

"You could always eat their souls." opined Snow Drift calmly. After taking a slurping sip of her smoothie she added "Do you want me to kick them back in line?"

Ground Chuck was always getting out-flown, but the stadium had room for twice as many ponies as had already bought tickets. Mouth dry, he tried to unstick his tongue to respond but first had to manually un-clench his jaw to reply "You know I'm not ashamed of being a half-breed." He closed his eyes, sighed, and made himself draw the next breath slowly, carefully. Looking at his classmate, he asked rhetorically "I mean, where are my wings?" Now in line right behind the place-stealing couple he added "Has anypony confirmed if that even works?"

Drift choked on her drink and coughed a little. Throat cleared she replied with a quick, flat "Of course not." with a seriousness usually reserved for interrogations by the Solar Sins. "Looks like I should have acted sooner." as she pointed with a fetlock at the sudden shortening of the line.

Jaws clenched again, Chuck told himself the pair in front of him hadn't made it to the ticket booth yet, meaning he hadn't actually lost anything. Yet. Drift was holding back to let Chuck keep up so the place-stealers had already left by the time Chuck and Drift were at the ticket window. The pterippus in the booth was nervously shoving drawers shut, locking cabinets as the last pair of ponies in line approached. Dark green eyes found Snow Drift first, as he began telling her "Concert has been canceled I'm Sorrrrrrrrr rrrp?"

This last because the eyes had drifted to acknowledge Ground Chuck, who was not standing on the ground as this part of town was located at about thirty five hundred hooves up. Drift tried to slurp a little more of her empty smoothie, and Chuck broke the silence, only awkward at this point to Chuck himself because he didn't want to explain, by asking "Band came down with feather flu?"

The ticket seller shook his pale cream-orange head slowly, then normally before saying "No, weather event. Out of curiosity, can you cloud walk?"

Chuck could practically hear Drift roll her eyes. "Yes." Chuck replied flatly. "And ... we're pterippi. Can't we just not have a weather event right now?" He reached into his pack and brought out his flight school ID.

He stared at Chuck's ID, squinted and stared closer, before (still squinting) saying "Future weather patrol?" Making eye contact now, he said "Can you report to security? I just got a memo that the whole weather team has been incapacitated. I bet ..." He hesitated, eyes now locked onto Chuck's bare back; the place where his wings weren't. The poor ticket taker had to close his eyes to finish his thought. "They'll want any help they can get right now."

Chuck was already on his way before he realized Snow Drift hadn't already followed, and certainly was not passing him. Or pushing so he could get there faster, which she had done a few times and offered to do twice as often. It was true she was focusing on accounting, hoping to get an office job when she graduated. But she was actually quite an accomplished flier, and seemed to truly enjoy gymnastics though Chuck was one of the few students she'd allowed to learn that she went to the training courses after dark to run them.

Drift had put her cup away by the time Chuck had finished these thoughts, and was nervously adding, as if she'd been discussing this with him since he responded, "You know there's a whole team of grown ups I bet they don't need a couple useless students getting under hoof." Chuck looked over to see her scanning the surrounding cloud columns quickly, lips pursed, nostrils flaring at each breath. It occurred to him her amber eyes were almost the orange of the ticket-taker's coat. "We should go hide in our dorms; I bet a lock down has been called."

"Over a weather event during a flu outbreak?" He wasn't in denial about his flight skill; he was a half breed, though fate thought it amusing to give him to normal-flight half-breed parents. Wingless or not he had grown up in this town, and by Tia he would defend it against all threats. Even though he was less than a quarter of the flier Snow Drift was.

"You're better at this than I am. You should help too; they'll have something for inexperienced pterippi so I want you to come with me."

She had to think about that for a long moment. But the change from a slanted back, raised forehooves to flat back and tucked hooves, and the set of her neck from a raised curve to a gentle slant that telegraphed her decision before she asked aloud "You want me to push you?" He nodded, and she repositioned herself behind him, head tucked against his hips as she grabbed his hind feet in her forehooves and said "Lock your wings!"

He didn't have wings, depending on how you meant that. But he could feel them, and while he could 'flap' through a wall, or another pony, he could also feel where his wings were. Folded them perfunctorily during class – and it had been found that when Snow Drift pushed him along, he needed to lock his wings straight out, and not try to 'help' fly, but just to soar, and steer while under the thrust of Drift's wingpower.

The campus weather department didn't have an actual fence, just a polite bar of cloud, mid-floor. It was there to mark the building off-limits without physically preventing curious students from poking their head in. The pair went over it, and angled down to the first floor front-door. The building was constructed as a four-story affair, though there were less than three floors worth of offices, he knew. Most of the height was for the machinery that spanned the larger warehouse and shop areas. Snow Drift had already let up, to the point Ground Chuck was drifting gently out of her hooves a few feet before he braked hard to reach the door exactly as he stopped.

Drift had already started her 'well so long' speech when the door was ripped open by a cauliflower blue coat growing out of a faculty stallion whose yellow-to pale-red eyes were as large as dinner plates. He ducked out of the dooryway, shouting "In! In, please! Hurry we need every hoof the both of you!"

There were no machinery noises inside the weather factory. The stallion slammed the ephemeral door shut behind them, hard enough to make a slight whoosh, which was out of keeping for both protocol and for this particular stallion, whose eyes Chuck knew belonged to instructor Draft Wind. Both students must have shocked looks on their faces, but Draft didn't take note but immediately whisper shouted "I have dire news, and I MUST get you to swear to silence on the matter."

Chuck still hadn't seen or heard another pony or a piece of machinery, and Drift looked a little bit shell shocked for having been so forcefully included. Neither moved or said anything to the campus instructor for the two seconds he waited, before he told them his dire news. "The Wonderbolts assigned here, the whole weather faculty, and several students have been struck by a magical bomb embedded inside a simple zephyr. They seem to be alive, just unconscious, and students have been dispatched to the ground to request royal help but there is a large weather pattern moving in. It would be disruptive but some worry it could be one of several other things."

"Surely you don't want an accounting student attacking a class-five storm?" Drift managed to say fairly calmly, considering her pink eyes were hard to find surrounded by all that white. Her body language said she was expecting to be expelled, or to be told her degree depended on sculpting, in the next hour, a life size copy of the taj marehall using just a small bottle of water and a whisk.

Draft waved Drift's concerns away immediately. "It's scarcely into the upper reaches of class-two, only it's large. As large as a ground-city, and seems to have been drifting in a very straight line from the Gryphon kingdoms."

Chuck thought it an odd set-up too, honestly. "You want us to make sure it's an international incident by dissipating the cloud cover until armed gryphons kill us in the open, so Celestia can declare it an act of war?"

That did get a wry grin from the middle-aged school employee. "Just get some pictures. A member of the Unicorn Guard will be here with the next few minutes and will put warding on your coats so they can't hurt you even if they see you coming. But we don't have anypony available to reach all three levels."

Drift was putting together a rebuttal, about being an accountant who wanted to hear the airband in town. Chuck turned and tried to interrupt, saying "Drift! Don't back down you can be a hero! Just for this one day!"

Snow Drift's eyes briefly met Chuck's but quickly jumped to a point behind him; not where Wind Draft was but down the hall some distance. Chuck had heard a sort of popping sound behind him, and might have turned to see its source but the color in Snow Drift's coat actually drained away for a second. Then she was flying straight through the wall, as fast as she could. She had consciously turned off her cloudwalk sense, for her entire body, so she left no more of a hole in the wall than if an earth pony had been chucked through it.

At this Chuck did turn, and found a unicorn with a dusty-green coat that had coppery specks, and his eyes were the very same shade of pale pink as Snow Drift's eyes. He was staring slack-jawed at the place where Chuck's classmate had just disappeared. It took him a moment to recover, blinking, slowing his panicked breathing, and finding where his jaw was supposed to go before he could speak again. The blinking brought tears, as he turned to the two stallions that were still here. "I just saw what looked like my niece, Snow Drift, fly through the hallway then outside."

Chuck nodded. "New student, very pleasant mare."

Wind Draft tried to ease the unicorn's concerns by adding "About three weeks ago, in fact. Promising student, Snow Drift is good with numbers." Wind Draft didn't himself have tenure, and tended to fill in gaps all over the flight school, so had probably worked with Drift personally.

The unicorn burst into tears, and fell, inconsolable, to the floor weeping loudly.

This left Ground Chuck confused, but he didn't get a chance to respond as a unicorn mare with a mahogany red coat and reddish-purple highlights popped into existence beside him, two large, awkward but simple looking cameras hanging from her neck. She looked around, eyes barely acknowledging Ground Chuck or Draft Wind, before scanning again and looking down to find an inconsolable unicorn stallion, who sniffled several times in order to say "I saw Snow Drift."

The mare inhaled slowly, fully, and put her right front on his shoulder, saying gently but firmly "It was just a pink pterippus."

She looked over and made eye contact with each of the upright stallions, and when the weeping unicorn replied "She had wings, Berry Field." she winced, but recovered and removed her hoof, and decided on looking at the younger stallion.

"How long have you known Snow Drift?"

It wasn't lost on Chuck that the name hadn't been mentioned in this mare's hearing since Drift had been in the school halls. And she had been in an incredible hurry to be elsewhere, but Chuck had never gotten the idea she had trouble back home. "Just a few days more than three weeks ago, ma'am. I met her at the south end of Cloudsdale, where I was watching the Canterlot waterfall at sunset and she was curious about half-breeds and I talked up our school pretty well."

Chuck hadn't quite noticed, but the instant he'd said the magic three-week sequence her eyes had squinted tightly shut, and at the mention of half-breed ponies her mouth had contracted into a scrunchie face. It took her several seconds of controlled breathing to re-open them, but her lips retained their angry bind. "Let me start with you." Here she broke eye contact with the indicated pony, and looked at Draft Wind "No one else yet?" and with no encouraging response, but only discouraging ones, she looked back to Chuck. Levitating a camera over his neck, she explained "West by South-West of here, about ten miles, is a category two stormcloud. It's big enough all of downtown Cloudsdale could fit in it, you can't miss the monstrosity." She indicated the shutter button with a hoof. "Fly inside it, touch nothing, say nothing, make no contact. Take a picture of ANY creatures or structures you find. There are only EIGHT blank plates in this camera. We don't need even that many. If you get one really good photo, even if you're not sure who or what you're looking at if it was clear and clearly unexpected, call it good; fly back." She levitated the second camera off her neck. "Any chance you could get the new girl to help?" Chuck shrugged but admitted they'd been friends until today. Which earned a sharp "Snow Ski! Get up."

The unicorn stallion pulled himself together, still weeping but making eye contact with his coworker. Berryfield shook the camera in her aura, and Snow needed several breaths to steady himself before he closed his eyes, and a magical aura glowed from his horn's tip, which he touched to the proffered camera. Sighing, he stood normally, almost himself again.

The camera was proffered to Chuck. "Get her, Snow Drift specifically, to help you, using this camera. Use whatever lies you want or need to. My colleague has put a tracking spell on it so we'll know to pick her up for ... well, anyway."

Ground Chuck solemnly took the second camera in his mouth, and flew out to look for her. His first instinct was the pines-course; tall columns of cloud, reinforced to make pterippi bounce off if they missed as they threaded their way through the 'trees' as fast as they could. And he was right, she was here, sitting in the closest-knit four columns, seated and shivering. He hung the second camera on her, and put on his best encouraging face.

"What did he tell you about us?" She hadn't yet questioned the camera.

"He just said he thought he saw a ghost." His heart was pounding. Chuck couldn't tell from inside his head if he sounded fake, but he sure felt fake and hollow right now. "Draft Wind has been deputized to get students to take pictures inside the storm." He pointed at her camera. "Fly inside, take a picture or three of anything that isn't cloud, there are eight film slides if you miss or something but they just want one clear shot, and rush the camera back to Draft." Chuck tried to smile to cover his worries. Suddenly realizing he could cover his nerves with believably false bravado, he added "As you said, we're just students. If you get scared before you get any pictures just bring the camera back and apologize for your nerves."

And before he could say or do something that would indicate there was more to the story, he flew off, trying to thread the maze and get off campus.

And an hour later, he found that the storm was every bit as big as he'd been told. Well defined edges, perfectly even gradation of excess moisture to make the bottom layer dark and angry and the middle and above look fluffy. It absolutely screamed 'artificial building' except there were no windows, doors, winged inhabitants entering or exiting. It would turn out it was moving a very steady, fairly straight three and a quarter miles per hour, which was exceedingly odd for a town, and a bit slow for a storm, but mostly said 'artificial' and not so much "weird storm experiment escaped from the laboratory"

And as soon as he had made out his target, he saw Snow Drift, camera still around her neck, speed past him, two hundred hooves above his altitude, and clearly going for the early win. Since she went straight into the middle, he aimed at the lower right corner, just above where the floor would be if they had crammed four into what any self respecting pterippus would have called a short three-story building.

He'd guessed right. It was a tight fit, but after he re-oriented himself to the close floor and ceiling he put his cloud-walk sense back into place. From his left, a black feathered gryphon strode in. Chuck had a moment to realize this catbird was wearing more than ever he'd seen or heard of them wearing but didn't parse more than to hit the shutter button, and retract his cloud-walk, dropping back down just as the gryphon looked up at him.

He went further in, hovering inches below the floor of the beast, constantly looking behind him in fear a squad of guards would appear from out of thin air, but chose a point to rise up, hugging the wall as well as the floor. Again, a shallow walkway. This time he didn't slow but kept rising, smacking his head into a steel beam, which reverberated more than a little. He reached up, grabbed the beam, and flew around it. The channel for it to sit in was extremely narrow, barely twice the thickness of the beam that filled the air channel. He positioned his camera to pick up the beam in its cloud furrow, and then tried to decide would he be seen sooner if he rose to the natural clouds above, or should drop straight to the ground.

As there were two floors yet above, and it would take him a long time to rise to the cover provided by natural clouds drifting overhead at more than thirty thousand hooves, he dropped straight down passing again through the short hallway, which was mercifully still empty, and angled a bit towards some buildings he saw on the ground, ponies gathered around in a clearing there.

By whatever blessing of whatever alicorn, no search party followed the clumsy combat journalist to terra firma below. His brief glance into the great blue yonder did not yield sight of Snow Drift and Chuck had a moment for something like regret, fear, and apprehension mix in his chest as he tried to plan his return to the school.