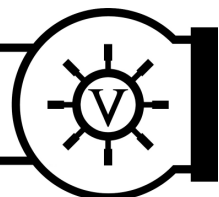


# The Savage Way

Horse Voice

PONY FICTION VAULT



Caramel's strength had nearly run out when he unexpectedly felt a forehoof touch solid rock. Responding as much from survival instinct as from his remaining shreds of consciousness, he grabbed for the stone while giving one last kick at the water. A particularly large wave struck him from behind, and he felt himself lifted forward and brought down chin-first onto bedrock. The sea drew back, leaving his body clear for a moment, before another wave rushed up over him, threatening to draw him back into the brine. He choked and sputtered.

As the latest wave broke and retreated, bony mandibles gripped his forelegs beneath the shoulders, and dragged him up the shore in fits and starts. He felt little pain as his belly scraped against the stone; exhaustion and cold had numbed most of his body. At last, when the foaming sea could no longer reach his rear hooves, the grip released.

"Man, you guys are heavier than you look!"

The words, shouted over the storm's roar, were Equus, but if Caramel's mind had been clearer, he would have noticed the accent was wrong. He vaguely considered opening his eyes.

"Hey, you alive?"

Caramel responded by vomiting some water, then taking heavy breaths interrupted by deep coughs. The voice came again, fading quickly as exhaustion cast a veil of darkness over his mind.

"Thank God. I don't know CPR for equines..."

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Caramel's senses did not come back all at once. He was first aware of intense light, shining through his eyelids. Then he heard the slow, regular whoosh of a calm day's sea swell, and felt salt encrusted around his nose and mouth, as well as rough stone under his right side.

He opened his eyes as slowly as he could, so no sudden flash would aggravate the pounding in his head. One by one, he moved his stiff, aching legs, making sure they weren't broken. He painstakingly rolled onto his belly, then struggled to his hooves, and scraped some salt from his face with a foreleg. Moving his jaw brought pain – from when he hit it on the rocks, he guessed. He noticed scrapes on his knees and belly, from being dragged. Dragged by...

To Caramel's right, on the other side of a small hillock, came the clatter of dry sticks falling onto stone. As he shakily made his way toward the sound, he had to squint against the light that not only beat down from the now cloudless sky, but also upward from the sea. Toward the shore, he saw a white dinghy pulled up just above the tide line, and a short distance down the rocky beach, a thin, gangly figure gathered driftwood. As Caramel approached, the tapping of his hooves against the bedrock drew its attention, and it nodded in greeting.

"How ya doin'?" it called.

It was not Caramel's first time meeting one; they had made up a little over half of the ship's crew. The ship – he and this human might be its only survivors. Still groggy, he couldn't at first think of something appropriate to say, so he walked slowly toward his rescuer, hoping the human would assume he wanted to get closer before speaking.

Caramel didn't remember seeing him on the ship. He wore plain clothes – jeans, a sweatshirt, leather boots – and so was probably not a crewman. His blonde mane – no, hair – was cut quite short, and he had a couple of days' growth on his chin. As Caramel reached him, he dropped another armload of driftwood onto a pile at his feet.

"Thanks for, uh, pulling me out," Caramel said.

The human half-smiled. "Alex Clark. Nice to meet ya." He gave a shallow bow. The two species' height difference made hoof-shaking inconvenient, so in the early days of interdimensional travel, bowing became the standard cordial greeting.

"Caramel Apple." The stallion bowed back. "Same here." He made a show of glancing at the horizon, though he didn't expect to find it broken by any rescuer's silhouette. "Are we all that's left?"

"All that's made it to this island," Alex said. "Sorry to break bad news, if you were hopin' for a peninsula."

Caramel pointed his snout at the dingy. "Do you have oars for that?"

"Lost 'em in the storm. No motor either. 'Course, I don't think we'd make it to land anyway."

"Why?"

"Look at the sky."

Caramel had only visited the Equestrian coast a few times in his life, and the voyage that ended in disaster had been his first. Looking into the empty blue, he found himself a little annoyed at the implication he should have nautical knowledge.

"There's nothing there," he said.

"Right. If we were near a coast, there'd be seabirds." Alex turned away, and moved toward a scattering of ungathered driftwood.

Caramel stood silently for a moment, as the ramifications sank in. He looked at the horizon, more carefully this time.

"They'll look for survivors," Alex said at last, returning to deposit a small armload. "Searching'll be easier here than on Homeworld, 'cause they'll have pegasi. I mean, they'll be pegasi. If this island's on the map, they'll prolly check it."

He did not emphasize the "if," but it stuck out in Caramel's mind.

"I wonder how long that will take," Caramel thought out loud.

"Well," Alex said, "good news is there's a little spring in the middle. I'm no geologist, so I don't know if that's weird on a small island like this, but I never look a gift ho—" He stopped mid-word. "Uh, come on. I'll show you."

He led Caramel toward the island's centre. The total dry land was a little less than a square kilometer, and was mostly solid rock. Luckily, much of this was covered by a layer of sandy earth, which dithered out just above the tide line, but grew thicker toward the middle. From this grew tall bluegrass, broken here and there, where bedrock showed through. Near the island's middle, Caramel heard the babble of flowing water, and hurried ahead to a brackish spring, from which trickled a shallow creek that cut a dark line through the soil on its way to the sea. Ordinarily he would have gagged at its taste, but parched from the brine he had swallowed the night before, he knelt and slurped like an animal.

"Come on," Alex said, when the pony at last rose to his hooves. "I've only looked around half this place."

The duo continued onward, eyes scanning the distance for any sign of salvation. Above the tide line opposite their arrival point, they found a cave, partly sheltered from the wind by an outcropping of worn stone, and barely large enough for Caramel to stand up inside.

"Only enough room for one in here," Alex said. "You take it; I'll turn the boat over and sleep under that."

"You're claiming the one that's not as drafty." Caramel raised an eyebrow.

"Not to be selfish. I don't have fur."

"Hair," Caramel said. "Not fur." He raised no other objection, having slept outdoors before. Besides, if the cave's floor was too rough, he could sleep standing up.

"Well," Alex said a few moments later as they made their way back to the dingy, "this was some maiden voyage, for the first ship built by both species."

"You don't seem bothered."

Alex's brow creased a bit. "Survivor's guilt'll prolly hit once we escape."

A moment of silence passed, before Caramel gave a short, humorless laugh.

"It could have been easier than this," he said. "A unicorn could try some magic. A pegasus could fly for help, and rest on clouds on the way."

"There aren't any clouds."

"Not right now, but..." Caramel's thoughts suddenly turned to a certain somepony. "You know, my marefriend is a pegasus. She's probably worried sick right now. Maybe she's joined the search."

"Well, hope so. If not, that just adds insult to injury."

Caramel shot Alex a look.

"Kay, I know that doesn't help. Anyway, just think about seeing her again, and maybe it'll keep you going."

Caramel decided to change the subject. "So, do we have a plan?"

Before answering, Alex took a long breath through his nose and looked up, as if the sky might yield ideas.

"They'll search during the day. We better crash soon as it's dark, so we're up looking for them, too, first thing in the morning. We'll take half the island each; set off a signal if we see anything."

"You were collecting wood for a fire, right?"

"Not for signaling – for cooking, and in case a cold front comes." Alex brightened slightly. "For signaling, we got flares – a few kinds. There's a locker in the boat. Had a waterproof lighter and a knife, too. No food, though."

"Well, at least there's still –" Caramel was about to point out the grass, when he realized the problem. "– Oh."

"Yeah." Alex looked away, and there was another long pause. "There's seaweed," he said at last. "And maybe crabs or something near shore."

Caramel decided to make a point of not eating when Alex was nearby.

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The next morning, as Caramel approached Alex's side of the island, he heard a tapping of stone on stone. Rounding the last hillock, he saw his new friend squatting over a small pile of flints, using one rock to carve another into a rough spearhead. Beside him lay a completed spear, the head wedged into a crevice in one end of a short, knobby pole, and fastened with thin cloth strips.

"Morning, Mel," Alex said. "What's up?"

"Mel" – short for Caramel, of course, but also a human name. In both cultures, giving someone a nickname was often a friendly gesture.

*Even if you've lost everything else, you can still have friendship,* Caramel mused.

"I just thought I should see how you were doing."

"Fine, fine," Alex said, though the dark semi-circles under his eyes said otherwise. "Still no birds, though." He bit his lower lip, as if wondering how it would taste. "Right now, I could eat a seagull egg raw."

Caramel realized Alex had eaten nothing the previous day, and probably not much the day before.

Alex paused his carving, and held up the nearly completed tool. "Thought I'd try fishing."

"Why the extra spear?"

"In case one breaks – like, if I hit the rocks." Alex knocked one last chip off the new tool, ran his finger along its edge, and began working it into a split in the end of a second shaft. "Lucky there's flint here."

"You seem to know a lot about survival."

"Aw hell, where I grew up, most people knew this stuff." Alex noticed Caramel's quizzical expression. "I had an interesting childhood."

"Well," Caramel said, turning away, "I'll leave you to it, then."

"Hold on a sec."

"Yeah?" Caramel turned back, and saw Alex put the spear down and steeple his fingers. He wondered what the gesture meant, and hoped it wasn't too important.

"Look, uh, don't take this the wrong way," Alex said slowly. "I wanna declare a ban on talking about our personal lives. Actually, we shouldn't talk at all unless it's about surviving or escaping. And keep it brief, too."

"Why?"

"It's a small island; we gotta share it for a while, maybe. We get to know each other too much, we might find out we don't like the company."

"Okay. I guess."

"Good, good. Anyway, I'm glad you dropped in." Alex stood, and gathered up both spears, a knife, and more cloth strips. "I wanna try your side of the island first. Saw a fish jump there yesterday. Think you can watch this side?"

"Of course."

"The flares I gave you – where you keepin' 'em?"

"The cave."

"Good. Mine are in the dingy. 'Kay, wish me luck."

Alex didn't hurry, but plodded steadily – to save energy, Caramel supposed. He hoped Alex wouldn't find the cropped patch of grass, where he had breakfasted. Of course, it might not matter; Alex wouldn't always be able to ignore his misery having no company.

Caramel opened the dinghy locker. Here, in sealed plastic bags, were the flares – three red ones for night, and two smoke canisters for day. He took one of the smokers with him, and made a mental note not to leave it behind somewhere at the day's end. Taking position on a high knoll a short distance from the tide line, he began slowly scanning the distance, left to right to left.

Less than half an hour passed, before Caramel found himself bored. He knew it didn't make sense; after all, this was the sort of misadventure ponies wrote stories about. But with the bare minimum of his needs met, and with nothing to do but scan the horizon hour after hour, occasionally munching a bit of grass, his mind wandered.

Still, he reminded himself, boredom was far from the worst thing out here. If storms in this area were as violent as that last one, and appeared as suddenly as it had, another might leave nothing for searchers to find.

*Why was I even on that lousy ship?* he thought. *I should have just sold that ticket. I should have said, if my marefriend can't go too, neither of us goes. She wasn't keen on me going. How could I have been so selfish? And aren't tickets supposed to come in pairs when you win them like that?*

He rose and began pacing, his legs trying to keep up with his mind. He hadn't gone far, when his hoof came down in a patch of freshly turned earth. In one, two, three places he could see, the sod was crudely ripped from the ground and broken up, and the shallow topsoil stirred around. Caramel stared at the diggings, wondering if he should ask about them.

As he turned away from the holes, the answer hit him: Alex had been looking for worms. Caramel had heard from Ponyville's homesteaders – who sometimes needed to feed carnivorous animals – that worms could be used as fish bait. But Alex had no hooks, and to an omnivore, they could only have one other use.

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By late evening, a scattering of wispy clouds had gathered in the west, and the setting sun lit them up in red, reminding Caramel first of fire, then of blood as the twilight



deepened. Standing comfortably on a stone mound, he gazed upon the heavenly display, almost forgetting his predicament.

From behind him, growing slowly louder, came a rhythmic clink-clink-clink of hardwood meeting stone. He turned to see Alex approaching, carrying one spear and using the other as a walking stick.

"Okay, so..." Alex half-heartedly tossed his spears to one side – Caramel noticed one was missing its head – and half sat, half collapsed on the ground. "Fishing's hard."

Caramel tried to think of some consoling words.

"It's the water," Alex continued. "It bends the light, so the fish isn't where you think it is. Gotta compensate. Still haven't got the hang of it."

"What about seaweed?"

"I looked around. Isn't as much as I thought. Most of it's stringy and tough, like grass. Don't know if I can digest it."

Alex paused to scratch at his scalp, and Caramel noticed blotchy sunburns on his arms and neck, as well as a scab where his lower lip had cracked.

"How long can you last?" As the words left his mouth, Caramel wondered if he was prying too much.

"Couple weeks, maybe. Before then, I'll get to where I'm too weak to do much." Alex grimaced in pain – from hunger pangs, Caramel guessed.

"How long before?"

"I'd known I was gonna get shipwrecked, I'd have looked that up before I left."

Though he knew it made no sense, Caramel felt a twinge of guilt at not sharing his friend's weakness.

"Anyway," Alex said, "meetings in the morning 'n evening are a good idea, in case one of us thinks of something."

"I think I should be the one to make the trip." Caramel expected the starving man would want to save as much strength as possible.

"I appreciate it. Thanks for taking over today. See you tomorrow, right?"

Walking back to his side of the island, Caramel kept his head low and let his tail droop. He hoped Alex wouldn't see through his show of listlessness.

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"Mel."

"Alex."

"How many days has it been?"

"Five."

"Since we got here, or since your first morning?"

"First morning."

"Then it's six days."

*More like five and a half*, Caramel thought.

They had not reconvened in some forty-eight hours. This latest exchange, which began as soon as Caramel got close, made him wonder if he should have waited longer. The last few days' meetings had yielded no new ideas, nor encouraging news.

Not that this surprised him. In stories, castaways always found themselves on islands that, with some effort, yielded at least the bare necessities of survival. Here, a necessity was utterly absent, and no mortal power could change that.

No – that wasn't strictly true. When Caramel approached Alex that morning, he had seen him sitting cross-legged before his campfire, roasting tiny chunks of ugly flesh impaled on sharpened branches. Before their attempt at conversation, he had set them down on a clean stone to cool. Now, he began biting the pieces off their skewers. Each was less than half a mouthful.

"Limpets 'n snails," Alex said, noticing Caramel's curious look. "Not bad. Wanna try one?" He barely forced a smile at his own joke.

Caramel smiled back with as much enthusiasm. His stomach turned a little, at the thought of putting an entire animal in his mouth. Averting his eyes, he noticed a dozen or so broken shells piled downwind of Alex's fire pit. There were no fish bones. He wondered whether there were other shells before, which had been thrown away, or...

"I kinda envy your four legs. I get dizzy sometimes. Have to lean on this." Alex indicated the spear lying to his right.

"Well, I guess... that's what tools are for," Caramel replied lamely. He knew it wasn't the legs Alex envied.

"This goes on, soon you'll be able to carry me easy," Alex went on. "Might have to, if rescue doesn't come soon."

Caramel suddenly noticed Alex's boots were gone.

"What happened to your...?" He pointed a hoof at Alex's threadbare socks.

"Do you really need to know?" Alex suddenly turned toward Caramel, an edge in his voice and a crease of anger on his brow, as if the question compounded some existing annoyance. "I mean..." His manner calmed as suddenly as it had flared, and he forced another joyless smile. "'S not important. Found a good use for 'em."

A few minutes later, as Caramel walked back to his cave, his hoof fell upon an irregular lump covered by a patch of flattened grass. Curious, he pushed the grass aside, uncovering a rubber sole, boot laces, and metal parts. The leather was gone.

Caramel remembered Alex's smile, and thought, as if for the first time, about how sharp human teeth were.

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Caramel couldn't sleep.

Since the last meeting, a thought had percolated in the back of his mind. "Two weeks," Alex once said. But some time before then, he would grow too weak to do much. How long before? A few days? Alex said he didn't know. Was that true? Alex was wiry to begin with, so it couldn't be that much longer.

Not long ago, Caramel would have felt sorry for the starving man. Now, he wondered what the human might do if... although, he would have to live with himself if... but then, desperation often brought out the worst in somepony, or someone.

*Should I try to trick him into admitting it?*

No – ridiculous idea. If the human could do what Caramel suspected, he would already be thinking about it.

Loud in the early morning stillness, there came a sudden expletive, and the clatter of a stone bouncing across bedrock. Caramel's ears swiveled instinctively toward the noises, which came from the right of the cave mouth and a little way down the beach. But if Alex was on the beach, why hadn't Caramel heard his spear tapping against the rocks?

*He's sneaking up.*

The soil outside the cave entrance muffled Caramel's hoofsteps, as he hurried away from the sound, resisting the urge to break into a full gallop. The stone outcropping, which had shielded him from the wind, now blocked the approaching human's view. Some distance from the cave, Caramel crouched behind a boulder and peeked back the way he came.

A cloud moved away from the moon's face, and Caramel saw a lean figure, slightly hunched over but throwing a long shadow, approach from around the outcropping and creep toward the cave, gingerly shifting one foot, then the other. It did not lean on the spear it carried.

Caramel waited until the entrance completely swallowed the human's form, then rose and hurriedly trotted closer to the island's opposite side, stopping when the cave was just out of sight. As he stopped behind a large tuft of grass, a shout broke the silence.

"Hey! Mel! Where are you, buddy?"

*Like I'd fall for that.*

"You okay? Thought I heard you yellin'!"

*Liar. You heard your stomach growling.* Caramel caught himself pawing at the ground, and forced his hooves to remain still.

"Oh, you're off doin' business! 'Kay, I'll wait!"

*Of course you will.*

Caramel considered crouching down, for stealth's sake. But if the hunter came upon him suddenly, he would lose precious seconds rising to his hooves before he could fight or run. The enemy wouldn't wait forever, and Caramel knew he would have to keep ahead, at least for a while.

*You'll have to sleep sometime. Even if you find me first, you've been wasting away. You've got reach, but I've got muscle. One good kick, and something will break.*

Caramel's hooves were louder than human feet. Should he try to trick his hunter, like the hunter was trying to trick him? It might work, but Caramel probably wouldn't get close enough to strike first. He knew he couldn't afford to let that spear hit him even once. The infection would fester.

"You're takin' long enough! Hope you didn't trip and knock yourself out!" There was a short, abortive chuckle from the cave's direction.

Caramel's jaw clenched. *"Don't tell me too much about yourself," you said. If I had, I would gain more of an identity in your mind, and this wouldn't be so easy. So you've been planning at least since then. When I get you, I'll put rocks in your pockets, and the fish will pick your bones clean.*

He considered making a sneak attack right then, but knew the human would be watching for his return.

Suddenly, an idea struck him.

With no time to lose, he turned and quietly made his way toward the enemy's camp. Halfway there, he stopped at the spring, swiveling his eyes and ears in search of danger before taking a few hurried gulps and moving on.

He galloped the rest of the way to the dingy, threw open the locker, and pulled out the five flares within. Between these, and those in the cave, Caramel knew he could spare a couple.

He looked up and saw there were now less stars out, and a noticeable glow now radiated from the east. Was it too bright for a red flare? Caramel decided to set off a smoker too, just in case. The hunter would investigate, and his guard would be down. Or would it, when he saw no rescuers around? Caramel would have to move fast.

For equine use, modern flare sets included two floor mounts with clamps to hold flares steady on the ground. Struggling to keep his extremities from shaking from exertion, Caramel first set up a parachute flare, and, making sure to keep his head away from its trajectory, pulled at its ripcord. With a whoosh, the rocket head shot into the air, and a second later, a bright red starburst pierced the dawn sky's cool colors. It began slowly drifting downward, and Caramel thanked Celestia that the parachute had worked.

In the same way, he then deployed a smoker, backing quickly away to keep from inhaling any of the ensuing billow of orange smoke. A few meters along the shore, the sea had carved a crescent-shaped alcove into the rock, barely deep enough for Caramel to lay in wait. If he knelt down and held his head low, he could just keep the top of his mane out of sight. Once he began his charge, the hunter would hear his hooves on the rocks. He would have to be quick, and rely on his ears to tell him when the hunter was close. He tried to calm his breath, so the noise wouldn't drown out the approaching footsteps.

He waited. Minutes passed – or was it seconds? Caramel looked up to see the smoke drifting slightly to the east as it rose, and he found himself surprised by how long the flare kept releasing its charge. It made sense, of course, as a steady column would be easy to follow from a long distance.

A quiet doubt, which for a while had nagged him from the back of his mind, finally bubbled to the surface of his consciousness. The hunter wasn't wearing boots anymore. His feet would be almost soundless on the rocks. Caramel considered risking a peek from his hiding place, so as not to miss the opportunity to attack. Then the question was rendered moot.

From the flare's general direction, he heard an exclamation in English, and then, in heavily accented Equus, a shout. "Hey Mel! Mel! They saw it! They're coming! Where are ya?"

Caramel's whole body twitched, as he suppressed an urge to jump up and look. Was it another trick? Of course it was – of course. Even in his haste, he would have noticed searchers. Now the predator had given away his position, and would expect his prey's guard to be down. Caramel sprang from the alcove, and began to gallop with all his strength toward the enemy, who was now leaning on his spear with one arm and waving wildly with the other.

Seconds into this last desperate charge, Caramel stopped short. Silhouetted against the last of the morning colors, the new day's sunlight glinting off its silvery hull, was an airship.

Its prow was pointed toward the island.

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A few hours later, Caramel left the galley and headed for the sick bay. In the past few hours, he had received hearty congratulations, hoof-bumps, an honoured guest's tour of the ship, and several heaping plates of hay fries. His cabin, designed for important passengers, included a private shower stall, and for the first time in days, he had no salt residue on his body. The swiftest pegasus on board had volunteered to fly ahead, and send home news of his rescue. Now, with time to himself, Caramel sought to satisfy his curiosity.

Sick bay's only occupant dozed in a bunk. On the bedside table were two half-empty lidded cups, one with water and the other with a protein mix. Alex opened his eyes at the sound of Caramel's hooves.

"Hey, Mel."

"Alex. How are you?" Caramel's resolve faltered slightly. Earlier that day, he had planned to kill this man, and now had come to confront him for trying the same thing. But it was too late to retreat now.

"Bit better," Alex said. "I could walk around, but the ship's doctor insisted – bed rest."

"Well, that's good. Listen – one question."

"One answer."

"When the airship was within sight, you weren't on your side of the island. I had to set off your flares. Where were you, anyway?" Caramel would have brought it up more tactfully, if he hadn't been in the right.

"Hey, I could ask the same thing."

*A little evasive, huh?* Caramel thought. But he only said, "I asked first."

"Fair enough," Alex said, still seemingly calm. "Thought I heard you shouting something, so I went to ask what was up."

"You thought my voice would carry all the way across the island?"

"Silly, right?" Alex shrugged. "Maybe I dreamed it. But I thought, better safe than sorry. Must have just missed you. Guess you went to the ol' watering hole before I got there."

"The spring was right between our camps." Caramel stepped forward, and leaned a little closer to Alex. "I don't know how we missed each other."

"Went on the beach. Smooth rock's easier on my feet than the pointy ends of that bluegrass. Except when I cut myself on that rock, when I was getting close to your cave." Alex indicated the bandaged foot that stuck out from under his bed sheet.

"You took the long way around, when you thought I might be in trouble?"

"Guess I'm not as tough as I thought." Alex made a slightly exaggerated frown. "Sorry 'bout that."

"Why bring the spear?"

"To lean on if I got dizzy again. Duh."

"I didn't hear you calling at all," Caramel lied. "Why didn't you, if you were looking for me?"

"Well, I did, when I saw you weren't home. Not before, though – didn't want to wake you, in case you were asleep and everything was fine. Hey, what's with all the questions?"

"Alex." It was now or never. Caramel leaned forward even farther, and glared into the human's eyes. "If rescue hadn't come, and you were desperate enough, would you have resorted to..." He paused to let Alex's imagination finish the question for him.

Alex stared back for a second, then chuckled a bit, and finally closed his eyes, leaned back his head, and gave a weakened man's best attempt at a belly laugh.

"You're a funny guy, Mel," he said at last.