, that." Then in response to questions about learning magic, "There are some unicorns here. Not many but one might be able to teach you once you can talk. Writing is actually just for ponies that have moved from Canterlot; we don't go out of our way to teach it up here."

*Wasn't that special*, thought Forest. But asked in the sand pit "Will you teach me to fly?" Which earned a long stare, before Breeze hesitantly nodded.

### 1.1.1 Sleeping accommodations

There was only one bed. She was cute, if you liked ponies. And she had been, so far as he could read her, flirting off and on all day. They all were a little bit. But it hadn't been explained if she was offering to dally, or if this veritable cult just didn't think men & women (except somewhere during the day, he had realized that the word that dictionary translated as such, was

referring to the pony-exclusive words. Stallion/mare) sharing a bed would be odd ... and if that was the case, was it because casual sex was of no social consequence, or social norms were so strong that no one would offer or expect such?

Forest Fire decided, as they crawled under the covers, that he would try to find out ... without getting kicked out of town, although this had put him in better stead to survive on his own terms already. He reminded himself that knowledge was power, and he wouldn't bemoan the loss of a warm dry bed. After all, Rock Paints didn't, so far as he knew, have anything but his own coat to keep himself warm right now.

So Forest inched closer. The third time, his legs now against Breeze's shoulders and rump, she rolled back to look at him, a little bemused. He tried to cock his ears quizzically but didn't know if it would show in the dim light, or if he was actually doing it right anyway. Breeze carefully touched the sole of a hoof to the top of his nose, then she rolled quickly, the blanket flying back to cover Forest completely as she jumped into the air to fly to the living room where the sandbox had been left.

By the time Forest had walked out, half expecting to find her holding the door open for him to leave, she had moved the small table and the sandbox to the strongest light coming through the glass skylight door, and written "What do you want?"

He started to reply a couple times before deciding on "I thought you wanted company."

Breeze rocked back, then fell on her rump. *Whelp, if I'm lucky I'll have some couch to sleep on in town.* Breeze shakily stood up and wrote "How many?"

Forest almost fell over himself. What were these two saying to each other? "Why would other mares in the middle of the night move into your bed?"

Which barely needed a second thought from Breeze, who wrote "They would for you."

He was oddly flattered, but computer geeks hardly had experience being the center of this kind of attention. "I don't want you to feel bad. You spent your day with me, and we know each other now." Although the sheer ludicrousness of that statement made him add the word 'little' in between other, and now.

Breeze blushed, and ducked her head, and looked away, having to fight her own fight to respond like Forest just had. Finally she decided on writing "An experienced unicorn will teach you magic. A good flier will teach your your wings. You need more mares here so you can learn the best from them." And while Forest was still reading that, she laid a hoof to his shoulder, and then ran down the stairs.

It was ten minutes, during which Forest tried to tidy the spartan condominium, and contemplated setting out some snack food in case the visitors were supposed to introduce each other over a dinner like setting before getting hot & sweaty. Then a skinny unicorn, her colors muted in the unlit room's moonlight, walked in, and found Forest. She stopped, sighed, and then came up and hugged him. It was not substantially different than other hugs he had received during the day, and absolutely would not have understood it to be any level of flirtatious except for the context in which it was given. But then she turned, and rubbed her rump against his shoulders, and had her tail a little ways to the side. Just as Forest was considering if he was expected to mount her here, a wide, short earth pony mare came in the door, said a small greeting to the unicorn, and offered a hug to Forest. Again, it was a normal hug, but was immediately followed by her pushing her face into his coat along his ribs, finally stopping at the transition from leg to belly.

Between that and the unicorn kneeling away from him, tail over her spine, Forest almost missed the silent, lightning fast entry of Breeze and another pegasus. Forest had to try for several seconds, that he wanted to get away, to the sandbox. Finally they let him walk away, looking wistful as he strode those four steps away, and he wrote "Will you all fit onto her bed, or were you expecting to do this out here?"

The unicorn walked over, and her horn glowed like a lantern, but she stared dumbly at the sand. Breeze read it aloud, barely able to avoid giggling. The other three mares erupted into broad, easy smiles, and said various answers as they laid a hoof to whatever part was closest. Breeze finally wrote "Either." and at that, the earth pony sat and pointed a hoof into the bedroom and another at the living room floor.

Over the course of the night, with the unicorn illuminating and one of the pegasi reading, he learned the pony equivalent of 'the missionary position' - the one that they assumed was natural and right, is what humans would call doggy style. But having the mare face upwards was easy, and common enough - although it didn't seem to have a name like how humans named everything. But when he tried to get the earth pony mare to ride him cowgirl style, she was a little dumbfounded, and he had to again write out what he was asking. But for Forest Fire, they would try anything.

He didn't get much sleep that first night, but it was very warm.