

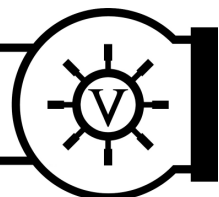
# Of Skies Long Forgotten

The 24<sup>th</sup> Pegasus

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*When I look back on my life, through all the highs and lows, through all the choices I've made, in the battles I've fought and the enemies I've killed; when I see the ashes of a nation, once mighty and proud, now scorched and blackened beneath my hooves, I wonder: in what light will my descendents view me? Will I be a hero to my equines, the one who led them away from destruction so that we may start anew? Or will I be scorned across the generations, remembered now and forever onwards as the pony who stood guard while Cirra burned?*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
22nd of Soaked Plains, 402 After Empire (787 Age of Tribes)

The sun was slowly reclaiming more and more of the sky from the darkness of night. It started with a faint glow to the east, and minute by minute, a tiny sliver of the golden orb pierced the horizon, growing and expanding in luminosity and brightness. The radiant disk finally revealed itself in its entirety, its yellow rays spreading forth across the land and bringing light and warmth to the denizens of the continent.

The sun pursued the fleeing moon, and where there was once darkness, the aura of life fell down onto the planet from the east. The sun's rays glanced off of grassy hills and valleys that defined the terrestrial boundaries of this portion of Earth. The rivers that had etched the valleys out of the ground over the course of thousands of years caught the sunlight as their own personal toy and scattered it before releasing it from the sapphire blues of their waters. High above, lazy cumulus clouds drifted over the land, projecting their obtuse shadows onto the plains below.

The shadows lifted on a quaint settlement built around the hills just to the east of the fertile plains that separated the town and the vast expanse of water that marked the ocean to the west. Several dozen thatched roofs picked up the amber glow of the sun, and the streets began to emerge into the light as the shadows of the houses flanking them on either side retreated to the walls. A lone flag, consisting of a cyan horse's head with open wings displayed on either side against a field of stars in the night sky, twitched gently from its flagpole atop the building in the center of the settlement.

In the fields just beyond the edge of town, the blanket of darkness unwrapped itself from the land and scurried to the west against the advancing light. But a part of the darkness remained, a small figure that walked the fields, towing an iron plow behind it. The

darkness was a stallion, and he paid no heed to the transition from night to day as he worked. The stallion was tall and well-muscled, dragging the plow across the cold earth with ease. His coat was a dark black complemented by a short, pale steel-blue mane and tail. The wings folded against his sides were powerful things, black with a touch of silver at the wingtips. His magenta eyes glinted in the early light, cutting through the remaining scraps of shadow that lingered on the field before him. Adorning his flank was a cyclone, spewing forth a three-tone gray lightning bolt that arched towards the ground below it. The darkness clung to that image as long as it could manage before it was finally spurned away by the sunlight.

The stallion grunted as he reached the end of the field and turned the plow around to start again in the opposite direction. Sweat already glistened on his neck and flanks, but he paid it no mind. He had been working on plowing the fields long before the sun arose, long before any other pony had even stirred from their slumber. His work was his life, and he might as well put all he had into it.

When the sun was halfway to its apex, the stallion unhitched himself from the plow and lay under the shadow of a nearby tree. He pulled a few carrots out of the saddlebag resting against his left side and munched on them pensively. He stretched his wings in slow, rhythmic circles, relaxing the muscles and reconnecting blood flow to the sore limbs. He was momentarily distracted from his thoughts by the squeals of foals playing in the nearby hills. When he finished his breakfast, he walked back to his field and hitched himself up to the plow again.

As he hauled the plow down another swath of field, a pegasus filly came out of the house to his right. The light-brown mare smiled at him and waved a wing, then went to the storage shed behind the house, returning with a basket full of seeds. She began to walk along the fields where he had already plowed, carefully depositing the shells that would give rise to next fall's crops.

By noon the field had been carved up and down its entirety, so the stallion dragged the plow off to the side and unhitched himself from it. He was about to return to the house when a soft flutter of wings alerted him to an approaching pegasus. The dark stallion listened, and by the pacing and pitch of the wing flaps he could tell who it was. He had known this pony since his foalhood.

“Ho, Silver Sword. I was wondering when I'd see you today.” The pony known as Silver Sword possessed a light gray coat that was his namesake. His mane was a darker shade of gray, though interrupted with streaks of silvery hair. The pony was of average height, slightly smaller than the dark stallion who had spoken, but with an equally well-toned

muscular build, the signs of hard work on a farm combined with the regular practice and discipline of training. Silver Sword spent an hour every day training with the weapon that gave him the latter half of his name, and the conditioning was visible in his body. Adorning his flank was an image of a pair of crossed swords, further emphasizing how much enjoyment he found in practice.

“Ho, Hurricane! Done with the fields already, eh?” Silver Sword spoke with much more enthusiasm than Hurricane. Even though the two pegasi were of the same age, the farm work hadn’t managed to dull Silver’s energetic nature, and Silver would be much more likely to be caught zipping through the clouds than Hurricane on any given day. The gray pony was probably cutting his chores right now, Hurricane supposed.

“You know me, I just like to get it over with,” said Hurricane. “And then it means I don’t have to listen to Twister harp on about the colts in town for another few hours.” At the mention of the dark stallion’s sister, Silver Sword waved a wing to the brown mare. Twister acknowledged him with a nod of her head and continued planting the seeds.

“Ah, who is it now? Cold Canter? New Frost?”

“Hard Rain.” Hurricane rolled his eyes as he named Twister’s newest crush.

Silver Sword almost did a double-take. “Hard Rain? Ha! She sure knows how to pick ‘em, doesn’t she?” remarked Silver. Hurricane chuckled in agreement. Hard Rain was the Mayor’s son, and as such he had access to many of the things Hurricane and the rest of the farming families didn’t: money, books, and clothes, any of which Twister would kill for. Hurricane’s family had little in the way of money, a few old books, and one good set of formal attire each for any social events in town they were invited to. Which were many, but they only bothered to attend a few a year.

“I have no doubt about that, Silver. One of these days maybe she’ll actually get serious about her love life and pick a good colt to settle down with.”

“Or maybe one of these days a good colt’ll get it through his head how great your sister is.” Hurricane nodded. Despite his sister’s flirtatious attitude she was very intelligent and hardworking, not to mention beautiful. With her long, black mane and large golden eyes, Hurricane had no doubt that she’d find the right stallion eventually. Unfortunately, despite their father’s prestige, the other ponies in town looked down on her as a simple farm pegasus, and with the social hierarchy anyone marrying down was frowned upon. And Twister knew that she could do better than another farmer’s son.

Silver Sword hummed his agreement, then resumed his usual nature. “Hey I almost forgot, guess what I picked up the other day!” Quickly, the stallion pulled an envelope out of his saddlebag and passed it to Hurricane. Hurricane opened the envelope and looked at the two tickets neatly packaged inside. He smiled and handed the tickets back to Silver Sword.

“You got tickets to the festival? That’s awesome, Silver! I would kill for a chance to go this year.” Hurricane was happy for his friend. Silver Sword had always wanted to go to the capital and attend the celebrations for the nation’s founding. Tomorrow the mighty Cirran Empire would be celebrating four hundred years of its existence, and for the milestone year the parade would be larger, the festivities grander than ever. To be able to go to Stratopolis and partake in the celebration was a once in a lifetime event. Hurricane wanted to go more than anything else, but...

“I know! And I made sure to get an extra ticket while I was at it too. It took a year to save enough bits to get them!” Silver pulled out his nearly empty coin purse for added emphasis. “So, you wanna come with?”

Hurricane shook his head. “I’m sorry, Silver, I really, *really* wish I could come, but I’ve got too many responsibilities here to just head off for a few days.”

Silver Sword was a little crestfallen, but tried to cover it the best he could. “Oh, well, that’s okay. I understand. I’ll just see if I can find someone else who wants to go.” He paused. “How is your father, anyways? He doing alright?”

Hurricane nodded. “He’s doing better now than he was last week, at least. He was actually out of bed when I got up this morning.”

“That’s good to hear. The doctors ever figure out what’s wrong?”

“No. They’ve tried to do what they can, but he’s finding it harder and harder to breathe. Last week he was coughing up blood—just a few drops, but still.” Hurricane sighed. “He’s already fifty-five. I guess such things are just to be expected when you get old.”

Silver put his hoof on Hurricane’s shoulder. “Relax, Cane, he’s led a good life. The Legion’s proud of his service...” Silver’s words trailed off as Hurricane gave him a sorrowful look. “Erm, I mean, I’m sure he’ll get better soon.”

Hurricane walked forward a few steps. Silver hadn’t meant any offense by that; every Cirran knew of the inevitability of death. His friend just tended to speak before he thought about his words. Silver Sword stepped back up to Hurricane. “Hey, if you need

anything, you know I'll always be here for you. Times like these, it's good to have a shoulder to lean on."

Hurricane's stoic expression remained unchanged, but his wings loosened slightly, a sign he appreciated the gesture. "Thanks, Silver. I should be getting some lunch anyways before I have to get back to work. Try not to have too much fun without me in Stratopolis."

"Don't worry, Hurricane, I'm sure you won't be missing out on anything too important." Hurricane glanced at his friend. "Well, I guess, I mean, other than the four hundredth anniversary and such, and—I should probably stop talking now. See you later!"

Hurricane chuckled under his breath as Silver Sword flew off. He never was one with a way for words. The dark stallion scratched his head as he thought to himself. They'd been friends for what, fifteen years now? It seemed like ages ago that they first met at flight camp. He hummed a tune to himself as he gazed out over his hometown, Zephyrus.

The land the town was built on was known for the nearly continuous breeze from the west, thus giving it its name. Unlike the massive airborne cities interspersed throughout the continent, small pegasus settlements like Zephyrus were built on the land. It was much simpler for the pegasi to use materials such as wood and stone to make their homes rather than struggle to collect the massive amounts of cumulus cloud it would take to create even the foundation for the settlement. Projects such as that required the efforts of hundreds of pegasi to put together; Zephyrus' population numbered only about two hundred by comparison.

Flight camp had been a fun experience for Hurricane. It was there that he discovered just how fast he could push himself through the air. During just his second month at camp, Hurricane was already cutting through the skies, tearing wisps of cloud asunder with his great speed and agility. It was at flight camp that he earned his mark and met Silver Sword during one of the "friendly" competitions between youngsters organized by the adults.

How much things had changed since then. Even though he and Silver were as close as ever, with each passing year they gained a wider understanding of the world around them. Life wasn't all sunshine and butterflies as they had believed when they were young. Tensions with the griffons in the east were higher than ever, Hurricane's father was sick, and the population growth in the surrounding area put more pressure on Zephyrus' farming families to produce larger harvests. The fun things in life, like Day of Empire, were becoming increasingly harder to come by. As the dark stallion trotted back to the

house, he tried to convince himself that he wasn't disappointed about not being able to go with his friend. He met with marginal success.

The smell of eggs and bacon greeted Hurricane as he walked into the house. He looked over to the kitchen, where a gray mare was preparing lunch. The mare was around fifty years of age, and her black mane and tail were pierced with streaks of silver hair. She hummed softly as she cooked the midday meal but stopped when she saw Hurricane and smiled, revealing a set of perfect white teeth.

"Smells good, Mom," said Hurricane as he walked up next to the elder mare. Hurricane was several inches taller than her, and she had to reach up on her hind legs to hug him.

"Hiya, Hurricane. Done with the field already?" Hurricane's mother, Raincloud, took the meat off of the stove and deposited it on a plate along with some eggs and lettuce and passed it to him. Hurricane placed the plate on the table and sat down, eager to dig into his lunch.

"Until Twister finally finishes planting the seeds I am." He took a bite of the bacon and let himself become absorbed in the crispy, greasy meat. The pegasus farmers found it difficult to produce enough grain for all of Cirra, so they regularly supplemented their diets with meat and other animal products, much like the predatory griffons to the east. But after pulling the plow for half the day, nothing was better than a warm meal and a cool drink.

As he worked on his meal the door opened again, and Twister trotted into the house. She quickly grabbed her plate and sat down next to Hurricane, devouring her food with a ravenous hunger. Hurricane was amazed at how fast his sister could down a meal.

"You finished planting, Twist?" Hurricane eyed his sister, a smirk on his face.

Twister took a huge bite of her lettuce and spoke around the food in her mouth. "Uh... yeah? Of course!"

Hurricane smiled and turned back to his food, shaking his head. He flicked his sister lightly across the back with his wing. "You didn't really, did you?"

Twister tried to remove the guilty look from her face. "Hey, when I smelled food, I couldn't just stay out there. The hunger was *killing* me!" As if to emphasize her point, she dramatically threw a hoof up to her forehead and leaned back, which caused her to fall out of her chair. Hurricane laughed as she unwound her limbs from between the chair and table and jumped back onto her hooves, annoyed. She tried to hit him behind the

head with her wing, but Hurricane merely ducked under it and poked her under the shoulder, where she was most ticklish. Twister leapt back and angrily hit him in the foreleg before finishing the last of her meal in one large bite and cantering back outside.

Hurricane rubbed his foreleg with a smirk as she stormed out of the door. He very much enjoyed the company of his little sister. He was also very protective of her, a fact that Twister was embarrassed by, though there was little she could do about it. Hurricane had once knocked another colt's lights out when he wouldn't leave Twister alone at a party, and she had stormed off more embarrassed than angry that her brother had to come in and intervene for her.

The dark stallion finished off his food and returned his plate to the sink, where Raincloud washed it off. He was about to head back outside when he heard a quiet cough behind him, followed by the weak clop of a hoof against the wooden floor. Hurricane quickly turned around to see an old black stallion emerging from the hallway. The pegasus' head was stooped and the feathers along his wings were grayed almost the whole way back to the arm. His once black mane was now entirely silver from age. He had a long white scar down the entire length of his left side that ended just before his cutie mark, which was a pair of gray thunderclouds that arced a lightning bolt between them.

Hurricane quickly bowed his head in respect. The older stallion simply advanced and slowly spoke through wheezing breaths. "Up, boy. I don't want your respect. You owe me nothing."

Hurricane rose back up to his normal height. "Father, it's good to see you out of bed!" He walked over to the old pegasus and rested his head across his shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

The old stallion warmly returned the embrace and stepped back. "Better, for today at least. I think I might go for a fly." Hurricane's father weakly flapped his wings and chuckled at their uselessness. It had been many seasons since he last left the ground.

Hurricane laughed as well. "I'd be careful if I were you. If the Legion heard you were flying again they'd want you back for sure."

"Well they'd have to fight to get me to leave my family now. How are you, son? Still plowing the fields?"

"Already done, sir. Twister's out there finishing the planting."



The old stallion shook his head. “If only your sister were as productive as you. Spends too much time with her head in the clouds, that one.”

Raincloud leaned her head around the corner that separated the kitchen from the hallway. “Thunder Gale! You’re just in time. Your lunch is about ready. Maybe I won’t have to clean bread crumbs out of the sheets tonight, since you’re up and about.”

Thunder Gale laughed, a rough and wheezing sound as his damaged lungs panted their air out. “I was getting sick of the ceiling anyways. Figured a change of scenery would do me some good.”

Hurricane helped lead his father over to the table, supporting his weight as the old stallion leaned against him. When his father sat down, he gestured for Hurricane to sit, to which he complied. Raincloud brought over the old pony’s food, and they kissed briefly before she went to go take care of the laundry.

Hurricane watched as his father slowly munched on his meal. The look of sickness still hadn’t left his body, but his eyes shone with an energy he hadn’t had at all in the past month. After taking a long drink of water, Thunder Gale looked out the window to where Twister was finishing up planting the seeds in the ground.

“How is she doing?” Thunder Gale’s eyes were thoughtful as he looked at his daughter. Twister didn’t come and talk to him as much as Hurricane did, so he often relied on Hurricane for news on events in the outside world.

“Twist? She’s doing fine. She still chases every colt in town, but she at least gets her work done.”

Thunder Gale slowly nodded. Then he turned to Hurricane and said, “How about Silver Sword? I thought I heard his voice just a little while ago.”

“Silver Sword’s doing well. He was worried about you, though.”

Thunder Gale dismissed it with a wave of his hoof. “Bah, I’m fine. He should be more concerned about finding a mare, and working on his technique. He still practices, I hope?”

“Every day. When the recruiters come into town next month, he hopes to show them his stuff.”

“Ah, I forgot that the two of you were twenty. That’s good to hear. The Legion would do well to pick him up.” Thunder Gale’s mood suddenly turned pensive. “But there was something else he wanted to talk to you about, wasn’t there?”

Hurricane moved his hooves as if he were actually trying to brush away the topic. “It was nothing important. He just talked about his plans over the next few days.”

Thunder Gale looked out the eastern window, where a patchwork of fluffy white cumulus clouds were congregating on the horizon. “Day of Empire. It is the four hundredth year of the Empire tomorrow, if I am not mistaken.” He cast his glinting steel eyes at Hurricane. “He wanted you to go, didn’t he?”

Hurricane brushed a hoof behind his mane uncomfortably. “Yes, but I told him I couldn’t go. There’s enough work on the farm as it is.”

Thunder Gale shook his head. “That is disappointing. You should go. Such festivities are not to be missed when they are so rare.”

“I couldn’t, I don’t want to have to leave you guys with my chores to perform in addition to what else needs to be done. Especially with your condition—”

Thunder Gale cut him off before he could continue. “Do not worry about me, lad, and do not worry about the farm. There is nothing that waiting a few days will hurt. Besides, you have not gone before, no?”

Hurricane shook his head. “No, father, but I—”

“Then there is no reason for you not to go. Come.” Thunder Gale stood up from the table and slowly limped into his bedroom, Hurricane not far behind. While the elder pegasus looked through the contents of some of his shelves, Hurricane allowed his eyes to wander the room. Old war memorabilia served as the few decorations in the small space. Over the bed hung a dusty sword with a large notch taken out of the center—if Hurricane remembered correctly, the notch came from the spiked helm of a griffon. In the far corner of the room stood a set of black armor edged in gold trim. The left side of the armor was split open from shoulder to flank. Hurricane whistled to himself as he wondered how big the griffon was who cut through that.

Against the near wall was a charcoal portrait of Thunder Gale in his younger days. He stood slightly angled towards the artist, one hoof atop his helmet, which was positioned on the ground. A set of three stars were arranged in a triangle between two open pegasus wings on the shoulder piece of the armor. Gale was a commander in the High Noon War

twenty-five years ago, and until he was wounded the Praetorian was considering accepting him into their ranks. But instead of joining the highest-ranked military officials of the Cirran Empire, Thunder Gale's service was cut short at the battle of Nimbus when he tangled with the griffon responsible for the damaged armor in the corner of the room.

Hurricane turned around just as Thunder pulled an old wooden box out of one of the chests in the room. He opened the box and flipped through the contents, looking for something specific. The box rattled as the numerous medals Thunder Gale had collected from his time in the Legion shook in his grasp, until finally he pulled out an old iron medallion and passed it to Hurricane. Engraved on its surface was Thunder Gale's name, rank, and regiment, hard to see under the oxidized metal but present nonetheless.

Hurricane directed a confused gaze towards his father. "What's this for?" He lifted the iron token and felt its weight.

"My service tag," answered Thunder Gale. "I have no use for it anymore, so I'm giving it to you. Take it to Stratopolis. If my name is still as respected there as it was when I retired, then it should get you through the crowd easier."

Hurricane set the tag down. "Father, I couldn't just leave you here."

Thunder flicked his tail. "Of course you could. I have your mother and your sister for company, and," he stretched his left wing and rubbed at the scar along the arm, "it's not like I'm going anywhere."

Hurricane tried to push the medal back to Thunder Gale, but he wouldn't take it. "But father—"

"I never went to any of the celebrations myself when I was your age, Hurricane, and I've regretted it all my life." He held out the medallion again before his son. "I ask you to not make the same mistake I did."

Hurricane was silent for a moment, then sighed and took the medal around his neck. "If you insist. You're absolutely sure you'll be fine?"

Thunder snorted. "Bah, you sound like your mother. The last thing I need is two of her keeping after me every day." He coughed again, but waved Hurricane off when he tried to support him. "Go, son. For me."

Hurricane hugged his father one last time and helped him settle down in the bed before closing the door and walking out of the house. Twister was already sound asleep under the tree, her wings twitching softly in her dreams. His mother was out putting the laundry on the line alongside the house. Hurricane trotted over to her and said his goodbyes, then flew towards the north to find Silver Sword. Despite all his reservations about the trip, he couldn't deny that he was excited to go. Especially since it was a centennial year, it was bound to be one of the biggest events in Cirran history.

He just couldn't have foreseen how much so.

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*Out of the dust of the Earth, two races rose above the rest  
Griffon and Pegasi, both destined for greatness.  
But greatness for one came as weakness for another  
And the toils of war soon ravaged the land.  
Until one day, the great Roamulus was born  
Wielding Cirra's wrath, he shattered his foes  
And solidified for eternity the Emperor's throne.*

—Excerpt from The Emperor's Creed

“Hurricane, check it out.” Silver Sword’s voice drifted back to Hurricane on the winds as they soared high above the earth. Hurricane shook his head and restarted his brain at Silver’s command. The flight to Stratopolis was a long one, and Hurricane had spent the last hour gliding in his friend’s wake, lost in thought.

Straining his eyes before him, Hurricane peered out into the dim light filtering through the high clouds. At first he saw nothing, just a mass of unremarkable gray cloud. He was wondering if Silver was suggesting that they fly around it, but then he noticed the regularities within the cloud. It was no ordinary thunderhead.

As they parted through more and more of the outer shell of cloud, a magnificent airborne city began to take shape before them. The foundation of the city was a large blanket of stratus and cumulus clouds, stretching out for miles in any direction. At the lowest level of cloud stood hundreds of modest residential homes, mostly one story high, but several with more than one. Set a few blocks in from the edge of the city soared a towering wall made of solid cloudstone, the refined cumulus mortar that pegasi were so adept at working with. The walls themselves raised nearly a hundred feet into the air before ending with weathered watchtowers placed at regular intervals around the city.

Within the walls, two and three story structures arose with the white streets, each more splendid than the last. Pegasi flitted about their daily business in the streets and on the rooftops of these structures, hanging laundry across the streets to dry or perhaps polishing the solid white walls of their homes. The main street that led away from the gate extended for several hundred yards before abruptly opening into a large marketplace. Hurricane could see hundreds of stalls arranged in a series of concentric semicircles around a fountain in the center of the plaza. The merchants advertised their wares to anypony within earshot, hoping to add a few more bits to the day’s profits. The

scale of the whole thing was impressive; Hurricane figured he could nearly fit Zephyrus in its entirety within the single plaza.

Shooting off from the Plaza of the Emperor, as it was called, were a dozen streets angled in nearly any direction. Every other street in the city was connected to one of these twelve roads, stretching out towards the horizon. However, it was the road that led due north and upwards that caught Hurricane's attention.

To the north of the plaza, the tallest district of the city hovered above the clouds spread below it. Impressive buildings of marble adorned the cloud that comprised this section of the city. The fact that actual marble was utilized in the construction of these buildings as opposed to cloudstone lent weight to the observation that it was by far the most important quarter of the city.

Amongst the grand buildings of marble there stood one enormous construction, larger than any other building in the city. The emperor's palace crested the top of the city like a plume on a soldier's helmet. The magnificent construction sprawled across several acres of cloud, rivers of water and rainbow slicing their way down the white material in canals. These canals reached the lower levels of the city before finally pouring their contents through drains, where they plummeted several hundred feet and splashed into a wide lake below.

Hurricane and Silver Sword hovered idly about five hundred yards from the gate as they took in the sights. Since Zephyrus was all they had known their whole lives, they had figured it was the average size of a settlement. The mighty peaks and spires of Stratopolis dwarfed their hometown into a nearly infinitesimally small speck of the Cirran Empire. The seat of Cirran government was a mighty testimony to the Empire's strength.

After the two pegasi had gawked at the impressive capital for what seemed like hours they finally began to move towards the main gate, wingtips quivering in excitement. There in front of the gate were thousands of ponies trying to cram their way into the city through the south entrance. Hurricane thought it odd that they couldn't just fly over the walls and into the city, but a glance to the top walls revealed hundreds of Legionnaires manning the perimeter, turning away pegasi who tried to avoid the crowd. Security sure was high for the centennial year, he thought.

Silver Sword dipped several feet in flight as he groaned aloud. "We have to get through all that?! By the time we get in the parade'll be over!"

Hurricane looked through his saddlebags and pulled out the tag his father had given him. He put the neckband on and held the medal out to his friend. “No worries, Dad gave me the VIP pass. We’ll be through in no time.”

Silver Sword flew up next to the dark stallion and stuck his wing out. “Nice! I knew bringing you along would pay off big time.” The two pegasi clapped wings in midair, then turned towards a small knot of Legionnaires by the wall, Hurricane leading with the medal proudly displayed on his chest.

The lead pony of the cluster of Legionnaires didn’t notice them until they were a dozen yards away, but flew forward to intercept them before they got closer. His iron armor glared in Hurricane’s face as he raised a hoof to stop them.

“All access to the city is restricted to one of the four cardinal gates, traveler. Turn around and get in line like everypony else.” The guard’s gaze wandered as he lazily issued the command. It was obvious he’d had to deal with Cirrans trying to fly over the walls all day.

“I’ve got a pass,” said Hurricane as he pulled the medal off and flipped it towards the guard. The guard clumsily caught it, his ears perking up a little as he read the inscription. His eyes switched from the medal to Hurricane and back again, before he returned the tag and nodded stiffly.

“You’re Thunder Gale’s son, eh? I was just a recruit when he got hurt. Damn shame too, only heard good things about him. He would’ve made a good Praetorian.” The Legionnaire turned back to his companions and lazily waved a hoof at them. “You’re good to go. Enjoy yourselves down there. Wish I could get me some of that Pileus wine from the north while I’m on duty.”

The two young stallions flew towards the walls, where the knot of Legionnaires parted ways to let them pass. They soon set down on the white cloudstone streets of Stratopolis, their hooves making a satisfying clack. Hurricane thought it funny that material made of cloud could be so much like stone.

Silver Sword brushed wings with Hurricane as he walked up beside him. “Magnificent,” was all the gray stallion whispered. The true scale of the city reached them as they stood in Main Street, where the lofty palace seemed to stretch forth to caress the sun between its towers.

Hurricane and Silver Sword slowly began to meander their way towards the central plaza, where the buzz of the marketplace quickly escalated into a dull roar as thousands of Cirrans weaved their way through the stalls, throwing a few bits down here and taking an item there. The two pegasi walked past most of the stalls until they found themselves in the center. They gazed upwards at the towering statue that housed the fountain.

The statue was made entirely of bronze, reaching around forty feet tall. Two armor clad pegasi, wings flared and each holding a spear, hovered on either side of a central pony. The pony in the center bore elaborately decorated armor and its face gazed out over the plaza, stoic expression forever looking south. The pegasus' forelegs were balanced on a bronze spear, the tip impaled in a griffon's throat as it struggled with its dying breaths to break free. Hurricane remembered seeing a depiction of the statue in one of the few years of school he attended in his youth. It was a statue of Roamulus slaying the griffon warlord Haldber during the pegasus unification wars. Roamulus united the tribes under his rule and carved out land for them from Haldber's own territories, thus leading to the creation of the Cirran Empire. It was hard for Hurricane to imagine that this happened four hundred years ago to the day.

After admiring the statue for a time, the pegasi turned north towards the emperor's palace. The parade was due to begin in fifteen minutes, and the benches were rapidly filling up. Hurricane managed to find two open seats near the entrance to the palace estates, where the procession would leave from, heading through the plaza, down Main Street, and out the south gate of the city. Already the Legion was shooing away vendors and merchants from the plaza to clear the path for the parade.

"I can't believe we're actually here! This is going to be the best day ever!" Silver Sword's forehooves left the ground as he fluttered his wings in excitement. Hurricane leaned away from his friend's wings, lightly punching him behind the head when he settled down. Silver Sword hit Hurricane back, then nudged him more gently on the shoulder, pointing several rows down.

Hurricane craned his neck to see what the steel pegasus was pointing to, when he saw it—or rather, them. Three beautiful mares were trying to find a place to sit down, with the parade to begin any moment now. They weren't all that much older than fillies, probably around his and Silver Sword's age. The dark stallion's heart did a backflip. They were much more beautiful than any mare back in Zephyrus. Their bodies were lithe and slender, and based on their complexion it was easy to tell they were from the higher clouds of the city. Two of the mares, a brown one and a light blue one, bore decorative anklets with the Cirran seal printed on them. Hurricane inferred they were probably the daughters of senators. The third pegasus, a manila colored mare, bore no such



adornments, but her light-brown mane and tail were cut relatively short for a female. She also seemed to be the most athletic of the bunch. Hurricane decided the look suited her.

Silver Sword looked mischievously at Hurricane, then turned and whistled at the three mares. The ponies turned their heads towards Silver Sword, who was gesturing emphatically to a bank of open spaces in front of him. Hurricane nervously ducked his head a little as the mares looked his way. The manila mare caught his eye, and he sheepishly smiled at her. She smiled back, a bright and wonderful thing, then exchanged a few quick words with her companions and glided over. The senators' daughters followed in her wake, leaving little doubt as to who was the leader of their trio.

The three mares sat down on the bench in front of the stallions, the manila one placing herself on Hurricane's right side while her friends sat to her left, in front of Silver Sword and his companion. The pony next to Hurricane folded her flawless wings and leaned forward so she could see both Hurricane and Silver Sword.

"Thanks for saving us a seat, strangers! I was worried that we'd have to hover the whole parade." She glanced at her friends, who were busy readjusting their anklets so the Cirran crest faced outwards. "Or at least I would've. I don't think these two could stay aloft for that long." Her voice was strong but young and lively, with a slight hint of warmth in it that made her seem likeable and friendly.

Silver Sword straightened his back into his most gratifying posture as he basked in her praise. "Not a problem at all, miss. Happy to help." He went to flare a wing and show off his feathers, but his shoulder popped loudly, causing him to yelp and tumble off the bench. The two mares closest to him giggled loudly as he clambered back into his seat, trying to hide his embarrassment. Hurricane chuckled quietly and looked back to the mare, who was smirking herself.

"Ladies, I present to you sir Silver Sword, Zephyrus's own comedian in residence." Hurricane ducked under a swipe from his buddy, rapping him across his ribs in return. Silver regained his composure before taking his own jab at Hurricane.

"Well at least a comedian's better than a workaholic. Seriously ladies, Hurricane here's no fun, all work all the time. He'd make as interesting a date as some of those clouds over there." Silver Sword gestured gravely to the sky at a passing wisp of cirrus cloud, recoiling when Hurricane tried to clip him with his shadowy wings.

The manila mare smiled sincerely at Hurricane. "Where I'm from, nothing is more appreciated than a hard worker." She held her hoof towards the stallion, and he shook it

gently. “Name’s Swift Spear, though you can just call me Swift.” She angled her wing up a bit to reveal her cutie mark, an image of a curved spear with a ghostly crescent trailing the tip to simulate motion.

The image apparently caught Silver Sword’s attention, as he leaned forward towards her. “You train too? I didn’t think any mares would be interested in the Legion in today’s age.” Silver Sword showed his own image to Swift, to which she nodded approval for.

“Not many do, but when your father’s Commander Gold Feather, there are certain things expected of you.” Swift shrugged her shoulders. Hurricane and Silver Sword both nearly fell over.

“Your father’s... Commander Gold Feather? The Praetorian Imperator?” Hurricane was stunned. Praetorian Imperator was the highest-ranked military official short of the Emperor himself. The entirety of the Praetorian was at his command, and he was tasked with personally escorting the Emperor wherever he went. Hurricane couldn’t believe that Swift didn’t seem to care that much about it. She seemed to pick up on his thoughts.

“What, you’re wondering why I’m not up in the palace or something? Frankly I don’t care for all the political bull the senators hurl my way.” She looked introspectively off into the distance for a few moments before continuing. “My father’s shadow has impressive weight to it. Sometimes I just want to get away from it all, so I spend time training or wandering about downtown.”

Silver Sword nudged Hurricane’s shoulder. “Sounds like you two have a lot in common then! Hurricane’s father was Commander Thunder Gale, the legendary tactician who led the defense of Nimbus. Well, before he got hurt that is.”

Hurricane glanced at his hooves uneasily. “I haven’t had to deal with the same attention out in Zephyrus. At least the ponies there treat us like any other farming family, even if father does lead the parade on armistice day every year. When he’s feeling well, that is.”

Swift’s face quickly transitioned into genuine concern. “He’s sick? Does his wound bother him?”

Hurricane shook his head. “No, the only thing his wound did was rob his ability to fly, or at least fly for more than a few hundred feet. He’s just getting old I guess, and his lungs are giving out on him. The doctor didn’t think he’d make it more than a year.”

Swift gazed sadly with Hurricane across the street, solemnly nodding her head. “I’m sorry. How long ago was this?”

Hurricane snorted. “About two years ago. Thunder’s a stubborn sonuvabitch, I’ll give him that. Though he has been getting weaker.” He sighed. “Oh well, some things can’t be helped, and if there’s anything dad hates more than griffons it’s ponies lamenting for him.” Hurricane looked away towards the other two mares, who were enthusiastically chatting with Silver Sword. They were talking about tales of ponies without wings or with horns instead of wings that lived far across the ocean. Hurricane thought the notion preposterous. If they didn’t have wings, how could they ever survive in such a harsh world? Cirra’s strength was its ability to manipulate weather and communicate across vast distances in a matter of days, as well as building cities and fortifications high above the lumbering predators that walked the land. The griffons hadn’t mastered those concepts, not yet at least, and that was why Cirra had been so successful against their barbaric society for four centuries. Plus, he didn’t see what good a horn would be in a fight. They had swords for that, right?

His thoughts were interrupted as the fanfare of trumpets silenced the crowd. By now tens of thousands of ponies jammed the stands alongside the streets. Still more hovered in midair, kept back at a safe distance by Legionnaires on clouds floating just around the edges of the road. A platoon of archers watched over the surrounding area.

Every pegasus suddenly rose to their hooves as the Cirran standard emerged from the gates, shouldered by a young private and followed by twenty additional Legionnaires. A Cirran commander in onyx armor with golden trim led the standard down the streets, head raised high.

The cheering that poured down from the stands was deafening. Hurricane pressed his ears flat against his head as the noise threatened to shatter his skull from within. He had thought the thunderstorms in Zephyrus were loud, but the voices of thousands of enthusiastic Cirrans were much worse. This day was teaching Hurricane just how small his world was.

Following the standard bearer were another five thousand Legionnaires marching in full armor. Their crest identified them as the 18th Cirran Legion Regiment, and they marched with iron heavy armor. One large sword adorned each flank, complemented by a large, rectangular shield mounted on their backs.

“Heavy infantry. Father enlisted with them.” Hurricane turned to Swift Spear, who was watching the parade nonchalantly. Although her perked ears belied her interest in the parade, her dull tone revealed that she was all too familiar with the structure of the Legion.

“How can you tell?” Hurricane was rather embarrassed that he didn’t know more about the Legion, especially considering the prominence his own father once had. But then again, he never planned on joining the Legion himself.

Swift pointed towards the shields on their backs. “It’d be pretty hard to fly with that over your wings, don’t you think? The heavy infantry is tasked with doing the dirty work on the ground. Griffon settlements aren’t built in the sky like ours, after all. And as long as other elements of the Legion provide the air support for you, you can whittle away at earthbound targets.”

Hurricane nodded as the next regiment came out. These ponies were much more lightly armored, the iron only covering their backs and chests. Their helmets were made of a sleeker material and construction, and the edges of their wings were adorned with scaly rows of iron plates, each one honed to a razor sharp edge. Hurricane could see the joints along the plates that allowed them to flex with the wing.

“I suppose they provide the air support?”

“Yeah, though they get less protection than the heavy infantry. It would seem a weakness, but it plays to our advantage. Pegasi aren’t strong fliers, at least not when compared to griffons. A griffon will outfight you in face-to-face combat any day of the week, but they’re slow and cumbersome, especially when clad in armor. We use our natural agility to our advantage in the sky. Also, the wingblades protect your wings from being broken and allow you to have a lethal weapon when fighting. After all, it is pretty hard to use a sword without solid footing.”

Several more regiments of pegasi passed before them, some mixes of heavy and light infantry, others made entirely of archers. After the modern military regiments passed Hurricane and his friends, there was a pause before the next group reached them. These ponies numbered far fewer, only two or three hundred, and they were clad in old armor reminiscent of Cirra’s early days. Hurricane realized that they were the first of the procession that recounts the Empire’s history every year. Despite the militant nature of Cirran society, the organizers of the parade still knew how to put on a good show for the crowds.

Hurricane watched as Cirra’s timeline unraveled before him. In the beginning, the pegasus tribes were disparate groups, united only in a common squabble for land and resources. The neighboring griffon conglomerate was strong, and the tribes were hard pressed to defend themselves.

Then, the spark that would begin empire was born. Roamulus hailed from the tribe of Cirra, and with age he became a natural leader. After ascending to claim rule of his tribe, he slowly assimilated the neighboring groups into his empire, using diplomacy and force. Eventually the griffon warlord Haldber, feeling threatened by Cirra's growing strength, moved to crush the fledgling nation before it could unite the rest of the pegasus tribes under its hold.

However, Haldber's move backfired, and though his armies made swift progress in the first months of the war, the remaining pegasi joined Roamulus in his struggle and added their weight to the brawl. The scales slowly began to tip in Roamulus' favor until the battle of Feathertop Mountain, where the pegasus surrounded Haldber's forces and killed every last one, including Haldber himself. Cirra was now master of the western lands of the continent of Dioda, and Roamulus became the first emperor of the new Cirran Empire.

For the next three hundred years, Cirra slowly expanded their borders, fighting for and claiming more and more lands from their griffon neighbors. Cirran might remained unchallenged for the better part of four centuries, until the griffons savagely fought back twenty-five years ago in what became known as the High Noon War.

The griffons organized their collective city-states into one nation for their protection from continued Cirran hostility, creating the empire of Gryphus. Cirra struck fiercely at the nation in a sort of reversal of history from four centuries prior. The griffons were resilient however, and under the leadership of Emperor Bizmack they pushed their pegasus enemies back into Cirran lands. With the griffons now on the offensive, Cirra's then-emperor Julius Haysar scrambled to find some way to turn the tides of war. After drafting nearly every stallion aged eighteen to twenty-five within the holds, the Emperor gave his commanders a simple two word order: Stop Bizmack. The commanders were then turned loose into the field with their troops, with Haysar trusting that they were competent enough to coordinate the counterattack while he personally organized the defense of Stratopolis.

After many months of fighting, Haysar's trust in his commanders paid off at the battle for Nimbus. Thunder Gale, who was in charge of the defense of the city, withstood a seven week siege by Bizmack's forces until another Cirran army could break the siege. From then on the griffons were on the run as Cirran troops marauded through Gryphus, turning the earth into scorched wastelands. Finally, nearly a year after the war began, Bizmack surrendered and stepped down from the throne. Cirra had been indecisive about how they wanted to punish Gryphus, ultimately settling upon breaking the nation

down into small occupied zones and forcing them to pay tribute to Cirra on a yearly basis. Thus Cirra's control of Dioda spread from the west to the east.

As the last of the regiments representing the High Noon War passed by, there was a lull in the procession as the trumpets delivered a fresh burst of fanfare. Everypony leaned out to take a look down the gates, straining to see into the shadows beyond. Suddenly, a small procession emerged to much applause by the ponies lining the streets. The procession consisted of sixteen armor-clad pegasi that marched their way down the street, five in the front and back and two on either side. All of the ponies were clad in the black and gold armor of commanders, save the two pegasi in the middle of the procession.

The one on the left had jet-black armor with white trim along the edges, and he swapped a few brief words with the pegasus next to him. His solid white coat, black mane and tail gave way to an impressive set of golden feathers on each wing. Swift Spear jumped to her hooves and saluted as her father walked past. Commander Gold Feather glanced quickly in her direction and raised a wing towards his daughter, holding it aloft a few seconds before returning it stiffly against his side. About a hundred star-struck fillies in the stands thought the gesture was for them, and Hurricane placed his hooves over his ears to try and block out the shrieking.

The other pony on Gold Feather's right side hardly seemed to notice the crowds around him. His armor was a magnificent blend of iron and gold, with a red robe that draped over his left shoulder. His mane and tail were cut short, black tufts of hair against an olive drab coat. A wreath of solid gold crafted in the likeness of pegasus feathers around his head gave away his status. Everywhere Emperor Augustus Haysar passed, hundreds of Cirrans bowed down in awe at their magnificent leader.

Silver Sword let out a shout of excitement as he rose from his bow. "Emperor Augustus! *The* Emperor Augustus! I never thought I'd see him in person!" Hurricane leaned forward to try and watch the emperor as he passed. There certainly wasn't a single pony in the world who could command the respect of his citizens in such a manner.

Hurricane watched the emperor descend down the street when he heard whispers behind him. He turned to look when a cloaked figure roughly pushed past him, making its way towards the front of the stands. "Excuse you..." Hurricane muttered to himself, looking towards the ground. Then he saw the figure's hooves.

Or rather, lack thereof.

In place of hooves, a set of scaly talons flicked out from under the lengthy cloak, disappearing just as quick. Hurricane gasped as the figure navigated its way closer to the front of the stands, closer to the emperor.

“Griffon! Guards! Guards!” Hurricane shouted out at the top of his lungs as the figure reached the edge of the stands. The alarm was soon picked up by several other pegasi in the crowd, and the Legionnaires above quickly swiveled their heads to locate the cause of the distress. A terrified shriek rang out as the griffon threw off his cloak and streaked towards the emperor as fast as he could, a jagged dagger clenched in his talons. The stands erupted with panic as the situation escalated. The Praetorian Guards accompanying the emperor quickly shifted to face the oncoming attacker. But suddenly, several other griffons burst out of the stands on either side and rushed the group, now trapped in the streets. Hundreds of terrified Cirrans shot out from the benches in all directions, hindering the Legionnaires’ ability to join the fight.

There was a flash of movement at Hurricane’s side as Swift Spear jumped into the air. Her intentions were clear, and Hurricane nearly fell over as he stretched to bite onto Swift’s tail before she could join the fight. The additional mass caused the mare to plummet back into the stands, where the two pegasi tangled with each other.

“Get off of me!” shouted Swift, thrashing beneath Hurricane’s powerful grasp. “My father—”

“Will be fine,” grunted Hurricane, clenching his teeth as the mare bucked him in the chest. “You don’t have a weapon, they’ll cut you apart!”

“I don’t need a weapon! I can do some damage without one!” Swift gave another powerful surge of her hind legs, nearly taking Hurricane into the air with her before they collapsed again. Only as a result of years of heavy labor on the farm did Hurricane have the strength to keep her contained.

At this point the standoff between the griffons and pegasi ended abruptly. The first of the assassins let loose a terrible yell and collided with the nearest Praetorian, attacking with a deadly combination of beak, claws, and daggers. The Praetorian Guard, though caught off balance, quickly countered the flurry of blows, striking back with their own swords whenever possible. In the confusion of battle the first griffon, the one that Hurricane identified, leapt up to the Emperor and struck at him.

Although at first it seemed like the blade was going to connect with the Emperor’s throat, the pegasus rolled to his side, striking a glancing blow off of the assassin’s shoulder. The

griffon staggered but was quick to counter, scoring a hit across Haysar's face with his unarmed hand. The blood from claw wounds dripped off of the Emperor's cheek, but the drab coated pegasus snarled and lunged forward, tackling the griffon. The two figures tumbled several feet until the assassin was hurled through the air, striking his back against the ground before his open wings could right himself.

The assassin went to pick up his dagger from the ground, but an arrow glanced off of the cloudstone road mere inches from his outstretched hand. The griffon looked up and saw that the skies were relatively clear and the Legion was descending into the street. The main knot of fighting had broken down into a few scuffles as the last of the griffons tried to fight off the Praetorian. Several dead bodies, griffon and pegasus alike, littered the streets.

The griffon turned to fly off, but Haysar was faster. In an instant he had gripped the griffon's dagger in his mouth and hurled it at the fleeing hybrid. The blade lodged itself deep in his right wing, and the griffon tumbled out of the sky, impacting the ground with a dull thud.

The would-be assassin tried to get up and flutter his wing, but the bone was locked in place by the dagger. Before he could move farther, the Emperor had his own sword to the griffon's neck, a blood-soaked Gold Feather at his side. Other than the white stallion's panting, he appeared unharmed.

In the stands, Swift Spear had broken loose from Hurricane's grasp with the aid of a well-placed buck towards his groin. She clambered down to the edge, ready to join the fight if necessary, but saw that it was already over. To her relief, Gold Feather was on his hooves, and nodded to his daughter that he was alright. The mare let out a tense breath and sat on the stands, watching. Hurricane stumbled over to her and sat down, gasping for air with a hoof over the afflicted area. Swift turned her gaze away from him pointedly.

Haysar had taken his sword away from the griffon's neck and jammed it sharply into the griffon's shoulder, causing him to yell out in pain. When he spoke, his voice was like a smoldering fire, monotonous but charged with hidden energy and malignity.

"What did you hope to achieve by coming here, crossbreed? To kill me? You should have known that here only death awaits your kind." Hurricane's blood turned to ice as he heard the Emperor's chilling tone. Before the fight, the Emperor passed by a good forty feet in front of him. Now that the fighting was over, he found himself within spitting distance of the powerful figure.



The griffon merely chortled with a laugh that seemed borderline insane as he spoke with his thick Gryphon accent. “You are smarter than they tells us you would be, yes. My only regret is that I could not have sunk Atreia into your neck.” The assassin looked almost lovingly at the weapon lodged in his wing, as if to forgive it for preventing his escape.

Haysar was unmoved. He pushed his blade further into the griffon’s shoulder, eliciting a sharp cry of pain as well as a twisted smile from the creature before him. “You will tell me who it is that sent you and your companions here.” Augustus flicked his tail disgustedly at the bodies of the other assassins behind him. “And only then, when I am satisfied with your answers, you have my permission to die.”

The griffon spit into Haysar’s face. “Foolish pony. I welcome pain! Magnus has already taught me its true meaning!”

The Emperor pushed the blade even farther into his defeated opponent’s shoulder. The scraping of steel against cloudstone could be heard from under the griffon’s body. “Then we will redefine it for you.” Haysar released the blade and turned towards Gold Feather. “I want this griffon bled dry of any information he carries. Find out his name, residence, motives, anything that we can make sense of.” Haysar began walking towards his palace, wiping the blood off of his face with a hoof. He turned back to Gold Feather one last time, his wounds still dripping. “And find out who this Magnus is.” Then he turned and disappeared into his estates.

Gold Feather rubbed a hoof over a wound on his foreleg before barking an order to two of the Praetorians still standing. The soldiers saluted and grabbed the babbling assassin, dragging him down to where Stratopolis’ dungeon lay. After one last glance at his daughter, the Praetorian Emperor paced away after the Emperor.

“I could’ve taken them,” muttered Swift Spear angrily to the sweating Hurricane beside her. “Just because I have a mark for the spear doesn’t mean I need one to kill a few of the bastards.”

Hurricane sat up, having managed to suppress the pain he felt. “If your father’s the Emperor, I don’t think he needs assistance.” He took a deep breath, glad that the dizziness was starting to leave him. “If anything, your presence might have distracted him from the battle. He could’ve gotten hurt much worse than he was.”

Swift stood up and fixed a piercing glare on the black stallion. “I know much more about combat than you, Hurricane, so don’t try to lecture me.” She turned away, light wings

spread under the sun. “It was a pleasure meeting you,” she remarked sardonically before flying away.

Hurricane watched her figure disappear towards the palace, becoming a thin form against the bright sky. There was a flutter of wings at his side, and Silver Sword landed next to him, panting.

“There you are! I thought I lost you in the panic after the griffons showed up. Were you here the whole time?” Hurricane nodded his head slowly in response. Silver’s expression turned serious. “I saw the Emperor walking back to the palace on my way back here. Anything important happen?”

Hurricane shook his head and mumbled “nothing” before turning back to look towards the high cloud again. He couldn’t help but feel like something important to him flew off in that direction not too long ago. But then again, he’d never had that feeling before, so he wasn’t sure.

With one last solemn glance, Hurricane took to the air and began to fly out of the city, Silver Sword not far behind. It had certainly been a day to remember, but not in the way anypony could possibly have imagined.

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*Whenever the might of Cirra is contested,  
Whenever those who would seek to cause harm to my friends, family, and emperor strike  
us,  
Whenever the thick clouds of war cover my land,  
I will stand in the face of such terror  
And together, a million strong, we will fight the enemy hoof and feather  
Ceasing only when it has been driven back into the abyss,  
Or my blood stains the skies of my homeland red.*

—The Cirran Oath

The grindstone hissed as it reshaped the iron pressed against its surface. A stream of glowing, amber sparks cascaded downwards from the dull metal as the stone trimmed its edges into neat razors. The sparks tumbled along the air currents for a mere second before they eventually fell into the dirt and died out. Thick and dusty sunlight pierced through the window in the barn.

The axe was raised from the stone and held against the sunlight, sharply slicing through the dust and sending it scurrying away from the blade. Hurricane squinted as he examined the blade, a circle of light hovering over his eye as it sifted through the hole in the axe head. Satisfied that the tool was sharp enough, the pegasus lowered it and strapped the axe across his back. He lifted himself from the grindstone and sauntered out into the sun, raising a wing against the sudden clarity in its glare as he escaped the dusty structure.

It had been two weeks since Day of Empire was cut untimely short by the attempted assassination of the emperor. In an instant the joyous festivities were forgotten about and the mood of the nation plunged into one of apprehension and worry. Rumors of violence along the Gryphon border trickled across the nation, although the official messenger pegasi from Stratopolis had said nothing of the news. Regardless, the threat of war was the first thing on everypony's mind but the last thing anypony wanted to hear.

As Hurricane passed by the house he saw Twister applying a new coat of paint to the wooden construction. As was usually the case whenever Twister was in charge of repainting the house, hardly half of the building was painted but nearly all of the filly was colored white. She was trying hard not to gag on the soaked brush handle as she moved it in slow lines up and down the side of the house. Hurricane tried to suppress his laughter

as he trotted by, but Twister's ears perked up and she turned towards him, obviously annoyed.

"What are you lookin' at, featherhead? Can't you see I'm trying to work?"

Hurricane's lip twitched as he fought to keep a straight face. "Honestly, Sis, I can't tell if you're painting the house or if the house is painting you. Are you sure you know how to use a brush?"

Twister's face contorted and she shook her body vigorously, flinging loose drops of paint everywhere. The white paint struck Hurricane's black coat despite his best efforts at avoiding it, and he cursed as he tried to rub the stain out. His sister spat out the brush, and the corners of her mouth twisted upwards in a smile.

"You deserved that one. Next time I'll gladly let you paint the house while I split firewood." Twister bent down and picked up the brush as gingerly as she could, trying to avoid the most paint-laden area. She shuddered as she tasted the foul material and went back to painting.

Hurricane lingered another few seconds before asking, "Hey I'm going into town today, you need me to get you anything?"

Twister looked over her shoulder before going back to painting. "Yeah, some mouthwash would be *reeeeal* nice about now. Maybe some toothpaste too."

Hurricane chuckled and shook his head before flying off. At least Twist wasn't in a somber mood like the rest of town, even though she was only sixteen and hardly cared about national affairs.

After a few minutes of leisurely flying, Hurricane descended into the town. After the vibrant atmosphere of Stratopolis, Zephyrus was rather slow and collected by comparison. The urban cityscape was hectic and unpredictable, but out in the country life progressed at a relaxed and reasonable pace.

As his hooves thudded onto the packed dirt road, Hurricane noticed that there were far fewer ponies in the market section of town than there should be for this time of day. He saw a few foals scurrying around a corner towards the center of town, and he followed, curious. Gathered around a raised platform, the majority of the population of Zephyrus looked up to a group of equines that stood surveying the crowd. Hurricane recognized the town's imperial messenger, Arched Wing, and standing behind him was a squad of Legionnaires. Hurricane cocked his head to the side. Arched Wing never had anypony

else with him when he read the news from the rest of Cirra. He paced closer as the messenger began to speak.

“Citizens of Zephyrus! I come to you with an urgent proclamation from the Emperor and the senate!” The crowd murmured softly to itself as Arched Wing broke the seal on a letter he removed from his saddlebags. Spreading it out on the pedestal, he loudly cleared his throat and began reading.

“A proclamation by His Magnificence, Emperor Augustus Haysar, 19th of First Seed, year Four Hundred After Empire. In pertinence towards the attempted assassination of our Emperor during the quadricentennial celebration of the famed holiday Day of Empire, the senate began investigations into the nature of the crime. Over the past two weeks, we have been gathering information on the situation, and now we are ready for action.

“This is what we have learned: that per order of the newly founded Kingdom of Gryphus, assassins were deployed towards Stratopolis to eliminate the Emperor in preparation for an offensive against the mighty Cirran Empire; that, despite the failed assassination attempt, our griffon subjects have begun limited combat operations along our eastern territories; that immediately prior to the assassination attempt, Archduke Ottgam Magnus of Angenholt, an outspoken anti-Cirran, was appointed emperor of the Kingdom of Gryphus; and, that our governors of the lands of Gryphus, installed after the High Noon War twenty-five years ago, have either been killed or have fled the nation. The Cirran Empire faces a wide-scale rebellion in its griffon territories to the east, and has decided to respond with force.

“In light of these events, the Emperor has ordered that every able-bodied stallion between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five be drafted into the Cirran Legion. It is the hope of the senate and the Emperor that the rebellion may be crushed by the uninhibited might of the Cirran Empire, putting an end to the turmoil in the east before winter. Every Cirran eligible for the draft shall report to their town hall by the end of the day and make the flight towards Stratopolis to begin training.”

Arched Wing set the message down on the pedestal and looked gravely out over the shocked crowd before him. There was absolutely no noise in the entirety of Zephyrus. Even the winds were still. A foal cried out from the congregation, and its mother tried her best to hush it. Suddenly, the crowd was released from its icy grip and the ponies dispersed in every direction, heads slightly lowered and whispering quietly with their companions.

Hurricane felt pegasi brush past him on either side, but he didn't see them. His gaze was fixated on the pedestal, still trying to take in what he had heard. *War... Draft...* His thoughts arranged themselves into a legible manner, and he realized the full implications of the order.

Cirra was at war with Gryphus, and he was going to be drafted.

Hurricane rocketed towards his house, almost colliding with Twister as she rounded the corner. His sister stumbled back, and she cast glaring eyes at her older brother. "What was that for? Don't see what's the big rush, Cane."

Hurricane panted. "Where's father?"

Twister angled her head to the side, confused. "Father? Inside where he always is. Hey, what's the matter? Did something happen?" The filly pushed herself closer towards Hurricane, concern filling her paint-streaked face. Hurricane shakily nodded, his feathers jutting outward as his mind raced.

"Tell you about it later," he mumbled. The stallion pushed by Twister, making his way into the freshly painted house. Twister scratched her mane with a hoof and followed him in.

Inside, Hurricane found his father sitting in his favorite chair, looking out at the thunder clouds gathering to the west. It looked to be a mighty storm, and it lent the room an atmosphere of solemn anticipation. His father turned around when he heard the door close, and the beginnings of a smile that had started to form on his face disappeared when he saw Hurricane's nervous expression.

"Hurricane? I didn't think you'd be back so soon. What is it, my boy?" Raincloud walked into the room shortly after Thunder Gale finished speaking. Hurricane looked over his family and took a deep breath.

"Arched Wing came today with news from Stratopolis. Cirra's gone to war with Gryphus." Hurricane looked at his hooves, wondering how to pass on his next statement. But he didn't need to. Thunder Gale rose from his seat, his weak joints cracking as he stretched the limbs to their full length, and walked over towards Hurricane. His expression told the family the rest of Hurricane's unspoken message.

"Oh no..." Raincloud put a wing to her face, tears starting to form in her eyes. She sadly walked over to Hurricane and embraced him, warm moisture dripping from her cheeks into Hurricane's mane. Twister was bewildered, and she looked from Hurricane to

Thunder Gale to Raincloud and back again. Thunder Gale slowly raised a wing and laid it across Raincloud's back, whispering soft words into her ear.

Hurricane felt the tidal wave of emotion build up within him and sweep over him like a storm. With a choked cry, he collapsed into his mother's arms and lay there, trembling. He felt Thunder Gale massage his back gently with a hoof, and he unfolded his wings limply by his sides.

He heard a voice that sounded like Twister's from afar. "What happened? Mom, what's wrong?" There was a slur of words from Raincloud that passed over Hurricane's head, something about how he was going to be drafted because of the war. There was a startled gasp from Twister, and then she was silent.

After what seemed like hours, Hurricane gently pulled himself away from his mother and wiped the last tears from his eyes. Raincloud stood back against Thunder Gale and held herself, sniffing. Twister was staring dejectedly towards the far table leg, shaking as she grieved inwardly. Hurricane walked over and pulled her close, feeling his sister's soft coat melt into his. She hugged him tightly and looked up into his face.

"Promise me you'll come back, okay?" she squeaked, large eyes looking into his. Hurricane could hardly bear to see the sadness in her beautiful golden eyes, and he stroked her slowly behind her ears.

"I promise you, Twist, I'll be safe." The dark stallion looked over at his parents, who stood watching him solemnly from a few feet away. "Take care of Mom and Dad while I'm gone. They'll need you more than ever."

Twister nodded her head, trying to smile through her tears. After one last embrace, Hurricane let go of his beloved sister and gathered the few items of value from his room. He stepped outside with his family and began the long walk back into town.

It took them nearly an hour to reach town, as Thunder Gale's condition kept him slow on his hooves. By the time they got there, there was already a small knot of young stallions gathered around a group of Legionnaires, who were taking names in giant scrolls.

Hurricane turned around to look again at his family. His mother ran up to him one last time and embraced him, though this time there were no tears.

"Be strong, Hurricane. Know that we love you, and I will pray for you every day. Please be safe."

Hurricane looked into his mother's longing eyes, and he knew she was trying to be strong for him. "I know you do, Mom. I love you too. I'll come back alive, you can count on it." His mother stepped back towards his father and nodded her head.

Twister approached him next. "Kill some griffons for me, will ya?" His sister's shining eyes betrayed the emotion she concealed with her humor. He smiled at her and tousled her mane with a hoof.

"Heh, I won't let any by me, Sis. Talk to Dad more often. He misses your company, and he'll miss mine too."

As Twister returned to her mother, who rested a wing across her shoulders, Thunder Gale slowly approached his only son. His voice was soft, but undeniably clear.

"I never wanted this for you, Hurricane. I fought so that my children would one day see peace. But all I've done is advanced the game a few steps down the line. I wish with all my heart I could take your place, but I can't. Whenever times seem tough, whenever things are at their worst, remember who you're fighting for. Twist, your mother, your friends, maybe even one day your children. You're a strong stallion, Hurricane. I know you'll be just fine."

Hurricane looked at his father and was surprised to see tears in the old pony's eyes. "Thank you, father, it means a lot. I'll be back before you know it. Maybe we'll have a story or two to compare?" Hurricane chuckled uneasily, and his father merely looked at him sadly.

"Stay strong, Hurricane, but remember there's no weakness in tears," the elder stallion looked towards the skies, where the first raindrops began to fall. "Emotions make us proud pegasi, more than just mere soldiers told to live and die for the Empire. Now go, son, with my blessing."

Hurricane smiled meekly at his father and slowly began to walk towards the draft officers. When it was his turn in line, he gave them his name and age, and was directed over to where the draftees from Zephyrus were standing. There were about three dozen ponies in the group. Hurricane saw Silver Sword standing off to the side and walked over to him. The two pegasi brushed wings but were otherwise silent.

The rains came down harder, and many of the onlookers scrambled for cover under buildings. The draftees merely stood out in the open for another fifteen minutes until the Legionnaires assembled around them and directed the young stallions skywards. The



platoon rose higher into the sky against the beating rain and began to fly to the north. Hurricane glanced one last look behind him and saw his father still standing out in the middle of the streets, despite his family's insistence on moving somewhere dry.

Then a curtain of stratus clouds closed around him, and Zephyrus was gone.

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*If I am to lose a wing, then so be it;  
It is much better to sacrifice the skies for my country than to fly against it with two.  
If I am to lose a leg, then so be it;  
It is much better to be crippled for my country than to stand against it with perfect health.  
If I am to lose my life, then so be it;  
It is much better to die for the glory of the Empire than to live a coward.  
Before the Legion there was nothing,  
And after the Legion there will be nothing.*

—The Legionnaire’s Oath

The world spiraled around Hurricane, the ground taking the place of the sky before it was chased away just as fast by the gray clouds. He felt the leading feathers of his left wing drag across the mud before flinging a few drops of muck skyward, his shoulders completing another rotation. With a grunt, the air was forced out of his lungs as his body collided with the soggy ground and his face dragged in the filth, blinding him.

Behind him, a severely dark blue pegasus lowered his hind legs onto the ground, looking scornfully over his gold-trimmed iron armor at the crumpled figure behind him. After pausing for a second, the soldier walked over to Hurricane, who was still recovering his breath on the ground. One wing was splayed out behind him, the other draped over his chest.

“On your hooves, recruit! I don’t know what kind of shit you wallow in back on your farm, but this soil’s far too dignified to have your sorry coat moaning in it!” Three twisted, arched feathers stacked atop each other on the pegasus’ shoulder piece glowed softly in the dreary gray light filtering in from above.

Hurricane grunted as he pushed himself to his hooves, resting on his hindquarters as he wiped the mud off of his face and helmet. He fiddled with the grime on the red plume atop his helmet for a few seconds before abandoning the effort. Seeing the centurion’s outstretched hoof, Hurricane grasped it and was hauled to his hooves.

He inhaled shakily and was about to mutter ‘thanks’ before a sharp jab from a wing across his cheek sent him reeling to the ground again. He felt a hoof smack against the side of his head as the centurion turned around to address the fifty-nine other privates standing a few yards away.

“Your enemy will give you no quarter in battle, and I expect you to give them none in return! Even if it means beheading every feathered bastard you see as he lies in a pool of his own blood, you will not leave alive a single griffon that could harm you or your comrades! Harden yourselves against compassion, for the griffons deserve none! Do I make myself clear?!”

The recruits replied with a weak affirmative, shrinking down within their armor under the centurion’s piercing glare. The pegasus’ face contorted into a scowl, and quick as lightning he yanked a random soldier from the line, bringing the might of his wrath down on the miserable creature. The soldier, who was barely more than a colt, nearly collapsed as the centurion screamed into his face.

“I can’t hear you, hawk bait! Are you scared? Do you want me to bring your mommy here for you?” The terrified recruit feebly shook his head, and the centurion hurled him back into the line, where he knocked over another two recruits. He swiveled his gaze towards the rest of the privates. “I said, do I make myself clear?!”

“Yes, Dusk Strike sir!” The response was loud and clear, even if half of the pegasi were quaking in their armor. Dusk Strike gave a satisfied nod, and flicked his tail towards Hurricane, who had just gotten himself up. Hurricane trotted back towards the ranks and resumed his place in line, mud still dripping from his helm.

Dusk Strike frowned and surveyed his recruits. The air whistled as the wind slowly began shifting across the ground. A fat raindrop landed between Hurricane’s eyes. He fought the urge to shake it off as his commanding officer spoke.

“Gryphus declares war on us, the world falls to shit, and the Legion hands me sixty greenwings to get whipped into fighting shape in just three months. I’d much rather be spilling griffon blood on the front lines, but if I’m the only one qualified to get meat like you to actually kill some of the bastards before your wings are ripped from your shoulders, then I’ll do it!” The centurion spread his wings out wide and gestured to the land around him. “I hope you haven’t gotten too acquainted with the scenery, because the way you all fight you’ll be six feet under before you’re even halfway through training!”

Several dozen hastily constructed buildings stood in neat rows behind him, each one serving as the barracks for a different regiment. In the center of the camp stood an impressive rough-hewn stone building that was the officer’s quarters, flanked on one side by the mess hall and the other by the armory. Hurricane and the rest of his platoon stood on the large stretch of barren earth adjacent to a lake that served as the training grounds.

Scattered across the field were other centurions drilling their recruits in a similar manner. The entirety of the area made up Fort Cyclone, positioned fifteen miles downwind from Stratopolis. Not that the recruits would have any time to visit the city during their training.

The rains started coming down at an ever increasing rate, while the unseasonably cold winds sliced through Hurricane's armor and coat, chilling him to the bone. Dusk Strike gazed at the sky, then spat at the ground angrily, crushing his saliva into the mud with a hoof.

"I've got much more important things to be doing than standing out here in the rain watching you fillies blunder over each other in what you call 'combat'. I'll see you out on the field tomorrow at four o'clock, fully armored and ready to go. Dismissed!"

The sixty recruits quickly saluted Dusk Strike and scattered off the field towards the barracks. Hurricane trotted in the rain, hoping the precipitation would clean the mud off of his armor for him. By the time he made it back to the structure, the rains were so thick that he couldn't see halfway across camp.

In stark contrast to the weather outside, the barracks was well lit, warm, and most importantly, dry. Hurricane slowly walked over to the bunks that he and Silver Sword shared, taking his armor off and trying to wipe the water out of the creases and grooves as best he could. Silver had just finished cleaning his own armor and was lying on the top bunk, staring up at the wooden ceiling.

"The Legion sure isn't anything like I figured it'd be," mumbled Silver Sword, tracing the rafters with a hoof. Hurricane set down the cloth he was using to dry the iron breastplate.

"It's everything I imagined it to be so far." The black pegasus stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth as he tried to polish away a spattering of mud on his helmet. He held the helm up to the light, squinting at his own reflection. Satisfied, he put the headpiece in the chest by his bed.

Silver Sword held his namesake weapon up to the light, absentmindedly pretending to slice the candle at the far end of the room in half. "Two days here and all I've done is been yelled at and kicked around by Dusk Strike and the other officers. When am I gonna get to actually use my blade?"

Hurricane finished polishing the rest of his armor and gingerly set it down in the chest. He looked up to where Silver Sword was running a hoof along his weapon, dully tracing the edge of the blade from the hilt to the tip and back again.

“They haven’t finished telling us we’re worthless pieces of crap yet to let us swing weapons at one another.” Hurricane looked at the sword he had been issued by the Legion. So far it hadn’t left the barracks, and its spotless iron surface glinted in the candlelight. The Legion preferred to use actual weapons for training rather than wooden swords, and Thunder Gale had told him of many stories where a pegasus was wounded or worse during a sparring exercise.

Silver Sword grunted his agreement and slid the weapon back into its scabbard. “Yeah, really looking forward to when I can actually kick some griffon hide rather than mope around here all day. Say, when’s dinner at?”

Hurricane felt his own stomach rumble at the thought of food. “I think the mess hall should be opening any time now.” He stood up and stretched his wings, shaking the moisture out of the feathers. “Though it’s probably military rations this time, not what we had last night.” To welcome the new recruits to camp, the Legion had provided a wide assortment of food, and much of it was better than the usual fare Hurricane could get back home. At the rate things were going, however, he very much doubted that their hospitality would continue.

Silver Sword rolled off of his bunk and landed with a thud, wings spread on either side for balance. He pushed past Hurricane towards the exit of the barracks, tail swishing back and forth enthusiastically. “I don’t even care, Cane, any food will do.”

The two pegasi emerged from the barracks, the camp now completely drenched with precipitation. They sprinted across from one building to the next, zigzagging their way under rooftops and overhangs to the mess hall. Silver Sword went through the door first, Hurricane not too far behind him. By the time he shook his coat dry of rainwater, Silver was already receiving his meal, an unappetizing mush of potatoes and carrots.

Hurricane quickly filled a tray and sat down across from his friend, who had forgone utensils in favor of a more direct food-to-mouth approach. He recoiled as Silver’s head emerged from his plate, dripping mashed potatoes. The two stared at each other awkwardly before Hurricane began shaking his head, smiling.

“What? I was hungry!” Silver began wiping his face clean with a hoof, carefully ensuring that no food went to waste. Hurricane rolled his eyes and began thoughtfully eating his own meal, trying to ignore the soggy taste.

As he was transitioning from the potatoes to his bread roll, Hurricane felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked to his left, but didn’t see anypony. He felt a hoof lightly punch his right foreleg, and he looked over to find a familiar manila-coated mare standing next to him.

“Hey. Mind if I take a seat?” There was a feeble smile on her face around the tray of food she carried as she waited for his response.

Hurricane nearly choked on the bread roll. “Swift Spear? What are you doing here?” He set down his food and angled his body closer towards the mare, motioning for her to sit. Despite the poor terms they left on last time, something within the stallion told him he wanted to repair relations with Swift.

Her smile solidified into a more confident expression as she placed her tray on the table and took a seat. “My father’s Gold Feather, remember? When the war started and the draft order went out, I volunteered immediately for the Legion. I doubt that father would have allowed me to stay around the house had I not gone.”

Silver Sword looked up from his tray, wiping the food off of his chin. “That’s pretty harsh, if I do say so myself.”

Swift partially extended a wing in greeting. “I just did what was expected of me. And I see the two partners in crime are in the same regiment. Good to have friends to work with in camp.” She turned her apologetic face towards Hurricane. “I’m sorry we left on less than amicable terms at Stratopolis. You were right, I didn’t need to go charging in to the fight and risk my life. Father would have been fine anyways. Can you forgive me?”

Hurricane nodded, his own expression brightening. “Of course I can. I understand you were worried about your father, and I was just worried you’d get hurt.” He hesitated a bit, then held out a hoof towards her. “Friends?”

“Friends.” Swift tapped her hoof against Hurricane’s and began to take bites out of her meal.

“I wish you were in our regiment, Swift. Do you know anypony in yours?”

The mare shrugged. “I already know most of the centurions and commanders at the fort. But no, you could say that the rest of the recruits I’m not familiar with.”

“Well, couldn’t you request a transfer to our regiment then? We’d love to have another friendly face to drill with.”

Swift Spear shook her head. “As much as I would love to, the centurions running the camp have already been hard enough on me with my father’s reputation, trying to test my mettle. The last thing I need is for them to get another angle to drop the hammer. They’ll think that I couldn’t take the pressure by myself and wanted out. I don’t intend to give them that notion.” She took a long swig from her mug of cider before setting it down, looking at her reflection on the surface of the drink.

The black stallion shifted in his seat. “Is it really that bad? I didn’t think any of that would matter to them.”

“Half of camp is learning to play the game. You either learn to shut up and take orders or you get drilled and broken down until the Legion can bend you to its will. My father—our fathers—learned how to play both sides of the coin, learned when to take orders and when to improvise. That’s how they became commanders.”

Hurricane nodded thoughtfully, tucking away that snippet of information for later reference. He finished his meal and pushed the tray to the center of the table, pensively sipping on his cider.

Silver Sword downed the mug in one go, slamming the wooden container on the table. “Seems rather pointless to me. I can’t tell if the centurions want us to be good soldiers or if they’re more interested in breaking us to pieces for the hell of it. Make up their minds, why don’t they?”

Hurricane was about to reply, but a roar of raucous laughter several tables down interrupted him. A group of four pegasi were slamming their hooves down on the table, obviously slightly drunken. They were all gesturing and trying to talk to a large red pegasus who sat at the center of their knot, obviously the one who made the joke. Swift Spear sighed and rolled her eyes, taking another gulp from her cider mug.

“Fire Star,” she muttered, her voice filled with contempt. Hurricane raised a questioning eyebrow at her. Swift looked back again at the red pegasus, who was receiving high-hoofs from the other ponies sitting around him. “He’s from my regiment. Obnoxious stallion, thinks he’s better than everypony else. Idiot.”

A mischievous smile crept across Silver Sword's face. "Sounds like it's something personal, eh Swift?" A glaring set of blue eyes silenced the jocular stallion. "Hey, it was just a joke..."

"Then I apologize. The first day I had to put up with him hitting on me while we were getting assigned regiments and equipment. By some cruel joke of the Gods I got placed in the same regiment as him." She pressed a hoof between her eyes. "I wish that the Legion actually had a separate barracks for its female soldiers. I'm surprised I hardly got a wink of sleep in with all the catcalls being hurled my way. Gods, what I wouldn't do to just kick him in the nuts over and over again!"

Silver Sword and Hurricane looked on at her outburst with more than a little worry. Hurricane, who had been at the receiving end of one of those outbursts not too long ago, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Silver Sword soon broke the silence. "That was an alarming display of hostility towards a stallion's personal zone."

"That's because this specific stallion deserves it," said Swift as she made one last look towards Fire Star's table. Unfortunately, the red stallion noticed her and began whispering amongst his friends, pointing in her direction. Following a burst of snickering from the table, he rose from his seat and began strutting over.

"Somepony please kill me..." muttered Swift under her breath, head held low between her forelegs. In a second Fire Star was standing over them, a smug grin emblazoned across his face.

"Ah, Swift, there you are. I was feeling oh so lonely last night, why didn't you come over?" Fire Star began massaging Swift Spear's shoulders. Hurricane knew she was struggling to contain herself, but only her flaring primary feathers betrayed her emotions.

"I'm sorry, but I thought a fully grown stallion such as yourself would be past needing someone to tuck him in." She turned and glared at him, blue eyes piercing through red. "Or do you have mommy issues?"

There was a chorus of low calls from the pegasi at Fire Star's table. Somepony muttered "burn" just loud enough for Hurricane to hear it. Fire Star must have heard it as well, for he glanced at his companions with the tiniest hint of rage before burying it under his surly expression.



“Good one,” answered Fire Star through gritted teeth in a horrible representation of a smile. “I love it when the ladies play hard to get. I’m too used to getting all the attention back at home.”

Silver Sword snickered at the other side of the table. “From what, your hoof?” Hurricane quickly stifled a chuckle as Fire Star took to the air, hovering mere inches from Silver’s face.

“You think you’re a funny guy, eh?” Hurricane could almost see the flames flickering from the red stallion’s nostrils. “You better watch your mouth, colt, or that’ll be the last thing you say.”

Silver was unfazed. “Practice what you preach. At least I’m not the one kneeling in the alley behind the barracks.” Despite his best efforts, Hurricane snorted loudly at Silver Sword’s retort. The steel pegasus seemed to expand with the anger Fire Star directed his way. Verbal sparring was one of his favorite forms of entertainment.

Fire Star backed off, seeing a squad of centurions enter the mess hall. “One of these days your words are gonna come back to bite ya, chump. I’ll make sure to clear a spot in my trophy case for your mark.” The heated pegasus turned away and stomped off, his group of friends following him closely behind, looking over their shoulders at Hurricane and his companions. Silver Sword wasn’t done yet, and stood up long enough to hurl one last insult at Fire Star.

“Can you just skip the foreplay then? I’ve got things I’d much rather be doing than spending the night satisfying your fantasies!” The stallion sat back down, receiving a high-hoof from Hurricane over the table. There was a solid *thwack* from the opposite end of the cafeteria, and a bowl of mashed potatoes and carrots struck Silver upside the head. Hurricane turned just in time to see Fire Star lower his rear hooves back to the ground and storm out of the mess hall.

Swift Spear passed a stack of napkins to Silver Sword, who began clearing his face of the mush. “Sorry about that. He’s one of those stallions who’s quick to anger at anything. Thanks for standing up for me, though.”

Silver dropped a potato-encrusted napkin onto his tray and picked up another one. “Hey, that pony’s a pain in the flank. Somepony’s gotta show him his place eventually. And he gave me some more food anyways.” He finished clearing his mane of the potatoes and set the bowl down in front of him, emptying it of its remaining contents. Hurricane watched quietly, feeling bad that he hadn’t helped Swift out himself.

The lightly colored mare looked up through the high windows, the panes dripping with water. In the distance, the sun was starting to peek through the flat gray clouds that surrounded it. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and flexed her wings, the long primary feathers inadvertently brushing against Hurricane's side. She opened her eyes and smiled.

"Perhaps camp won't seem as long as I figured."

Hurricane wasn't so sure about that, but he was inclined to agree with Swift. The future definitely seemed a shade brighter.

*I remember when I was just a young soldier, hanging on every word issued by the Emperor. I was just like the rest of the nation: blind and worried, hoping for any news that the world wasn't going to crash down around our heads. But as I matured, I saw through more and more of Cirra's veil. I saw that it wasn't just another war with the griffons, another squabble over land or a chance for Cirra to reassert its might. It was a war where our very survival was in question. And the more I saw, the more I knew that the veil needed to be maintained.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
13th of Long Night, 401 After Empire

*Clang!*

Hurricane tightened his grip on the sword as it rebounded from his opponent's block. The weapon quivered with the kinetic energy it picked up, and the vibrations hurt his teeth. The thin leather padding around the handle did little to soften the movement.

*Clang, skrriiichh!*

The two swords ground past each other, scattering a thin stream of sparks between them. The wind whistled past Hurricane's ear as he twisted away from a sword sailing alongside his neck. He felt the metal glance off of his shoulder piece, and with a grunt he rose up off of his forehooves and swung his own weapon back at the pegasus he was sparring with. He felt the transfer of kinetic energy travel up the sword and down his spine as the glinting blade collided with the plating on his opponent's neck.

There was a whistle from the side of the sparring circle, and Dusk Strike stepped forward. "Good! Edged Wing, Blue Gust, you're up!" Hurricane sheathed his sword and trotted back towards Dusk Strike, keeping his excitement contained within him. The centurion gave him an approving nod as he passed but refrained from saying anything. The black stallion took his place in line adjacent to Silver Sword.

The steel pegasus held out a wing towards Hurricane as he stepped into rank, to which Hurricane clapped his own against. "Damned good fight if I do say so myself, Cane. I'm surprised you don't have a mark for the sword yourself!" The two ponies turned their

heads towards the ring, where Edged Wing and Blue Gust were duking it out in a flurry of blows.

“Well, it was only Down after all,” said Hurricane. He looked over to see his opponent, Mark Down, standing in line at the other end of the circle, hoof rubbing his neck. Mark Down’s style was more of an aggressive approach, and as such his high power offense was often compromised by a poorly executed defense.

“But he’s swinging five hundred and you still got him. What’re you at now, six hundred?” Silver squinted at the platoon’s leaderboard, where the recruits were all graded on how well they did in their fights. Mark Down’s score was a .500, meaning he won as many fights as he lost.

“Six sixty-seven actually,” remarked Hurricane. “There are plenty of ponies better than that. Yourself for example.”

The stallion’s words made Silver’s chest inflate slightly. “Fourteen out of fifteen right here. Still can’t believe that runt got a hit on me,” the pegasus grumbled as he watched the fight. Hurricane chuckled, remembering the smallish pegasus who through sheer luck managed to score a death blow to Silver’s chin in the opening moves of the fight. He racked his brains to try and remember the pegasus’ name. Pan Sea? He couldn’t recall. All Hurricane knew was that he was from Altus in the west, one of only three pegasi drafted from his small town with the onset of war.

The fight in the ring was drawing to a close. Blue Gust was fast, but Edged Wing was patient. He had spent the majority of the fight weaving in and out of his opponent’s blows, striking back when he got the chance. Once Gust’s stamina had finally collapsed, the gray pegasus drove his blue opponent back farther and farther with strikes of impressive strength, sweeping Blue’s legs out from underneath him and planting the blade of his sword in the ground by his neck. Dusk Strike blew the whistle, and the two pegasi trotted off the field. The centurion tallied the victory on a scroll that he had spread out next to him, then called for the next two combatants.

“Shear Point and Silver Sword!” The two stallions stood up from opposite ends of the circle and trotted towards the middle. Hurricane wished his friend luck, to which Silver flicked his tail in acknowledgement.

When they had both reached the center of the field, the pegasi shook hooves and stepped back three paces. Shear Point possessed a brilliant white coat and a deep blue mane, and his eyes were of a similar blue coloration. A long scar trailed down from his brow to his

cheek, cutting across his left eye. Shear Point was from the far east of Cirra, his home standing in what was disputed ground between Cirra and Gryphus. Being a pegasus in an ethnically griffon land made his farm subject to bandit raids, and he had gotten his scar defending his home from Gryphon marauders. It had been difficult for him to leave when the fighting began, but he promised his family he'd be back soon enough with the entire Legion. That promise alone fueled his success in training camp.

At Dusk Strike's command, the two pegasi drew their blades and squared off against each other, trying to pick out weaknesses and attack points they could utilize in the fight. Shear Point's score was almost as high as Silver's, .867 compared to .933, and they were both strong and resilient fighters. Hurricane knew that this would be a match to remember.

The whistle blew, and Silver Sword didn't waste any time leaping into the fray. Yelling through clenched teeth, he brought his sword down towards Shear Point's head. The white pegasus spun to the side, his own sword sailing into the air and catching Silver's. The two blades sung as they rebounded, Silver Sword lowering himself back onto his hooves and advancing towards Shear Point.

The pegasus slowly retreated from Silver's advance, methodically maintaining the distance between them. When Silver Sword leaped for Shear Point again, the white stallion ducked low and slid across the ground under his airborne opponent, raising his sword to catch Silver in the gut. The crowd gasped as Silver lowered his forelegs, letting the bracers on his shins take the blow. He stumbled several paces when he landed, nearly falling onto his face, but came out of the block on all fours and within the circle.

Shear Point somersaulted onto his hooves, back stained with dust and dirt. He paid the grit no mind, flipping backwards and twisting in mid-air to come to face with Silver Sword. As he turned, there was a gust of air as Shear drove his sword towards his steel opponent. Silver deflected the downwards strike, hitting Shear across the snout with his wing. The white pegasus snorted as he absorbed the blow but twisted and redirected his hind legs towards Silver as he fell. With a powerful kick, Shear Point propelled himself in the opposite direction of Silver, who went tumbling backwards.

In an instant, Silver was back in the air, jumping across the field with the aid of a few wing strokes. Shear Point was nearly caught off balance, staggering backwards as he deflected the blow. Silver Sword pressed his advantage, hammering away at Shear Point's defense as he pressed the white stallion back. Shear Point was on the ropes as he felt his hooves come in contact with the cobblestone ring at the edge of the field.

In one last desperate effort, Shear Point ducked low and then up as Silver's weapon sailed over his head. Silver had to lean in with his shoulder to block the blow with his armor, but the awkward position caused him to lose his grip on his sword. With a kick from Shear Point, Silver Sword's weapon was hurled across the field.

The momentum had shifted, and now Silver Sword was ducking and using his bracers to try and ward off Shear's attacks. He tried making his way back to his weapon several times, but the white pegasus kept himself between Silver and his blade.

Suddenly, Silver Sword rolled over to the side under Shear Point's strike. He stuck out a hoof as he rolled, causing Shear to trip and come falling to the ground. The sudden change in direction caused Shear's weapon to slip out of his grasp, shooting high up into the air. The two pegasi looked at each other for a brief second, then dashed to their respective weapons.

Silver Sword reached his first, grabbing the blade off of the dusty ground and immediately turning skywards. Shear Point was tracking his weapon as it spiraled in the air, trying to grip the handle and avoid being struck in the face by the blade. He reached it just as Silver reached him, and swung the blade downwards without looking.

A piercing cry of metal rang out through the air, and the crowd held its collective breath. Silver Sword had turned upside down at the last second, forelegs held out in front of him like a shield. His sword had connected with Shear Point's neck armor a second before he collided with him, sending the two tumbling downwards. Shear Point's own sword dropped away towards the ground, having harmlessly bounced off of Silver's bracers and dealing no damage. The pair of pegasi crashed into the ground as Hurricane's side of the ring erupted into cheering and applause. Silver Sword hopped to his hooves and bowed to the crowd before helping Shear Point up.

Dusk Strike blew the whistle, and the two soldiers shook hooves again before walking off towards their respective sides. Hurricane patted Silver Sword on the back as he walked up next to him, a grin plastered across his face.

"Way to go, Silver. Now *that* is what I'd call a 'damned good fight.' I've never seen moves like that before."

Silver Sword smiled and shook the gravel and dirt off of his coat. "Thanks. That was a tough match. I didn't think that he had that much fight in him." He turned and nodded at Shear Point, who was trotting over towards him.

“Good fight, friend,” spoke the white pegasus. His voice was lively, and his eyes glinted with an energetic spark. “I thought I had you for a minute there, but you’re harder to pin down than a fish in a stream.”

Silver chuckled. “I hope you aren’t calling me slimy, Shear. I made sure to take a bath last night, so you know.” Hurricane looked at his friend with sarcastic incredulity.

“Last night? By that logic, we only got here from Zephyrus yesterday.” Silver Sword stuck his tongue out at Hurricane, who only winked at him. Shear Point pawed the ground, a smile on his face.

“You certainly have an interesting concept of time then, Silver. We’re already a third of the way through our training. Before we know it, we’ll be on the front lines, our entrails hanging off of griffon iron.”

Hurricane grimaced, while Silver just laughed uneasily. “Well, that’s what the matches are for. We pick up things that we can use in combat.” Silver and Shear Point turned towards the barracks, Hurricane not far behind them.

Shear Point snorted at Silver’s comment. “Yeah, but we’re fighting each other, not griffons. They fight differently than us. They’re bigger, hit harder, and are tougher to take down.”

“But they’re slow and clumsy, not anything like the graceful dancers we are,” remarked Silver as he executed a sloppy pirouette. He staggered backwards at the apex of the spin, ending up face first in the dirt. Hurricane and Shear Point laughed as Silver lifted himself off of the ground, feathers ruffled.

“You keep going like that, Silver, and soon enough you’ll be dancing with the angels,” laughed Hurricane. Shear Point and the black pegasus high-hoofed as Silver wiped the dirt off of his metallic coat.

“I wouldn’t mind a little dancing myself, as long as I’ve got a wide assortment of mares to choose from.” Silver preened a few of his feathers back into shape, rejoining the frayed ends of his primaries. The wind whistled softly across the camp, combining with the warm sun and verdant fields to paint the picture of a perfect spring day. Pegasi were spread out across the grass on their backs or lying under trees, taking in the nice weather and enjoying themselves. Even many of the centurions were in cheerful moods, content to sit on the shores of the lake rather than on the spirits of their underlings.

“I could do with a swim,” commented Shear Point as they passed the lake. “How about you guys?”

“Way ahead of you,” replied Silver Sword as he trotted towards the water. Hurricane and Shear Point glided after him, alighting down by the crystal clear lake, the glass waves gently lapping the shore. The expanse of water stretched a good distance out towards the horizon, where the far shoreline was only visible as a brown smudge between the blue skies and sapphire waves.

The three pegasi set their heavy iron armor down on the shoreline and waded into the lake. Hurricane sighed in ecstasy as the warm waters washed away the troubles of the past month that he'd been at camp. All the bruises, dings, and scratches upon his sore body disappeared with the gently tugging ripples of the lake. He flipped over onto his back, letting his wings gently propel himself across the surface. Pegasus wings were remarkably useful for movement in the water, he realized.

Hurricane opened his eyes and looked around for Silver Sword, not seeing him nearby. He jumped when something brushed by his tail—or at least he thought something did. Moments later his suspicions were proven when a metallic equine burst forth from the water, landing on top of Hurricane. The dark stallion flailed his limbs in surprise as Silver dunked him.

Hurricane emerged from the water seconds later, where Silver and Shear Point were giggling in amusement. With a shake of his head Hurricane flung the water from his eyes, nostrils flaring. “You’re dead, Silver,” growled the black pegasus playfully as he lunged towards his friend. Silver ducked under the water to avoid Hurricane’s grasp, using his wings to propel himself like a torpedo away from him. Hurricane dived after Silver, reminiscing about how they used to play a similar game when they were colts in the ocean near Zephyrus. Silver may have been faster underwater, but Hurricane could hold his breath longer and outlast him.

The world possessed a hazy, bluish tint under the aqueous surface, but Hurricane soon located his prey. A pale gray shadow flickered off to the side to lose him, but the black predator pursued it, swiftly and quietly. Gliding through the water felt much like flying through the air, only with more resistance and fewer currents. He elongated his body into a smooth, aerodynamic shape, his massive wings pushing him through the water, capitalizing on the momentum of each stroke. Hurricane saw Silver break the surface to catch a breath, and watched as his body twisted, trying to locate his pursuer. Hurricane stuck to the bottom of the lake, using his dark coat to blend in with the shadows. When he felt his lungs were about to burst, he sprang forth from the water.



Silver Sword quickly spun around as he heard Hurricane break the surface of the lake. The steel pegasus collected his breath and began to submerge again in an attempt to dart away from Hurricane, but like a shark, Hurricane descended on the pegasus and gripped his wings against his body, twisting as he tried to hold onto Silver's flailing figure. After a few moments he had his friend sufficiently incapacitated, and slowly let the air in his lungs raise the two towards the surface.

When they once again exchanged the liquid atmosphere for the gaseous, Hurricane had his foreleg wrapped around Silver's neck. "Give up yet?" he shouted in Silver's ear, speech punctuated by coltish laughter. The steel pegasus struggled against Hurricane's vice grip, a smile of his own plastered through gritted teeth.

"I give up when I'm dead!" shouted the pegasus, thrashing his way out of Hurricane's hold on him. Using his hind legs, he pushed off from the black stallion's body to travel a good twenty feet away, shaking his soaked wings in a taunting gesture. Hurricane was about to pursue him, when he noticed a familiar mare sitting along the shore.

"Hey, Swift! Why don't you come in? The water's pretty damn nice!" Hurricane flipped over on his back and glided a few easy strokes closer towards the mare, black coat glistening with the moisture he had picked up from the lake. Swift set down her gear and waded a few steps into the water, stopping when the waves lapped at her knees.

"I'd much rather avoid getting dunked, thank you very much," quipped the mare. "Seriously, what are you guys? Twelve?"

"Hey, I'm twenty, thank you very much. Silver might be twelve, but I'm not sure about even that." Hurricane beckoned with his hoof, and Swift Spear sighed before submerging herself up to her shoulders. He felt a current push against his coat and saw Silver glide next to him, punching him in the side.

"Dude, I'm at least three months older than you, don't even start," retorted the steel pegasus. He reoriented his body so that he and Hurricane were facing the same direction and crossed his hooves behind his head, soaked wings spread on either side of his shoulders.

"But you never act like it." Hurricane raised his head off of the water to look at Swift Spear. "Seriously, Swift, did you even suspect for a second that he was older than me?"

She shook her head. "Can't say that I did. But still, three months isn't all that big a deal."

Silver Sword placed a hoof over his heart. “There goes half the foundation of my foalhood,” he said. Hurricane splashed him using his wing.

Shear Point glided over from his far side of the lake. “You know these two?” he asked Swift, gesturing his head towards the two stallions now trying to dunk each other for the second time that day.

“I had the pleasure of making their acquaintance two months back,” replied Swift. She stuck her hoof out towards the white pegasus. “Swift Spear. Nice to meet you.”

The stallion shook her hoof. “Shear Point, likewise. I hear your father’s Commander Gold Feather?”

Swift Spear rolled her eyes. “Yes, that’s true enough, though I’d prefer to make my own name rather than live under his.”

Shear Point withdrew slightly. “My apologies, I didn’t know that you were uncomfortable about it. I would’ve thought most pegasi would relish having the Praetorian Imperator as their father.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just that wherever I go, my father’s shadow always seems to follow me. I’ve grown sick of ponies asking me over the years about my father, or trying to appease me to fall in favor of his judgment. It’s the worst in Stratopolis, with all the senators running around.” Swift turned and shielded herself with a wing as a splash of water came her way. Hurricane was in the process of holding Silver’s head under the surface, waiting for him to give up. Silver Sword, to his credit, was making it difficult for Hurricane to hold onto him, hence the splashing.

“I never had that problem myself,” said Hurricane. “Even though... ungh... Thunder Gale was a commander during the War.” The black stallion grunted as Silver squirmed in his grasp, kicking Hurricane in the stomach and finally breaking free. The grayscale pegasus took several deep gasps for air before facing his friend, a fierce glint in his eye.

Swift shook her head. “You’re in their regiment; are they always like this?”

“I thought you knew them longer than I did,” responded Shear Point.

“They put on their best behavior around me... usually.”

“Heh. They’re like brothers, really.” There was a sad smile on Shear’s face. “I knew what that felt like once...”

Swift was about to press for answers, but the noise of something fundamentally annoying to her very being interrupted her. It was only after she gritted her teeth did she realize that it was a voice.

“I thought you were above this kind of company, Swift. When are you gonna learn that hanging with the weak makes you weak?” Fire Star advanced to the edge of the shoreline, the usual trio of his cohorts behind him. Swift suppressed the urge to break his face in and, taking a deep breath, turned around.

Fire Star was wearing his armor, so Swift assumed that he had just finished up with his drills for the day. A glossy sheen of sweat coated his neck and glistened under his wings, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, Star seemed to relish the sensation, enjoyed the hard work. As much as Swift wanted to drive the end of something sharp deep into his throat, she admitted that he would make an impressive Legionnaire.

Not that she would ever tell him that. The red pegasus could stand to learn a thing or two about humility, and if Gold Feather had been his father, he would have executed the poor sod rather than bother with discipline. Fire Star was too far along the path of self-absorption to be brought back now.

“Me? I figured that out long ago. Maybe you should try teaching your friends the same.” Fire Star's companions growled at Swift, and one took a step forward towards her. The red pegasus held a wing out to the side, blocking his progress.

“Charming. You would be making a mistake to ignore me, my dear. I have plenty of mares to choose from, but I've chosen you.”

Swift snorted. “You fail to realize that's a two-way street. If you want my flank in bed with you you've got to try a lot harder.” She turned away from him. “My advice? Maybe if you weren't such a stubborn asshole then maybe you'd actually have a chance. Unfortunately, it's too late for you to do anything about it now. First impressions are hard to overcome, and second impressions even harder. Both of them have shown me that you'll never amount to anything other than a jock that thinks the world stops and starts on his command.”

A brief flicker of rage passed over Fire Star's face. He took a step into the lake, and it almost seemed like steam flew away from his hoof. “Swift my dear, I'm... speechless.” The final word was forced through gritted teeth, the syllables oozing venom. “Me? I'm just a pony who clawed his way to the top through nothing but determination and hard work. I didn't ride my father's tail to get to where I am now.”

Swift had heard enough. She walked towards the shoreline, raising her wings above the water and shaking them dry. If she was going to fly, then she couldn't be slowed down by soggy feathers. Fire Star saw her advancing and snickered. Her eyes were fixated on the stallions as she got closer, waiting for an opening. First she'd catch his neck, and twist his foreleg when he tried to force her off, then—

She felt somepony touch her side. Hurricane walked up next to her and shook his head silently. Swift released the breath she didn't know she had been holding. She couldn't let Fire Star get to her this way. She'd be the bigger equine; she wouldn't stoop down to his level.

Fire Star realized that Swift Spear wasn't going to come after her, and he pawed the ground, leering at Hurricane. "Yes, listen to your friend, Swift. You wouldn't want to get in a tangle with me."

The mare simply raised her nose into the air disdainfully at him. "I don't need to beat the tar out of you to know I'm better. Killing another recruit wouldn't look good when they review my record for promotions." With a determined stride, Swift shouldered Fire Star out of the way, head held high and eyes lazily shut.

Hurricane followed her through the gap she had created in Fire Star's ranks. The red pegasus' piercing glare struck him to the bone, but he refused to let his wings tremble as he walked. He passed by the knot of Cirrans and trotted up to Swift Spear, where she was gathering her armor by the shoreline. Hurricane grabbed his own gear as Silver Sword and Shear Point caught up to them, watching the other four with a gaze of iron.

Fire Star motioned to his comrades, and the four of them stalked off in the opposite direction of Hurricane's party. The black stallion shouldered his gear and walked towards the barracks with his friends, giving one last look over his shoulder at the red pegasus.

Crimson discs stared back at him angrily, searing the air between the two Cirrans. Fire Star said something to his nearest companion, then turned his head pointedly away.

Hurricane wasn't sure what he said, but he knew it wasn't good.

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*The Empire was infallible. We all knew that. Neither the sands of time nor the battering of griffon heads against our doors would topple Cirra. The emperor was immortal, the senate unending. It's funny the lies one believes when there's nothing else to cling on to.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
4th of High Sun, 401 After Empire

*The smell of smoke reached Hurricane from afar. It was a thick stench, causing him to cough as flakes of scalding ash made their way into his nostrils. Outside something was burning—what was burning exactly? His thoughts were sluggish, the matter between his ears refusing to work properly.*

*He opened his eyes for the first time—actually, he wasn't even sure he opened his eyes so much as the world materialized around him. He was standing in a large marble room, immaculately decorated and well lit by the numerous sconces that bordered the floor. Along the walls, portraits of winged equines, powerful equines, all gazed back at him with a sullen and stoic expression. He should recognize the ponies, but for some reason he couldn't. Perhaps it was the same reason why his thoughts couldn't come to him?*

*His teeth tightened on the sword that he hadn't realize he was holding. The weight of the weapon felt strangely familiar; he could tell at a glance that it wasn't the sword he'd been issued at camp, for it was of a much higher level of craftsmanship. Somehow he realized he was wearing onyx armor lined with gold trim. The connections didn't fire in his brain. It must be the smoke; it had to be the smoke.*

*Hurricane realized he was standing in the focal point of the room, a raised platform where a solitary chair was placed. No, not a chair, a throne. It seemed like the emperor's palace in Stratopolis. That couldn't be right, he'd never seen the throne room in his life. But if it was, then where was the Emperor? Hurricane couldn't see him anywhere.*

*There were other ponies in the room as well; many bore the simple iron armor of the Legion, but several were outfitted in black and gold armor much like Hurricane himself. One of the ponies glanced back, a familiar face, silver eyes pleading with him. He coughed again at the smoke.*

*The massive doors at the end of the room shuddered under the force of an incredible blow. Hurricane's sword trembled in his grasp, and somewhere within him a primal fear let loose*

*a cry of anguish. The smoke burned his lungs. The doors shuddered again, this time massive splinters flinging themselves loose from the oaken constructions. The other ponies in the room tensed, lowering their swords in a defensive position. The pony with the silver eyes shouted at him, but he couldn't make out the words.*

*Suddenly the doors blew open, and dozens of dark figures burst into the room, engaging the pegasi scattered across the floor with swords and claws and beaks. A solitary figure detached itself from the rest of the horde, barreling straight for Hurricane. Something in its grasp caught the light, long and frightening.*

*He squeezed his eyes shut in fear.*

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Hurricane bolted upright in his bed, panting. He glanced around the room in a panicked manner, unable to see much of anything through the darkness. Piercing shrieks of pain lingered in his thoughts, and it took him a few seconds to separate reality from his imagination. His mind put together the pieces and his heart rate slowed down. With a deep breath, Hurricane placed his head back down on the pillow.

“It was just a dream,” he mumbled to himself. Although the visions of terror his subconscious had crafted were already drifting away like sand between his hooves, the smell of ash and the fear still lingered in his head. He realized that his neck was coated in a shiny, cold sweat.

Taking a few more deep breaths, Hurricane managed to flush the adrenaline from his system and settle down into his bed again, as close to comfortable as he could get. Above him, Silver Sword's low and steady breaths served as further comfort to the troubled stallion. “Just a dream,” he repeated, rolling over and closing his eyes.

But try as he might, he couldn't force the smell of smoke from his nose.

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The ground squelched below Hurricane's hooves as he walked across the soggy earth with the rest of his regiment. Stretching far out to his left, a block of nearly three thousand Legionnaires similarly plodded through the mud, heads lowered against the mist. The skies were bleak and gray, threatening to escalate from a thin mist to a heavy rain at any minute.

To Hurricane's right, the soldiers of Dusk Strike's platoon marched with him towards the staging area. The recruits were about to partake in one of their final combat exercises before being released from camp and sent to the front lines. The entire camp had been divided into two teams to square off against each other, and every pegasus was fully armored according to their regiment's standards, ready for battle. The set of heavy iron blades attached to the arms of Hurricane's wings felt incredibly foreign to him.

Dusk Strike called out the order to stop, and as one the sixty Cirrans in his platoon halted behind him. The entire regiment had stopped moving, and Hurricane could see soldiers lining up to coat their weapons in paint. The reasoning was to be able to identify which soldiers had been "killed" in the battlefield and which ones had not. They were about to partake in a grand battle of capture the flag, the scale of which Hurricane had never seen before.

Silver Sword walked up next to Hurricane, wingtips quivering in excitement. "This is going to be awesome," he remarked, taking a bucket of blue paint in his mouth and setting it down before them. Hurricane unsheathed his blade and coated it with paint, sliding it carefully back into its scabbard.

"Supposing you don't get out in the first wave, otherwise you'd have to sit and watch the rest of the battle," replied Hurricane. He took a rag in his mouth and dipped it into the paint, motioning for Silver to extend his wing blades. Silver complied, and Hurricane carefully coated the metal with the blue pigment, attempting to avoid the feathers as he clumsily maneuvered the rag in his mouth. After he had painted his friend's blades, Hurricane extended his own for Silver to return the favor.

"You know me, I'm not one to go down without a blaze of glory at my tail," said Silver Sword as he gripped a rag of his own. "I figure I can cut my way through half of the soldiers on their side, grab the flag, and fight my way back again."

"Way to think rationally," retorted Hurricane. He furrowed his brow as Silver accidentally dropped a few splatters of paint onto his pristine, black feathers. If there was one thing that could drive him crazy, it would be getting his feathers all disheveled. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything he could do at this point, and it was likely they would only get paint stained again before the battle was over.

Silver spat out the rag and passed the paint down to the next group of pegasi. "If I think rationally then I'm already setting myself up for failure. There's no use beating yourself down before you even get started."

Hurricane flexed his wings, again uncomfortable with the additional weight along the arms. “Swift’s regiment is on the other side.”

Silver’s ears flattened a degree. “Oh. Well then, I just might require backup taking the flag in that case.”

“What’s the matter? Worried that you’ll run into her? I thought you were good enough to fight her one on one.” Hurricane’s eyes had a teasing glint to them, and Silver flared his feathers out defensively.

“No! I just mean, well, um, if I run into her then that’ll take away time that I could be using elsewhere on the field.” Silver began to stammer, trying to come up with a suitable escape from Hurricane’s accusation.

“Don’t worry, I’m only kidding. Let’s just stick together, bring that flag back and be done with it, alright?”

Silver smiled in relief. “Sounds like a plan. I wonder when we’re going to get started.”

As if in response to Silver’s words, a bellow from a horn could be heard across the field. Dusk Strike paced in front of his platoon one last time before snapping his wings out to the sides, blue blades spattering paint on the grass around him. At his signal, the pegasi of the fifth regiment, twenty-third platoon spread their wings to the sides in preparation for takeoff. Hurricane could feel his heart rate slow in anticipation, the world around him shrinking until all he could see was Dusk Strike’s rigid figure.

There was a shout from somewhere to his left, where the bulk of the regiment was located. With a loud exclamation and a flare of his wings, Dusk Strike shot into the air, spinning off towards the far end of the field. Hurricane launched himself up behind him, burdened wings pushing fiercely against the heavy air. He had to adjust the angle of his wings slightly to smoothen the airflow around them in compensation for the shape and weight of the blades. Once he had his rhythm down, they weren’t too bothersome to fly with.

On the ground, the heavy infantry charged across the soaked field to close the half mile between the two sides. Their swords were raised high over their heads, and the drumming of a thousand hooves across the plains filled the air with a thunderous roar. To the rear, two battalions of Legionnaires, numbering five hundred each, formed a defensive line around blue team’s flag and waited for either a call for reinforcements or the advance of red warriors towards the base. In the air, the remaining thousand pegasi



of the regiment's three thousand soldiers formed a thick cloud that advanced towards the opposing side at great speed.

Ahead of Hurricane, numerous figures broke from behind the hills that concealed the enemy flag. Hurricane pulled off a quick count of the opposing air and ground forces. The red team commander had stacked his forces in favor of an aerial assault, but his ground forces didn't seem to be any smaller than blue teams. Unless he was granted additional forces, which Hurricane knew wasn't true, that meant his defense of the flag was minimal.

Hurricane realized that red team planned to swat aside blue team's air force and descend on the flag, hoping that their ground forces could keep blue team's at bay long enough to secure it. With a burst of speed, the black pegasus accelerated up to Dusk Strike to relay his observations.

Dusk Strike may have been a proud centurion, but he wasn't stupid. He listened to Hurricane's words as they flew closer and closer to the enemy, and with a slight nod of his head he angled his body slightly below the center of the enemy formation. The rest of the platoon followed suit, tightening into a thin line behind their centurion.

The red team's fliers were now close enough for Hurricane to distinguish the color of their coats. He looked for a familiar manila colored mare but didn't see any sign of her. He had little time for other thoughts as the first crashes of metal rang out across the battlefield.

Blue team's airborne platoons found themselves almost immediately outnumbered on a scale of nearly two to one. The walls of pegasi became entangled in full, spiraling in and out of formation as they tried to strike down an opponent. Unlike terrestrial combat where it was easy to maintain rank and file during battle, the skies shattered into hundreds of pairs of Legionnaires that chased each other through the damp air. Silver Sword pulled up alongside Hurricane, and the two exchanged a helmed nod. Flying in formation, they chased after the hole that Dusk Strike had punched through red team's flank.

Most of red team was behind them now, working to contain the pegasi they were up against. Blue team had adopted a hit and run approach, flying in pairs and trying to take down enemy pegasi that were chasing other pairs. They were making themselves hard to catch, but they were also wearing themselves down. It occurred to Hurricane that they were only trying to buy time for Dusk Strike's platoon.

On the ground, the battle had descended into a brutal melee between the opposing sides. All Hurricane could make out was a single dark blob from which the sounds of battle emanated. He could see several figures detach themselves from the battle and fly off to the sides, obviously soldiers that had been “killed”. Occasionally a group of officers had to drag an overzealous combatant out of the fight who had already been marked but refused to leave the combat zone.

A shout ahead of them drew Hurricane’s attention back into the air. Ranks of red team soldiers flew up to meet the incoming platoon. There were about a hundred fliers compared to Dusk Strike’s sixty, but they were medium infantry, designed to fit a multirole template and thus carried heavy armor but no wing blades. Medium infantry was more adept at securing defensive positions against a variety of griffon threats, not repelling an airborne assault of agile pegasi.

Dusk Strike led the charge into the rising red ranks. His blades found contact with shoulder pauldrons and chest armor, leaving streaks of blue paint along the metal surfaces. The pegasi detached from combat shortly after they were hit; those that didn’t found themselves struck again and again until they were finally beaten onto the ground by the incoming wave of light infantry.

Hurricane felt his wing blades collide with the body of a pegasus to his right. The unexpected blow caused his right wing to collapse on him, making him drop several tail lengths in the air before he recovered. Flaring his wings, Hurricane sharply cut his speed as he approached the ground. In a few moments, the black pegasus found himself running towards a central fortification, a crimson banner flowing above it. Several dozen medium infantry blocked his path, swords drawn.

There was the drumming of hooves alongside him, and Hurricane glanced around to see other Cirrans descending in the immediate vicinity, weapons unsheathed. Hurricane quickly grabbed his own blade, pleased to see that the blue paint was still rather fluid against the metal. Adjusting his grip on the weapon, Hurricane singled out an enemy and charged at him.

The pegasus glimpsed Hurricane bearing down on him and clumsily pulled his weapon from its sheath, blade red with paint. He turned the weapon to face against the black stallion, but it was too late. Using his wing as a ram, Hurricane batted the sword away and smacked his opponent across the neck with the flat of his weapon, leaving a satisfying streak of blue paint. The marked pegasus threw his wings up into the air and flew out of the combat zone, defeated.

Hurricane had little time to revel in his victory. Two medium soldiers were approaching his left flank, weapons drawn. Pivoting on his rear hoof, Hurricane adjusted his body to stand face to face with the defenders. As the pair got closer, he lowered his stance and darted at them.

When the three were separated by little more than ten feet, Hurricane suddenly folded his wings against his back and propelled himself at the smaller of the two, a mare with a gray coat. Before she could react, Hurricane had already collided with her and threw her onto her back. In desperation, the gray mare punched at Hurricane's face. The blow connected solidly, but it did little more than cause the black stallion to snort as his nose stung from the hit. With a fluid motion, Hurricane marked his opponent's neck blue and rose from her body.

Almost immediately he was knocked back by something colliding against his side, breaking his grip on his blade. The mare's companion, a large stallion with an orange coat, regained his footing after the hit and galloped after Hurricane's tumbling form. Hurricane saw his blue sword embedded in the ground no more than a tail length away from where his head came to rest, and he reached out with his jaw to grab it.

The orange stallion was quicker, kicking away the weapon with red horseshoes. Hurricane tried to roll away from him, but his wing was solidly pinned under the stallion's hooves. Smiling, the pegasus lowered his sword to mark Hurricane out.

Just then, a blue blade flung itself out from behind the stallion's head and slapped him across the eyes, blinding him. Silver Sword pushed the orange pegasus out of the way and helped Hurricane to his hooves.

"Nice timing. What took you so long?" remarked Hurricane. Silver Sword passed Hurricane his weapon, which he gratefully reclaimed.

"Had to help clear out the skies a little," he replied, gesturing with his eyes to the air around them. The last of red team's airborne medium infantry was trying to disengage and warn the main body of their team that the flag was vulnerable. Each pegasus was pursued by a single blue team member who was trying to stop them before they could alert red team's commander. Hurricane knew they'd catch them shortly; it was hard to outpace the light infantry when wearing iron heavy armor.

"Seen Swift Spear at all?" inquired Hurricane. The steel pegasus shook his head in reply while the two galloped towards the enemy fortification.

“She’s light infantry, right? She would’ve been up in that hairball over midfield then. We must’ve missed her, thank the Gods.” A column of Dusk Strike’s soldiers began descending on the fortification, making quick work of the stragglers around the flag.

The pair of pegasi reached the opening to the fortification, which Dusk Strike was currently in the process of cleaning out. He was down to about twenty Legionnaires, including Hurricane, Silver Sword, and himself, but at the moment red team’s defense was disorganized and losing badly. In the skies, a large group of pegasi detached themselves from the massive fight over the field and burned a trail back to red base. Blue team had less than a minute to grab the flag and get out.

“Go! I’ll cover you,” shouted Hurricane as he prepared to take flight and slow down the incoming pegasi. Silver Sword nodded and began to run off into the structure before stopping to add one last sarcastic remark.

“The Empire will remember you for your service on this day, oh valiant Hurricane,” he quipped, disappearing into the structure in a blur of gray mane and coat. Hurricane rolled his eyes and began to climb altitude in a suicidal attempt to buy time for his friend. But something made him stop in his tracks.

Hurricane craned his neck around. Was that a scream he heard? Given the current situation he normally wouldn’t be inclined to investigate, as the battle was filled with screams from both sides. But this one sounded familiar to him.

He heard it again, this time loud and distinct. It was coming from somewhere behind the battlefield, buried in the thick alcove of trees at the eastern end. His heart raced as he heard Swift Spear calling out for help.

Immediately he knew it wasn’t about the battle. It was too far off of the field of engagement to be so, and Hurricane could sense there was genuine fear in the voice. Without hesitation, he abandoned his mission and flew off towards where he knew his friend was in trouble.

“I’m coming, Swift!” shouted the black stallion as tree limbs whipped by his head, branches stinging his ears. He could hear other voices now, indistinct and scattered by the thick foliage. Squeezing his eyes shut, with one final stroke he burst into a clearing within the army of trees, panting. What he saw did nothing to relieve him.

Before him were five figures who all jolted their heads upwards at his sudden entrance. The one Hurricane immediately recognized was the mare lying on the ground, manila

coat bruised and spattered with blood stains. There was no way for Hurricane to tell at this distance whether or not they were from Swift, but the mare's labored breathing and huddled figure told him she was hurt.

If Swift's condition froze Hurricane's heart in worry, the next thing he saw ignited it in a blaze of anger. Crouched directly above the mare stood a familiar red pegasus, armor stripped away and cast on the ground. A fiery hoof was resting on Swift's flank. Around him, Fire Star's companions bore the signs of a scuffle that had taken place not too long ago.

It didn't take long for Hurricane to put two and two together. Nostrils flaring, the black pegasus slammed his hooves onto the ground and advanced menacingly towards Fire Star. "*You...*" hissed Hurricane, his feathers flared angrily out on either side of him as he advanced.

Fire Star took his hoof off of Swift's flank and stepped back. "Well, if it isn't Swift's little pet. You have a habit of showing up at the most inconvenient times, don't you? I would much rather if you leave me to my own pursuits from now on. We wouldn't want anypony to get hurt, now would we?"

Hurricane's piercing glare unnerved the red pegasus across from him. The magenta eyes bore the fury of someone deeply wronged and incredibly angered. Fire Star's friends scampered away fearfully as he approached. "Leave. Her. Alone." Hurricane spat the words out, where they fell to the ground with a roar of thunderous malevolence. Fire Star took several more steps back, trying to take control of the situation.

"Or what? You'll kill me? You wouldn't want to do that, friend." His eyes glanced nervously around the clearing, trying to look for anything to rally his support around. His friends retreated back even farther from the black stallion.

With the silence of determination and fury, Hurricane slowly unsheathed his sword and stalked ever closer to Fire Star. The red pegasus was running out of time to decide whether to fight or flee. Hurricane's eyes carried death in their glinting irises, and the sword twitched in anticipation in his mouth.

If Fire Star was smarter, he would have fled there and then. But to the self-centered pegasus, maintaining his honor was more important than escaping injury. If there was one thing he despised above all others, it was being called a coward. Sealing his fate, the red pegasus drew his sword and stood his ground.

There were no rules. There were no officers to moderate the fight. Hurricane and Fire Star stared each other down, swords quivering murderously in their grip. The black pegasus made the decisive action, running towards Fire Star.

The scarlet stallion spread his legs beneath him, ready to block and parry the blow. As Hurricane brought the sword down on his opponent, Fire Star moved to catch the sword with his own, angling his body to the side so he could quickly spin and strike at Hurricane. But Fire Star underestimated the force behind the blow, and his weapon came sailing back towards his face as it was rebounded from Hurricane's fearsome strike. The red stallion stumbled backwards as his vision blurred, struggling to maintain his grip on the sword hanging loosely from his mouth.

Hurricane gave his opponent no mercy. Before Fire Star could even blink, he was back at his throat again with his sword. The red stallion struck with a bladed wing at Hurricane's head, which he dodged easily, sending a bladed wing of his own at Fire Star's side. There was a hideous shrieking of metal as the blade slid across it, and Fire Star let loose a grunt as the air was forced from his lungs.

Immediately following up, Hurricane caught his opponent under the cheek with his other wing, centering his head for the final strike. If Hurricane wanted to ensure that Fire Star would leave him and his friends alone, he had to beat him quickly and soundly. Otherwise there was the risk that there'd be more fight in the hateful stallion's heart.

The tip of Hurricane's sword cut across the ground as he swung it upwards, severing blades of grass as it arced. He could barely hear a pleading voice from somewhere behind him, begging him to stop. The sword continued on its path, only increasing in velocity.

With the screech of metal being ripped asunder, the sword connected with Fire Star's neck. The red pegasus flipped twice in the air, spiraling backwards to where he collapsed on the ground in a messy heap. The immediate area was deathly silent as Fire Star's wings twitched several times on the ground.

Hurricane let the sword drop out of his mouth, where it clattered on the ground, painting the grass red. Fire Star's friends gathered around the motionless pony, breathlessly muttering to each other and eyeing Hurricane warily.

Hurricane walked over to where Swift Spear lay watching him with a spark of fright in her eyes. The black stallion helped her to her hooves where she leaned against him, a crippled foreleg held aloft at her side.

“Did they...?” whispered Hurricane in her ear. Swift Spear shook her head and looked over her shoulder at the cluster of pegasi standing over their fallen friend.

“Hurricane, you... you...” Her words were cut off by a hoof from Hurricane placed lightly across her cheek. The red sword was returned to its blue sheath, and slowly the pegasi began to walk back towards the fields, where the sound of a horn indicated that the battle was over. Hurricane began to shudder as he walked through the trees with Swift against his side. One of Fire Star’s friends bolted into the air to go find a medic, leaving the other two behind with the red pegasus. Hurricane looked back at the crumpled pony, seeing only an expanding pool of red.

His eyes caught those of the two pegasi around Fire Star’s body. They were filled with immense fear, and it was meant for him.

*When darkness falls,  
And the fires of war burn the sullen skies,  
I turn to you, brother.  
And together, drawing our swords,  
We go to face the enemy.  
We fight for peace,  
We cry for happiness,  
And we die for life.  
Through our sacrifice, the Empire will live on.*

—Legionnaire Chant

The clouds descended on the camp, blotting out the sky and bringing with them the soggy atmosphere of rain. Outside, several Cirrans scattered from the advancing gray clouds, retreating to the mess hall for warm food and cold drink. There was little movement within the barracks, and the air whistled through open windows left forgotten.

It was the final week of camp for the recruits before they would finally be considered full Legionnaires and sent to the front lines. The soldiers had been given leave to visit Stratopolis that night, and the fort was nearly empty. Apart from a handful of privates and the camp's senior officers, there was not a single pony to be seen.

Hurricane rested his head across the low walls of one of the fort's watchtowers, gazing gloomily across the shattered surface of the lake at the foggy horizon in the distance. His wings were spread messily on either side of his body, the feathers frayed and spotted with mud. He hadn't bothered preening them for two days. He didn't see the point.

It had been two days since the combat exercise concluded. Blue team had won a thrilling victory with a close flag capture by Silver Sword, who outraced a platoon of red team fliers with the flag back to base to score the victory. As a reward, the team had been allowed to skip practice the next day and sleep in, in addition to being allowed to travel to Stratopolis with the rest of camp to celebrate the end of training. It was supposed to be a time for the soldiers to relax, to enjoy their last few days at what had become their home for the past three months before being relocated to Nimbus and eventually assigned to a position on the front.



Celebrate. Hurricane had done anything but celebrate in those two days. It had been two days since he last slept, two days since he had more than a few stalks of celery for a meal, two days since he held a sword in his mouth. His nights were haunted with the color red, and he had spent the day washing and rewashing his sword, trying to remove some spot that refused to be cleansed.

Silver Sword had tried to persuade him to go to Stratopolis, but Hurricane flatly declined every time. He tried his best to cover his emotions and claimed that he wasn't feeling well, remaining inside the barracks and staring at the underside of Silver's bunk. Exasperated, Silver Sword eventually left with Shear Point and the other recruits to the capital city, leaving Hurricane behind.

There was a patter on the roof of the tower as the skies finally released their payload. A low thunder rumbled across the hills, rattling the beams of the construction. Hurricane closed his eyes as the vibrations traveled through his body, causing his tail to twitch uncomfortably. A few drops of rain scored hits across his muzzle, slowly falling to the floor. He refused to move deeper within the structure, unable to pick himself up and content to remain there.

He wasn't sure how long had passed—minutes, hours—until there was a flutter of wings behind him. A series of gentle taps on the wooden floor barely caught his attention as a pegasus alighted in the tower. He didn't bother to turn his head when he felt a warm coat brush against his side, trying to cling on to the strands of loneliness that he craved yet despised.

“Hurricane.” His name shattered the silence within the tower, but the stallion acted as though he didn't hear it. “Hurricane,” came the voice again, this time louder and closer to his ear. A hoof shook his shoulders, and he caught a glimpse of light coloration on the foreleg. “Hurricane, snap out of it.” The voice was getting irritated now, so the stallion shifted an unfocused eye towards the mare in the dim hopes that this would appease her.

Swift Spear was decidedly not appeased. She angrily slapped Hurricane across the muzzle, causing him to jolt back to attentiveness. Standing up now, Hurricane collected his wings by his side and rubbed his jaw with a hoof. Satisfied that she had his attention, Swift took a step back and looked into his eyes.

“Hurricane, I know what you're thinking right now. Stop blaming yourself. It wasn't your fault.” There was a hard edge in Swift's voice, but her eyes pleaded with the black stallion.

“Yes it is!” Swift took a startled step back as Hurricane shouted. “I was the one holding the sword! His blood is on my hooves!” The black stallion collapsed on the floor and set his head between his hooves. “Gods, I didn’t mean to kill him! He didn’t deserve to die!”

Swift took a few slow steps to the shuddering stallion and lay down next to him, extending a wing over his crumpled figure. “Hurricane, look at me. No one blames you. If they did, you’d have been gone long ago. You were just trying to protect me, and things got out of hoof...” Her words trailed off as Hurricane looked up at her, tears glistening on his face.

“That’s not true. I blame myself. I just saw him, and y-you were laying there, a-and I just got this h-haze that blinded me, and—” He leaned closer towards the mare, chest heaving. “I wasn’t in control of myself, I w-wasn’t thinking. S-somewhere in my mind I knew w-what I was d-doing, b-but I didn’t stop.” His sad gaze met Swift’s, his magenta irises glistening in the dull light. “I just wanted to end it, beat him so badly that he wouldn’t bother us again.”

Swift ran a hoof through Hurricane’s mane as she held his head against her body. “I know you never meant for this to happen. Fire Star had plenty of opportunities to run away, to get out of there before it was too late. His pride got the better of him, and he stayed.” She sighed deeply, closing her eyes against her own emotions. “I know there isn’t anything that can justify it, but you did what you had to. The officers understand it, I made sure of that. I’m... grateful that you showed up when you did, or things would have been much worse for me.”

She wasn’t sure if Hurricane was listening, but it didn’t matter for Swift. She needed this time to air out her own feelings and to collect her thoughts. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

“I knew Fire Star was up to something. I kept running into him after the incident by the lake, and sometimes I swore he was following me. A few times we crossed paths in the alleyways between buildings. Something was just... off in the way he acted. He didn’t say anything to me like usual, he just watched and waited. I had always thought of him as just an annoying jock before, but now he actually seemed frightening to me. I tried to avoid him as best I could, but he was always there, always waiting.”

Hurricane’s rapid heartbeat was slowly decelerating and his breaths were becoming more even. Swift realized she was holding onto him tightly as she recounted the worst of her story.

“I didn’t expect anything to happen at the exercise. I figured if something bad was going to happen, it’d be in the dead of night behind a building or something. It must’ve been almost immediately after your platoon broke through our air defenses that a pegasus came up to me and told me that another blue squad was circling around our ranks to take the flag from behind, and that he needed my help to close the gap. There was just too much chaos in the air for me to notice he was one of Fire Star’s friends, so I raced towards the rear to try and stop the squad before it was too late.

“Of course, there wasn’t a squad at all. I saw a trio of pegasi clustered on the ground in one of the clearings, so I descended on them, thinking they were the squad I was told about. I should’ve recognized his fiery coat anywhere, for no sooner had I landed than Fire Star and his companions were at my throat, trying to take me down. I fought back, landing some pretty good hits on Fire Star and his friends before they finally overwhelmed me. I suppose when I saw what he intended to do was when I started screaming, hoping that anypony would come and help me.”

She looked at the black stallion, who had calmed down and was staring quietly into the rain. There was another rumble of thunder, and the sky descended from a dull gray light to a thick shadow over the entire camp, reminiscent of night. “Those screams brought you there, and you did save me, Hurricane. It’s... unfortunate that Fire Star met his end that way, but he got everything he deserved, and then some.” As Hurricane recovered, Swift let herself break down, clutching onto Hurricane’s body for dear life. “He would’ve killed me if you hadn’t shown up, and the Gods know what else he would’ve done. I always figured that his psyche was a little off, but I never knew it was that... that...”

It was Hurricane’s turn to hold Swift as she crumbled into tears. He didn’t say anything as he held her, gently running a hoof through her mane and down her neck. There wasn’t anything that needed to be said. The rain slowly began to let up as the clouds pushed their way past the fort, the skies gradually brightening and the fog receding over the lake.

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“Can you believe we’re here again?” shouted Silver Sword over the thrumming of drums and the cheering of the crowd. Hurricane smiled and shook his head, flexing the blades along his wings. The regiment was marching towards the arch between Main Street and the emperor’s palace in Stratopolis, fully geared in brilliantly shining armor. Dusk Strike barked an order, and his platoon quickly tightened up in military formation. Hurricane wiped the grin from his face and set his expressionless eyes on the headpiece of the soldier in front of him.

A wall of noise hit the Cirrans as they marched into the street, and within seconds Hurricane's ears were ringing. He hardly faltered, and he did an excellent job of maintaining his soldierly air as he marched to the beat of hundreds of hooves against the cloudstone street. He became absorbed in counting the beat as he marched, feeling as though his heart was attuned to it as well.

It had been three months ago that the conflict began with the failed assassination of the Emperor. Just three months prior, Hurricane had been sitting in those stands as thousands of soldiers marched past him. How many of those soldiers were fighting now or were already dead he did not know. All he knew was that now he was one of the Legionnaires marching through the streets, ready to head to war. Was there another colt on the edge of the draft's age limit sitting in the stands right now, watching as Hurricane and Silver Sword and so many others proudly displayed Cirra's might? By the time that colt was drafted, who would be left from this regiment?

Hurricane realized his steps had dropped slightly off tempo, so he quickly readjusted to the rhythmic one-two stomping of the procession. Despite his continual worry about the fate of those before him and those who would come after, Hurricane couldn't deny he was proud. He was a fully-fledged Legionnaire, a member of the strongest fighting force in Dioda, if not the whole world. The safety of the Empire fell to him and his fellow Legionnaires, and he would fight to the death to protect it. He was following right in Thunder Gale's hoofsteps, fighting so that others wouldn't have to. He was fighting for Twister and Raincloud, he was fighting for Zephyrus, he was fighting for the Emperor. And he was proud to do so.

He wished that his family could have been here to see him today. He'd kept up with their correspondence while at camp, but it had been an incredibly long time since their teary departure at Zephyrus. Twister had actually found a steady relationship with Silent Step, the son of Zephyrus' largest merchant. That in itself was ironic, because in complete contrast to Twist's hyper and aloof personality, Step was quiet and reserved, speaking when necessary and preferring to let his actions rather than his words define him. He was a respectable young colt, and Hurricane had always liked him. He couldn't imagine a more perfect match for his little sister.

Thunder Gale had been feeling much better lately. Hurricane laughed inwardly as he recalled reading the scratchy mouthwriting of his father as he wrote about how he had walked to town and back by himself for the first time in months. It was a big accomplishment for the old pegasus, and Hurricane knew he was proud that he felt he wasn't decaying away into uselessness around the house.

Home. Hurricane wished he could see it one last time before he had to go to the front, but knew it was not to be. Despite the Legion's assurances that it was winning key victories in the east, it was pushing for more and more troops to be sent its way at an ever increasing rate. When the parade was over, the Legionnaires would spend one last day in Stratopolis before flying to Nimbus, where the actual combat would begin. There were no assurances anyone would make it back alive, so it was up to Hurricane to enjoy the time he had left rather than worry about the future. With one last twitch of the corners of his mouth, Hurricane pushed the worrying thoughts out of his mind and lifted his chin a little higher into the sun.

When the regiment entered the Plaza of the Emperor, Dusk Strike angled his platoon towards the side and lined with the rest of the regiment. Hurricane spared a quick glimpse around the plaza before returning to attentiveness. The square was filling up with numerous pegasi from the procession, all facing towards a raised platform at the end of the plaza. There must have been nearly fifty thousand Legionnaires already crammed into the precinct, and still more were piling into the rear. Hurricane guessed that many of these soldiers came from different camps scattered around the Stratopolis region, as there were far too many to be from Fort Updraft alone.

A bead of sweat trickled down the back of Hurricane's neck, and he bit his lip as he fought the urge to scratch it away. His thin iron armor had already absorbed an uncomfortable amount of heat from the sun, and he felt like his feathers were going to be singed by the wing blades. Next to him, Silver Sword was panting lightly. Hurricane wouldn't be surprised if it was nearly a hundred degrees out. It was the peak of summer, and the month of High Sun didn't earn its name from a reputation for mild weather.

After a few additional minutes, the entirety of the new Cirran 8th Legion was within the plaza. There must have been nearly a hundred thousand Legionnaires arranged in neat blocks by the time there was movement on the platform. A finely armored pegasus with a drab coat stepped forward to eclipse the sun, with a brilliantly white companion at his side. Emperor Haysar and Imperator Gold Feather were flanked on either side by a contingent of twenty Praetorians. There would be no risk of another attempt on the Emperor's life this time.

Gold Feather stepped to the edge of the platform and squinted his eyes as he peered into the crowd. Hurricane supposed that he was looking for his daughter, but amidst the sea of nearly identical pegasi, such a task would be impossible. Realizing he was wasting his time, the Imperator rose and spoke with a thunderous voice that cleared the plaza with ease.

*“Ante Legionis nihil erat, et non erit Legionis,”* began Gold Feather in the ancient pegasus tongue. “Before the Legion there was nothing, and after the Legion there will be nothing. You have heard these lines many times during training, but only now do you fully comprehend what it means. You are true Legionnaires, ready to fight and die at the Emperor’s command for the glory of Cirra. Your lives before mean nothing now, and now there is nothing after your service with the Legion. Separate yourselves from who you were and live for your country, for your fellow Legionnaires. The fear of death, taught to us as foals by our parents, must be forgotten. There is no greater honor than to die on the battlefield for the Empire. If the Gods have favor on you so that you may live, the Legion will remain a part of you, now until the day you die. Tomorrow, you will be sent to the front lines, where the griffon hordes terrorize our towns and cities. Their mindless numbers shall be crushed by the wrath of an Empire wronged, an Empire that demands blood be paid for this treachery. You are the strength of Cirra, her shield and her sword. The Legion is the Empire’s first and last line of defense, and until the last pegasus be wiped from this world Cirra will live on! But we shall not meet our end, for the Gods smile upon us, proud that we remain strong in a world filled with terror. And with this war, we shall finally strike down the foul crossbreeds that seek nothing but the destruction of Cirra. May you go forth to the battle, with my blessing!”

The white stallion snapped his wings open to his sides and extended a hoof directly in front of him in a stiff Cirran salute. He was met with thousands of pairs of open wings, some bladed and some bare, from the army of Legionnaires filling the plaza. Lowering his hoof and folding his wings back against his body, Gold Feather nodded stiffly and stepped back. There was a loud crash as thousands of hooves simultaneously stomped back onto the ground and wings compressed against armor. Then the drab coated pegasus stepped forward, his red cloak fluttering over his left shoulder.

“Legionnaires. Comrades. Friends. Brothers. Today we stand, ready to head to war. Our wings tremble in excitement. Our hearts race with the winds that have shaped our spirit for millennia. War is in our blood, and be it far from us to back down from a threat to our nation.” Hurricane felt himself shiver as he listened to Haysar’s speech. The Emperor’s voice, though not nearly as enthusiastic as Gold Feather’s, carried within its low and measured meter a hidden power that could not possibly be matched by any other pony. It was the kind of voice that even a foal could tell stemmed only from the purest form of authority. The entire plaza was deathly silent as he spoke, and his eyes could have struck any bird out of the sky with the weight carried behind them.

“The griffons seek to undo us. How quickly it is that they forget what happens when the anger of Cirra is tested. They did not learn their lesson during the High Noon War, so we shall teach it to them again. Only when the griffons are little more than text in the

records shall Cirra know peace. Therefore I ask that you show them no mercy. May the Gods watch over our battles, and may the last griffon fall before the year is out. The blessing of the Emperor and the senate be upon you.”

Haysar did not ask for a salute. He merely looked over his troops with a gaze of succinct praise, seeming to tell each and every Legionnaire that he was proud of their service and commitment to the Empire. His sight passed over Hurricane, lingering upon his iron clad form for several seconds before continuing on its sweeping path. Hurricane knew that the Emperor intentionally held him in his sights longer than the other Legionnaires, but as for why he couldn't tell.

The commander of the Cirran 8th Legion shouted an order, and as one the pegasi began to file out of the plaza in neat rank and order. Gold Feather remained standing and saluted the Legionnaires as they marched past, while Emperor Haysar stood stiffly with the usual expressionless face decorating his figure. From there it was only a short walk down the street until they reached the gaping maw of the south gate, where the neat lines of soldiers began to break down and separate by platoon.

Dusk Strike led his soldiers to an unoccupied stretch of cloud and turned to face them. The corners of his mouth were ever so slightly perked, and he regarded the ponies in front of him like a proud father.

“Damn good show today, Legionnaires. You finally did it. I figured you'd all be dead by now, but look where we are. I got sixty of some of the finest soldiers in the Legion under my command, and I'll be damned if we can't finish this war ourselves. Excellent discipline and an impressive show of force. Go out and enjoy yourselves today. You earned it.”

Without waiting for a reply, Dusk Strike nodded at them and flew off with several other centurions. Hurricane, Silver Sword, and Shear Point located each other and formed up in a neat triangle just under the gates.

“Last fun day we'll have in a while,” commented Silver Sword, watching as several clusters of pegasi flew off in every possible direction.

“Then we better make the most of it, right?” replied Hurricane. “This'll be our last chance to see Stratopolis for a long time, and the last time we were here together we kinda missed out on that opportunity.”

Shear Point was the first in the air. “No kidding. Now would be a great time to go visit the coliseum, or possibly tour the ruins of the original Cirran tribe, or maybe even take a look through the emperor’s palace.”

“Or we could go to the bar and get a spot before they all fill up. They’ve got some mighty good ale up here, nothing like that dingy stuff we get at camp,” suggested Silver, licking his lips in anticipation of a good drink.

“If this is going to be our last night in Stratopolis, I’d much rather remember it,” Hurricane countered. “I’m going to see if I can find Swift Spear. She’d know all the good places to see.”

“Two strokes ahead of you,” quipped the familiar voice of Swift. The trio of ponies turned to see her hovering just a few paces behind them, armor shining in the early afternoon sun.

“You know, it’s kind of creepy how you always show up out of nowhere, Swift,” remarked Silver. Swift Spear just shrugged her shoulders and settled down next to them.

“You guys just don’t see me coming until it’s too late.” She gently tapped a hoof against Hurricane’s helmet, causing him to flinch. “That kind of situational awareness, or rather lack thereof, will get you killed.”

Shear Point chuckled. “Well, nopony’s trying to kill us now, so there’s no need to be so vigilant. Hey, would you mind taking us through a tour of the city? Hurricane figured you’d probably know best what there is to see.”

Swift smiled. “Of course, I’d be glad to. It’s still much too early to get drunk, so we might as well take in something we’ll remember.” With a surge of powerful wings, Swift was in the air, the blades along her wings giving the impression that they were glowing. “You guys coming or not?”

“Oh I’m definitely coming,” answered Silver Sword, putting himself in the air with two flaps from his wings. Hurricane and Shear Point weren’t too far behind, hovering just in front of Silver and Swift. “Race to the palace, anypony?”

“You’re on!” exclaimed Hurricane, lining up next to his friend.

“Good! Last one there’s a featherless foal!” shouted Silver Sword as he took off. Hurricane and Shear Point quickly followed in pursuit, while Swift hovered for a second longer, shaking her head.



“Stallions,” she muttered, before flying after them.

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The last traces of pink sunlight disappeared beneath the mighty city as night overtook Cirra. Civilians leaned out of their doors and ignited the lanterns fixated to the walls of their houses before retreating within the pearly white structures to settle down for the night. But with the descent of the sun, Stratopolis did not grow quieter. It merely escalated with a new sound, the sound of the night, amplified by the many bars that served as speakers for the new noise.

Downtown Stratopolis was home to many wonders of the city’s red-light district. Brothels could be found on every street corner and prostitutes were as common a sight as the stars in the night sky, but the real attractions were the myriad of bars to choose from. Streets in downtown were not known by street names but rather by the title of the bar that occupied the center.

One of these bars, The Split Helm, eclipsed its competitors on adjacent streets with its raucous chorus of voices and crashing mugs. The Helm was a favorite bar for the soldiers of the Legion, and on this night it was especially packed. Hundreds of Legionnaires tried to cram into a building designed for only a hundred at best, and the spillover clogged the streets with drunken figures in various stages of intoxication. There was a steady rotation of soldiers going into and out of the bar, but its population remained constant.

Hurricane and his friends all occupied stools at the bar itself, half-empty mugs sitting before them while they talked. The ale was fine for such a low profile building in downtown, and before he knew it, Hurricane was already on his third draft. Silver Sword and Shear Point had long since blown by him, a dozen empty mugs sitting on the bar between them. Only Swift Spear seemed to be pacing herself.

“...and the size of it? You’d have enough room to pit two light infantry platoons against each other in there!” Drops of liquor freed themselves from Silver’s tankard as he swung his forelegs about, gesticulating wildly to Shear Point and two other armored mares sitting next to him. He was currently in the process of describing the palace to the mares, remarking on the size and grandeur of the marble construction. Hurricane and Swift Spear were content to sit and listen to their enthusiastic friend, enjoying the warmth of the fire and the burn of the alcohol down their throats.

“That’s awesome,” commented one of the mares. “I wish we’d gotten the chance to tour the palace, it sounds like it was neat.”

Silver Sword shrugged. “Just another day in the life of the Steel Pegasus. Though I have to thank my friend Swift here for giving us all the tour.” He gestured a hoof towards Swift, receiving a small nod of acknowledgement from the manila mare. The other two mares smiled, then quickly refocused their attention on Silver Sword as he continued his tale.

“The palace might as well be made out of the morning sky the way Silver describes it,” said Swift, looking at her reflection in the mug. “I’ve never heard a more glorified account in all my years in this city.”

“To be fair, it was impressive,” advanced Hurricane. “I mean, to take all that marble from over a hundred miles away and haul it up here to build one magnificent palace? It’s the kind of stuff from fairytales.”

“Father did say that it took nearly fifteen years to construct the palace and the senate. Long after this empire falls and the next one takes its place, they’ll still be there, one way or another.” With one final gulp, Swift emptied her tankard and pushed it away, raising a hoof for a new one to be brought over. By the time her bracer-clad foreleg returned to the table another mug had materialized before her, foam spilling over the wooden edges.

“You actually think the Empire will fall?” questioned Hurricane, glancing quickly over his shoulder. Even though Swift was Emperor Gold Feather’s daughter, saying anything negative about Cirra was often grounds for immediate execution. Usually this wasn’t much of a problem, as the Empire was well governed and provided for its citizens, but the few cases where it was... the alcohol brought back suppressed memories from his foalhood of emptied houses and public hangings, limp bodies twitching as the rope suddenly snapped taut. It had been much too frequent in the years following the High Noon War, where many Cirrans questioned the Empire’s handling of postwar Gryphus and the tightening of control on their lives. However, these details, like many other contradictory events to the Empire’s official history, were struck from the record books and forgotten about within a few years.

Swift must have sensed his concern, because she lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned closer to him. “Not this war, not this time, but one day it will. Empires only last so long, no matter what the senators claim. Eventually we’re going to find ourselves outmatched, and when we are, will Cirra be able to adapt quickly enough to survive? If we can’t, then we’re gone. And if it’s the griffons that beat us, then we’re really done for. We’ve kicked them around too much over the past four centuries, and they want vengeance.” Again, her thoughts were punctuated by a sip of beer. “That’s what this war is about, and they won’t stop until we beat them down or they kill every last one of us, leaving our burning cities as monuments to Cirra’s fall.”

Hurricane was taken aback by Swift's straightforwardness. "You really believe that?"

Her response was a solemn nod. "Yes. Do you believe everything the Empire feeds you? The Emperor is not immortal, the senate is not all-knowing. And, most importantly, the griffons are not the soulless, barbaric crossbreeds that the Empire wants us to believe they are. Gryphus is a proud nation, almost as proud as Cirra, and their military is highly disciplined and deadly. Their blacksmiths are some of the finest in the world, and they can produce better quality steel than us at a higher rate." She sighed gravely and shook her head. "The senate doesn't give Gryphus enough credit, and we're badly underestimating them. That's a recipe for disaster for any empire."

"Then we'll just have to do whatever it takes to keep the Empire safe. Pegasi are crafty and intelligent, so I'm sure we'll find a way to take everything that Gryphus gives us. But enough about that. How about we just enjoy this time while we can?" Hurricane's right wing was slowly extending as he spoke, and before he knew what he was doing the feathers were already lightly laying across Swift's back. Rather than recoil and hit him as he feared, Swift pulled closer towards his side, humming softly. Emboldened, Hurricane fully enveloped her body with his wing, feeling her warm breath against his coat.

In the center of the bar a quartet of young privates were singing one of the Legion's favorite songs, forelegs linked over each other's shoulders as they swayed back and forth to the drunken lyrics. It didn't take long for more soldiers, grunts and officers alike, to add their voices to the chorus.

*The journey begins,  
Starts from within,  
Things that I need to know.  
The song of the bird  
Echoed in words  
Flying for the need to fly.*

The song was pouring out into the street, traveling down the perfectly white surface to the north, seeking to permeate through the darkness and fill the city with its lively chorus. There was scarcely a Legionnaire within The Split Helm that wasn't contributing in some way to the wonderful tune. Even Hurricane found himself singing along, rubbing his wing gently up and down Swift's back.

*Thoughts endless in flight  
Day turns to night  
Questions you ask your soul.*

*Which way do I go?  
How fast is too slow?  
The journey has its time, then ends.  
If a stallion can fly o'er an ocean  
And no mountains can get in his way  
Will he fly on forever  
Searching for something to believe?*

Even the bartenders had slowed down, pausing in place to join in to the song. Tankards were raised high and several Legionnaires joined the original trio in the center of the bar, adding in their own shuffling hoofsteps.

*From above I can see from the heavens.  
Down below see the storm raging on.  
And somewhere is the answer  
There is a hope to carry on.  
When I finally return  
Things that I learned  
Carry me back to home.  
The thoughts that I feed  
Planting a seed  
With time will begin to grow.  
The more that I try,  
The more that I fly,  
The answer in itself will be there.*

As the song came to an end, the patrons stomped their hooves to their fellow Legionnaires, cheering them for their performance. The trio bowed and returned to their seats, laughing and smiling as they sat down. The bartender immediately dealt out a fresh round for everypony on the house, increasing the euphoria already present by a large amount. Swift was saying something into Hurricane's side as he grabbed their tankards from the bartender, but he couldn't tell what it was through all the noise.

Emptying his mug in several deep gulps, Hurricane set it down on the bar and held Swift closer to him, smiling at her lovely face as she lay against him, eyes shut and a hint of a smile left on her muzzle. He knew in a few days they'd all find themselves in the worst kind of hell a pony could imagine, and many wouldn't make it. Tonight was likely the last semblance of normalcy he'd experience for a long time, maybe even for the rest of his life.

Placing a kiss on Swift's forehead, Hurricane helped her up and left the bar, leaving a generous tip on the table. The night sky was the definition of peaceful, separated by millions of miles from the troubles of the poor planet below. He wished he could save the moment, knowing he'd need it in the months ahead.

As they walked back to the camp, leaning against each other and sharing their warmth, the stars slowly winked out their cheerful faces, letting the somber cloak of night dominate the last of the sky.

*So much fire. So much blood. The overpowering stench of death. Ruined buildings arrayed against a gloomy night sky, the maddening glow of fire sharply outlining their crumbled contours. The air was filled with the cries of my fellow Cirrans and the demonic shrieks of the Gryphon hybrids. No matter how much I've fought, no matter what I've seen, nothing has managed to shake loose my memories of my first battle, where I changed from being a pegasus from Zephyrus to a Legionnaire who spilt blood.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
2nd of Bare Trees, 401 After Empire

If there was one city in the whole continent of Dioda that was almost assuredly known by everyone, it would have to be Nimbus. Like many of the Cirran cities, Nimbus grew from the lands and skies historically home to its own tribe, becoming grander and more grandiose with each passing year. Despite being separated by half a continent from the pegasi of the Cirran tribe four hundred years ago, the Nimban tribe's influence rivaled that of their western neighbors so greatly that proxy wars between smaller coalitions allied with either of the two filled the later years of pegasus tribal history until the birth of Roamulus in Cirra.

After the Unification War, Nimbus became an important bastion for Cirran might in the Empire's disputed east, where the griffons continued to fight the war Haldbber had lost. It had been the addition of Nimbus' strength to Roamulus' cause that won the war for Cirra, and it would continue to be Nimbus' strength that would secure the Empire's east for the next four centuries. The city had been attacked and sieged innumerable times during the Empire's history, but never once had it fallen. Its fierce reputation as an impregnable fortress gave the City of Thunder the legendary title of "Cirra's Spiked Shield", known respectfully by Gryphons and Cirrans alike simply as "The Shield".

Cirra's most populous city fit together in a beautiful jigsaw of new and old. Impressive constructions of cloudstone towered over lowly ruins and ancient buildings, casting strangely fitting shadows over the silent memories of old. Scarred walls defended the million Cirrans within, and many of the older buildings carried wounds of battles long past. It was almost an honor to live in a building that had borne witness to the toils of war, and the city's architects and engineers did little to repair stricken edifices other than ensure that they were stable and habitable.

The northern section of the city was dominated by crumbling cloudstone relics, serving as an ever present reminder to the citizens of Nimbus of everything that they had fought for over the past millennium. Stretching upwards to the south, glistening modern spires adorned with sleek columns and immaculate statues struggled in vain to caress the celestial bodies that circled past incomprehensibly high. The city was devoid of many of the other aesthetic flourishes that defined the splendor of Stratopolis. There were no vibrant rainbows forming a link between sky and ground, and no cascading waterfalls fell from the airborne fortress to catch the sun and separate it into a million tiny shards. Instead, thick storm clouds arrayed themselves imposingly beneath and around the city, which was neatly contained within its rigid walls. The resulting appearance was that of a city rich in culture, assured of its dominance and willing to do whatever it took to maintain it.

The center of the city struck a magnificent balance of ancient Nimbus and modern Cirra in the governor's palace, which commanded the single largest share of cloud of any building. From here, the Nimban Regulus ruled the city with an iron hoof and a golden wing, commanding almost as much respect and authority as the emperor himself. It was said that the path to the throne begins in Nimbus, and many of Cirra's greatest emperors once were the city's Regulus.

The skies above the city were filled with hundreds of light infantry drilling in formation, tails leaving behind thin lines of ice crystals as they streaked through the upper atmosphere. It was impossible to go two strides down a street without crossing paths with a Legionnaire, and several of the largest apartment buildings across from the governor's palace had been vacated and converted into barracks for the soldiers. Thousands of additional Nimban militia patrolled the streets and the lands within the city's limits, identified by smears of ultramarine paint along the edges of their iron armor. Nimbus was less of a fortified city than a heavily populated citadel.

Hurricane felt loose particles of cloudstone crunch beneath his hooves as he walked down the streets. The towering buildings on either side seemed to block out the sun, caging him to the white roads and separating the pegasus from the blue skies. Stratopolis had an open feel to it, with plenty of space between the buildings and roads for the sun and wind to pass through. Nimbus was crowded, and Hurricane felt a rising claustrophobia accumulating within him. He had never felt so far from the skies as he did in the Empire's most magnificent airborne city.

The 8th Legion had arrived in the city just as the sun was cresting the rugged eastern horizon, the cheerful rays attempting to pass through the indifferent gray cloud that Nimbus rested upon. The yellow orb had been framed between two twisting bolts of

lightning that were ever present in the stormy city, and Hurricane had paused to gaze at it a little longer before entering. As soon as his hooves touched cloud, however, it was straight down to business. The Eighth's commander, Legate Red Tail, directed his legion to an open stretch in the ruins to the north where they would set up camp and immediately left with the divisional commanders to the governor's palace to receive assignments. After Hurricane and Silver Sword had pitched their tent and stored away their belongings, Dusk Strike allowed them to explore Nimbus until lunchtime.

It hadn't taken long for the silver pegasus to shell out the last of his coin. Within fifteen minutes of entering the Nimbus markets, Silver Sword had bought two expensive bottles of red wine—one to send back to his family and the other for "when we beat the tar out of Gryphus and finally get to go home." Hurricane was much more conservative with his gold, buying only a colorful paperweight that had actual lightning mixed into the glass when it was still cooling. He knew it would never serve any purpose for him, but he bought the souvenir simply because it was beautiful.

"Damn impressive city," commented Silver as he munched on a loaf of bread soaked in olive oil. Hurricane had to loan him a few bits to buy food, and he didn't expect to see his money back any time soon.

"Damn friendly pegasi," answered Hurricane, returning a salute to a couple that had stopped and gestured towards him. Everywhere he went it took a few minutes to walk down a street with all the salutes he had to answer. Despite Nimbus being more militant and rigid than most other parts of the Empire, the citizens were amazingly friendly and always stopped what they were doing to wave to a Legionnaire. Genuine admiration lit up their faces every time, and Hurricane's spirits lifted a little with each friendly action.

"And I thought Stratopolis was big on all the fun stuff involving the Legion. I figure when this war's all done and over with I'll use my centurion's pay to move here and hang out with the cool pegasi."

Hurricane scoffed. "You? A centurion? Get out."

Silver eyed his friend mischievously. "What? You don't think I could do it? Hurricane, surely you jest." He placed a bracer-clad hoof over his chest, setting a hurt expression on his face.

"If you somehow get to be a centurion, I'll be a commander." Hurricane squinted at the sun that was rapidly approaching its zenith. "C'mon, it's almost noon, and the Legate's supposed to have our orders after lunch."



Silver Sword returned a salute to a trio of fillies who stood giggling on the sidewalk and opened his wings, iron blades illuminated with sunlight. “Does this mean we get food now? Because man, I’m starving!”

“But... but you just ate that whole loaf of bread by yourself!” stammered Hurricane, incredulous. Silver Sword shrugged his wings, the blades rattling in response.

“There’s no food like free food, Cane. And if it’s anything like that bread, then I’m all over that.” He rubbed his stomach and licked his lips at his fond culinary memory. Hurricane shook his head and pushed past him, taking to the air.

“Hopefully you’re not too starving to race back?” challenged Hurricane over his shoulder. Silver made one last glance at his stomach before setting his face into a sly grin. With a light grunt, he forced his iron clad body into the air and propelled himself towards the camp, dropping the wrapper for his bread along the way. Hurricane wasted no time pursuing his steel friend, shadowy wings getting him up to speed in an instant.

It took all of thirty seconds to return to camp at the speed they were travelling, and in fifteen of those thirty Hurricane had already closed the gap on the steel pegasus. He quickly spun a taunting lap around Silver before propelling himself onwards, gracefully landing on his hooves and looking back to the skies for his friend. Silver Sword impacted the cloud decidedly inelegantly, tumbling forward several feet before coming to a rest on his back in front of Hurricane.

“Nice one, Silver,” said Hurricane as he helped his friend up. The collision with solid cumulus cloud had caused the particles to condense into moisture on Silver’s armor, and he shook it off violently. Hurricane raised a wing to shield his face from the scattering of water and began walking to the long, wooden tables where the rations were being served.

“Trying to take advantage of a hungry stallion. Way to go, Hurricane. Ha ha ha,” grumbled Silver as he trotted up behind the black pegasus. Hurricane’s ears twitched in amusement as he grabbed a bowl of salad and a few strips of beef and walked a few paces away, sitting down on a warm patch of open cloud. Silver Sword sat down next to him, already halfway finished with his meal.

It didn’t take long for Hurricane to spot Swift Spear and Shear Point. With a friendly gesture of his hoof, he waved the two over to him and Silver Sword, where they sat down across from them.

“Hey guys!” greeted Swift as she set her food down. “It’s been a while. What do you think of the city?”

Hurricane swallowed a bite of greens and wiped his mouth. “Very impressive, I have to say. The structures here are colossal, and the Nimbans are all really nice.”

“Nimbus is renowned for being Cirra’s uncut diamond,” interjected Shear Point. “Very rich in history and culture, very friendly pegasi, and a simple yet rugged resilience to anything that might threaten it.”

“You should feel right at home here, Cane,” remarked Silver Sword. “The last time this city was under siege, your father beat back the griffons for weeks until they finally gave up. If you told a few of the citizens here, I’m sure you’d get showered in gifts and adoration.”

Hurricane lowered his head in humility. “That’s quite all right, they don’t need to do that for me. After all, I’ll probably be dead in a few weeks anyways.” He chuckled uneasily, but Swift slowly shook her head.

“If you don’t give yourself a chance, Hurricane, then you might as well be dead.” She passed a loaf of bread to him, which he rolled around in his hooves for a second before taking a bite. “You’re a lot more skilled than you give yourself credit for. Your stats may not have shown it at camp, but you’re one of the most impressive Legionnaires I’ve ever seen.”

Hurricane was about to respond, but Silver Sword beat him to the draw. “Wait wait wait, is this on the field, or in the bedr—gah!” Before he could finish, Swift flung a sizeable chunk of cloud at his face which exploded in a shower of water droplets and tiny white puffs. Silver nearly fell over in shock and began trying to wipe the water out of his eyes while Shear Point heartily guffawed. Hurricane tried to cover his embarrassment, glad that his blushing wasn’t visible through the black fur of his coat.

There was an authoritative shout from across the field, and the four Legionnaires paused to look. A large stallion clad in gold-trimmed onyx armor stood in front of four similarly armored pegasi that served as the divisional commanders. A thick, crimson tail revealed itself against a gray coat, and the stallion’s maroon eyes were trained to see every fine detail at a glimpse. Every Legionnaire within eyesight stopped what they were doing and immediately saluted Legate Red Tail. Satisfied that he commanded the camp’s attention, the Legate strode forward and began to speak.

“Commander Gold Moon has given the Eighth its orders. At dusk, we fly east to the Gryphon city of Hengstead. The Cirran 4th Legion has taken heavy casualties in attempting to capture the city, and they’re calling on us for backup.” Red Tail paused, giving time for everypony to absorb his low voice. His maroon eyes flicked to each side of the camp once, measuring the effect of his words before continuing. “Your divisional commanders have their assignments, which they will share with their regiments. It will be your first battle for many of you young Legionnaires. Make the emperor proud.”

The Legate surveyed the camp one last time before nodding and walking off. Behind him, the four divisional commanders split to different corners of the camp, each one gathering the company of the eight colonels that led their regiments. Hurricane shuddered as Red Tail finally disappeared out of sight, only now feeling safe from the Legate’s piercing glare.

His friends must have also felt paralyzed in Red Tail’s sight, for they all let out deep gasps of air and flattened their slowly rising wings. Even Swift was slightly agitated by the Legate’s eyes.

“I haven’t seen anypony use the Stare like that before,” commented Silver Sword, trying to draw in deep breaths of air to calm his racing heart.

“It takes an extraordinary amount of magic to make it effective against other ponies, that’s for sure,” replied Swift, running a hoof down the frayed ends of her feathers. Hurricane shakily nodded his head in agreement. All pegasi possessed some natural capability to perform magical actions such as the Stare, but some were more skilled in it than others. For the most part it wasn’t very effective against other equines, but if one could summon enough magic it was entirely possible to freeze another pegasus in their tracks, as the Legate just demonstrated.

“I’m pretty sure we can all conclude that he didn’t get his position from diplomatic connections alone,” Hurricane suggested. His friends nodded their heads in agreement.

“I’m not sure whether I should be scared or glad that he’s our legion’s commander,” said Shear Point as he picked up his bowl and began to return it to the mess table. “I guess we should be getting prepared to head out in a few hours. We’re going to be leaving before we know it, and I still need to find time to make peace with the Gods.” He set the bowl down and flew off, flicking his tail in parting.

Swift Spear stood up as well and stretched her legs. “I’ve got a sparring session with some of my wingmates in a few minutes. Gotta stay sharp before the big fight.” She picked up

her dishes as well and began to walk off. “Be safe you two. I don’t wanna have to bury you before this is all over.”

“Hey, we’ll be alright, Swift. As long as I’m watching your coltfriend’s back, nothing will happen to him!” Silver Sword twisted to the side to block Hurricane’s jab while Swift snorted in amusement and disappeared.

“Must you really?” inquired Hurricane as he pawed the cloud anxiously, tiny droplets of water condensing on his hoof.

Silver nudged his friend gently. “It’s all fun and games, Hurricane. Besides, I know you two are close—like, close close. I didn’t think you had it in you, but I’m glad I stand corrected.”

Hurricane relaxed a little, his winged shoulders loosening slightly. “Thanks. I didn’t think I’d be able to do it either—I mean, we never really came to an agreement that we’re ‘together’, but—”

“Dude, you don’t have to come to an ‘agreement’ for that kind of thing to happen. I should know, I’ve been involved in more than a few relationships back in Zephyrus.” The steel pegasus paused to display a mischievous smile before continuing. “I can see it in the way you two act around each other. And you did kiss her, right?”

Hurricane shifted his weight. “Just her forehead, but—”

“But nothing. She’s into you, man. You gotta stop being so shy and secretive about it. Half the stallions—no, wait, pretty much every stallion—in this whole legion would kill to have a shot with her, and not just because she’s the Emperor’s daughter. You scored big time, Cane. Don’t let it go to waste.” Silver picked up his own stack of dishes and began to deposit them, Hurricane not far behind.

“I guess you’re right, Silver. Thanks. I’m just worried that I’d lose her—”

Again, Silver interjected. “You’d only lose her by not taking full advantage of the situation. Just cut loose, be yourself, and don’t be so scared about it. The pieces are already in place, you just gotta glue them together.”

Hurricane nodded thoughtfully as they walked back to their tent. There was no denying that Swift didn’t set his heart ablaze, and there was also no denying that Silver knew what he was talking about. Despite his usually aloof personality, Silver cared for his friends and sought nothing more than to help them with whatever it was they were pursuing. As

he surveyed his equipment back at the tent, he decided to follow up on Silver's advice the next chance he got.

He only hoped that it wouldn't be too late by then.

• • •

"You ready?"

"About as ready as I'll ever be."

"Good." Swift Spear touched Hurricane's side gently before returning to her flight lane. "Please don't die on me, Hurricane."

"I won't," responded the stallion bravely. There was a whistle from somewhere up ahead in the black skies. The only sources of light were the feeble moon, a few dim stars, and hundreds of lanterns carried by the centurions. Dim shadows of pegasi began to tighten formation at the sound of the whistle.

Swift Spear looked sadly towards the source of the noise. "May the Gods fly at your side and guide your blade, Hurricane. You too, Silver." The silver stallion nodded his head in acknowledgment but remained silent, consumed by his own thoughts.

"Stay safe, Swift." Hurricane paused as she nodded and tilted her wings away from him. "Give me something to come back to."

Swift delayed in her trajectory just long enough to flash Hurricane a gleaming smile. "Oh? Well, I'll try not to disappoint," she added playfully before finally banking away. Hurricane smiled to himself long after she disappeared into the murky skies, feeling warm and elated on the inside.

Hurricane realized that Silver Sword was being uncharacteristically silent and angled his flight to glide up next to him. "You've been quiet. Something on your mind?"

The silver pegasus sighed and looked ahead of him. "All my life I've dreamt of joining the Legion and fighting for the Empire. Now that I'm here, I wonder if I was wasting my youth with my dedication to training rather than enjoying life while I can."

Hurricane was taken aback, but determinedly pointed to the image on Silver's flank. "You see that mark? That's who you are, Silver. You were born to be a Legionnaire, born to be the best damn soldier the Empire's ever seen. That mark is a testament to your skill,

your determination. You will not fall tonight nor will you any time soon, and you will leave a pile of griffon corpses at the emperor's feet, ever proud to serve. Am I right?"

Silver's ears perked up ever so slightly, and with a move of finality he swallowed his worry and raised his head. "Yes. You're right. Thanks, Hurricane." A feeble smile crossed his lips. "I'll get you a round at the bar next time we get back to Nimbus. And together, we'll gut Gryphus and bleed it dry."

Satisfied that his friend was feeling better, Hurricane focused on trying to peer through the thick shadows that covered the Cirran 8th Legion. It didn't take long to find a glowing speck of light in the east. As they approached, the glow expanded into an inferno. Hurricane recoiled at the haunting smell of smoke.

If Hengstead was ever a mighty city, it would be impossible to tell now. The terrestrial settlement was home to thousands of buildings, and a good portion of the wooden and stone constructions were engulfed in flame. Gaping maws of arches and columns common to Gryphon architecture belched forth a thick black smoke, tongues of fire struggling to escape and ignite the next structure. The entire western wall of the city lay in a broken ruin of stone and blood, and the only buildings within a half mile were the charred husks of houses and stores. The Cirran 4th Legion was firmly in possession of the western quarter of the city but was having difficulty pushing any farther by themselves.

As the fifth regiment climbed to higher altitudes, the stench of death and decay nearly knocked Hurricane out of the sky. A massive bonfire was lit in the rear lines of the 4th Legion, where griffon corpses were carelessly flung into the blaze. Black soot and wispy brown feathers were carried upwards on the currents, sticking to Hurricane's coat and armor. He hardly had time to acknowledge their presence before the first cries of war reached him.

The weary units of the Fourth's air forces withdrew from battle at the arrival of the fifth regiment, leaving the three thousand fresh pegasi to wipe the skies of the remaining thousand griffon defenders. At the pace the battle for Hengstead was going, Gold Moon could have decided to send two of the 8th Legion's four divisions to aid the Fourth rather than the whole legion itself. Hurricane realized that Gold Moon was trying to show an overwhelming display of force rather than just win a victory.

Such thoughts were short lived as the fifth regiment clashed with the griffon defenders. Looking to Silver Sword, Hurricane ascended with the rest of Dusk Strike's platoon to higher altitudes. His heart racing, the black stallion flew blindly into the fray.

There were shouts from every direction, voices in the familiar Cirran tongue and thick Gryphon words that he didn't understand. Cries of pain and crashing metal ripped the lonely night apart. Something tumbled out of the sky and struck Hurricane across the face, a trickle of warm liquid staining his coat. Hurricane pulled the object off of his helmet and held it out before him. Several rows of beautiful pink feathers were attached to iron scales running down the length of the pegasus wing, stained a horrifying shade of crimson. Gagging, Hurricane tossed the severed limb away from him as he tried to control the muscles in his gut.

A shrill war cry rang out of the shadows, and suddenly Hurricane found himself face to face with a griffon warrior. Several scaly talons honed to lethal points were attached to a solid brown body, itself in turn covered in cold iron armor. Two black eyes leered out from underneath a terrifying spiked headpiece, complemented by a finely hooked beak already stained with blood. The beast opened its mouth to shriek, and Hurricane got a clear glimpse of rows of razor sharp white teeth within the beak. A pair of wing blades and a long, curved sword completed the griffon's profile.

The griffon, which must have weighed nearly twice as much as Hurricane, collided with the black pegasus and sent him tumbling away. The sudden change in direction almost snapped Hurricane's neck, and it took several desperate wing flaps to orient the smoldering ground below him. Shaking his head, the stallion charged back into the fray.

But Hurricane's assailant wasn't finished with him yet. Speeding out of the clouds, the griffon plummeted towards Hurricane, sword extended. The pegasus barely managed to spin out of the way of the projectile, turning to pursue the griffon. The hybrid's large mass made it difficult for him to turn around, and Hurricane planted a solid blow with his hooves along the griffon's back. It cried out in pain and flared its wings to stabilize itself, but Hurricane pressed his advantage, grappling with the griffon's neck and wings as it fell out of the sky.

The wind was whistling past his ears and mane as the two entered a frightening free-fall, and Hurricane squeezed the tears out of his eyes. A clawed hand struck at his side, raking light wounds on his exposed underside. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Hurricane fought to extend a bladed wing forward. In one final motion, the black pegasus wrapped his wing arm around the griffon's neck and tugged. There was mushy resistance and then a gurgling cry as the griffon's body went limp. Pushing off against the falling pile of meat, Hurricane returned to the fight.

The adrenaline was roaring through his ears as he looked for targets, the spray of red against his neck hardly noticed. Drops of blood fell off of his wing blade, dropping two

thousand feet to the burning city below. As luck would have it, Hurricane glimpsed a blur of silver pursued by two griffons against the backdrop of the moon. Taking a deep breath, he sped to intercept the lead griffon before it could reach Silver Sword.

The steel pegasus was carving intricate zigzag patterns in the sky, climbing and diving to shake the griffons fixed on his tail. The two griffons were taking turns flying close and far from Silver, the leader always staying within a few tail lengths of his prey and pushing the Cirran harder while the second griffon followed farther back to immediately pounce on Silver were he to change direction and shake his pursuer. The strategy was taking its toll on the elusive pegasus, and one of the griffons managed to shred a few of Silver's tail hairs as he rolled out of a dive.

Yelling, Hurricane slammed into the griffon immediately following Silver and sent him tumbling out of the sky. Hurricane began to dive and strike him before he recovered, but the second griffon grabbed his rear leg as it passed by. Snarling, the griffon flung Hurricane upwards and flew towards him, murderous beak ready to rip through his neck.

Hurricane desperately twisted his body to the side but was unable to orient his motions as he spun through the air. The griffon came closer, predatory eyes fixated on the flailing pegasus above it. Just when its beak was about to rip out Hurricane's larynx, a shouting stallion knocked the griffon away with a bladed wing. There was a sickening crunch, and Hurricane righted himself just in time to see a headless Gryphon tumbling to the ground. Silver Sword materialized in front of Hurricane, panting and with one wing coated in blood.

"Thanks for the... save... Cane," Silver wheezed, holding Hurricane's foreleg with his own as he recovered his breath. Taking a deep gulp of air, the silver pegasus looked around him. "How's about we handle this... together now, eh?"

Clapping his friend on the back, Hurricane smiled. "Sounds like a plan, Silver. Follow my lead!"

With a twist of his spine, Hurricane aligned himself with the thickest part of the action. Noticing a griffon by its lonesome, he signaled to Silver Sword and dove towards the enemy. The griffon saw them closing in and began to speed up in an attempt to get away, large brown wings pushing it through the smoke and leaving behind thin contrails.

The nimble pegasi were more than able to keep up with the lumbering griffon's clumsy movements. No matter how hard the griffon banked or rolled, Hurricane was right



behind him, cutting the distance with each beat of his wings. Realizing that it was outpaced, the griffon quickly turned about and grasped its sword, swinging it at the black pegasus.

Rolling to the side, Hurricane was able to catch the sword along his bladed wings as he passed under the griffon. The griffon swore, or so Hurricane presumed, and began to fly backwards as the stallion came around for another attack. The griffon was so fixated on Hurricane's approach that it didn't notice Silver Sword diving towards him.

With a cry of metal, Silver Sword knocked the blade out of the griffon's hand. Startled, it barely had time to block Hurricane's charge, deflecting his wings away from its face. The black pegasus recovered, joining with Silver as they advanced towards the disarmed Gryphon.

Seeing it was beat, the griffon threw its arms into the air. "*Bitte! Geben Ich auf! Bitte!*" it shrieked in its foreign tongue. Sensing the fear in the griffon's eyes, Hurricane and Silver slowed their advance, halting fifteen feet away.

"What do you suppose he's saying?" Silver Sword questioned, eyes locked on the trembling griffon. Hurricane slowly flew closer, examining the creature. He wasn't sure when griffons were considered mature, but the one before him looked young, probably younger than himself. There was terror in its eyes, and it spurted out a panicked string of incoherent nonsense in the Gryphon tongue.

"I think he said he surrenders," ventured Hurricane, flying closer. He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at the griffon's neck, making sure the hybrid's eyes made contact with his own. When he succeeded, he gestured his head towards the far east of the battlefield and lowered his sword. The griffon nodded shakily and quickly flew away, leaving behind a stammering of what Hurricane guessed were thanks.

Silver Sword flew up next to Hurricane as he sheathed his sword. "That was... interesting."

"He was just a kid, Silver. Just a terrified kid, dragged to fight a war his country started." Hurricane sighed, surveying the airspace. There were only a handful of griffons left, surrounded on all sides by units of the fifth but refusing to give in, insisting on fighting to the death.

“Kind of like us, then,” said Silver as he looked at the blood stains on his wings. “And now griffons are dead because of me. The senate says they’re just barbaric beings who deserve no mercy, but... well, it sure didn’t feel like that today.”

Hurricane shuddered as he recalled the griffon he killed earlier. “They’re sentient beings just like us. They’ve got their own families and own feelings too. But they tried to kill you, tried to kill me, and it was either us or them.” He paused as he felt for the first time the griffon blood staining his face, still warm in the cool night. “And better them than us, right?”

Silver nodded thoughtfully. “Right. They say it gets easier... I’m not sure whether that’s a good thing or not.” There was a whistle from over the city, where the fifth was reforming to continue combat operations in and around Hengstead now that the skies were clear. Silver looked towards the flaming city for a brief second before shaking his head and flying forwards. “We should go see what Dusk Strike needs us to do. Maybe we’ll find Swift Spear up there too, eh? Compare notches and whatnot?”

Hurricane nodded at Silver’s feeble attempts at humor and flew after him towards the regiment. The moon was beginning to recede in the western horizon, and the burning city was the only source of light for miles, a brilliant torch in a sea of nothingness. Hurricane stared at the ruins of Hengstead as he flew, trying to memorize the contours of the city and the patches of fire that illuminated its crumbling buildings. He hoped that he’d be able to flush the images of dead griffons, terrified soldiers, and severed pink pegasus wings from his mind with something else to remember.

Eventually he realized the effort was pointless, and so he flew in silence back to the gathering Cirran 8th Legion, hoping to find comfort in a familiar manila coat.

*As much as war can bring out the best in a soldier, reveal what makes him strong, what makes him tough, what makes him extraordinary, it can also bring out the worst. I saw unimaginable cruelty fighting Gryphus, and the memories still haunt me. Even in my sleep I can't escape the screams of innocents, the sound of blood and unarmored bodies hitting the floor. The Red Cloud War wasn't a war between soldiers; it was a war where the citizens were, above all else, the primary targets.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
9th Bare Trees, 401 After Empire

The battle for Hengstead lasted only three more days with the timely arrival of the Cirran 8th Legion. The last griffon soldiers were executed or fled to the east, abandoning the city and its populace to the furious hooves of the Empire. Without any interference from the Gryphon military, Cirra began to murderously crush the city into oblivion, the flames visible for hundreds of miles. For a full week on their march east, Hurricane could always orient himself to the west by the dim glow on the distant horizon. Then one night the glow dulled and ultimately vanished, and the griffon city of five hundred thousand was no more.

It had been a popular topic between Legionnaires to discuss the Empire's handling of the war from what limited action the soldiers of the Eighth had seen in the past week, and opinions were split along a razor's edge. There were those that wholeheartedly supported the Empire and saw the griffons only as vermin to be eradicated, put to the blade and buried dozens at a time. Then there were those who, like Hurricane and Silver Sword, questioned the ideologies of the senate and were revolted at the thought of exterminating every griffon encountered. Unfortunately for them, this group was by large the minority, and they could not discuss their opinions openly around the centurions. Too many Legionnaires had been felled by Cirran blades on accusations of heresy and treachery in the past few days for it to be even remotely considered.

"Tomorrow's Azoeth, huh?" muttered Silver Sword as he lay on his bedroll. Fat drops of rain pattered against the thick canvas sides of the tent that he, Hurricane, and Shear Point all shared. The moon's pale light was far away, separated by a rude blanket of nimbostratus clouds, and the camp was dark with the exception of the dozens of torches placed across the hills Cirra's armies commandeered to host their soldiers for the night.

“Yeah. Supposed to be a small town—only a few hundred or so—but the rest of the Eighth’s gonna be hitting other targets between here and Bavargade as we push eastward.” Hurricane sighed as he rolled over, trying to relax his weary wings. “Damn Legion’s trying to hunt down every griffon settlement in Dioda and wipe it out. No wonder they’re calling for every stallion they can get.”

Shear Point grunted. “If we’d just focus on taking their metropolises and knocking out their government this war would be over before we knew it. I don’t get the point in fighting for every mile of Gryphon sky when we could cut through their defenses at a few key points and rip them apart that way.”

“It really could mean only one thing,” replied Hurricane, magenta eyes a dim red in the faint light. “Cirra is actually trying to kill every last griffon in Dioda.”

“Insane,” Silver Sword mumbled, raising his hooves into the air as he increased in volume. “Insane! Is it really so worth it to make it a goal to kill millions of griffons? Even if it means our generation is all but bled dry in the process? They’re damned sentient like us too! Can you justify killing a family, a wife and her children, because we ‘think’ they might be a threat to us?” The steel pegasus flipped onto his side, feathers practically smoldering in anger.

“The Empire thinks that killing every griffon is the only way to ensure peace for the rest of us. In theory they’re right, but that doesn’t justify it, let alone make it any more possible.” He pulled out his sword for another glance, eyes fixated at dark brown stains colored a putrid black in the night light. He had spilt more than his fair share of griffon blood in the past week, with the fighting in Hengstead and fending off griffon hit-and-run attacks. It was odd, Hurricane thought, that they hadn’t encountered much resistance in their invasion. If the rumors he kept hearing about Gryphus and Magnus were true, he expected that they would’ve fought back fiercely with all the strength they could muster.

Shear Point groaned as he heard Hurricane sliding his blade in and out of its sheath. “Hurricane, will you just put the damn thing away already? I’m never going to get any sleep at this rate!” He spun onto his side and pulled his blanket up irritably, willing the dark walls of sleep to close around him. Hurricane returned the sword to its scabbard and lay it down by his side, bored eyes gazing at the canvas ceiling of the tent.

“Well, there’s definitely too much bad blood between our two species for the gap to ever be repaired,” said Silver Sword, continuing the conversation. “One of us isn’t going to survive this conflict at the rate it’s been going at, and as much as I hate to say it, better the

griffons than us.” Sighing, he closed his eyes and tried to relax. “I’m just not sure whether it’ll be a good thing to live long enough to see the end or not.”

Hurricane’s head nodded in the dark, and a sudden gust of wind extinguished the torch placed nearby, plunging that section of the camp into utter blackness. In his wandering thoughts, he pondered whether or not the skies would ever brighten again, if he could ever return from this experience and take up his old life at Zephyrus. The faces of his family flashed before his eyes. What he wouldn’t do to get a piece of paper, just a measly scrap of parchment, and tell them that he was alright, tell them how much he loved them.

There was a flash of lightning, brilliant and blinding, and Hurricane could have sworn he saw his father standing outside the camp. But the tidal wave of darkness, crashing back over the camp, swept away the image, and with the rumble of thunder Hurricane’s consciousness drifted off to sleep.

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Azoeth was a small settlement, nestled into a bowl formed by five distinct hills that bordered the griffon town. Dozens of wooden and stone buildings congregated in the center of the bowl, and cresting the hills were large farms, the stone farmhouses standing erect against the buffet of winds that had permanently flattened the golden prairie grasses. The sun slowly rose over the hills, shooing away the shadows and promising the griffons that called the land home that it would be a marvelous day.

To the west, nearly three thousand Cirran Legionnaires sought to ensure that it wouldn’t. At the front of the column the fifth regiment’s commander, Colonel Rising Coat, was accompanied by Legate Red Tail as he steered his soldiers and the rain of ruin they would bring towards the settlement. The Legate, rarely one to stay behind and away from a fight, had decided to tag onto the fifth regiment for the day’s mission to monitor its progress and capabilities in combat.

“Centurions, spread ya platoons an’ drop your altitude! We’ll take ‘em by surprise an’ make short work of this blasted town, an’ then we can be on our way.” The Colonel’s voice carried the cheery drawl common to his hometown of Procella, a modest settlement at the very southernmost tip of Cirra. The sound of his accent nearly drew a chuckle from Hurricane and Silver Sword as they flew, but they managed to suppress it with Dusk Strike only a few strokes away. As the platoons split off, Silver Sword glided closer to Hurricane to exchange a few remarks.

“Can’t believe I never heard him speak before, I’m so used to hearing our orders come from Dusk Strike. Seriously though, can you believe that accent?” Already the silver pegasus was grinning at his recollection of the Dux Centurion’s voice.

Hurricane was smiling as well. “Procella was one of the last independent city-states to join with Cirra, and they’ve only been a part of the Empire since the High Noon War. They’ve had plenty of time to... evolve their language before adopting standard Cirran. They’re good warriors though, and I hear their food is excellent.” At the mention of food, Silver Sword licked his lips.

“Damn it, Hurricane, now I’m hungry again. That carrot stew just did not cut it for me this morning,” he grumbled, hoof rubbing over his stomach gingerly. Hurricane laughed and began to line himself up in formation. He realized he was a whole row ahead of where he normally lined up, and he shook his head mournfully. The twenty-third platoon had lost about a quarter of its fliers, and there were no more than forty-five pegasi left out of the original sixty. Still, it could have been worse. The fifteenth and seventeenth platoons had been wiped out at Hengstead while the thirty-ninth platoon had to be combined with the fortieth to bring them back up to strength.

The usual surge of adrenaline rushed into Hurricane’s veins as they approached Azoeth, but other than the racing of his heart he felt surprisingly calm. Excluding the different skirmishes at Hengstead he’d been involved in, this was only his second battle that he’d be playing more than a support role. He figured it would have taken him longer to get over his combat anxiety, but as his kill count rose his fears seemed to decline. Whether or not that comforted him was another thought entirely.

Dusk Strike had lowered his platoon so close to the earth that if Hurricane stretched a hoof down it would skim across the long prairie grasses. The other platoons were fanning out and creating the prongs of a pincer formation, circling away from Hurricane and receding towards the rear of the settlement. Flaring his wings, the centurion slowed his platoon and alighted behind one of the hills overlooking Azoeth.

Lying on his stomach, Hurricane peered over the hill at the town below. The small cottages were just beginning to stir to life, exhaling thin wisps of smoke as their inhabitants began to prepare the morning meal. A few brown figures emerged from their houses and crossed the streets to shake hands and share friendly words with their neighbors. Small children scampered down the dirt roads, fledging wings barely giving them enough lift to bound forward in excitement as they chased each other in early games of tag.

It was all so peaceful and so serene, and then Hurricane looked around him. The hills were virtually bristling in iron clad demons, ready to rain down on Azoeth at any moment and spell death and ruin for its population. The griffon fledglings squealed in happiness and blissful ignorance, but in mere moments Hurricane knew they'd be screaming in terror.

There was a flash from the hills on the other side of the town, a series of short and long blips as an officer sent a signal to the rest of the regiment. Dusk Strike fumbled with his saddlebags for a second before pulling out a reflective piece of glass and angling it towards the sun, flipping it up and down in his mouth as he responded. Spitting the shard out, he placed it back into his bags and stood up.

“Swords, ready!” he shouted, turning around to face his platoon. As one, the forty-five Legionnaires of the Fifth Regiment, Twenty-third Platoon drew their weapons and spread their wings, ready to take flight. Azoeth's fate was sealed, and it was only a matter of time before it would be reduced to a charred blemish on the Earth and nothing more.

There was a yell from somewhere to Hurricane's left, and he turned to see the crimson-maned Legate and the white coated Colonel taking flight towards the town, bladed wings and sharpened swords catching the sun as they began their murderous descent. Scores of armored figures leapt after them, and immediately after, Hurricane, Silver Sword, and Shear Point all found themselves as part of the noose rapidly tightening around the griffon settlement. There was a shriek from one of the houses and the buzz of the settlement went deathly quiet, only to be whipped up again into a frenzied terror as more Azoethans spotted the incoming Cirrans. The bells in the church steeple began ringing frantically and mothers rushed onto the streets to grab their children and haul them indoors.

The massive bells tolled only six times before the regiment entered the city, cutting down whomever it encountered as it began to reform in the town square. Several dozen militiamen and a handful of Gryphon regulars emerged from the central barracks in various amounts of armor and gear, struggling in vain to come up with any kind of response to the Cirran incursion.

Dusk Strike's platoon was one of the several designated for striking from the center of the town outwards while the rest of the regiment fought their way inwards, and the burden of dealing with the griffon defenders fell to Hurricane and his companions. A pair of griffons flew into his path, both obviously militia by their civilian clothes. The mustache of one was half shaven, his face still wet with water and shaving cream. Raising his sword, Hurricane took the half shaved griffon first, ducking low under the swipe of his dagger

and turning a wing blade upwards towards the griffon's chest. In one fell swoop Hurricane managed to liberate the griffon of his innards, chunks of red organs plunging with the body as it fell and intestines trailing it like streamers. The sticky red blood clung to his feathers, and Hurricane had to give his wing a quick shake to separate them.

The companion to the first griffon recoiled in horror as his friend fell, obviously gagging on what little breakfast he had managed to eat before the attack. Twisting his neck, Hurricane drove his sword towards the separation of white head feathers and brown body feathers, squeezing his leading eye closed against the spray of blood he knew would follow. There was a jolt on his sword as Hurricane collided with the griffon, and the coppery taste of blood stung his lips. The griffon let loose a choking gasp for air through the new hole in his neck as Hurricane withdrew his sword, and then the mottled corpse fell on the rooftop of a house with a dull thud.

A few strokes of his wings and Hurricane alighted on the ground with a handful of other Legionnaires, many of whom had not the slightest speck of blood on their coats. The Cirrans had heavily outnumbered Azoeth's defenders from the start even with sending in only half of the regiment to wipe them aside, and several Legionnaires were able to reach the center of town unimpeded.

Silver Sword and Shear Point dropped onto the ground next to Hurricane, both with blood dripping from their wing blades. Silver was unhurt and alert, sending fleeting glances to the rooftops to check for threats as he waited anxiously for additional orders. Shear Point was holding a hoof over his eye, trying to stop the bleeding from a series of cut marks across his left brow. Hurricane started over to see if he was alright, but Shear waved him off with his wing and began to look around the plaza for any more griffons.

A few Gryphon stragglers fled down the alleyways as additional Legionnaires landed and began to organize for further combat operations. At the edge of the town the first plumes of smoke rose from houses as the rest of the regiment fought its way inwards. A platoon of Cirrans circled overhead, keeping watch over the streets for any griffons trying to muster a defense and swatting down those that tried to flee.

"Legionnaires, form up!" Legate Red Tail's voice rang over the shingled rooftops, immediately drawing the focus of the Cirrans in town square towards his blood-streaked face. "I want every house in this town brought to the ground, piece by piece if you have to! If you encounter any of the clawed bastards it is your duty to kill them! Am I understood?"



The response was swift and affirmative, the salutes crisp and rigid. Satisfied, Red Tail swept his fearsome eyes over his soldiers once more before continuing. "Your platoon leaders have their assignments and will direct you to your targets. I will accompany centurion Dusk Strike's platoon for this operation." He turned away and began walking to the north, bluntly indicating he was finished speaking.

Hurricane cringed when he heard that the Legate would be joining them in the razing of the city and trotted after the scarlet tail wearily. Silver Sword and Shear Point assembled themselves at his sides, weapons loosened from their scabbards and eyes trained on the shaded alleys. The trio rounded a corner with the rest of the platoon and stepped onto a fine cobblestone street lined with splendid houses on either side.

"Good thing I went to the bathroom before this mission," the steel pegasus muttered. "I'd have ended up shitting myself when I heard Legate Hardass is going to be watching my flank the rest of the day."

"Even Dusk Strike's on edge, see?" Shear Point gestured his head towards the front of the column, where the centurion kept nervously glancing over his shoulder. His wings were slightly flared in an anxiety not normally seen in the elder Legionnaire's countenance, and he wiped his brow several times as if he was sweating profusely.

"Can't say I blame him," Hurricane said as he pulled his sword from its sheath. "I'd be nervous as hell too if a Legate wanted to watch my platoon specifically. And of course it doesn't help that it's Red Tail." The three ponies stopped their conversation as Dusk Strike began dispersing troops into the different houses. The Legate for the most part just looked bored, watching as the first pegasi smashed down a building's door and rushed inside. Seconds later his ears perked slightly and a malevolent smile twitched the corners of his flat mouth when the first screams of fear became audible from the broken windows. The whole scene made Hurricane shudder as he looked on.

"Cane, Sword, Point, with me!" shouted Dusk Strike as he galloped to a door. The four Legionnaires plus Red Tail gathered around the oaken entrance, weapons grasped in their mouths and heads held low. After a curt nod from the Legate, Dusk Strike delivered two powerful bucks to the door, reducing it to kindling and splinters. Hurricane led the way in, rushing straight into a living room while his friends checked the corners.

There was an obnoxious screeching noise as a griffoness fled from the Legionnaires' advance, scooping up two fledglings and disappearing into the kitchen. Dusk Strike shouldered his way past Hurricane as the dark stallion completed his search of the living room, relaxing his grip on the sword held between his teeth. Expressing a sound of

approval, Shear Point walked up to a table and placed a few scraps of jewelry in his saddlebags before continuing on into the rest of the house.

Dusk Strike had already cornered the griffon family in the kitchen, standing ten feet back from the cowering mother and children as he watched them with steely eyes. Legate Red Tail paced up to the centurion and gave the kitchen one last look around.

“What should we do with them?” began Dusk Strike, lowering his sword into its sheath. Red Tail took a step closer, regarding the sniveling beings before him as one might regard a repulsive insect. Hurricane and Shear Point, who had completed their searches, walked into the room as well.

There was little reason for the Legate to hold back. The Legionnaires all knew that he wanted to kill the vermin before him, and the only reason he delayed was to watch the terror in the griffons’ eyes. He was the chief justice, the harbinger of life or death, and the power to choose lay solely in his hooves.

A yell from behind them interrupted the stallion’s sadistic pleasure, and Hurricane turned around just in time to dodge a large griffon hurling a meat cleaver at his head. The griffon knocked Hurricane and Shear Point aside, trying desperately to get to his family. He was tackled by Dusk Strike, who quickly incapacitated the griffon and pressed his blade against the hybrid’s neck.

A winded Silver Sword burst into the room as Hurricane brought himself to his hooves. The steel pegasus had a large gash along the side of his muzzle and his right eye was swollen shut.

“Came out of... one of the alleys... gave me a pretty good fight... whew...” panted Silver as he wiped the blood from his face. The griffon was struggling in vain against the pony planted atop his back, and Dusk Strike soon silenced its fight with a slice from his wing blades.

The family of griffons was frenzied, the fledglings crying and the mother shouting something in the griffon tongue at Dusk Strike and the other Legionnaires. One of the fledglings who was almost mature enough to fly broke from its mother’s grasp and ran towards the body of its father, screaming. Red Tail grabbed the griffon, but it struck out at him, tiny claws digging through his eye. Shouting in pain, the Legate hurled the poor creature into the corner by its mother and held a hoof up to his bloody eye, teeth gritted in a mixture of rage and agony.

“Kill them!” he hissed, trying to find a rag or anything to stop the bleeding from his ruined eye. “Kill the little bastards!” Hurricane gave him a strip of cloth from his saddlebags, and the Legate wrapped it across half his face in a makeshift bandage. His fury was not tempered, however, and he glared at Dusk Strike as he waited for his command to be obeyed.

“Sir,” began Dusk Strike, slowly. “We should just take them to the camps like the others. They’re just kids...”

The centurion’s voice trailed off as the Legate advanced. Even with one good eye, Red Tail was more than capable of staring down Dusk Strike.

“I gave you an order, centurion, and I *expect* to see it carried through.” The peaks of rage had been flattened from his voice, but the growing hostility was shifting from the griffons to Dusk Strike.

The centurion gulped and straightened his neck defiantly. “I cannot execute your command, sir. Killing them accomplishes nothing, other than making me a murderer of innocents. Cirra may have my full support in the war, but I cannot condone these kinds of actions.”

The single maroon disc blinked once in surprise. The Legate leaned closer to Dusk Strike until he was almost whispering in his ear. “I hope you understand the price of your actions, Dusk Strike. You have ten seconds.”

The centurion shakily nodded his head in defiance. “I do understand, sir, and I will not let my actions tarnish my honor. You and the rest of the officers may have forgotten what honor is, Legate, but I have not.”

Red Tail had no response. He silently reached for the dagger on his right flank and unsheathed it, drawing the blade closer to the centurion’s neck. Hurricane, Silver Sword, and Shear Point looked on in trepidation as Dusk Strike closed his eyes and savored the last breath he would ever draw. There was a *snick* and a silent wheeze for air, and the Cirran centurion fell by Cirran iron.

Legate Red Tail stoically observed the body before returning the dagger to its sheathe. The griffon family huddled in the corner had become deathly silent, the fledglings trembling in their mother’s arms. Suddenly the Legate turned his gaze towards the trio of Legionnaires standing under the arch that separated the kitchen from the living room.

“You.” Hurricane practically jumped out of his armor as Red Tail pointed a bracer-shod hoof towards him. The Legate ripped the shoulder piece off of Dusk Strike’s armor and threw it to him. “You are now centurion of the twenty-third platoon. If you will not execute the filth behind me, then leave my sight.” With a scornful push, Red Tail moved Dusk Strike’s body out of his way. “I expected more of my experienced soldiers, and if they won’t do the task then why should I expect you greenwings to be able to. But let this be a lesson for you. When a superior officer gives you a command, you are *expected* to execute it. I will not be forgiving next time.”

Hurricane nodded and picked the shoulder plate off of the floor, the metal quivering in his mouth. With a crooked nod of his head, he led Silver Sword and Shear Point out of the house and into the street, which was already choked with ash and smoke from the burning ruins of Azoeth. There was a series of shrieks from inside the house cut untimely short, and then a more crimson Red Tail emerged from the doorway. Silver Sword quietly helped Hurricane affix the new insignia to his armor, then stood by his side as the pegasi of the twenty-third platoon gathered around him.

The rest of the day was a blur. Somehow he got back to camp with the rest of the Eighth as its various regiments returned from the days assignments. He didn’t remember much past sharing a few quick words with the platoon he was now placed in charge of and then wandering back to his bedroll. Even in the dark, Dusk Strike’s defiant body remained seared into his retinas, a bloody dagger dripping from Red Tail’s mouth.

He had occasionally dreamt of being promoted and maybe one day becoming a Commander like his father, but his sleep that night was only filled with nightmares. He dreamt he killed Dusk Strike and took the centurion’s insignia for his own. He dreamt he was Dusk Strike, and he was too terrified to carry out Red Tail’s order. Then the Legate would advance, the terrible dagger glinting in the light, and then he would awake from his sleep whimpering for his life.

He wished he could go visit Swift Spear for comfort, but her regiment hadn’t returned from its mission far to the north. He felt so utterly alone and guilty that he wanted to cry.

And under the mournful starry skies, that was exactly what he did.

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The moon shone over the mountains, its waning light bathing the peaks in a sad, blue glow. Nestled in and among the tallest spires were hundreds of thousands of dots of light, each one revealing the presence of a griffon home.

High atop the tallest mountain, a magnificent complex watched over the capital of Angenholt with a vigilant gaze. The architecture was massive and geometric, curves and organic shapes largely flushed out of the masonry. Giant columns supported the entry to the palace, and a dozen meager torches struggled to repel the darkness.

A large figure paced the stone floors in front of a massive throne, claws creating a rough staccato of clacks as it walked in the shadows. A massive crown decorated its head, and its sides were covered in steel armor. Another, smaller figure approached the pacing one from outside, wings fluttering as it set its solid body on the floor before the large griffon. The griffon with the crown snorted and stopped his pacing, walking to one of the massive windows overlooking the city.

“Speak, Gustave. If this is the news I have been waiting for I would suggest you tell me quickly.” The voice created by the beak under the crown was deep and smooth, flowing gracefully over the syllables yet maintaining a firm hand on authority in its intonation. It was the sort of voice that one would wish they could sit and listen to all day, willing to do whatever the melodic words said.

The griffon known as Gustave rose from his bow and pulled out a scrap of parchment. “Our scouts report the Cirrans have broken through the second ring. The towns of Azoeth, Isbaen, Bavargade, and Sthugart have all been razed to the ground. In addition, the first ring city of Hengstead is completely destroyed. Other than the refugees who fled from the onslaught, no survivors are reported.” Rolling up the piece of parchment, Gustave took two steps back and braced himself for the large griffon’s outburst.

A small puff of wind whistled through the palace, seemingly coming from the griffon itself. The crowned griffon’s tail swished back and forth, but the anger never came. Instead, he smiled as he watched over his city and the lights winking out one by one with the advent of night. A few deep and rich chuckles escaped his beak, and slowly the griffon turned to face Gustave.

“Good. Cirra has been even more brash and arrogant than I could have hoped. They’ve already solved the problem of mixing up war fever for Gryphus, and it’s only a matter of time before every male in the country is scrambling to enlist.” He shook his head and smiled again, as if he couldn’t believe that everything was falling into place. “Remove the restriction on combat operations. I want everything we’ve got sent to the front. Their armies are overextended and easy prey, and they will not be expecting an onslaught of this kind.”

Gustave hesitated, the quill ceasing its scratching against the parchment. “Everything, Your Royal Highness?”

The crowned griffon had already returned to his post by the window, staring to the west where he knew his enemies were waiting, vulnerable. He ran a serrated claw along the stone window frame, producing a horrible grinding sound. Sparks fell from the abnormally sharp talon, their brilliance illuminating the face of the griffon emperor Magnus.

“Everything,” he repeated, dismissing Gustave with a wave of his tail. A few quick wingstrokes signified the secretary’s disappearance, and the emperor was alone.

“How shortsighted you are, Haysar. The signs were there, but you chose to ignore them. Now your armies will starve, Nimbus will fall, and Cirra will be ground into dust, lost with the sands of time.”

The winds outside were increasing in strength, mirroring the temper of the Gryphon Emperor. He took one last scornful look out of the window before walking away into the shadows, his rich voice following him as he disappeared.

“I hope you’re ready for the storm.”

*Death never pierces your soul until it happens to someone close to you. I saw many Cirrans ripped apart and dying violent deaths, but other than a momentary disgust or a lingering horror I remained unchanged. When a friend dies, you learn how you really feel about them, and just how important you never realized they were in life.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
26th of Last Seed, 401 After Empire

Forty-eight hours. That was exactly how long it took for the world to turn upside down. Forty-eight hours after the destruction of Azoeth, everything changed for Cirra. And as the fate of nations inexorably affects the fate of its citizens, so too did life change for Hurricane.

The first twenty-four hours had been chaotic, but the word itself was an understatement. Hurricane found himself trying to organize and command his platoon without any of the vital knowledge or experience from officer's training. Dusk Strike had been an excellent centurion, and his authority over his troops was absolute. Hurricane lacked the natural persona or bravado of his predecessor, but he had at least known everypony in his platoon from training camp and was able to command them as one might suggest a course of action for a friend. Hard, solid respect, the kind that inspired Legionnaires to follow their centurions to the gates of hell and back, was much more difficult to acquire.

The entire ordeal had left Hurricane exhausted. It was still difficult to keep Dusk Strike's death from replaying in his head, and so maintaining some sort of industry was essential to the troubled stallion to keep his mind off of it. Rather than assigning nonessential tasks to his Legionnaires like his predecessor, Hurricane completed them himself if they were within his means and time. He had even flown to the rear himself to pick up his new set of centurion armor. The soft gold trim formed a glistening outline on his armored figure, and he inadvertently picked up salutes from different Legionnaires as he walked across the camp.

A dozen figures nearly knocked him over without so much as an apology as they sprinted through the camp. Hurricane grumbled to himself, temper short on a lack of sleep and weariness from the week long sprint into Gryphon territory. As far as he could tell, there had been some sort of complication to the north that was tying down the second regiment. Swift Spear's regiment. Hurricane, although not usually religious, had nevertheless prayed to the Gods that she was safe.

Communications with the north had been spotty at best. A bloodied messenger, who barely managed to fly back to camp with broken limbs and tattered wings, spoke only in incoherent ramblings before quickly succumbing to his wounds. The messengers that Legate Red Tail had sent to the north had not returned, and he was pondering whether or not to mobilize a regiment to investigate.

It was on the second day that news finally came through. Hurricane had finished drilling his platoon to keep it sharp and was on his way back with Silver and Shear to get something to eat when a pegasus nearly fell onto him, collapsing into a heap a few feet away.

“Hey! Watch it Legionnaire—” Hurricane’s words were cut off as he recognized the mare in front of him. Swift Spear was stained in blood from head to tail and one of her wing blades was missing. With an agonized grunt, she pushed herself off of the ground and hobbled over to Hurricane, a crimson hind leg held aloft.

“Hurricane...” she began, her voice sounding frail and old under her tarnished and dented helmet. “I need... G-get me the Legate...” The mare took another step and abruptly collapsed. Hurricane dove forward to catch her before she could hit the ground, and he cradled her wheezing head in his forelegs.

“Shear! Go and bring the Legate to the infirmary. We’ll meet you there,” barked Hurricane as he maneuvered Swift onto his back. Shear Point nodded and flew off to look for Red Tail while Silver Sword supported Hurricane as he stood up. The black stallion grunted as he heaved Swift and the hundred pounds of armor between the two of them onto his hooves and began to trot to the medical tent.

Equine meteorites began to fall into the camp in a similar fashion as Swift Spear as stragglers from the second regiment made their way home. Thick pockets of pegasi began to crowd around the fallen Legionnaires, prodding the weary figures with questions while others ran to find doctors. Hurricane pushed his way past all of them, arriving in front of a large tent where several dozen wounded Cirrans lay in rough cots.

“Doctor!” shouted Silver Sword as he cleared the way for Hurricane. Finding the nearest available cot, the Hurricane carefully transferred the delirious mare off of his back and began to help remove her bloodied armor.

“What is it? I’ve got a dozen more ponies I’ve got to get a look at,” grumbled an angry-looking Cirran medic. A white apron that was so soiled that it hardly stood out against his red coat covered his chest, and off of it hung several stained tools. The stench of



blood nearly caused Hurricane to vomit, and he took a few steps away from the medic towards fresher air.

“She’s a soldier from the second regiment,” began Hurricane. “She just fell out of the sky a few minutes ago, like she just sprinted back from where her regiment was deployed.”

The medic sat down next to Swift, pushing away the bundle of damaged armor at the foot of the cot. The mare was trying to formulate coherent sentences, but the doctor ignored her exhausted ramblings as he tested for anything that was broken. After stretching each of her tired limbs, the doctor stood up and turned to Hurricane.

“She’s just delirious. By the looks of her feathers she’s been in one hell of a fight, and I doubt she slowed down for a second during her sprint back here.” Hearing another cry for his aid, the doctor gathered up his tools and took to the air. “Luckily she hasn’t broken anything. Best thing for her is to rehydrate and get some rest.”

Almost as soon as the doctor left, Shear Point arrived with Legate Red Tail. Hurricane and Silver Sword saluted him, but the gray pony ignored them and walked up to Swift Spear.

Red Tail looked over the injured mare, a simple leather eye patch covering the empty socket where his damaged eye had been removed. Swift’s breathing had slowed down and her dazed eyes were fixated blankly at the ceiling of the tent. “What’s her condition?” he asked over his shoulder, not looking away from Swift’s face.

“Stable, sir,” answered Hurricane. “The doctor said she just needed some time to rest and she’ll be back in fighting condition.” Hurricane walked to the other side of the mare across from the Legate and gently shook her shoulder. “The Legate’s here to see you, Swift.”

The mare detached her eyes from the ceiling and slowly angled them towards Red Tail, sapphire irises struggling to focus on his form. She raised a shaky foreleg and held it out before her in a rough approximation of the Cirran salute, then let it fall back onto the cot. A feeble “sir” was barely heard above the cries of amputees and other agonized pegasi in the tent.

Red Tail cut straight to the point. “I need to know what happened out there, Legionnaire. We haven’t heard from the Second in days, and the legion is tied down without knowing what we’re up against.”

Swift grunted and licked her split lips. “After we destroyed Bavargade, some Legionnaires spotted a griffon platoon attempting to regroup to the east. The officers gave the order to pursue, and we chased them through the highlands for the better part of the day. Then...” The mare’s stained coat visibly shook and she squeezed her eyes shut. Taking a shaky breath, she rubbed one of her frayed wings. “We stumbled across a griffon army. Thousands, hundreds of thousands, it mattered little. We withdrew, but the army was so large it quickly engulfed us before we could escape.”

There were cries from outside as more injured survivors of the second regiment were carried into the tent. Swift’s eyes were drawn to the wounded Legionnaires, many of whom were her friends. One mare in particular was screaming in agony as two stallions held her against a cot, a ragged and bloody stump of a foreleg flailing in the air.

“Focus, soldier,” commanded Red Tail. Swift’s sapphire eyes quickly returned to the Legate’s face. Shaking the dizziness out of her head, she stole a glance at Hurricane as she resumed.

“We had no hope, so the commander ordered us to flee back to camp with all haste. Only a hoofful of us managed to escape.” The mare solemnly pointed towards where the doctors were furiously working on the wailing survivors of the second regiment, “and at no small cost too. I had to fight my way through a half dozen griffons just to break through the containment, and then I had to evade patrols the rest of the flight back.” Closing her eyes and gritting her teeth, Swift laid her head back against the cot, pressing her ears flat against her head.

Legate Red Tail stood up and nodded to Hurricane. “I’m assigning her to your platoon to compensate for recent... losses on the battlefield. Take good care of her, centurion.” Returning Hurricane’s salute, Red Tail bowed his head to Swift Spear. “Thank you for your information. I shall send a flier to Gold Moon with this disturbing news.”

Before he could leave, Swift suddenly jerked up, groaning as she clutched her side in agony. “Legate, the griffons... They’re heading for Nimbus.”

Red Tail stopped dead in his tracks, one hoof raised in the air. Cautiously resettling it on the ground, he turned back towards her. “You are sure?”

Her response was a worried nod. “The army, it continued moving west after engulfing the regiment. I know the Sixth Legion is supposed to be holding the city, but...” She gulped nervously. “I don’t think they’ll be able to without aid.”

Glancing at some of the wounded thoughtfully, the Legate pensively began to walk away. "Personnel assessments are none of your concern. I shall discuss the matter with my officers." With a flutter of his wings, the Legate rose up into the air and away from the stinking medical center.

The three remaining stallions slowly pressed up to Swift on different sides, hoping to comfort the injured mare. Hurricane held her foreleg and silently ran a hoof through her mane, while Silver Sword cracked horrible jokes to try and lighten the mood. Somehow Shear Point had produced food and water and helped Swift nourish herself. The pitcher of water was the first to go, followed shortly thereafter by the slices of bread and lettuce he provided her. Feeling better, Swift sighed and settled down into her cot contentedly.

"Thank you, colts," she remarked gratefully. A ghost of a smile graced her lips as she slowed her breathing to a long and even pace, yawning once.

"Anything else we can get you, Swift?" murmured Silver. The mare shook her head and rolled onto her side, searching for the warm embrace of sleep.

Hurricane rubbed Swift's neck one last time before stretching to his full height. "Then I suggest you two better be going. Take care of whatever your assigned duties are, and if she's awake when you're done then you can come back and talk. I'll stay here and keep an eye on her."

The two stallions nodded and left the structure together, whispering about Swift's health between them. Hurricane sighed and pulled up a stool to sit on while he rubbed her neck gently, his eyes never leaving the mare's body. At first he thought Swift was asleep, but she began to whisper just loud enough for him to hear.

"So... centurion, eh? Glad to see you're moving through the ranks, Hurricane. I knew from the moment I met you that you were command material."

Hurricane shifted uncomfortably in his seat but continued to massage Swift's neck and shoulders. "It's not exactly under the best of circumstances. Dusk Strike..." he bit his lip as he searched for the appropriate words, "perished at Azoeth. The Legate appointed me to be the new centurion of the twenty-third platoon in response."

Swift rolled over and arched an eyebrow in surprise. "Red Tail? Why not your Colonel?"

Hurricane looked away, but unfortunately there wasn't much to look away to. "He was in a unique position to do so." He sighed and let his wings collapse from his sides. "I'd

rather not talk about it right now. All that matters is that my platoon needed a leader, and I got picked for it.”

The mare nodded slightly. “I understand. I never really knew him, but Silver always said he was good.” She coughed lightly and closed her eyes, immeasurable amounts of weariness filling her voice. “I’m just glad you’re okay...”

Her voice trailed off into a light snore, her eyelids fluttering gently in a restful sleep. Hurricane stood up and smiled. “You too.” He waited a second longer, admiring the soft face nestled in the embrace of sleep. Even covered in blood and sweat and grime, it carried a graceful expression and disarming friendliness.

Leaning forward, Hurricane kissed Swift’s lips. It wasn’t a quick peck; it was long and full of emotion, and Hurricane thought there was a fluttering response under the sleeping mare’s eyelids. He drew back, slowly and reluctantly, and spared one last look at Swift’s lovely face.

“I love you.”

And even as he left the tent, his confession lingered in Swift’s confused dreams, filling them with warmth and hope.

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*There was a roar of thunder, and Hurricane felt himself being flung backwards. His armored back collided with something solid, and the resulting dissipation of momentum caused him to drop to his face. As he struggled to stand up, talons squeezed around his throat and lifted him off of his hooves. The pain was intense, and his winded lungs suddenly found themselves unable to draw breath.*

*“Pitiful,” came the voice behind the talons. “Just like your father before you. You both decided to fight when you could have ran. And now, like him, you will pay the price.”*

*The claws were tightening around his neck, and Hurricane could feel blood being drawn through his black coat. No matter how hard he flailed and thrashed, the grip only tightened, slowly crushing his windpipe. Another mighty crack of thunder deafened him, and his vision began to swim away.*

“Hurricane!”

*The grip on his neck loosened, allowing Hurricane to draw a breath before it clamped down again. Summoning all his might, he tried pushing against the invisible face he knew was there, fighting to reach the sound of his name.*

“Hurricane!”

Hurricane blinked, reality finally making itself apparent. It was the middle of the night, but there was shouting and screaming outside. Suddenly aware of the signs of imminent danger, Hurricane dizzily sprang to his hooves.

Silver Sword helped him gain his balance and tossed Hurricane his armor. The steel pegasus was already haphazardly armored, several loose leather straps sprouting incongruously from the sides of his iron plates. As soon as Hurricane had caught the iron flung at him, Silver drew his sword and looked outside.

“What the hell is going on?” shouted Hurricane above the screams. With a few quick snaps his gold and iron armor was securely mounted against his back and sides. Rummaging through his saddlebags, he produced two golden wing blades.

“Griffons!” was all Silver breathlessly shouted. There were more calls of alarm and confusion as a cluster of tents lit ablaze, spreading a beacon of light throughout the whole camp. Pegasi in various stages of combat readiness were trying to organize a defense against the black wraiths that swooped down from the smoky skies to land death wherever they struck.

Hurricane managed to secure his blades and sprinted into the open, Silver not far behind. There were screeches as a platoon of Cirrans rose into the air and began to strike back at the marauders, and the smoke began to precipitate blood.

“How the hell did they cut past our defenses?!” Gripping his sword, Hurricane sprinted to the nearby clusters of tents, trying to rally the soldiers of his platoon who were engulfed in different stages of confusion and panic. Gathering as many as he could under his wing, Hurricane led them towards a clearing in the camp not yet under siege by griffon soldiers.

“Overwhelming force by the looks of it!” Silver knocked Hurricane over as a griffon swooped low to take him out. The beast screeched angrily at its missed opportunity and disappeared back into the smoke and shadows, no doubt looking for more prey.

Hurricane pulled Silver to his hooves and sprinted in between tents to shake any griffons that might be stalking him. The rest of his regiment wordlessly followed, keeping wary

eyes to the sky. More and more fires were sprouting up over the Eighth Legion's camp, turning thousands of canvas tents into fuel for the inferno.

"Where the hell is Shear Point?" Hurricane shouted as he recounted his forces. He couldn't lose him in this fight, and he most certainly couldn't lose—

"He sprinted off to go get Swift as soon as the griffons showed up!" answered Silver Sword. He and Hurricane both jumped to opposite sides of the alley of tents as a trio of griffons streaked through it, deadly claws extended. There was a crash of metal and two Cirrans fell to the ground as they passed, bloody necks ripped open. One of the three griffons tumbled out of the air as they completed the pass, a spear lodged in its chest.

"Then we need to get to the medical tent! On me!" Hurricane led his platoon through the camp, dodging griffon attack runs and avoiding the fires that now covered the hills. Everywhere pegasi were screaming in agony, and the bodies of dead Cirrans and Gryphons alike polluted the ground.

Making a left and a right, Hurricane came face to face with a massive burning tent, the red cross signs withering away under the blaze. Dozens of charred bodies were visible within the structure, and a belch of smoke was released as one of the supports cracked.

"Swift! I'm coming!" Without thinking, Hurricane dove directly into the inferno. The fiery red glow stripped away his depth perception and scalding ashes landed on his nose and eyes as he pressed onwards. Within seconds his armor was attempting to broil him and the smoke was filling his lungs with its foul black poison. Raising a sooty wing to his face, Hurricane tried to filter oxygen to his nostrils but met with little success.

"Swift! Where are you?!" Hurricane wheezed out between choking breaths. His coat was slick with sweat and its saltiness stung his eyes. There was another snap as more of the supports threatened to give way.

A shout and a heavy figure collided with Hurricane, pressing him down into the ashen floor. Carrying his momentum backwards, Hurricane pushed off with his wings in a roll and bucked the figure airborne. There was a grunt as it collided with a row of fiery cots, skidding to a halt less than twenty feet away. Hurricane was already in the air, blade drawn to confront his foe.

The figure stood up and shook loose ashes from his white coat, ready to continue the attack. Shear Point's eyes locked with Hurricane's, and suddenly both stepped back in surprise.

“Hurricane?” Shear Point put his weapon away and galloped over, a pained smile on his face. “I’m so sorry man, I thought you were a griffon!”

Hurricane breathed a sigh of relief—or tried to, as the air was still thick with scalding soot—and also returned his weapon. “I can assure you I am most certainly not. Where’s Swift?”

“Over here.” There was a cough as Swift pushed aside some medical equipment and strode into the open. She was already fully armored, and a broken shaft of wood served as a makeshift spear. As she advanced towards Hurricane he couldn’t help but notice the hobble in her step, and she leaned heavily on the spear for support.

Hurricane rushed over and hugged her, nearly lifting her off of her hooves. “You’re all right—both of you,” he hastily added to Shear Point. “We’ve got to get going and do something about this mess.”

There was a sharp splintering of wood, and the burning canvas ceiling dipped precariously closer to the exit. Shear Point turned around anxiously and gestured to the shrinking ring of fire. “Now would be a perfect time to leave, don’t you think?”

Hurricane nodded in agreement and helped Swift hobble out of the tent, Shear Point right behind them. No sooner had they left than the structure let out one last roar of fire and collapsed in upon itself, adding its smoke to the blazing atmosphere.

Silver Sword supported Swift as Hurricane left her to wheeze the ash out of his lungs, coughing up a slimy mass of black sludge the taste of which was akin to eating charcoal. Getting some fresh air into his lungs, Hurricane stood up and ordered his platoon into the air.

No sooner had the forty pegasi risen thirty feet off of the ground when they were struck on all sides by Gryphon soldiers. Hurricane desperately ordered his troops to hold formation and form a defensive ring, but it was impossible to locate incoming threats through the smoke. The griffons, with their predatory eyesight, had no such problems finding hovering pegasi, and Hurricane lost nearly a dozen soldiers before he ordered them to the ground again.

“How the hell are we going to fight if we can’t get airborne?!” screamed Shear Point over the cries of war and pain that filled the camp with its unearthly misery. The white pegasus ducked from another griffon and flung his bladed wings into the air, cleaving off

half of the hybrid's wing. The screeching thing fell to the ground and was silenced by the jagged end of Swift's spear.

"If we can't fight, then we survive!" Hurricane gripped his sword and pointed to the western edge of the camp. "Get out of the camp and take to the skies! We'll withdraw to a safe distance while we plan our next actions!"

The sprint to the edge of the camp was the most harrowing experience of Hurricane's life. Dozens of wounded Cirrans lined the edge of the road but he was unable to stop for them, knowing that his only chance for survival lay in getting out of the camp as soon as possible. A squad of griffon fliers noticed his platoon's retreat and began to harass them, striking from different directions and trying to pick off unsuspecting pegasi. A teal mare to his right was suddenly jerked into the air before his eyes, her shrieking body gripped between two griffons as she was lifted higher and higher. Then the griffons tugged in opposite directions, ripping her wings from her shoulders; the agonized mare fell and was silent. All Hurricane could do was keep running and thank the Gods that her death had been quick.

A pair of talons suddenly materialized out of the smoke directly in front of Hurricane, driving straight for his neck. Hurricane tightened his grip on his sword and lowered his shoulder, hoping to knock aside the incoming attack and escape mortal injury. Before the griffon could connect with him, there was a choking cry of pain and a writhing body bluntly bounced off of Hurricane's side. The stallion turned his head to see Swift ripping the javelin out of the griffon's shoulder, stomping on its neck as she did so.

In one fluttering leap over the line of wooden pickets, Hurricane exited the burning camp. The gauntlet had taken less than a minute, but the entirety of the sprint was etched into Hurricane's mind in every excruciating detail. Silver Sword, Shear Point, and Swift Spear all joined his side, as well as two dozen other Legionnaires.

*Too few.* Hurricane's platoon was down to under fifty percent combat strength, losing nearly thirty soldiers in the past fifteen minutes. There was no way they'd be able to take on a griffon platoon at this rate, and the camp was essentially lost.

"Centurion!" Hurricane swiveled his head in search of the voice. Rising Coat appeared before him, covered in sweat and blood.

"Sir, we need orders—!"



The Colonel interrupted him with a wave of his hoof. “Get to Nimbus, take everypony you can with you. The Legate’s already on his way to bolster defenses, and he’ll need every soldier he can get.”

Hurricane nearly doubled over at the orders. “Sir, we’re abandoning the camp?”

Rising Coat gestured crudely with his wings. “Take a look for yourself, centurion, the camp’s already been lost.” He began to fly away, frayed wings keeping his flight unsteady. “I’m going to gather whoever else I can, and then I shall rejoin you at Nimbus. Best of luck!”

With one last flutter of his wings, Rising Coat disappeared into the inferno over the camp. Hurricane watched him go, then ordered his own soldiers into the air. “Legionnaires, on me! We fly to Nimbus at once!”

Silver Sword flew up to Hurricane as they began their sprint to the northwest. “So we’re just giving up?”

Hurricane shook his head. “We’re overstretched and we need to bring our forces back to regroup. Gryphus is going to hit Nimbus with everything they’ve got, and half of the entire Legion is stuck in Gryphon territory and unable to assist. We got played, and now we’ve got to pay the price.”

Silver nodded solemnly and was quiet the rest of the flight. Slowly the burning camp faded behind Hurricane’s small platoon, becoming little more than a stain of light against the inky skies. It was no longer a camp now, but instead a grave for thousands of Cirrans. How many had been able to get out or would be able to get out he did not know, but he had a sinking feeling too many did not.

*Too many.*

There was only one thing he could do now, and that was head to Nimbus with all due haste, bringing his meager troop accompaniment with him. He only hoped that it would be enough.

*Too few.*

The thoughts alternated in his mind the entire flight back.

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The deep bass of war reverberated through the atmosphere, stretching for dozens of miles farther than it should ever have had reason to travel. The rains ceased, the clouds fled, and the sun reluctantly peeked a fraction of its face over the eastern horizon. For the hundred figures flying high above the silent hills, the sound only guided them from one killing field to another.

It became apparent to Hurricane that the dark clouds ahead were really massive plumes of smoke, and the trembling war bass caused his ears to twitch in annoyance. Shouting an order to the makeshift platoon following him, Hurricane rose to higher altitudes to prepare for combat. During the flight from the camp he'd manage to corral a sizeable fighting force of survivors and stragglers, bolstering his original platoon strength from two dozen to over four times that number.

Silver Sword drifted closer to Hurricane, warily eyeing the distant city as they cut down the remaining score of miles left to travel. He cast the black stallion a sidelong glance and fluttered a quick series of anxious wing strokes.

"So what's the plan, Hurricane?" he questioned intently. Hurricane squinted at the city ahead and ascended another two hundred feet, Silver and the rest of the platoon following him.

"We have to strike our way into the city. We'll be coming from behind the griffon lines so we'll have the element of surprise, but every pegasus that isn't inside in the first minute isn't going to get in at all." His magenta eyes were unblinking, and he was trying to convince himself he had come up with the right plan.

Silver, however, doubted the integrity of what Hurricane was proposing. "Really? We need to go *into* the city? The city that the griffons are trying to bring to the ground?" When Hurricane nodded, Silver shook his head. "But why?"

"Because if they've got an entire army out there, a hundred pegasi aren't going to stand a chance if they don't have some fortifications to utilize. We'll need Nimbus' walls and buildings if we have any hope of surviving."

"Or we could just fall back and regroup with the legion controlling Feathertop Mountain rather than joining in on a helpless cause." Silver gestured with his hooves. "There isn't a single officer here other than you, Hurricane. Whatever you say, goes."

Hurricane took a deep breath and poured on the speed. "We swore an oath to defend the Empire to our last breath, Silver. Nimbus isn't lost yet, and we may still be able to make a

difference in its defense if we just get there on time. Do we want the Twenty-Third to be remembered as heroes or cowards?"

Silver sighed and backed off. "I'd much rather live to see another day than be remembered either way, but whatever. I'm with you, Cane. Whatever you say, I'll be with you to the end."

That brought a smile to Hurricane's face. "Thanks, Silver. I promise you the same. No matter what, always together as friends, soldiers..."

"Brothers," Silver interjected, flying up to pound a hoof with Hurricane.

"Yes, brothers." Hurricane continued to grin as Silver broke off to pass on the plans for attack. They were only about ten miles away now, close enough to pick out individual shapes moving through the stormy haze surrounding the city. Unfortunately, that only caused Hurricane's smile to drop off his face and plummet thousands of feet to the earth below.

The city was in pathetic condition. Nimbus' peaks and spires were ablaze, and what was left of the wall was under siege by thousands of Gryphon regulars. Massive chunks of cloudstone were falling, slowly spinning as their surprisingly diminutive masses plummeted to the earth in slow motion. Wherever a chunk hit the hills below, a massive spray of water erupted into the air like a geyser before settling down onto the soaked plains. Even as Hurricane watched, one of the tallest towers in the southern section let forth a mighty boom of thunder as the cloudstone split and crumbled into pieces, falling down and out of the city and carrying all of its occupants with it.

What was most worrying was the innumerable griffon warriors sprawling over every inch of sky, pounding away at every available target without mercy. It was only with great difficulty that the Legion was holding the center of the city and the Regulus' palace, but it wouldn't be long before their lines crumbled as well.

"Wedge formation!" Hurricane shouted, tightening his form and pressing his forelegs out ahead of him. The order carried back through the ranks until a massive spear point had formed, with Hurricane being the tip. Putting everything he had into the charge, Hurricane drove the spear through the rear of the griffon lines.

There was considerable squawking and surprise from the eagle-lion crossbreeds, and several dove out of the way to avoid being crushed by the incoming formation of pegasi. As Hurricane approached the front of their lines, several griffons turned to try and stop

the advance. One of them flew directly in front of Hurricane, but the black stallion lowered his shoulder and crashed into griffon directly under its chin. There was a snap and a gasp, and the griffon fell out of the air, limp but not yet dead, unable to get a response from its limbs as it plummeted.

Hurricane took two or three staggering wing strokes to stabilize himself and finally broke through the griffon lines into the city. Looking behind him, he was pleased to see the rest of his platoon emerging as well, relatively unscathed. Making a quick about-face, Hurricane landed behind a pile of rubble with a cadre of other centurions manning the perimeter of the palace.

“What the hell happened here, centurion?!” Hurricane shouted over the screams of war and death. The centurion was covered in sweat and precipitation, and several nasty cuts were visible through his iron armor.

“Griffon army came out of nowhere! Smashed through our border defenses before we even knew what was happening, and pretty soon they started ripping down the walls!” The centurion ducked from a volley of arrows that skittered across their cover, one of the feathered shafts impaling a young Legionnaire through the neck. The centurion cursed and threw the body off of him, ripping the soldier’s service medallion from his neck and stuffing it in a pocket.

“How strong are the defenses? Can they last under this kind of pressure?” There was a yell from on top of the rubble, and Hurricane jumped up, driving his sword towards the sound of the voice. His blade connected with flesh, and a gasping griffon in its death throes fell next to him.

“Us and whatever’s at the Regulus’ palace is about all the Legionnaires we have left. The Sixth Legion was virtually destroyed in the early hours of the fight, and aside from the hoofful of regiments left we’ve only got militia between the griffons and Gold Moon!” The centurion bent down to pick up a javelin and hurled it at the advancing griffon ranks, where it lodged in some unlucky soldier’s neck and brought him to the ground.

“Then we have to make them pay for every inch!” Hurricane rose up from behind the rubble, taking to the air. “Additional reinforcements are inbound from the Cirran 8th, and they’ll be able to help secure the city!” *I hope.*

The Twenty-Third was already thickly entangled in combat over what was left of Town Square, and already their fresh energy was being worn down by the relentless griffons.

Two pegasi fell, then four, then eight, and Hurricane jumped into the fray to help before he could lose any more soldiers.

His friends were already working as a strong unit, countering and dispatching griffons almost as fast as they could arrive. Silver Sword lured a Gryphon warrior in where Swift Spear was able to impale its wing, giving Shear Point the chance to finish it off and move on to the next target. But their resilience was drawing additional heat, and they were slowly becoming overrun with brown bodies.

With a fierce yell, Hurricane dove into the midst of his friends and bucked away a griffon going for Shear's neck. Drawing his sword, Hurricane parried a swipe from another griffon, then dodged under a peck from its beak. Raising his neck in an arc, he brushed aside the griffon's weapon and sliced at its shoulder plates.

To Hurricane's surprise, his iron weapon rebounded harmlessly off of the griffon's armor, leaving a disheartening ring as it departed. The armor was hardly damaged, and the griffon twisted its beak into a vengeful smile as it struck back at Hurricane. The stallion was barely able to duck under the blow and drive his sword into the griffon's gut, where it made a much more satisfying solid contact.

Wrenching his sword out of the corpse, Hurricane observed the griffon's armor plates. The hybrid was much better armored than many of the other soldiers Hurricane had fought, but the plates were decidedly thinner and shinier. The fact that such a thin metal could easily rebound his iron sword confirmed Hurricane's suspicions.

"They're using steel armor!" he shouted, not sure to who. The superior strength of the metal made anything but direct stabs ineffective to protected regions, a difficult task for a Cirran holding a sword in their mouth.

Another wave of griffons threw themselves at Hurricane's squad, and they set about the gritty work of defending themselves. Two of the beasts attacked Hurricane head on, and it took excessive concentration to not be ripped to shreds on their steel weapons. Ducking and weaving in and out of their attacks, Hurricane managed to disarm one's weapon—only to be struck across the face with its clawed hand. He cursed and gripped his temple, blood dripping onto his hoof and into his eyes. The other griffon attempted to attack him while he was blind, but a well-timed slice from Silver Sword lopped off the brute's head.

The action bought Hurricane just enough time to angle his sword for the other griffon's neck, juking to his side to drive the blade deep through its armor. Gurgling, the griffon corpse fell to the ground, the cloudstone eagerly absorbing its red blood.

"Fall back!" Hurricane turned to locate the sound of the voice, dispatching one last griffon in the process. He looked upwards to see Legate Red Tail hovering over the square, armor absolutely covered in sweat and blood. His eye patch had already been ripped away, and the gaping hole where his eye once was bored emptily into the air before it.

"Fall back! You heard the stallion, fall back!" shouted Hurricane, withdrawing from the airspace to the palace. The remnants of his platoon retreated with him, numbering now no more than thirty soldiers. They formed up on the hill in defensive positions, the griffons greedily taking the vacated town square below.

"Sir!" shouted Hurricane, keeping a wary eye on the sky. The Legate turned and faced Hurricane, indiscriminate anger at the griffons boiling over in his one-eyed stare.

"What is it, centurion?!" the Legate shouted as he commanded platoons to fortify themselves and prepare for the onslaught.

"Can we hold this position? The griffons will be coming in..." Hurricane's voice trailed off as Red Tail focused his anger on him, advancing threateningly.

"We **will** hold this position, centurion! Even at the cost of our lives, we will not retreat one more step!" Giving Hurricane an angry shove, the Legate threw him forward to one of the barricades and hooped him a javelin to keep the hordes at bay.

There was a ferocious screech of impending death, and as one, hundreds of griffons rose from the town square and began to assail the palace from all angles. Hurricane's javelin proved useless, missing completely and sailing harmlessly out of reach to the streets below. Gripping his sword, he began his desperate last stand against the soldiers of Gryphus.

*This is where it all ends.* Hurricane found himself trading blows with four of the feathered beasts at once, being hopelessly driven back. Swift and Silver Sword were managing to hold off a wave of their own, but even they were beginning to yield under pressure. Shear Point had disappeared entirely from Hurricane's sight, but he couldn't spare a glance to locate the white pegasus.

Something cold pressed against Hurricane's wings, and he realized he'd been backed completely up to the metal doors that barred entrance to the palace. Like a cornered rat, he struck out randomly at his foes, hoping against hope he could dispatch just one and lessen the pressure. But despite his best efforts, the sword was wrenched from his grasp and he was slammed back against the doors, the breath knocked out of him.

Before he could draw his last breath, a flurry of arrows and swords decimated the assailants and bought Hurricane some breathing room. Picking up his sword, he turned and watched as two thousand Cirrans joined the fight from the southeast, buying with their blood and iron a brief respite for the warriors defending the palace. A familiar white and purple stallion led the column, and the griffons surrounding the hilltop frantically retreated from Rising Coat's sudden appearance.

"Hurricane!" The stallion recognized Swift's voice, and he immediately sprinted over in her direction. Drawing closer, he dropped his sword and frantically knelt down next to the mare.

Cradled in Swift's forelegs was a familiar white face, tarnished with blood and leftover soot from the camp. His blue mane was ripped apart and frayed at every possible angle, and his sides were covered in claw marks. The stallion was breathing heavily, a griffon dagger protruding from his chest.

"Shear Point, no..." whispered Hurricane as he searched his friend's face. Silver had taken his helmet off and was holding onto Shear's foreleg, trying to decide how best to remove the dagger. His hoof reached for the handle, but Shear waved him off.

"Leave it..." The words were spoken through gritted teeth, and it was clear that the mere process of breathing caused the stallion great pain. "I'm... done..." He gasped once more, blood trickling down his chin. "The rest... is up to you..."

"Shear, just hang in there," pleaded Hurricane. He looked over his shoulder for a medic, but there was not a single doctor to be found on the hill. Ripping off a strip of cloth from a tattered flag laying nearby, Hurricane tried to staunch the bleeding from the dagger wound, but he knew it was to no avail.

"Think of your family, Shear," Silver argued, his voice shaking a bit. "You still have them to fight for, don't give up!"

Shear chuckled, a slow wheeze with as much air leaving through his chest as through his mouth. "No... You don't understand. My family... I'm going to see them now." There was

true happiness on Shear's face now, unmistakable through his bloody lips. "They... died soon after I left. I know because... their mail stopped... coming. And I saw them... in my dreams... they talked to me..."

The white pegasus coughed and hacked, blood burbling through his teeth. Silver Sword was still unwilling to let his friend go. "You don't know that, Shear, they could still be alive!"

Shear Point's breathing was slowing down and becoming more ragged, but his eyes refused to become glazed over, making sure to hold his closest friends in his vision for as long as he could. "No, Silver... I know... They're in a... better place... And I'm going to join them..." Giving each pony a mournful smile and looking into their eyes, Shear's breaths faded to almost nothingness. "Be brave... be strong... and know that... I'll always be watching... over you..."

His irises disappeared behind white eyelids, but he held his sad smile as the hourglass ran out. One, two, three small breaths, and then Shear Point drew air no more.

Swift Spear laid Shear's head down and spread his wings out from under him so that they were outstretched and facing the heavens. It was an ancient Cirran belief that a pegasus' wings guided him to the afterlife, and so every pegasus was buried in wide coffins with their wings outstretched. Sniffing, the mare stood up and walked next to Hurricane, nearly collapsing on him.

"He was a good stallion," Hurricane whispered through the tears on his face. Silver nodded his head slowly, a trickle of moisture falling from his face and landing on Shear's wing. Picking up Shear Point's weapon, Silver knelt before his fallen friend and pocketed the sword in remembrance.

"We won't let you down, Shear," Silver barely whispered, wiping tears from his eyes. "And we'll avenge your family. You can count on it."

Paying last respects to his departed friend, Hurricane led Swift Spear and Silver Sword back to the perimeter, where the Legate was busy arguing with a messenger. Red Tail saw them approach and was about to scold them for not manning their positions, but one look at their faces stayed his tongue.

Departing a last few scathing words to the messenger, the Legate trotted over to Hurricane. "I'm... sorry about your friend," he began, nodding at Shear Point's resting



body, “but we have to hold this position. Those were the last survivors from the camp, and the griffons are making short work of them. They’ll be back soon.”

Hurricane shook his head and walked past the Legate, not even sparing him a word. Silver Sword and Swift Spear followed, gloomily huddled together and whispering in low undertones.

“I know what you’re thinking, Legionnaires.” The Legate turned to face them, a sorrowful determination in his eye. “You’re thinking that if I had ordered the retreat, he’d still be alive. But we have a job to do, and I’m pulling in the last Legionnaires and militia in the city to defend the palace. Word has been sent to other legions for help, but I’m not sure when they’ll get here. If we can hold the city for just another twenty-four hours... We can do this, Legionnaires. And his death won’t have been in vain.” Picking up Hurricane’s sword, he stretched the handle to the centurion. “We’re a team here.”

Glaring, Hurricane grabbed the sword between his teeth and slid it angrily into his scabbard. “No. We’re not a team. There’s us,” he gestured defiantly to Silver Sword, Swift Spear and Shear Point, “and then there’s you.”

Saying nothing more, Hurricane walked back to his position and kept watch for any more griffon threats, leaving Red Tail to stand alone.

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*Nothing is eternal. Time demands the end of all things. A thousand years of victory must be paired with a thousand years' worth of crushing defeat to balance the scale. In the end, what does it matter that something stood tall and proud for hundreds of years if it is felled in one mighty and awful strike.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
12th Shivering Rains, 401 After Empire

Two divisions of pegasi from the Cirran 2nd Legion arrived on the third day of the siege to relieve the beleaguered remnants of the Eighth Legion. The additional forty-eight thousand pegasi were able to secure the southern quarter of the city, including the Regulus' palace, buying some precious breathing room for the weary defenders. The griffons had withdrawn into the eastern quarters of Nimbus to regroup, but Cirran scouts had spotted additional reinforcements massing with the Gryphon hordes. It was only a matter of time before they struck again.

To make matters worse, incursions into Cirran territory near Feathertop Mountain were becoming more and more frequent. Seeing this as a precursor to a massive invasion, the Second Legion's Legate was demanding that his two divisions be returned to bring his legion to full strength in face of the coming onslaught. By the fifth day of the siege, the invasion in the south was all but certain, and the divisions began making preparations to withdraw.

Hurricane had gotten a full day's rest for the first time in several days of intense fighting with the arrival of reinforcements, but the lack of activity only gave him more time to think about Shear Point's death. As much as he tried to push the thoughts out of his mind and carry on with his life, the image of a bloodied stallion, glistening dagger sunken into his white coat, continued to haunt him. The black pegasus hadn't so much as uttered more than a hoofful of words to anypony in the two days since.

Legate Red Tail had been all but absent from Hurricane's sight, spending the better part of the past forty-eight hours in the palace with Gold Moon. The two officers were furiously bickering over strategy and what to do with the city, and sometimes the shouts were audible even through the thick cloudstone walls. Such outbursts were short-lived, however, as the Legate had no authority over Gold Moon's decisions.

It was high noon on the fifth day of the siege when the Legate finally emerged from the palace, his face filled with a defeated anger as he walked under the shadow of his helmet. Every Legionnaire in the immediate vicinity stopped what they were doing and watched him, waiting.

“Gold Moon has ordered an evacuation of the city. The Second Legion will withdraw first while the Eighth holds this position. Only after they have left will we retreat to Feathertop Mountain.”

Silence. Absolute silence filled the air around the palace. No pony had the ability to process their thoughts in any sequential order. Even Hurricane had lost his morose air, only for it to be replaced by a concoction of conflicting emotions. He was finally getting what he wished for, the order to retreat, but on the other hoof, Cirra was abandoning Nimbus. The legendary City of Thunder, the Spiked Shield of Cirra, would fall for the first time.

The Legate took in the burning sights of the city, knowing that it would be the last time he would see it. “Gather whatever things you have left. We should be out of here in an hour.” Slowly unfurling his wings, the officer lethargically pushed himself into the air to spread the news.

“We get to get out of this hell-hole, eh?” Silver mumbled, looking at the grime caught around his hooves. “Maybe we’ll be able to get something to eat.”

Swift Spear stood up from where she had been laying against a pile of rubble. “We really don’t have much of a choice at this point. We’re badly outnumbered and out of food, and we’re losing the Second Legion anyways.” Grabbing her spear, she looked out towards the griffon camp. “This is going to be a killer for morale.”

“I still can’t believe those bucking griffons got the better of us,” cursed Silver Sword. “How many soldiers did we lose back at camp? And after Hengstead, I thought we had the bastards routed.”

“I want to know how my father could have gotten us into this mess.” Swift’s eyes were glinting, and they searched far to the west where she knew Stratopolis floated peacefully, hundreds of miles away. “Any Legionnaire worth their mettle would have seen that something was going on!”

Hurricane reached over and placed a hoof on the mare’s shoulder. “Maybe it’s not his fault. Haysar ordered the Legion to crush the rebellion as soon as possible, and we were

pushing deep into Gryphon territory at great speed. My guess is that the Legates got so overzealous in their pursuit of the enemy that they didn't see it coming. It takes too long for orders to get from the front to Stratopolis and back, anyways."

The mare's wings collapsed and she leaned into Hurricane's coat, her sides beginning to shudder. "You're right, Hurricane. I just... I can't think straight with all we've been through, Shear Point..." Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to let go and stand tall. "We just need to get away from this city and take some time to reorganize our thoughts, settle down a bit."

Hurricane nodded and looked up, seeing formations of pegasi beginning to take to the air and fly to the south, away from the smoldering remains of the city. Thousands of civilians, mostly mares and their children, were struggling to keep up with them, flying through the one wedge of the city not encircled by the griffon assailants. Many of the militiamen that had gathered at the palace were watching the exodus with misty eyes, praying that their loved ones were somewhere up there and leaving the city safely.

A sinking feeling began to materialize in Hurricane's gut, and he galloped back to the eastern perimeter around the palace. Silver Sword raised an eyebrow and followed him, Swift Spear bringing up the rear.

"What is it, Cane? Griffons?" The steel pegasus skidded to a halt next to Hurricane, head tilted anxiously towards the handle of his sword. Hurricane's eyes were glued to the occupied zone of the city, looking for any sign of movement.

"The griffons have to be able to see this," muttered Hurricane. "They're going to be at our throats in a minute, just you wait."

Almost as if on command, a chorus of screeching arose from the griffon camp, and hundreds of brown and black figures began to take to the sky. Backpedaling, Hurricane drew his sword from its scabbard and kept his eyes locked on the rising Gryphon soldiers. Silver Sword and Swift Spear drew their weapons as well, taking to the air and slowly falling back to the palace.

"Go!" Hurricane shouted, turning back towards the Cirran lines. "Spread the alarm, we have to hold for the civilians to leave!" The trio of pegasi scattered towards different segments of the Cirran lines, rallying the troops in a desperate attempt to hold fast in the face of the incoming hordes.

Shouts of alarm sung out around the palace, and as one the remaining fifteen thousand Legionnaires and militiamen prepared to try and stop the flow of nearly a hundred thousand griffons. Already the mass of troops was descending on the palace, speeding through the thin screen of arrows the depleted Cirran archers could put up to slow them. Bracing themselves for the moment of impact, the remnants of Hurricane's platoon spread their hooves for balance and gripped their weapons.

The collision of the two armies was thunderous and brought immediate death to the hilltop. Blood crashed across the soggy clouds like waves on the shore, the ruttled cloud already so saturated that the scarlet liquid ran in thick rivulets down the sides of the hill. In the first second alone, no more than fifty corpses had fallen; by the tenth second, that figure numbered closer to five hundred. The air was so thick with the screams of the dying and the vitality of the dead that it might as well have been the center of Armageddon.

Left, right, slice, parry, counter, stab. The volume of griffons fighting to claim Hurricane's space was so dense that the black pegasus had little time to breathe and much less to think as he defended himself. Shear Point's dying face had entered his mind again, but instead of crippling him in sorrow the stallion's face fueled Hurricane's limbs with an otherworldly speed that dispatched griffons as soon as they came within range of his sword. Silver Sword and Swift Spear were powered by a similar rage, and together the trio formed a wedge that ripped apart everything thrown at them.

But despite their best efforts, the Eighth was losing ground at an alarming rate. A flurry of airborne strikes drove Hurricane and his friends apart, and the stallion found himself backpedaling up the hill to the palace. Losing his footing under a particularly strong blow, Hurricane tripped and fell backwards into a trench, stomach helplessly exposed to the warrior above him.

A ferocious shout rang in Hurricane's ears, and a bloody sword whirled past his snout with frightening speed, liberating the griffon's neck from its body. The ex-griffon tumbled into the trench and landed on top of Hurricane, drenching his coat and armor with blood. Straining under the weight of the griffon and its steel armor, he bucked the corpse away and scrambled to reach his sword. A pair of gray hooves wrapped themselves around Hurricane's chest, and the pegasus was soon on his feet under the cover of the trench.

"Where's your platoon, centurion?!" Legate Red Tail shouted over the massacre. A volley of arrows skittered across the top of their cover, causing Hurricane and Red Tail to flatten themselves deeper into the trench.

“Scattered, sir!” Hurricane shouted back. There was a primal yell at the top of the trench, and Hurricane jabbed his sword into the body of the griffon that had just crested the hill. Uttering a last sputtering cry, the hybrid tumbled into the rapidly filling trenches.

“Unfortunate. The Second Legion has already pulled out, and we’re next, but first I need Commander Gold Moon secured and evacuated safely! Can I trust you with the job?”

Hurricane didn’t even hesitate. Nodding, the black pegasus immediately took to the skies and sprinted to the palace, dodging arrows and dive-bombing griffons alike. For a split-second his worries about Swift Spear’s and Silver Sword’s safety surfaced, but Hurricane immediately forced them back down. They were going to be fine, he told himself, and he had to do his duty as a Legionnaire and ensure Gold Moon’s safety.

There was already smoke billowing out of the windows of the palace’s great hall when Hurricane arrived, mingling with the pollution from the rest of the burning city. Taking a deep breath, the stallion smashed through one of the windows with his shoulder, immediately colliding with the back of a heavily armored griffon. The two slid across the floor amongst shards of broken glass and pieces of smoldering charcoal until they came to a stop in the center of the hall.

Hurricane was the first onto his hooves, quickly sliding his sword out of its scabbard and bringing it to bear on the griffon soldier. The blade was immediately caught and deflected in midair by the surprisingly nimble opponent, and a serrated black dagger was swung at Hurricane’s neck. The black pegasus barely had time to turn away, feeling the tip of the blade graze across his chin with frightening ease. Carrying his momentum with him, Hurricane spun backwards an additional three paces and squared up with his opponent.

As the griffon stood to its full, menacing height, Hurricane was able to see just how outmatched he was. The griffon stood a full head and a half over any other griffon, and instead of white or brown plumage its feathers were black like the soot on its armor. Its steel armor was crafted into a terrifying array of razor-sharp spikes and blades along every limb, and even the beast’s claws were serrated and honed to beyond-lethal points. A jagged beak and two curved swords, one in each hand, completed the griffon’s arsenal.

The soldier let out a fearsome cry, and Hurricane was immediately beset by the hundred points and blades adorning the warrior’s body. Twisting every possible way, Hurricane skirted around the attack and delivered a weak slice to the griffon’s side. His blade rebounded harmlessly off of the steel armor, and a set of spiked rings around the

griffon's tail lashed at his side as he passed. As Hurricane yelped in pain, the griffon turned around, a smug smile adorning its twisted beak.

“Oh, did I do that? My apologies, *freund*, but you're going to have to be faster to get zu mich.” The beast's complacent voice twisted into a menacing chuckle as it used its enormous bladed wings to balance on two feet, swords angled out to either side. “Or did someone not tell you zat you were fighting ze High Guard? Tsk, you should have stayed outside und ran away vith ze rest of your Cirran scum. I promise you zat your death will not be painless.”

The griffon came again at Hurricane, swords swinging in a wild yet controlled maelstrom of death. To even collide with the griffon would mean instant and painful death, and Hurricane was lucky that he had hit the beast's spikeless back when he smashed through the window. Quickly parrying one of its swords, the pegasus ducked under the griffon's second slice and bucked at its underside. The hybrid grunted as Hurricane's hooves collided with its thinly-armored chest, but a swift kick from its rear paw sent Hurricane tumbling away with the addition of three claw marks across his side.

“Is zat all you've got, freund? At least give me a challenge!” This time the griffon sat waiting for Hurricane to strike, eyeing a talon lazily.

Hurricane took a deep breath and racked his brains for a solution. Every moment he spent fighting this warrior was another moment that Gold Moon was at risk, another moment that the Eighth was unable to retreat. His friends were in danger, and the only way to save them was to kill the griffon and get the commander out of there. But how?

Suddenly an idea struck Hurricane. Spreading his wings, the pegasus took to the air and began to spiral about the room, trying to gather as much speed as he could and make his movements unpredictable. The High Guard soldier watched him keenly, ready to make any split-second moves. Satisfied he had enough speed, Hurricane began his attack.

Whistling across the room, the pegasus struck at the soldier with a bladed wing. Unfazed, the griffon blocked it with a sword of his own and attempted to counter, but Hurricane had already dived away from him. Sliding across the griffon's beak with several more wing jabs, Hurricane managed to catch the griffon off balance. Immediately coming back for a finishing strike, he tucked himself into a ball and launched at the griffon with incredible velocity.

Nothing the soldier could have done would have prevented what happened next. Snapping out of his spiraling form at the last possible second, four hooves connected

solidly with the griffon's jaw and propelled it into a nearby wall. Stunned and with a shattered beak, the griffon struggled to regain its footing, but it was too late. Grabbing his sword from its scabbard, Hurricane flung the blade at the griffon's neck, which it pierced through with ease and became lodged in the cloudstone wall behind the warrior. With the last of its dying gasps, the griffon clawed desperately at the blade lodged in its throat, but soon its arms fell limp, never to move again.

Panting, Hurricane trotted to the impaled corpse and put his teeth around the sword. Straining with all his might, he was finally able to wrench the blade from the wall. The griffon's body fell to the side, revealing an impressively deep gash through the wall where the sword had stuck.

"Was that fast enough, *freund?*" taunted Hurricane to the former High Guard. Returning his sword to its scabbard, the black pegasus sprinted through the palace to the throne room.

The building must have been impressive in its prime, but in just five minutes it had been turned into a ransacked structure notable only for what it would have looked like before. Massive blocks of rubble from a caved-in ceiling filled the halls, and dozens of statues lay shattered and mangled across the cloudstone floor. Most of the pictures had been knocked loose from the walls, and some of the rooms were home to spontaneous fireplaces fueled by makeshift tinder in the form of whatever had occupied the room before. The bodies of several Cirrans and Gryphons littered the halls as Hurricane advanced.

After what felt like miles of running to the tired stallion, Hurricane finally burst into the throne room. Climbing over a pile of corpses, he saw something entirely unexpected. There in the center of the room stood the largest griffon he had ever seen, even larger than the High Guard he had just killed. And in that massive griffon's claws was Gold Moon, struggling against the force strangling the life out of him.

"Put him down!" shouted Hurricane, gripping his sword between his teeth. Raising an eyebrow, the massive griffon loosed his grip on the commander just enough to allow him to breathe and turned to Hurricane.

"My my, what do we have here?" The smooth tenor of the hybrid's voice completely washed over Hurricane, causing him to step back as much from awe as in worry. "A little colt, hoping to save his commander? I am intrigued, pony. Come, tell me about yourself, and then I can see to ripping your intestines out."



“My name—” Hurricane’s voice cracked, and he coughed nervously to stabilize it. “My name is Hurricane, centurion of the twenty-third platoon of the Cirran 8th Legion, Fifth Regiment. And I demand that you let Commander Gold Moon go, or I’ll have to kill you!” The griffon’s beak twisted into a smile, and its laughter caused Hurricane to shrink back with fear.

“You? Kill me? Bah hah, I haven’t heard a joke as good as that one in days!” The griffon threw Gold Moon aside, advancing towards Hurricane. “Let me ask you this, little pony; do you know who I am?” Seeing Hurricane feebly shake his head, the griffon sighed and adjusted the straps of his shoulder armor. “My, I thought Cirra would have respected me enough to teach its soldiers about their enemies. I, young colt, am the legendary Emperor Magnus, ruler of Gryphus, God of the griffons!”

Powerful winds seemed to burst forth from under Magnus’ wings, and Hurricane almost dropped his sword in response. Emperor Magnus, the griffon responsible for starting the whole war, was here at Nimbus? And he was a god as well? Hurricane suddenly felt less sure about his already slim chances of surviving this encounter.

The griffon emperor chuckled and drew a notched golden sword from its scabbard. “Seeing as how you’ve come this far, I could do worse than withholding the honor of allowing you to die by my blade. Come at me, pegasus, and let me see what you can do.” Magnus then flared his massive wings to his sides and crouched, terrifying gold blade held horizontally across his face.

Hurricane took a step back and inhaled sharply. The armor Magnus bore across his shoulders and chests was a combination of gold, steel, and amethyst gems, giving it an intriguing purple-gold color combination. Gem-studded plates of gold extended down the lengths of his twenty foot wingspan, and the spiked helm he wore on his head was trimmed in some of the finest gold Hurricane had ever seen. Other than a few spiny ridges along his arms and shoulders, the armor was devoid of many of the lethal adornments the High Guard soldier had worn. Altogether, the set of armor had to weigh nearly twice as much as Hurricane himself.

Sprinting towards the towering griffon, Hurricane brought his sword to bear on Magnus. Feinting right and then slicing to the left, he hoped to catch the emperor off guard and cut through the weak point under the griffon’s arm. The effort was futile, and Magnus easily parried the blow and punched Hurricane’s snout with a balled fist rather than an open-clawed strike that could have ripped his face off. Snorting in pain, Hurricane recoiled out of Magnus’ reach.

Slowly walking forward on three legs, the mighty griffon emperor swung his massive sword at Hurricane, driving the pegasus back. Hurricane dodged the first two blows and attempted to block the third. The strike had so much force behind it that even though Hurricane successfully connected his sword to counter, he was flung backwards into a cloudstone wall at the far end of the room. Stunned, Hurricane dizzily grabbed his sword off of the floor and attempted to stand up.

Magnus was there before Hurricane could shake the stars out of his head, and in three rapid strikes he had cut off the shoulder piece and side armor of Hurricane's left side. Using his wings to raise into the air, the griffon delivered a crushing kick to Hurricane's ribs. The black pegasus was launched backwards again, this time smashing completely through a pillar in the center of the room. How his back didn't break Hurricane could only guess, but the iron armor protecting his spine was smashed into uselessness.

Laughing, the griffon emperor was advancing again. Hurricane knew he couldn't take much more of the beating being inflicted upon him, so with a painful grunt he forced himself into the air. If he could just use his speed and agility to get behind Magnus...

"You think you can evade my strikes from up there, pony? Do not mistake my size for clumsiness. I would not have survived the High Noon War otherwise." With a mighty gust of air, Magnus propelled himself off of the ground to eye-level with Hurricane. The displacement of the griffon's wings was enough to almost destabilize Hurricane in flight, and he had to push his own wings twice as hard to stay in place.

Diving low to the ground, Hurricane attempted to twist under the griffon and strike at his exposed flanks, but Magnus was more than ready for the maneuver. Predicting exactly when and where Hurricane would be, the griffon spun a massive wing at him. The collision snapped Hurricane's neck to the side, and the world swam before the pegasus as he tried to right himself. Shaking off the dizziness, he tried again, this time spinning over and under Magnus in to try and disorient his foe.

Magnus patiently waited out Hurricane's acrobatics, then twisted and struck with all his force square at the pegasus' head. There was a mighty crash of metal, and Hurricane's helmet fell apart into two pieces. Remarkably his head was still intact, but the fight had been all but drained from Hurricane's limbs.

The pegasus fell limp to the ground, panting for breath as blackness threatened to overtake his vision. Staggering to his hooves, Hurricane feebly clamped his teeth around his bent sword as Magnus' massive paws thundered onto the ground before him. The

griffon began swinging his own sword again, this time showing no intent of toying with Hurricane.

Three blurry swords rushed at Hurricane's head, and it was all he could do to simply dodge them and remain on his hooves. His mind felt more sluggish than after a night of heavy drinking, and the triple-vision wasn't helping at all. There was blood all over Hurricane's face, but from which specific wound he couldn't tell. He was more tired than he ever thought possible, and all his limbs screamed in protest whichever way he moved them.

Two more strikes from Magnus, and Hurricane had taken almost as much as he could endure. Raising his sword high above his head, the griffon emperor brought the golden blade to bear on Hurricane. The stallion was too tired to move, so he twisted his head to the side to catch the golden sword with his own weapon.

A resounding cry of metal pierced the room, and Hurricane's iron sword was ripped into two pieces, each one sliding away in a different direction. Hurricane collapsed onto the floor, unable to breathe and unable to move. Smiling, Magnus returned his sword to its sheathe and grabbed Hurricane by the neck, lifting the pegasus off of his hooves.

Two golden orbs flickered over Hurricane's meek form as Magnus studied his foe intently. His eyes narrowed in scrutiny, slowly widening as a twisted smile came to his beak. "I thought you looked familiar. You're Commander Thunder Gale's son, aren't you?" Seeing a flicker of understanding in the choking stallion's eyes, Magnus slightly loosened his grip to prolong Hurricane's life. "I thought so. Tell me, how is the old fellow these days?"

Hurricane's gasps for air were his response.

Magnus shook his head. "Fine soldier, if my memory serves me. Led the defense of this city twenty-five years ago in the war, and what a damn good job he did too. Held out longer than any of my superiors thought possible, and we lost more soldiers there than in any other battle in our entire history. We almost broke him though, before more of you damned flying horses showed up to push us back." Balancing on his hind legs, Magnus pulled out his sword and showed it to Hurricane.

"You see this blade? Oh, your father remembers it well. It was in this very palace, if I remember correctly. Nimbus was crumbling, and victory was almost ours." Turning, Magnus directed Hurricane's gaze towards one side of the throne room. "I fought your father one-on-one in that very spot. He made a stupid mistake, and paid the price for it.

My sword cut through his entire left side, from shoulder to flank. He collapsed right on the spot, begging for mercy.” Magnus laughed and returned his blade to its scabbard. “I would have finished him then and there if his damned reinforcements didn’t break into this room at the next moment. So I simply fought my way out and left him there to die of blood loss. Unfortunately, he must’ve been tougher than I thought.”

Hurricane managed to summon enough air to form a response. “This... isn’t over... Gryphus will be stopped...” His mind was racing, trying desperately to find a way to free himself from Magnus’ grasp.

The massive griffon laughed. “Oh, but it is over. Your armies are being destroyed as we speak, and soon there will be nothing left to stem the flood of griffon rage.” Tightening his grip on Hurricane’s neck, Magnus began to crush the life out of the black pegasus. “Pitiful. Just like your father before you. You both decided to fight when you could have run, and now, like him, you will pay the price.”

The world was losing its color, slowly fading to black and white and red. Hurricane’s lungs were screaming in protest, desperate for a single gasp of air. Nothing he could do was loosening Magnus’ grip on his neck, and the griffon’s golden irises bored into his own eyes, waiting for the life to leave him.

Suddenly Magnus cried out in pain, loosening his grip on Hurricane’s neck just enough to allow him to draw in a deep breath. Twisting his body, Hurricane delivered a powerful buck to the griffon’s beak, breaking free of his grasp and falling backwards. Rubbing his strangulated neck, the pegasus crawled out of reach of Magnus’ scaly hands.

Twisting an arm behind his back, the griffon emperor pulled out a bloody spear embedded in his shoulder. Before he could see where the weapon came from, a solid brick of cloudstone struck him across the face, drawing blood from under the golden helmet. The griffon located the source of the attacks and turned to see two bloody pegasi blocking the entrance to the throne room.

“Hurricane!” A worried mare’s voice broke through the screen of confusion still wrapped around Hurricane’s mind as he staggered to his hooves. Swift Spear and Silver Sword rushed over to him, forming a defensive line between him and the griffon emperor. Swift steadied Hurricane as he shook reality back into focus, panting. He waved a wing in thanks, unable to form words yet.

Magnus scowled at the trio of pegasi as he discarded the bloody spear. “And so history repeats itself, the blood of Thunder Gale’s family allowed to live another day. But it is still

too late for Nimbus, and so my work is finished.” Raising into the air with his massive wings, Magnus began to move towards the exit. “Rest assured, Hurricane, that this is not the last time we shall meet. And when we do meet again, then you will die.” Flying through the arch of the doorway, the griffon emperor disappeared to find new prey.

The pegasi watched the doorway for another several seconds to make sure that Magnus was really gone, and then Silver Sword turned to Hurricane. “You alright, Cane?” Seeing Hurricane nod his head, Silver’s wings loosened slightly. “That’s a relief. A griffon that size, and you’re still alive? That’s an accomplishment in and of itself.”

Swift reached over and grabbed her spear from where it lay on the ground. “Was that... Emperor Magnus?” Again Hurricane nodded, and Swift’s eyebrows shot up in awe. “You fought Emperor Magnus and *lived*?”

“Not just an emperor. He... has control of the winds... like a god of some sort...” Hurricane coughed on the blood pouring down his throat from his bloodied nose.

Silver Sword slapped Hurricane on the back, celebrating for the battered stallion. “That’s freaking impressive, Cane! I wouldn’t have given anypony more than ten seconds against a monster like that, but I guess you’re better than I thought, eh?”

Swallowing deeply, Hurricane gulped down a few last breaths of air. “It wasn’t... easy... I didn’t even land a single blow on him.” Shaking his head, Hurricane retrieved his lost shoulder piece, affixing it to the remnants of his armor. “He, on the other hoof, gave me quite a thrashing.”

Before Silver or Swift could ask any more questions, a different wheeze for air caught their attention. There, in the corner of the room, a winded Commander Gold Moon was leaning against one of the cloudstone pillars near where Magnus had thrown him at the start of his and Hurricane’s fight.

“Commander Gold Moon!” exclaimed Hurricane as he stumbled towards the metallic pegasus. Helping him to his hooves, Hurricane and Silver Sword provided shoulders for the battered commander to lean on as they guided him towards the exit.

“Centurion... privates... My thanks to you,” the elder stallion began. “If you hadn’t have shown up, especially you, centurion, then the bastard would have killed me for sure.” Satisfied that his coordination had recovered enough for his own liking, Gold Moon slowly separated himself from the two stallions supporting him. Grabbing his sword, the

commander walked up to one of the windows overlooking the burning city. “What is the situation out there?”

Hurricane saluted as he relayed the news. “The Second Legion has pulled out, along with a good number of civilians from the southern district. The Eighth, or what’s left of it, is also getting ready to evacuate, but Legate Red Tail is holding us back until your safety could be determined, sir.”

Gold Moon nodded. “And so this is it. Nimbus, after a thousand years of history and culture, finally falls.” The stallion sighed and shook his head. “Were it that I had the brilliance of your father, centurion, else we might have been able to hold it.” Gold Moon gazed forlornly at the remains of Nimbus’ eastern district, which was still swarming with griffon soldiers.

Coughing nervously, Silver interjected. “With all due respect, sir, we need to evacuate immediately. Every second we spend here is another second that a Legionnaire dies.”

The golden stallion nodded solemnly. “You are right, private. Come, let us be off. There is nothing here for us now.” Kicking apart the window that he had been looking out of, Gold Moon took to the skies. Hurricane, Silver Sword, and Swift Spear all wordlessly followed him.

Gathering up whatever troops were left defending the palace, Red Tail and Gold Moon led the final exodus out of the city, squeezing through the last pegasus-controlled zone of Nimbus before it finally collapsed and retreated. The griffons let them go, cheering as the defeated Cirran Legion fled to the south. Out of a legion numbering ninety-six thousand at the start of the war, only two thousand survivors were left after Nimbus. In the space of one week, nearly two hundred thousand Legionnaires had lost their lives in the different theaters of the war. One of those had been Shear Point, and his corpse had been abandoned at Nimbus along with the rest of the civilian population unable to leave the city.

As the mighty City of Thunder receded behind them, Hurricane looked over his shoulder as massive shockwaves punctuated the upper atmosphere. The once proud towers and spires of Nimbus were beginning to collapse, and the griffons had immediately seen to it that the foundation of the city was be ripped apart. Millions of tons of cloudstone were sent plummeting to the ground, where the fires only continued to rage with the freshened supply of fuel for burning. And just like that, Nimbus, Cirra’s Spiked Shield, home to nearly a million pegasi, became a grave for just as many Cirrans and Gryphons alike.

*“I united my race, I founded a nation, I slayed the warlord Haldber. I built my empire, I lost battles, I won wars. I laughed, I cried, I loved, I lied. I lived a full life, and now to die as the Emperor of everything I built... there is nothing more that I could have ever wanted.”*

—The Epitaph of Roamulus

Shovel in, dirt out. Shovel in, dirt out. Pause to wipe sweat from brow. Hurricane groaned as he rested on the handle of the tool lodged in the ground, squinting his teary eyes against the chilly winds. In the lofty Waldren mountain range, the curse of winter had no patience for the end of autumn.

Two months had passed since the destruction of Nimbus, two dreary and agonizing months of suffering and melancholy. It was never officially declared, but the entire month of Bare Trees might as well have been a month of mourning for Cirra. The official news from Stratopolis had tried to downplay the event, but there was no possible way to make the destruction of a city any less terrifying. For the first time in the war, the citizens of Cirra were genuinely fearful of the strength of Gryphus.

That was another thing Hurricane had noted. It had long since stopped being called a rebellion or conflict among the griffon territories, instead called a full-scale war. The senate had found it necessary to step out of their sphere of arrogance and label Gryphus a hostile nation in the hopes of rallying support for the war back home. But despite their best efforts, the economy was tipping and morale was dropping away at a frightening pace.

Shovel in, dirt out. The onset of cold weather in the mountains had brought fighting almost to a standstill, and there was little for Hurricane to do except occupy himself with moving the rocky highland soil to make graves for the never-ending supply of bodies. Although the Cirran casualty rate had rapidly dropped off as both sides began to bunker down for the winter, the cold and dwindling supplies were taking their own toll on the Legion.

It had been a long time since Hurricane had buried a face he remembered. The survivors of the Eighth Legion—no more than a thousand now—had been absorbed by the Second Legion to make up for the losses they sustained at Nimbus. The casualties had only continued to pile up in the month following as the griffon hordes reached Feathertop

Mountain, seeking to dislodge the Cirrans from their heavily fortified encampments. The Second Legion had been strong, however, and the hordes were repelled each and every time until the cold weather stopped their attacks.

Despite the successes of the Second, the rest of the entire Cirran Legion was collapsing across the continent. There had been eight legions at the start of the war involved in combat, but now that number had dwindled. The Cirran 4th and 5th Legions were wiped out in the griffon counterattack after Azoeth, and the Cirran 6th was destroyed in Nimbus. The Seventh Legion was still mostly intact but was surrounded deep within Gryphon territory. No communication had been exchanged between the Seventh and Stratopolis in a month, and they were presumed to be destroyed in action. The Eighth had, of course, been destroyed at camp and at Nimbus, leaving only the First, Second, and Third Legions in one piece to defend the interior of Cirra. According to the official reports, three hundred thousand Legionnaires had died in the war so far, but Hurricane knew the number was much higher.

The centurion sighed as he wedged the shovel between two rocks and abandoned it, having finished the grave he was digging. Despite all the losses from his legion, even Shear Point's death, at least Silver Sword and Swift Spear were still alive. Hurricane knew these two pegasi so well that even the thought of their possible demise nearly crippled him in depression. Silver Sword was his lifelong friend, and Swift Spear was... something much more. The three of them had spent so much time together since Shear Point's death that unless they were preoccupied with other duties they were inseparable.

Hurricane gritted his teeth as a flurry of ice crystals stung at his eyes. His armor felt like ice, and the cold wind cut to his bones. The sun was a rare sight through the gray clouds over the plateau between Feathertop Mountain and Jagged Spire Peak, layering another level of symbolic chill to the frosty air. The entire area was a barren wasteland, home only to rocks and the hardy lichens that grew over them

The two peaks that made up Feathertop Mountain were a curious geological formation. The massive spires on either side were connected by a half-mile wide stretch of barren rock, as flat as could possibly be. The camp was sprawled across this massive plateau, giving way in the east to rocky ledges and the fortifications that so many decaying griffon bodies lay against. A fine black soot covered the slab of stone, getting into everything that touched it. Hurricane was grateful that his coat was a similar black coloration, unlike Silver's or Swift's.

The rows of tents were arrayed in a series of segmented rings around a massive structure at the center of the plateau. Standing proud and defiant against the bitter winds for four



centuries, a monolithic spire engraved with early Cirran drawings and icons dominated the spot where Roamulus had slain Haldber and built an empire. A rough portrait of Roamulus was carved into one side of the monument, chiseled from the stone by Cirrans nearly four centuries dead. The spire always had a small congregation of Legionnaires around it, paying homage and reverence to the one figure more important in Cirran history than the Emperor. Hurricane had visited it once or twice, but felt no need to revel in the accomplishments of a dead pegasus. However important he was in life, his legacy did little for Cirra here and now.

With a quick flutter of his wings, Hurricane alighted in the center of his regiment's camp. When the survivors of the Eighth Legion were redistributed after their arrival from Nimbus, Hurricane's platoon was placed in the seventh regiment of the legion's Fourth Division. He and the five other survivors of the twenty-third platoon were attached to the fifteenth to make up for losses. Technically, Hurricane and the fifteenth's centurion, Light Stroke, were supposed to share command over the platoon, but Hurricane preferred to operate his small group of survivors as an independent task force that flitted to and fro across the field to provide assistance to his regiment.

It didn't take too long to find Silver Sword and Swift Spear, for they sat at the same spot they had occupied every day for lunch since they arrived. With a wave of his wing, Hurricane greeted the two and dropped to the sooty rock. A meager bowl of watery stew was waiting for him, and the stallion sighed as he brought the bowl to his mouth. The quality of the rations were declining rapidly with the final harvest for the year already completed, and there wasn't much for Hurricane to look forward to until spring.

The trio of pegasi ate in silence for several minutes, watching yet another division of greenwing Legionnaires arrive at the mountaintop. The last news Hurricane had heard from his family in Zephyrus was that the draft window had been opened to stallions ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-eight, and the Legion was considering a limited draft of mares to replenish the rapidly dwindling armies at the front. He hoped that it didn't come to that, because not only would it put an entire generation at risk of being destroyed, it also meant that Twister might become a potential target of the draft. If Hurricane had to die the most brutal death imaginable so that his sister could stay safe, he would take it without hesitation.

Hurricane, Silver, and Swift watched the procession of greenwings file away to their section of camp, a glum frown on each of their faces. The colts, for most of them were only sixteen or seventeen and not yet considered stallions, were clad in armor that looked two sizes too big for them and carried weapons nearly as heavy as they were. It was only when the new arrivals passed and the crowd refused to die out did they notice that

something else was going on. Intrigued, the trio deposited their now-empty bowls and trotted towards the center of camp.

“I wonder what all the commotion’s about?” pondered Silver Sword. “Unless there’s a fight or something, there really isn’t all that much to see around here.”

“I heard that somepony important was supposed to arrive today,” Swift added. Parting her way through the crowds, the mare struggled to see who it could be. Hurricane followed in her wake, straining his neck to catch a glimpse of the source of the commotion. Upon seeing it, he immediately understood the reason for the excitement.

In the center of a large clearing, surrounded by no fewer than a hundred Praetorians, Emperor Augustus Haysar and Imperator Gold Feather plodded their way across camp. Both stallions were clad in their finest armor and armed to the teeth, carrying two large swords on each flank in addition to the golden blades along their wings. There was no question about it; the Emperor and his contingency were fully geared for combat.

“Haysar? Here? Why?” Hurricane couldn’t believe that their emperor would leave the safety of his palace to fight on the front lines. He turned to Swift with a questioning glance, hoping that her knowledge of government could fill in the gaps.

“It’s a tradition for the emperor to serve for one month out of the year when the nation is at war.” The mare made room for Hurricane and Silver Sword to stand next to her at the edge of the crowd, where they had a good look at the Emperor. “Most emperors choose the wintery months, for no other reason than that the lack of fighting and activity means that they’ll be relatively safe.”

“Seems kind of cowardly if you ask me,” Silver commented, angrily shaking soot out of his feathers. “If they come all the way to the front just to boost our morale, they might as well contribute something useful while they’re here, too.”

Swift Spear snorted in amusement. “Yeah, and if they end up dead, then what happens? We better hope the Imperator will make a good emperor and can show the people not all is lost. The continuity of our leadership, for all the benefits it gives us during times of peace, can be very disorganizing and destructive in times of crisis if it were to be broken.”

Hurricane wiped a sooty hoof on his coat to remove the ash before rubbing it across Swift’s neck. “I think your dad would make a good emperor, right, Swift?” Hurricane chuckled to himself as the mare glared at him. “Lady Swift Spear, daughter of Emperor Gold Feather. That has a nice ring to it.”

Swift rolled her eyes in response. “And the hoof-licking of the politicians would increase tenfold. If there’s been one good thing about this damned war, it’s that I haven’t had to deal with any political bullshit in a long time. I’m not looking forward to it when this is all over.”

Hurricane and Silver Sword laughed quietly as the Emperor’s contingent finally passed them by. Gold Feather trudged by, no more than twenty feet away from the three. His face was consumed with a melancholy expression, and his wings were almost imperceptibly drooping from his sides. Despite his soldierly posture and tempo, it was obvious something was bothering the stallion.

Despite the ring of Praetorians surrounding the two central figures, Swift Spear decided to rectify that immediately. Breaking loose from the crowd, the mare rushed past two Praetorians towards her father before a third could slow her advance. Struggling against the pegasi trying to return her to the crowd, Swift called out to Gold Feather.

“Dad!” Her voice struck the Emperor like a bolt of lightning. His eyes snapped back to attentiveness and his wings tensed against his sides. Pivoting on his hind leg and nearly striking Haysar across the neck with his tail, the Emperor quickly located his daughter amongst the throng of soldiers.

“Swift!” Abandoning his duties as the Emperor’s personal bodyguard, Gold Feather ran to Swift Spear and pushed the Praetorians aside. There, finally face to face for the first time in many months, father and daughter embraced each other, their armor clanking as it collided.

“I thought I lost you,” the stallion began. “After what happened at Nimbus, and the reports that your legion had been destroyed, I was worried sick when I didn’t get any letters...”

It was shocking for Hurricane to see one of the two heads of his government caving in to tears across the back of his daughter. Swift was similarly breaking down, finally having somepony to help truly get the experiences of the past months off of her back.

“I didn’t think I’d live long enough to see you again,” Swift replied. Supporting each other’s weight, the two family members stood up and walked back to where Haysar was waiting. Ignoring the teary family reunion behind him, the Emperor resumed his powerful air and led the contingent plus one out of Hurricane’s sight. The black stallion was smiling as he turned back to his tent, but it quickly dropped off his face when he spotted a familiar figure watching the procession from afar.

Standing tall on top of an outcropping of rock at the edge of the plateau, Legate Red Tail's single eye traced the Emperor's progress towards his reserved quarters. Nearly two dozen pegasi, most of whom were in centurion armor, were concentrated around him but pretending not to notice each other. When Haysar ducked inside his tent with Gold Feather and Swift Spear, the Legate backed off of his perch and disappeared from sight. One by one, the centurions followed until the rock surface was bare, almost as if nothing had happened.

Hurricane didn't know what it meant, but his feathers were instinctively rising against some chill that traveled down his spine. He stood for a few seconds longer as his mind tried to put imaginary pieces together, but eventually the stallion gave up and returned to his tent with Silver Sword. Whatever it was, the Emperor's arrival had something to do with it. Hurricane just had to figure out what.

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There was no doubt that the arrival of the Emperor had put the troops in a better mood, and not just from his presence alone. Accompanying the imperial leader were imperial meals and rations that trickled down to the regular soldiers, royal fare compared to what they had the past few months. Fresh greens, steamy bowls of stew, and tender legs of mutton made regular, even if miniature, appearances at least once a week. Hurricane's stomach was so unused to fats and protein that he almost felt sick eating the savory meals.

Militarily, the morale boost had earned the Cirrans several key victories against the encamped Gryphon forces. Since the Emperor's arrival, the Second and Ninth Legions had taken several griffon embattlements and routed a horde in one of the northern passes. The griffons were reeling, and Haysar was demanding that Gold Moon press on the attacks and remove Magnus' armies from Waldren.

Magnus' willingness to commit himself to the front lines at Nimbus was probably one of the reasons why Haysar had insisted on accompanying regiments on routine missions. Silver had supposed that the Emperor felt idealistically threatened by Magnus' willingness to involve himself with his armies and was trying to justify his position as emperor by one-upping the griffon leader whenever possible. Swift Spear, who had been spending much of her time with her father, had been silent on the subject so far, though she consented that the imperial tent had been consumed with a frenetic mood since it was commandeered.

Hurricane and Silver Sword were enjoying a leisurely game of horseshoes when they got the order to assemble at the center of camp. Silver sighed in annoyance while Hurricane collected the shoes and deposited them around one of the stakes.

“This going to be the day, huh?” Silver waited for Hurricane to join him at the entrance to their regiment’s camp before slowly walking down the path. “Let’s see what plan those imperial minds can conjure up to salvage this war before it’s lost.”

“It’ll take much more than one battle to save this conflict,” Hurricane countered. Silver snorted and motioned with his wing towards a group of Legionnaires from their platoon to join up.

“The griffons sure proved otherwise. One fell swoop, and Nimbus was sent burning to the ground, the Cirran dream along with it. Payback for Hengstead and Azoeth, or do we need to get even now?”

Hurricane shrugged as he ducked inside his tent and pulled his armor out of its chest. “I don’t know, but I bet Haysar does. The problem with this war is that both Haysar and Magnus are keeping tallies of cities destroyed and citizens killed, retaliating in greater and greater magnitude each time.” The centurion grunted as he pulled on the leather straps around his wings, securing the blades in place. “Hengstead was five hundred thousand, Nimbus was one million deaths. If that trend keeps up, we owe the griffons two million.”

Silver cursed under his breath as the pair emerged from the tent, fully armored and ready for combat. “I’m sick of this war already. I’ve put enough griffons in the dirt myself, and it’s only a matter of time before karma decides to pay me back. I’d much rather it if both sides could just settle our differences and move on. Who cares if we lose the Gryphon territories!? Shouldn’t the happiness and well-being of our own people be more valuable than the resources we get from the east? And the griffons, don’t they deserve a chance at freedom and happiness too?”

Hurricane grunted his agreement, but said no more as he stepped into a clearing and waited for the platoon to form around him. He grumbled quietly to himself when he noticed Light Stroke wasn’t there, as was usually the case. The blue mare ran her platoon about as loose as the Legion tolerated, and it was with great difficulty that she ever managed to be on time for assembly and briefing. Stroke was probably halfway through a bottle of whiskey by now anyways.

Five minutes passed, and all the pegasi of the fifteenth platoon were lined up before Hurricane under the cold sun. All except for two, that was. Hurricane sighed as he strode up to a random Legionnaire.

“You there!” The soldier gave Hurricane a crisp salute in response, perfectly executed and rigidly disciplined. “Go drag that sorry excuse for a centurion Light Stroke from her drunken stupor and bring her blue flank over here immediately!” The Legionnaire nodded and immediately flew off, making a beeline towards the tent Light Stroke was usually passed out in. Shaking his head, Hurricane counted his troops again.

“Legionnaire Spear isn’t going to be with us, sir?” questioned a younger soldier. Hurricane had been waiting for the mare to show up, but at this point it seemed unlikely. She was probably still hanging around her father, like she had been for the past month.

“Damned if I know, soldier, but we’ll get the job done with or without her, whatever it may be.” Stepping away from the line of soldiers, Hurricane resumed his measured pacing as he waited for the Legionnaire to return with his centurion.

He didn’t have to wait too long. There was a round of angry shouting, and a bottle of whiskey exploded two steps ahead of Hurricane. The black stallion looked up to see the Legionnaire fleeing from a decidedly drunken Light Stroke. The mare’s armor was disheveled and dripping from excess alcohol, and she listed heavily to the side as she walked. A short sword was loosely clamped between her teeth, the tip dragging across the ash, as she positioned herself near Hurricane.

Light Stroke’s eyes spun in their sockets before managing to weakly focus on Hurricane’s face. Finally recognizing the expressionless black stallion, she smiled and leaned in to try and kiss him. Hurricane shoved her away angrily, pointedly turning his shoulder on her.

“Hurrahcaineee! How’re ya, ya big oaf?” She took a step closer to him, nuzzling against his side. “‘Twas lookin’ for ya, earlier ta day. I had a nice ‘n cozy spot in bed for ya, wit me.” The mare’s slurred speech caused the line of soldiers to snicker, but a stern look from Hurricane silenced them. Redirecting his attention towards the mare, Hurricane pushed her away again.

“Light Stroke, you are an embarrassment not only to yourself, but to the Legion you represent.” Seeing his message fail to penetrate through the mare’s stupor, Hurricane sighed and tried again. “You are unfit for duty. Please return to your tent until an official response for your behavior can be determined.”

The mare gave Hurricane a stupid look and giggled to herself. “Ah, dass why you’re so funny, Hurrahcane. Always speakin’ in fancy words... ‘n stuff.” Reaching into one of the bags on her back, Stroke produced another canteen of alcohol.

“For the love of...” Hurricane muttered angrily as he shoved the mare away. This got her attention, mainly because it knocked loose her precious liquor, and she fell onto her back, unable to correct herself in her intoxication. “Leave, Light Stroke. Now.”

The mare’s drunken ecstasy turned to anger. Grabbing a particularly large rock off of the ground, she flung it at Hurricane. The pegasus didn’t even have to move, her aim was so terrible, and the stone sailed over his head. Then Light Stroke came at Hurricane with her sword, hoping to strike at the foul being who would dare separate her from her drink.

Hurricane didn’t give her the chance. Before she could raise the dusty tip of her sword off of the ground, the stallion spun on his front hooves and delivered a powerful buck to the centurion’s jaw. The mare dropped her sword and tumbled end over end until she came to a rest on her back, wings splayed out on either side. Blood dripped out of her nose as she lay there, unconscious.

*Pathetic excuse for an officer.* Disdain filled Hurricane’s gaze as he looked at Light Stroke’s form and led his platoon away. Hopefully she would be dishonorably discharged after this incident, and Hurricane wouldn’t have to deal with any more distractions in the platoon. The fighting hadn’t even started and already he was looking forward to finishing that game of horseshoes with Silver.

He didn’t notice the sly smile on the collapsed centurion’s face as he left.

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The griffon camp in Waldren was stationed a little more than fifty miles away from Feathertop Mountain. The beasts, in contrast to the Cirrans’ plateau, had chosen a massive caldera to base their forces in. The rim of the crater rose a thousand feet above the floor, and the massive space inside easily swallowed two hundred thousand soldiers.

It would have to hold many more by the day’s end. Flying through clouds of ice crystals well over the jagged peaks of the mountains was the largest pegasus army ever assembled, completely blotting out the sun in a massive cloud of iron and feathers. The past month of planning and troop movements had fielded four full legions for the fight. At ninety-six

thousand pegasi each, the number easily dwarfed the amount of griffons that were supposed to be in the area.

Being near the tail end of the formation, much of the spectacle was lost on Hurricane and his platoon. On a good day, the cold weather and moisture formed mostly harmless frost along a pegasus' wings that served more as an additional nuisance to the frigid air than an actual hindrance. Today, the winds were howling and a thick sleet had begun to fall, immediately freezing to whatever it touched. Hurricane's armor was already coated in a thin sheet of frozen gloss, and his half-frozen wings were barely keeping him aloft. Flakes of snow and droplets of rain were scattered towards his face from the incredible turbulence of the three hundred thousand Legionnaires in front of him. There, frozen, straining, and aching, Hurricane wondered if it could get much worse.

"I bucking hate winter!" screamed Silver as he shook nearly two pounds of ice off of his wings. A sudden crosswind nearly sent Hurricane and Silver spinning out of control, and did in fact knock a handful of greenwings out of the sky. "Perfect that the Emperor decides that he's not going to partake in his master plan he's been drawing up for a month! He's just going to hang back and watch while the rest of us freeze to death!"

"Can't say I don't blame him," Hurricane grumbled. "But I figured he'd partake in this battle and show the world who the real emperor is. Especially if that was the whole point of his coming here and all."

The pegasi entered a pocket of cooler air, and Hurricane swore the temperature must have dropped ten degrees. He was shivering, and the iron armor only amplified the effects of the cold. Already he couldn't feel his ears, and the tips of his wings were starting to go numb. He may be able to land and fight if he had to, but getting airborne again would be a whole new problem.

Speaking of fighting, the four Legates began furiously blowing into their whistles to order their legions to combat readiness. Hurricane could now see the rim of the griffon encampment, brown bodies flying in and out as ants would to their nest. As the Cirran armies closed in, the flow of soldiers slowed until a cluster of thousands rose out of the crater at once.

"Legionnaires! Air support priority one, then we drop and clear the camp! Don't leave a single griffon in our skies before the battle is finished!" Hurricane shook the ice off of his blades and tightened his sword in its scabbard while the platoon responded to his order. The griffons were holding defensive positions above the caldera with more scrambling



upwards to join them every second. The advantage lay with the Cirrans, who were closing at breakneck speed.

Both armies screamed at each other as they collided, a small group of warriors trying to hold back an avalanche. The skies were lacerated in the greatest carnage the continent of Dioda had ever seen, in a land worthless except for its cultural significance. The rains turned red, the hail was replaced by blood and feathers, and mangled bodies fell by the dozens. And no one would care nor remember it but the survivors and the history books.

Hurricane saw only one griffon by the time his platoon made it to the front, and he quickly decapitated the warrior with a powerful strike from his frozen blades. A large dome of pegasi had already formed over the caldera, cutting everything that tried to escape to ribbons. The Second, Ninth, and Tenth Legions were descending into the griffon camp while the Eleventh provided air support. A small cluster of soldiers clad in onyx armor flew in lazy circles high above while the Emperor watched the fight. Swift Spear was up there somewhere, but Hurricane didn't have the time to look.

The griffon complex was just as vast and impressive as the Cirran camp. Thousands of multi-tiered wood and stone constructions served as shelters for the griffon soldiers, stretching from the far wall of the crater to an open space in the center. There, occupying the center of that space, was a massive fortress of stone with ramparts stretching up towards the mouth of the pit. Hurricane knew that was where the officers were staying, and followed his regiment as Red Tail led the legion towards it.

The walls of the tower were swarming with bodies as the Cirrans descended on the griffon defenders. Hurricane's regiment landed on one of the upper ramparts and was immediately beset by scores of Gryphon regulars. Flinging himself down into the chaos, Hurricane ripped his sword from its scabbard and swung it at the nearest griffon. The blade glanced off of the soldier's steel shoulder, but Hurricane used the momentum to twist his wing under the griffon's unarmored neck, ending the creature's life before it had the chance to strike back.

Hurricane had little time to remark upon his success. An unarmed wing struck him across the snout, the rows of rigid bone in the griffon's wing dazing the stallion. Hurricane knew what was coming next, and let the force of the wing push him away from the griffon's instinctive sword jab. Reaching forward, Hurricane wrapped his leg around one of the griffon's arms and pulled it closer, bringing its neck within reach of his sword. The griffon screamed in fear, but Hurricane ran his blade through its throat and silenced it.

The regiment had finally secured its foothold to the castle, and the defenders retreated within its walls as more reinforcements overwhelmed them. Hurricane located Silver Sword and helped him to his hooves, tossing aside the dead weight of the griffon body that had been pinning him down. The two began to sprint towards the massive wooden doors at the other end of the rampart, but a trembling in the ground stopped their progress.

“What was that?” Silver Sword’s wings flared out to either side as his hunched form steadied itself against the shaking earth. Other Legionnaires had also paused as the intimidating motion increased in magnitude. Then, just as quickly as it began, the rumbling stopped.

Hurricane tested his steps gingerly before regaining the courage to sprint on ahead. “I don’t know. Probably nothing. The locals say that tremors are common in this region.” The respite in the battle had already been forgotten by both sides as they threw themselves at each other again. Hurricane joined fifty other pegasi in smashing apart the massive doors to the fortress and bolted inside, glad to escape the rain of blood and entrails that was still falling from the sky.

The castle was sparsely decorated and roughly hewn together, but it was still impressive for only a few months of construction. Impressive pointed arches supported the ceiling, and massive, barred windows overlooked the rest of the camp. The tile floor was haphazardly placed together, but still striking nonetheless. And then there were the griffons clogging the hallways and barricading the doors.

Hurricane pointed his sword at a line of griffons already entangled with a group of Cirrans, and as one his platoon went after them. Following in their wake, Hurricane and Silver Sword punched their way into the thick of the fighting, striking at targets of opportunity whenever possible. Hurricane drove his blade through the leg of one griffon before finishing it off with his wings, then spun and cleaved the beak off of another assailant. The griffon howled in agony before Silver Sword cut its legs out from under it and split his blade through the griffon’s neck.

“Good kill!” Hurricane shouted over the roar of battle. Silver Sword nodded and wiped his blade on the body, removing some of the blood. Together, the two of them forced their way to the opposite end of the hall, dispatching the last of the griffons in front of a large staircase.

“Which way?” The steel pegasus slid next to Hurricane and turned back to the hallway to ensure they were safe from attack. Hurricane eyed the stone steps, listening for activity

either above or below them on the spiral staircase. Making up his mind, Hurricane signaled his troops and took to the air.

“Up.” The nimble pegasus twisted his form around the spiral as he ascended, hooves running along the wall to keep his balance. The stairs opened up through a doorway, and Hurricane launched himself through the gap at the nearest figure. He knocked over a large, black and white griffon covered in edged steel armor. The hybrid struggled under Hurricane’s weight before the pony slit its throat with his sword.

“That an officer?” Silver asked as he came up the stairs, the rest of the platoon following him. Hurricane rolled the body onto its side to look at the insignia. There were a trio of golden claws painted on its shoulder wrapped around a golden star. Hurricane figured it was the equivalent of a captain’s rank.

“I think so. We must be close.” Turning to his platoon and the additional Legionnaires climbing up the stairs, Hurricane stretched his voice. “Clear these rooms one by one, and bring every officer to the ground! We kill the commander of this fort, and we liberate this sector from griffon control!”

The Legionnaires saluted and began to move towards the wooden doors barring access to the rooms, but stopped in their tracks as the ground began shaking again. The tremors lasted longer than the previous quake, and the fortress began to shudder violently. Just when Hurricane thought that the ceiling was going to collapse, the earth stopped trembling.

They needed to finish their job before any more of those tremors threatened to topple the castle with them in it. Seeing his soldiers frozen in anxiety and eyeing the support columns warily, Hurricane barked at them to execute their orders. This broke them out of their worry, and they began to tear down the doors with haste. Hurricane took Silver Sword and the other survivors from the old twenty-third and led them to the massive doors at the end of the hall.

The Legionnaires lined up at the doorway, and Hurricane broke it apart with his rear legs. There was shouting inside as his troops rushed in, hacking away at their opposition. The griffons were all tied down except for one, a streaky white and gray warrior encased in intimidating spiked armor. The golden insignia on his shoulder was a cluster of six talons juggling three stars between them, and the paint was worn down from numerous battles. Without hesitation, Hurricane flung himself at the griffon commander.

The commander had recovered from his initial surprise and flipped the table over as Hurricane came at him. Dozens of maps and scrolls slid to the floor, and Hurricane awkwardly twisted himself over the edge of the table to avoid hitting it. The griffon reared up and punched Hurricane in the gut, launching the pegasus into the opposing wall. Groaning, Hurricane slid down the wall as his vision danced before him.

The griffon had picked up his sword and was turning to strike at Hurricane. Mustering his strength against the ache in his back, Hurricane rose off of the ground and launched himself at the commander's legs. Sliding across the ground, Hurricane tripped the griffon and rose into the air, twisting to dive at it.

The beast cursed and rolled onto its back, swinging its sword at the diving pegasus as it twisted. Hurricane saw the blade come at him, but it was too late to change course. Taking a page from Silver Sword's book, Hurricane extended his bracer-clad forelegs ahead of him, catching the blade before it could reach his coat. The maneuver had rotated Hurricane to his side, and the point of his sword was now directly aligned with the griffon's neck. The commander let loose a demonic shriek of rage before the blade split its larynx in two. The warm blood gushed forth onto Hurricane's face and the griffon's claws clutched at the air before falling to the side.

Hurricane clambered to his hooves, ready to assist his comrades if needed, but the haste was unnecessary. The bodies of the leading griffon officers were scattered about the room, interspersed with the corpses of a few pegasi. Hurricane sighed and shook his head. With the exception of Silver Sword and Swift Spear, the last of the twenty-third platoon had just died to eliminate the griffon command.

"Damn it," Silver cursed under his breath as he flipped a fallen pegasus over and removed his tags. Hurricane recognized the white and black Legionnaire as Edged Wing, and he knelt down to close the stallion's eyes. Even when he felt like he was alone, Hurricane had always looked towards the banner of his platoon for comfort. Now even that was stripped away from him, the tattered fabric long abandoned in the Gryphon east and now devoid of value without those who once carried it.

"Gather whatever intel you can, then we're moving out." Hurricane ripped the shoulder plate off of the fallen commander and stuck it into his saddlebag as proof that the griffon officers were dead. As Silver Sword gathered up the scattered maps and papers, Hurricane searched the bodies of the officers for any directives or information they might have had on them. He was in the process of rummaging through a lieutenant's gear when the fortress began shaking again, violently.

Letting out a strained breath, Hurricane waited for the tremors to stop. He must have stood in place for nearly a full minute before he realized that the ground didn't show signs of stopping anytime soon. Down the hall, several bloodstained pegasi were sticking their heads out of the doorways to look for their centurion and the orders they hoped he would provide. Hurricane flicked his tail for them to assemble and looked out the window.

He immediately jumped back as a massive boulder of rock fell from the ceiling of the caldera right past the window. Everywhere stone was breaking free from the roof and slamming into the ground, releasing huge plumes of ash and crushing dozens of tents and unlucky soldiers beneath their gargantuan masses. Realizing the whole structure was about to collapse, Hurricane spun and screamed at his soldiers.

“Earthquake! Get the hell out of here!” Hurricane's hind legs smashed through the glass behind him, creating an opening for his troops to flee through. They wasted no time taking to the air, shooting past Hurricane and fleeing the pit, dodging the falling stalactites that rimmed the caldera. Silver Sword lingered long enough to ensure Hurricane got out of the structure alright, then shot towards the mouth of the pit with the black stallion.

Even the air began to vibrate with the force of the quaking of the earth, and the sky was filled with griffon and pegasus soldiers fleeing for their lives together. The two sides, which had been fighting tooth and nail only a few moments before, had forgotten their hatred towards each other in their scramble for survival. Hurricane was unlucky enough to catch a glimpse of a massive fissure opening up on the caldera floor, scalding a troop of griffons and pegasi to death with the steam it released. Similar fissures began opening up across the rest of the floor, releasing copious amounts of steam and thick, black ash.

As a deafening roar echoed off of the caldera walls and the ash intensified, realization struck Hurricane like a blow from griffon war axe. Pouring on the speed, the black pegasus burst forth from the mouth of the caldera and immediately changed his trajectory to the Cirran camp, hoping to escape the impending doom hanging over his head.

Silver Sword struggled to catch up to Hurricane, panting through a blood-streaked mouth as he strained himself. “Hurricane, slow down! We're clear of the cave-in, what's there to worry about—!”

The steel pegasus was never able to finish his sentence. With a thunderous boom that seemed only the Gods themselves could produce, the bowels of the Earth emptied in a

spectacular display of fire and ash. A massive pillar of lava exploded nearly a mile into the air, showering fiery death onto everything within its range. Even more worrying, a massive cloud of ash and stone was expanding outwards at speeds nearly three times what any pegasus could fly at.

Hurricane dove for the ground to try and find cover, but it was no use. In a matter of seconds, the ash and soot overtook him and Silver Sword, blotting out the sun and entombing them under its gritty blackness.

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Nothing moved. The landscape was barren, empty. Strange black clouds slowly descended over the choking hills, coagulating in the narrow streams that still trickled through the mountains in the early winter. The remains of a second sun were fading away, disintegrating into glowing flakes of ash that rode scalding air currents still scurrying away from the volcano. The skies were painted red, and the ice clouds were sent reeling from the sudden blast of fire.

A wheezing gasp broke the odd silence that had pervaded Waldren. Something moved, a barely perceptible twitch in the thick ash that was the only movement for miles. Struggling against the weight of powdered rock, a column of the ash detached itself in the shape of a hoof. It stretched towards the blistered sky, as if testing to be sure whether it was really free, before returning to the ash to paw away at it.

It took Hurricane an incredible amount of work, but he managed to break free of his tomb. Taking several long seconds to cough the ash out of his lungs, Hurricane doubled over in pain as flakes of fire stung his already sensitive airways. His wings weighed nearly three times their normal mass, and he produced a massive cloud of black soot as he shook the ash off.

Priorities first. Once he was sure that he wasn't going to collapse in pain and could draw breath somewhat steadily, Hurricane tested his legs and limbs. Nothing was broken, and he still had his blades tightly affixed to his wings. Even his sword had survived the apocalyptic event in one piece.

Sword. Spinning in circles, Hurricane located a twitching mound of ash not too far away. Bounding over to it, Hurricane dug until the soot became wedged in his hooves and bit at the skin. But still he kept digging, trying to find his way to—

“Nngh!” The mound shook violently and burst open as a steel pegasus emerged from his grave. Stretching his blackened limbs from their ashen prison, Silver Sword flipped onto his hooves and took several wheezing gasps for air. Hurricane reached over to steady his friend as Silver convulsed and vomited up several pounds of ash from his stomach.

“Bucking... rocks...” Silver slowly stood up from the putrid bile he produced and took a few wobbly steps back to where he had been buried. Digging through the ash with his hoof, he located a missing wing blade and his saddlebags and reattached both items to his person. Finally sure of his footing, the pegasus strode over the torrid ground towards a river valley that was now thick with ash.

“Do you think...” Hurricane coughed and tried to put his voice back together. “Do you think anyone else made it?” As far as both pegasi could see, there was only an unbroken and unmoving sheet of volcanic ash that covered everything. Hurricane figured it was several feet deep already in some places. Luckily, he had guided Silver down to an outcropping of rock that had shielded them from most of the falling soot and fire. Otherwise, they would have been too deep to dig out, or had their wings ripped from their shoulders if they had continued to fly.

Silver took several cautious steps through the crumbly powder, worried that he might fall through at any given moment. “I don’t know, Cane. It’s awfully quiet...” The steel pegasus opened his wings and flapped several times but failed to produce enough lift to leave the ground. Cursing, Silver bent a wing in front of him to examine the feathers. The barbs had been stripped or burnt off of half of his primaries, and the secondary feathers weren’t much better. A quick flutter of Hurricane’s wings confirmed he was in the same situation as Silver Sword.

“I guess we’re hoofing it then,” Hurricane remarked grimly as he set his legs in a line and began walking towards the river. His throat was screaming for rehydration, and even if the water was half rock by now it would still be better than nothing. Hurricane could barely support himself as he waded into the stream and plunged his muzzle into the roiling liquid. The water was hot and tasted like iron, but it satisfied the stallion’s need well enough.

After both pegasi had rehydrated on the noxious water, they began to trudge to the west. Wherever they looked, the winter had been replaced by some twisted version of the season. The warm ash had replaced the chilly snow, falling coals and flakes of fire had vaporized the sleet and hail, and thick clouds of smog took the place of the thin cirrus clouds that had dominated the region for the weeks past. Even the air was warm as the

heat blast began to recede, and Hurricane was profusely sweating through his dusty coat as he fought his way through the black snow.

Silver Sword yelped in alarm and fell onto his back, scurrying away from something in the ground. Hurricane waded over to his friend and helped him up, then proceeded to investigate the cause for alarm. He immediately regretted the action.

Under the blanket of ash, a lacerated foreleg protruded directly into the path Silver had been taking. The flesh hung loosely from the exposed bone, stained a filthy black from the environment. A scarred metal bracer clung onto the limb, and the hoof was cracked open. Hurricane's head was spinning, and he stepped away from the ravaged pegasus corpse and resumed his hike uphill.

It took them another hour to progress a half mile through the apocalypse, stopping several times to rest and circling wide around graves they stumbled into. In all that time they had only seen one flight of pegasi sailing overhead, moving as fast as possible through the smoky skies. Hurricane and Silver Sword had desperately tried to get their attention, but they were either unseen or ignored as the flight disappeared over a hill.

Finally clawing his way to the top of the hill, Hurricane collapsed over the crest onto a blanket of charred rock and lay there, panting. Silver Sword hauled himself up after him, and the two rested there, recuperating their strength. Before them lay a wide bowl of earth that was partially filled with dust, and at the end of the bowl a wide crack in the ground led down into a dark tunnel. It wasn't the tunnel that most interested Hurricane, however.

Several bodies, freshly killed, were scattered around the entrance to the cave. The blood still trickled from their wounds and fell onto the ash, turning into a sticky slush of vitality and rock. Hurricane counted a dozen pegasi lying in the open, but not a single griffon was to be seen. Curious, Hurricane popped the strap holding the hilt of his sword in its scabbard and loosened the blade as he walked towards the crack. Silver Sword followed him warily, his eyes glued to the fiery skies.

Kneeling down by one of the bodies, Hurricane flipped it over. The armor was stained in soot and blood, but the insignia of the Praetorian Guard was unmistakable. The pegasus' neck flopped limply in Hurricane's grasp, as it was only half attached to the shoulders. Other than the slit in his throat and a gash along his side, the Praetorian was relatively intact.



“No claw marks, no beak wounds...” Hurricane set the body down and examined another one. It too bore only the signs of bladed weapons along its body. This soldier was a centurion, his life ended by a precise line cut the length of his neck. The blades still attached to its wing rattled as Hurricane set the body down and examined the soldier’s weapon.

“Cane, you might want to take a look at this.” Hurricane abandoned his search and trotted over to Silver, who was pointing to a particular wound on a female centurion’s shoulder. A series of long, jagged cuts down her shoulder and across her neck were still glistening with soot and blood. Hurricane dusted away some of the ash to get a better look.

“That’s not a sword wound. Too long to be a beak jab, and a claw strike would leave three.” Hurricane blinked as he narrowed down the choices. There was only one type of weapon that could cause such damage.

“Wing blades,” Hurricane produced with finality. The realization had grim implications, and Hurricane checked the other bodies for supporting evidence. Sure enough, several had wing blade scars on their torsos, and one centurion had the unmistakable hilt of a Praetorian dagger lodged in his chest.

“Why were they fighting each other?” Silver Sword uneasily glanced over his shoulder, half expecting the bodies to come back to life and attack him. Hurricane peered into the cave, listening for any sounds of life. He couldn’t see very far through the darkness, so he withdrew his head and pawed the ground nervously.

“Dunno, Silver, but if these guys are Praetorians, then the Emperor isn’t too far away.” Thoughts of a certain mare came to Hurricane’s mind, and he looked into the cave again. “And wherever the Emperor is, we’re bound to find Swift.” Taking a deep breath, Hurricane placed a hoof into the crevice.

A flurry of bats burst forth from the cave and nearly caused him to jump out of his armor. Taking a second to recover, Hurricane stepped closer again. Now he could hear something, the low murmurs of distant voices. Signaling with his tail to Silver, the black pegasus silently trod into the cave.

The first two hundred feet were in terrifying darkness, and once Hurricane slipped in a pool of blood as he descended. His heart was climbing into his throat, and the urge to urinate was slowing his progress. He could feel Silver holding on to the end of his tail so that they wouldn’t get separated as they walked into the subterranean labyrinths. His

nose bumped into the wall at the far end of the tunnel, but a dim, gray light to his right guided him deeper into the cave system.

The tunnel opened up into a large cavern, where gray light was filtering in from a massive split in the ceiling. Tiny flakes of dust and ash fell to the cavern floor like snow, collecting in a pile of fine, black soot. Two centurions stood in the center of the room with their backs turned to the entrance. Hurricane motioned for Silver to get down and keep quiet as he dropped in on their conversation from the shadows.

“...griffons made the job easier though,” the larger stallion was saying to a lithe mare. “Wore ‘em down a little before they could get away. Good thing we found ‘em, though, otherwise ‘twould’ve been for nothin’.” The centurion stretched his wing and rubbed at the arm, the iron blades glistening with blood. For the first time Hurricane noticed a small pile of Praetorian corpses in the side of the room.

“Doesn’t matter. We caught them completely off guard. The Emperor doesn’t stand a chance once the boss gets to him.” Light Stroke seemed to be remarkably recovered from her intoxication only a few hours earlier, and her blades were also dripping crimson fluid. Hurricane supposed she had been faking it, but the reasoning as to why was much worse than the act itself. A rogue group was trying to kill the Emperor and presumably claim the throne for themselves, and by the looks of it they had already dealt with most of the Praetorian. And if they were going after the Emperor, that put Swift Spear in danger.

“What I wouldn’t do to wring that filly’s neck,” Light Stroke continued, grappling with an unseen opponent in frustration. “Dropped Dawn Star and Lightning Helm before she ran off. At least we got her separated from the Emperor and her father, so that’s one less thing to worry about. She can be dealt with later.”

Hurricane let out a sigh of relief. Swift Spear was presumably still alive, though for how much longer he didn’t want to wait and find out. Unfortunately for the pair of stallions, the larger centurion had heard Hurricane’s exhalation.

“Hey! Who’s there?” The pair of centurions drew their blades and turned towards the entrance, where Hurricane and Silver Sword emerged with their own weapons drawn. The two groups stared each other down before Light Stroke broke the silence.

“Well well well, if it isn’t Hurricane. I still have to repay you for that kick this morning, dear.” The mare rubbed a bruised spot along her jawline and smiled around the sword she gripped in her teeth.

Hurricane took one step closer. "You! How did you know this was going to happen today, why are you trying to kill Haysar?" Silver Sword advanced with Hurricane, but the traitors calmly stood their ground as they approached.

"You mean the volcano? We had no idea the earth was going to split like that. We always had planned on taking down Haysar this day, and the Gods just decided to give us a little help." Light Stroke flexed her wings in anticipation of the fight, and her eyes glinted in the soft illumination. "His death will save millions of lives, and we can end this pathetic war!"

"No it won't! It'll weaken us in our darkest hours!" Silver Sword's blade quivered in his grasp as he seethed with rage. "The eruption killed thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of soldiers! Our military is absolutely decimated, and you think killing our leader is going to make it get better?!"

The large stallion snickered. "We're not the ones bringin' Haysar down, that's the boss's job. We's just supposed to keep anyone from interferin' with his work 'til he's done. In return, we get to be the new Praetorian when the old's all gone." It was clear they weren't going to move, and time was running out.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Hurricane growled. Lowering himself towards the ground, the pegasus propelled himself at Light Stroke with surprising speed. The swiftness of his attack induced a moment's hesitation in the mare's response, and Hurricane made her pay for it by knocking her onto her back. Her stallion companion turned to assist, but Silver Sword threw himself around his neck and began trying to strangle him.

Light Stroke wasn't going to go down so easily. Carrying her momentum with her, the mare backflipped into the air and delivered two powerful kicks to the charging stallion. Hurricane recoiled from the force of the blow, and the nimble mare twisted to deliver a rapid series of punches across Hurricane's face and chest. Light Stroke's attacks came in so fast that he could barely counter, and he lost track of her limbs as they whirled around his face. He tripped backwards over a rock, and the centurion spun to deliver a powerful kick right under his chin. By sheer luck the blow landed across the bottom of his jaw instead of crushing his windpipe, but the tradeoff of a powerful pain traveling up the left side of his skull crippled Hurricane's response.

Evidently deciding that she was through toying with him, Light Stroke switched to using the three blades she had at her disposal to hammer away at Hurricane. The stallion countered a wing slash with his sword, then blocked the mare's own blade with his wings.

With her free wing, Light Stroke tried to strike at Hurricane's neck, but the stallion ducked under her strike and delivered a powerful punch to her gut. The traitor stumbled back, and Hurricane drove a wing at her face. She easily blocked it with her own wing, but it was the move Hurricane was expecting. Throwing his other wing at her chest, Stroke blocked it with her sword. Hurricane shouted through his grip on his sword as he brought it to bear on the centurion's neck. Only now did Stroke realize her critical mistake, and she tried to disengage one of her blades to block Hurricane's sword. It was too late, however, and the blade fell cleanly and evenly through metal, flesh, and sinew, all the way down to bone. The traitor let out one last surprised gasp as her body went rigid, and then she collapsed in a pool of her own blood.

Drawing his sword out from the dead mare's neck, Hurricane turned to see if Silver needed any assistance. The steel pegasus was still clinging onto his opponent's neck, but the stallion was running out of air and energy to move. In two or three sharp tugs, Silver brought the centurion to the ground and snapped his neck. There was a choked wheeze, and then the second traitor was dead.

Hurricane tossed Silver Sword his weapon, which had fallen loose during his struggle, and the stallion gladly sheathed it. Knowing time was of the essence, Hurricane and Silver Sword ran through the tunnels as fast as they could, following the trail of bodies towards the sound of fighting. They ran past a room where a group of Praetorians were still fighting some of the centurions, but seeing blood in the hallway ahead of them they pressed on without stopping. Left, right, left again and then down, and the two pegasi slid through a stone archway into a dead-end cavern.

The cavern was illuminated by pillars of bioluminescent fungi growing out of the stagnant water collecting in the bottom of the room, stretching in eerie blue colors towards the top of the ceiling. The room was little more than a forty by forty space, though it was filled with bodies. Nearly a dozen Praetorians and several centurions were littered across the floor, but there were two that weren't lying face down in the water. Emperor Haysar and Imperator Gold Feather both lay against the wall, daggers protruding from their chests. The Emperor was breathing fitfully, but the Imperator's chest was already still.

"We're too late." The realization struck Hurricane with the force of a thousand bricks. Their fight against Light Stroke and her companion had been for naught. The head of Cirran government was on the verge of death, and there was nothing they could do about it. Hurricane would have flown to the Emperor were it not for a gray figure emerging from behind one of the pillars.

“What do we have here? You two aren’t my officers. If I didn’t know better, I would have supposed you fought your way here.” A single menacing eye fixed on both soldiers simultaneously, causing the two to step back in shock. “But those wounds, I see they could not have been caused by the volcano. So perhaps you did?” Legate Red Tail sauntered to the center of the room, letting the bioluminescent light wash over him. “If that is the case, then you must die to atone for their deaths.”

It all made sense to Hurricane. When the Emperor first arrived, the Legate had been consorting with his allies and planning the coup. And the whole time leading up to the day’s assault, their plans had been carefully laid and concealed, waiting to be executed. Not even Gold Feather had caught wind of the plan, and now he was dead because of it.

Hurricane had but one question to ask. “Why?” The Legate raised his eyebrows, but upon receiving no other answer from the black stallion, he turned his head and began to stride across the cave.

“It’s simple. Haysar has proven he was not fit to guide Cirra in this war. He may share the name Haysar with Emperor Julius, who won the High Noon War for us twenty-five years ago, but that does not mean he shares his talents. He has doomed our armies with foolish attacks and bullheaded strategies, which Magnus has capitalized on to the fullest extent. Today’s massacre was just another example. Three hundred thousand dead, and for what? A lava-filled crater?!” The Legate slammed his hoof angrily on the ground, and the scream of shattering stone echoed off the walls as a fissure split the rock under his hoof. “I will not let Cirra crumble under this stallion’s guidance. Our nation needs someone who understands war, and who will provide the best means to win it!”

Hurricane’s heart was beating faster than he could ever remember. He saw truth in some of the Legate’s words, but could not come to accept him as a replacement for Haysar. This pony was violent and volatile, willing to sacrifice everything and everyone to win a war. Could he be trusted to lead the nation? The answer was a flat no.

The sword hissed against its scabbard as Hurricane drew it before him, the iron blade catching the blue light from the fungi. It wasn’t so much about defending his emperor or honoring his country that Hurricane knew he had to kill the Legate. Red Tail had already cost him and his friends so much—Shear Point, Dusk Strike, his platoon, and now Swift Spear’s father—that he needed to die. And Hurricane knew he couldn’t rest until his blade was sunk deep into the traitor’s neck and he watched the life drain from his single eye.

Seeing Hurricane draw his blade, the Legate nodded his head and drew his own sword. "So be it. The Emperor will have to wait while I kill you two." Red Tail evenly balanced himself in the center of the chamber, waiting for the first strike.

Hurricane and Silver Sword jumped at the gray pegasus together, but the Legate was too fast for them. Twirling to the side, Red Tail used his wings to launch a spray of water at his attackers. The sudden scattering of water blinded Hurricane and Silver Sword, and they recovered just in time to dodge a slice from the Legate's sword.

Ducking under the attack, Hurricane turned his shoulder into the chest of his opponent. Red Tail stumbled but quickly recovered in time to block Silver's attack, retaliating with a powerful smash from one of his wings. The blades ripped off Silver's shoulder piece, and the steel pegasus fell backwards from the blow. Hurricane tried to capitalize on the Legate's extension, but Red Tail blocked his sword jab with a braced foreleg.

Taking the opportunity to slide back and regroup with Silver, Hurricane flipped backwards as the Legate tried to gut him. The blade slid inches from the stallion's stomach, but Hurricane could have sworn the air friction cut through his coat anyways. Now back at Silver Sword's side, the two pegasi circled to opposite sides of the Legate and attacked together.

Remarkably, Red Tail was unfazed by the attack. Lunging towards Silver Sword, the stallion blocked his downwards strike with a wing before striking at Silver's flank. Silver had to twist to redirect the blow to his armor, but the Legate countered by elbowing Silver in the neck and kicking him away. It had taken Red Tail a little over a second to dispatch Silver Sword, and now he turned to Hurricane.

Hurricane had been hoping that the double-teaming effort would have opened a hole to attack the Legate, but those chances were dashed when the Legate efficiently blocked Hurricane's sword and wing blades. Wrapping his forelegs around Hurricane's neck, Red Tail fell backwards and flipped Hurricane over his shoulders, delivering a powerful buck to the stallion's groin as he passed. Hurricane groaned as he slammed against the far wall and slid down, his legs crossed in agony.

Trying to buy some time for his friend to recover, Silver Sword crawled back onto his hooves and placed himself between the Legate and Hurricane. This time the officer didn't wait, and lunged at the steel pegasus. The strikes from Red Tail's hooves and sword were so fast that Silver was hard pressed to defend himself. Somehow picking up each of the Legate's swings, Silver paced backwards until he could deliver a blow to Red Tail's face. The officer ducked out of the way just in time, but the point of Silver's blade cut a painful

gash across Red Tail's snout. Pressing his advantage, Silver hammered the Legate back to the other side of the room, before Red Tail used one of his wings to knock Silver's weapon loose.

Silver Sword broke engagement with the Legate to recover his weapon, and Red Tail paused to wipe the blood out of his one good eye. Looking up, he was able to locate the scrambling steel pegasus with ease, but Hurricane was nowhere to be found. Realizing what was coming next, Red Tail desperately flung his wing and sword into a defensive parry to his blind side. The ring of metal sounded true, and through mere luck the Legate had blocked Hurricane's sword from decapitating him.

Backpedaling through the water now, Red Tail struggled to keep up with the speed and ferocity of Hurricane's attacks. Their swords collided one, two, three times with frightening force as they crossed the center of the chamber. Rebounding off of the third strike, Hurricane quickly rose upon his rear legs and flung his sword at the Legate. Red Tail was able to block the projectile, but the force Hurricane had thrown his sword with shattered the officer's weapon into two. Now down a blade, it was all Red Tail could do to fend off Silver Sword while Hurricane fetched his weapon.

The battle was definitively pitched in Silver's favor, but Red Tail refused to give in. As skilled as the officer was in blocking the steel pegasus' attacks with his wing blades alone, his age was beginning to show. Red Tail was panting hard, and the sweat and blood was pouring into his one good eye. The Legate tried to block another of Silver's hammering strikes but miscalculated, and the steel pegasus' blade severed a gray wing from his body.

There was a sharp gasp of pain but surprisingly nothing more as Red Tail felt his limb being cleaved from his body. The battle was essentially over now, but the Legate wasn't dead yet. Ducking low and to the side, he used his remaining wing to smash in Silver's neck armor. The metal stopped the blade from cutting through his throat, but the strike was enough to wind him. Silver collapsed and clutched at his bruised neck as he struggled to breathe, but Hurricane stepped in to stop the Legate from dealing any more harm.

It wasn't even a contest anymore. With only one blade to stave off Hurricane's three, the Legate was completely outmatched. Hurricane used a wing to tie down his opponent's defense, and in one powerful, merciless strike, the black pegasus jammed his sword deep into the Legate's ribcage.

Red Tail let loose not a sound as the blade traveled the length of his body cavity. He could feel it ripping through his lung and stomach and liver all the way down to his

intestines, but even through the greatest pain he had ever felt he let nothing escape his lips. His bare teeth were gritted and exposed over Hurricane's shoulder and his entire body went rigid. His heart was intent on ripping itself to shreds with how fast it was beating, but soon enough it realized the futility of its struggle and began to slow down. The air in his left lung had escaped along the metal of the sword, but there was enough remaining in his right for his last words.

"So Cirra burns... not with me... not with Haysar... but with you..." Red Tail's vision began to darken, and he used his last moments to pierce through Hurricane's eyes with his own disappointed and defiant gaze. Then there was darkness, and the blank eye remained unblinking.

Hurricane felt Red Tail's body grow still, and grunting, he released his grip on the sword and the Legate's corpse. Both collapsed together in the little pool of water with a light splash, and what wasn't already red soon absorbed a dark, crimson hue.

It was over. Vengeance had been dealt, but it could not bring back those already lost. Hurricane helped Silver Sword back onto his hooves just as a bloodstained mare appeared under the rock arch. Lacerations decorated her coat and face, and one wing hung limply by her side, but the fire in Swift Spear's eyes had not yet died.

"We've dealt with the traitors at the west end, and—" Swift's words were cut short as she saw the bodies in the room. Her eyes were drawn to the bloodied form of one white stallion in particular, the crumpled tips of his golden primaries more red than metallic. The sword was dropped from her mouth, clattering harshly on the ground. "No..." Swift took one step forward, then another. "No... no no no! **NO!**"

Hurricane wracked his brain for anything to say, anything at all. He started once or twice but cut himself off after each false start. The manila mare stumbled across the chamber as she ran to the side of her father. Throwing herself on top of his cold form, she began sobbing heavily into his chest. "Please father, you can't be dead! Not like this! Not now!" Swift was bawling like a lost foal, and the sound of her agonized screams ripped Hurricane's heart in two. Each hoof felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as he set them in a painful line towards Swift.

The mare was but a shell of her once vibrant and glimmering energy and optimism. Her forelegs were wrapped tight around her father's body, and she gently closed his eyes as she wailed into his shoulder. Hurricane touched her gently, letting her share her grief with him. Loosening her grip on Gold Feather's neck, Swift turned to Hurricane and hugged him. Tears were streaming down his face for no other reason than that tears were



streaming down hers. The mare's heaving ribcage and howls slowly began to die out, and Hurricane felt his neck moisten with warm tears. He rubbed a foreleg between Swift's wings, massaging stress and sorrow from the limp appendages as best he could.

"He was a great stallion," Hurricane murmured. The sobbing mare was slowly regaining control of herself, and Hurricane saw another pair of forelegs wrap around them as Silver joined in. "The Gods will welcome him with open arms. He's in a better place now."

The wails across his shoulder had been reduced to sniffing now. "Why... why him? Why did he have to die?" Hurricane couldn't provide an answer for the distraught mare. He only hugged her tightly, pouring out love and support as a simple bandage for her shattered soul.

"Because... he did it... for you." Hurricane and Swift turned their heads to the second figure laying against the wall. Haysar's breaths were ragged and his limbs shook meekly, but he was fighting with his remaining strength against the curtain of death descending upon him. The defeated emperor reached out a shaky hoof to touch Swift's side, and the mare slowly unwound herself from Hurricane to hold it. The three friends remained in silence as Augustus built up the energy to speak.

"When the Legionnaire... surrenders himself for... Cirra, he fights... not for me... but for those... closest to him. I never asked... for him to die... for me, but he gave his life... without question... without hesitation." Haysar coughed painfully, droplets of blood escaping from his nose and mouth into the already large pool around him. "Be proud of him... young Swift Spear... for there is no better honor... than to die for those... you love."

The mare nodded, the faint touches of a mournful smile coming to the corners of her lips. The Emperor nodded weakly back at her, and then he slid his glassy eyes to Silver Sword. "You," he extended his other hoof towards Silver, "I do not know you, but I can attest... that you fought... with honor. You would make a great Praetorian..."

The steel pegasus nodded. "Thank you, sir. The name's Silver Sword, and your words do me great honor."

Haysar chuckled once through gritted teeth. "Hmm... Silver Sword... yes, that is a fine name... for a warrior." Lastly, his eyes focused on Hurricane's face. The spark was dying, but it was still there, and it had more to say. "Hurricane... I knew your father well. I fought with him... the entirety of the War... He would have been emperor, had he not been wounded..." Haysar sighed with what little breath he could spare and shook his head. "Instead, the mantle fell to me. I never wanted it... I never asked for it... but I

embraced the responsibility... to the people. I doubt that... Red Tail... would have been so... accommodating.” Reaching towards the golden necklace hanging over his broken armor, the Emperor ripped it off and passed it to Hurricane. “History finds a way... to get what it wants... in the end. Hurricane, I make you... Commander Hurricane... Twenty-Fourth Emperor of the Cirran Empire. May the Gods guide you... may they guide Cirra... may they have mercy on the fallen...”

Hurricane was too stunned to object. He clutched the necklace, a golden eagle flying through a storm cloud, against his chest. “Th-thank you, sir...”

Wheezing gasps of air that passed for a laugh escaped Haysar’s lips. “No, Emperor... thank you. Thank you for killing Red Tail. He would have destroyed Cirra, but you... you will save it. I know it in my heart; this is what you were born to do.” Haysar didn’t spare any breath. He had said all he needed to say. His eyelids slowly descended, and so too did his neck. “Before the Legion... there was nothing... and after... the Legion... there will be...”

“Nothing.” Hurricane finished the stallion’s words as his slumped figure finally ceased to draw breath. Emperor Augustus Haysar, Twenty-Third Emperor of the Cirran Empire, was no more.

Rising, Hurricane extended the former emperor’s wings and laid his body down gently. Again he looked at the golden necklace, how it shimmered in the blue light. Taking a final breath, Hurricane raised the chain over his neck and lowered it across his shoulders. The transformation had begun, and there was no turning back.

Swift Spear placed one last kiss on her father’s forehead, and as one the three pegasi left the chamber. A small knot of Praetorians met them just outside the room, bloodstained and wounded, but alive. Upon seeing the bodies of the Emperor, Imperator, and Red Tail, as well as Swift Spear’s safety, they let down their guard. One of the Praetorian noticed Hurricane’s necklace, and the understanding passed among the soldiers. Breaking the silence, the Praetorian stepped forward and saluted. “Emperor. We must be going now, before any griffons find us.” Hurricane pushed past them without a response, and the Praetorian raised an eyebrow. “Emperor?”

Hurricane stopped in his tracks and spoke to the stone floor. “Yes. Emperor. Though Commander Hurricane will suffice just fine.” Then the three weary pegasi continued on, with the Praetorian bringing up the rear. Rounding a few corners and then climbing up to the surface, the Cirrans disappeared, allowing sacred silence to fill the bloody caverns.

*Power is the ultimate paradox. It's the one thing everyone wants in times of peace and prosperity, yet it's the last thing anyone desires when your nation is crumbling around you. And when you find yourself in a position of power during such times, it can be tempting to give up and pass responsibility down to someone else. But leaders like I cannot do this; no one will accept the mantle. And so we do the best we can until our inevitable failure consumes us.*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
22nd of First Seed, 401 AE

The city was robed in black. Shadows scaled the walls of Stratopolis' mighty buildings, taunting the east with their solidity. The rainbow canals had been stopped, the flags were lowered, and everywhere ponies walked with their heads down. Pegasus lore claims that the sun never rose on the second of Long Night, and with good reason.

Main street was lined with figures in black mourning robes, their dreary attire matched perfectly by the impossibly thick stratus clouds that blocked the sky. Even though the canals that deposited so much water and rainbow into the lake below had been stopped, the same amount of water fell in tears. The stores were closed and would be for the rest of the week, all because of this one, single event.

It started with two regiments from the Cirran 1st Legion that marched down the street and swept away any stragglers who didn't remain on the sidewalks. The Legionnaires' helmets were hung off of the hook on their saddlebags, and the blades along their right wings were removed. At the sight of the head of the procession, the city fell deathly quiet.

Next came the regiment of the Praetorian Guard, their eyes and muzzle streaked in black Cirran tribal paint to artificially convey sorrow on their permanently stoic faces. They too marched without one bladed wing, though their onyx helmets were fixated in their usual position. Four of the Praetorians, the highest ranking members of the Guard, each shouldered their share of an immaculate casket topped with the Cirran flag.

Following the Emperor's body were two pegasi that the crowds had already seen before but didn't recognize. Hurricane and Silver Sword strode side by side in the wake of the casket, heads lowered respectfully. Two additional platoons of Praetorians flanked the pair in the center, eyes locked forward but acutely aware of their surroundings.

It was the longest walk of Hurricane's life. Thousands of faces watched him from every street corner, whispering amongst themselves in skeptical undertones. No amount of onyx and gold armor, even swathed in a flowing red robe, could shelter Hurricane from their piercing scrutinies. The new Emperor and Imperator could only follow the body of Hurricane's predecessor and try to appear resilient.

A distant rumble of chilly thunder darkened the mood even further, and within minutes the rain began to fall. Many of the bystanders threw their hoods up and ran off with the onslaught of the storm, and Hurricane wished he could do the same. The wintry rains were slicing deep to his bones, and the porous cotton cloak covering his left shoulder was quickly saturated with icy water. It would be a long time before he could retreat into the safety of the palace.

After what seemed like hours of an agonizingly slow walk, the casket finally was laid down in front of the statue of Roamulus in the Plaza of the Emperor. Hurricane and Silver Sword ascended a rough wooden platform in front of the procession and turned to face the crowd. Already half of the bystanders had disappeared, and Hurricane could see many of the regular Legionnaires shivering in the cold. The Praetorian Guard managed to hide their discomfort under a decade of training and service.

Hurricane coughed nervously as another flash of lightning lit the area. Public speaking was never his thing, and yet he desperately needed to come off as strong and confident if he was going to win over the support of the people—his people. Focusing on the expressionless eyes of Roamulus, Hurricane inhaled and shifted his wings.

“The war has cost us more than we ever bargained for—land, possessions, ponies—but nothing so great a price as the body of our beloved Emperor Augustus Haysar.” *So far so good.* “Today, we are assembled in his memory, more than his memory, in memory of all those who have died in this wretched, wretched war.” Hurricane paused, then began to pace across the scaffold. He let the energy of his words resonate with the crowds, and in turn he fed off of that energy to fuel his speech. “Our Emperor was struck down by ponies whose souls lusted for power, willing to throw away the future of our nation, of your lives just to satisfy their thirst. Through the heroics of the Guard we were able to stop them, but the Emperor gave his life fighting for you. With his dying breaths he appointed me the next emperor of Cirra, and I swear to you that I will do everything within my power to uphold his name, and the name of everything he stood for; Cirra, the mighty empire that spans a continent, the one nation that shall never fall. With your help, I will ensure our survival, and with the blessings of the Gods I will do my best to deliver victory to you. And so we find ourselves at the end of one road and the beginning of another. Before the Legion there was nothing, and after the Legion there will be

nothing. I have surrendered my future to you, Cirrans, and all I ask in return is for your loyalty and devotion to defend this nation we love so much.”

There was no applause, but neither did Hurricane expect there to be one. All he had to do was look into the faces of his soaked followers to know that his message had come across. There was a steely determination in their flinty eyes, and for a second the young emperor had hope that he would be successful. Maybe he could reverse Cirra’s fortunes. Only time would tell, but even that was a precious commodity that he was quickly running out of. He just hoped there was enough left for him to work with before the Empire collapsed.

Silver Sword saluted to the Praetorians, and the Emperor’s body began to move again. The Legionnaires passed the leaders by, followed by the casket, and then there was nothing. The body of the Emperor was marched out of the southern gate and flown down to the earth, where Haysar would be buried with the rest of Cirra’s many rulers. Lingered for a moment longer while the crowd dispersed, Hurricane slowly descended from the scaffold and began to walk back to his palace. Power had exchanged hooves, and now it was his responsibility to save millions of lives.

If they could have, Hurricane and Silver Sword would have flown quickly back to the palace. As it was, their wings were still recovering from the eruption in the east, and their flight was erratic and crooked—hardly the dignified and powerful air they needed to convey as leaders of the nation. And so they trudged up the steps in the blistering wind and rain until they reached the marble ceiling and the protection it granted.

A swarm of servants met the two as soon as they entered, carrying away Hurricane’s soaked cape and polishing his armor before escorting him to the throne. The black stallion approached the mighty seat warily, feeling as though it wasn’t his place to rest upon it. Luckily, a timely delay in the form of Swift Spear arrived to stop and chat.

“How’d it go?” A fine eyebrow was raised ever so slightly under Swift’s black and gold-trimmed helm. Onyx armor coated the rest of her body, carrying with it gold trim and a golden lightning bolt across the breastplate that signified the armor of a Praetorian Commander. Hurricane had saw fit to promote her to the Praetorian, even if it was just to keep her by his side and away from the fighting.

“Better than I would have thought. I didn’t break down on stage or anything, so that’s a plus.” Hurricane sighed and fiddled with the golden feathers wrapping across his head. The headpiece was surprisingly sharp, and the feathers kept his ears irritated. He wasn’t ready for this.

“That’s good to hear. The servants tell me you’ve got half an hour before your first meeting with the Senate.” She paused and bit her lip nervously, trying to dance around the topic as best she could. “I guess now would be a great time to get better acquainted with your new... erm, role.”

Hurricane nodded gratefully. At least Swift and Silver didn’t treat him any differently than before. Sure, they may all have new jobs and new interactions with each other, but at heart they were still the same three young pegasi who trained together and fought together so much in the past eight months.

“Yes, thanks, Swift.” Hurricane nuzzled her gently and stepped back. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to keep you from anything. I’m sure you’ve got much to do and catch up on, this being your first day on the job and whatnot.”

Swift Spear smiled and touched Hurricane’s wing. “Unfortunately, I’ll be able to help you through your first meeting with the senators, but then I’ll be busy. I should be able to get a break later, though, and we can talk.” Her blue eyes flitted to Silver Sword and she slightly revealed her teeth. “That is, if my superior lets me.”

The steel pegasus chuckled and ran a hoof across his black and white-trimmed armor. “Of course, Commander, as long as you aren’t slacking or anything.” Winking at Hurricane, the manila mare smiled and flicked Silver lightly on the nose with her tail before walking off. The two stallions smiled as they watched her go, and then confronted the momentous task of ascending the stairs towards the throne.

“This is it, ain’t it, Silver,” ventured Hurricane as he stared at the seat. It was an impressively crafted wood and marble throne, covered in red velvet and flanked on either side by mighty torches. Over the throne was an immense collage of stained glass, depicting the dawn of Empire under Roamulus’ rule. There was no seat as mighty or as grand in the entire world as the emperor’s throne in Stratopolis.

One hoof was placed on the first step. Then another on the second. Then another, and another. Fate was inexorably drawing Hurricane forward, and there was little he could do other than place one leaden hoof in front of the other. Each step brought the pegasus closer to something he awed yet feared.

There were no more steps to climb. Hurricane’s hooves all aligned on the same plane, and the throne was less than a tail length away. In a few shaky steps, Hurricane touched the throne for the first time. From there it was a matter of willpower and determination to force his weary body to sit upon the most powerful seat ever crafted by pegasus

hooves. The symbolic transfer of power had taken place twenty minutes earlier in the misty streets of Stratopolis; now the final transformation was complete upon the mighty Cirran throne.

Silver Sword quickly took his place by the side of the throne as Hurricane allowed himself to get comfortable. The Emperor flashed the Emperor a hearty smile, which Hurricane readily returned. This was his place, and long before he was even born he was destined to sit in this seat. The world looked different from the perch of a ruler, and now it was Hurricane's duty to struggle with the titanic forces that molded it and impart his own mark on history. It was a monumental task, but Hurricane finally felt ready.

“Bring it on.”

• • •

The Senate answered Hurricane's challenge. Swift Spear had returned to the throne room and taken a place by Hurricane's side, bringing with her no fewer than fifty senators and their envoys. Swift had warned the new emperor that the Senate would try to test Hurricane's authority, and if it weren't for her counsel he would have failed right out of the gate.

To start with, the senators insisted their inaugural meeting be held in the Senate chambers. Hurricane flatly declined and kept the meeting in the throne room, arraying the senators out on his home turf. A few senators tried to leave at various points in the meeting, but curt words from the Emperor were enough to turn them around. Seeing that the new emperor was no pushover, they began to test his political mettle instead.

This part, which lasted for two hours, strained every shred of Hurricane's patience and twisted his mind into such a puzzlement that it was all he could do to retain his calm and imperial air. Every manner of domestic policy and economic proceedings were brought up, scrutinized, shuffled back into the pile, then brought up again and cross-examined. Tax figures were thrown at Hurricane, which he managed to scrape past by agreeing to a five percent tax hike for the next year. City limits, boundary disputes, intercity commerce, and other confusing matters were deferred to Swift Spear, who understood such political intricacies and ultimately developed most of the policies for Hurricane to agree or disagree on. At least foreign policy was relatively simple. There were few foreign matters outside of 'raze Gryphus' to keep track of.

Finally, the markup session drew to a close. Hurricane quickly sifted through the myriad scrolls, adding his signature to the passed bills and separating the bills that needed to be

further revised. He lazily pushed aside the foreign policy bills into the passed section, but stopped when he noticed the title of one. Pulling it out of the stack, he opened the scroll and read the text.

“Approval to explore lands in the west.” Hurricane cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow at the committee of senators. One coughed lightly and stepped forward, nearly tripping on his purple robes.

“It’s just a minor issue, Your Highness. A group of sailors uncovered the remains of a ship that drifted towards our western shores. The markings on the mast and sails were neither pegasus nor griffon in origin.” He hesitated slightly, before continuing decidedly. “There may be other kingdoms to the west that we have never met before.”

Slowly and deliberately, the scroll was set down and furled. “I see.” The Emperor’s eyes drilled the senator and his committee. “A minor issue. Do you understand what this could mean for the Empire?”

The senators shifted uncomfortably under Hurricane’s scathing glare. Rising from his throne, the emperor began to pace on his elevated platform. “Entire nations that we could trade with. They may know new technologies or knowledge we’ve never even heard about. Hell, they might even be able to help us out in this war! And this is a minor issue?!” Getting no response from the senators, Hurricane sighed and collapsed back onto his throne. “How long has the Empire known about this?”

The same senator spoke up again. “About seven months, sir. The Senate decided there were more... pressing matters to attend to.” The pegasus quickly sat down on the floor again, spreading his purple robe out from underneath him.

Hurricane released an exasperated sigh. “Fine. What’s done is done, and there’s nothing I can do about that, but I want a platoon sent on a scouting mission. Send them across the ocean, and when they reach land they must report back to me. Chances are we’ll need this knowledge in the future.”

The resolution was swiftly passed and the senators began to file out. Hurricane thanked them for their time as they left, hoping to find a balance between reconciliatory and unyielding. When the eldest of the senators vacated the throne room and the Guard finally shut the doors, Hurricane collapsed into his seat and placed his head between his hooves.



“I hate politics...” he moaned as he massaged his temples. Swift Spear stirred from her spot by Hurricane’s side and rubbed the back of his neck gently. Silver Sword excused himself and went to the throne doors, claiming he heard an altercation outside. The Emperor and the commander were left to themselves with his departure.

“You didn’t do too bad,” Swift offered. “You weren’t overwhelmed or anything, and you definitely showed them who was in charge.”

“I had no idea what they were talking about half the time.” Hurricane sat up and closed his eyes, stretching his tired wings out to either side. “I thought I was ready for this, but now I’m not so sure. You would have made a much better emperor, Swift. You understand how the nation works and what we have to do to run it. I’m just some pony who knows how to fight and little else.”

“No, Hurricane, you’re more than that. Sure, fighting may be your expertise, but that’s what the Empire needs right now. You can look at a threat and deconstruct it, then hit the enemy where it hurts. With our armies in shambles right now, we need that more than anything.” The weariness hadn’t left Hurricane’s eyes, but he nodded in acknowledgement.

“Maybe. But I haven’t been deserving of my promotions—any of them. I was simply in the right place at the right time. I only became a centurion because Red Tail needed a replacement for Dusk Strike. And I only became emperor because Haysar thought I’d have my father’s skill.” Hurricane’s confidence continued to be squashed under his own blows. “What value does anyone see in me, that they would make me a leader?”

The mare carefully calculated her response before speaking. “Because you have charisma, Hurricane. Ponies are drawn to you by your personality and morals, not just your skill. It was your charisma that drew Red Tail’s attention to you when he made you a centurion, and it was your charisma that guided Haysar’s hoof when he chose you to be his successor. He could very easily have chosen Silver Sword or me, and probably would have chosen me in any other circumstance. But he saw something in you, Hurricane. He knew you had what it takes to be a leader, and he damn well knew you’d do a fine job of leading this Empire!” Swift lowered her head down to Hurricane’s eye level and placed a hoof under his chin. “So enough of this moping around, Hurricane. If you weren’t the right pony for the job, Haysar wouldn’t have chosen you. You, out of all the Praetorian and the Senate, out of all the ponies he knew. And me?” She leaned back, straightening her spine in a show of respect. “I would have done the same thing.”

Hurricane relented and released a long exhalation. After fighting with the inner machinations of his mind for a brief moment, the black pegasus straightened himself within his armor and focused his magenta-bladed irises ahead of him. His wings were tightly coiled at his sides and his breathing was slow and even. At that moment, the imperial armor suited him more than ever before.

Swift smiled to herself at her success, and stood up next to the throne. She patted Hurricane lightly on the shoulder, then turned as the throne room doors opened. An excited Silver Sword stuck his head into the room.

“Hurricane! You’ve got some visitors for you, all the way from Zephyrus!” The stallion then pushed the doors open wider, revealing three familiar equines standing next to him.

Hurricane’s first reaction was one of disbelief. His head jolted back and his eyes widened in surprise, but the expression was quickly discarded with a vibrant display of joy and affection. In a manner completely unbecoming of an imperial leader, Hurricane flung himself out of his throne and across the short distance that separated himself from his family.

“Twist! Mom, Dad! It’s been so long!” Hurricane exclaimed as he threw himself into their embrace. The four pegasi joined together in a tearful knot, and Silver Sword respectfully shut the throne room doors for their privacy. Hurricane was truly laughing for the first time in months, and he was sure his family felt the same.

“Hurricane! How in the Gods’ names did you manage to become emperor of the entire nation?” Twister giggled between outbursts of elation. Letting himself draw away from his parents, Hurricane wrapped his forelegs as tightly around his little sister as he could.

“I survived, Twist. I survived.” The stallion tousled his sister’s mane before turning to his parents. His smile only broadened when his eyes looked over his father. Thunder Gale was still hobbled with the signs of age, but his eyes were bright and his breathing was strong. The old stallion was even standing by himself, his strong limbs fidgeting in excitement.

“Son! It’s good to finally see you.” Thunder Gale’s voice was lively, and the usual rasping tone had been all but banished. “Your mother was worried when we didn’t get any mail, but I told her that the Legion’s better at distributing bodies than parchment. How’ve you been, Hurricane?”

Hurricane embraced his father warmly and stepped back. “Pretty good for the most part.” The stallion pointed to a few scars along his face and sides. “A little beat up, but alive. You will not believe what I’ve been through in the past eight months.”

Rain Cloud stepped in between the two stallions and wrapped her wings around her son. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty of stories to tell, Cane. It’s a good thing we’ve got time to hear them all. We’ll be staying in Stratopolis for the weekend. Your father wanted to see the city again after all these years, and with your becoming emperor and all, now seemed like the perfect time.”

Hurricane smiled and spun back to his father. “That’s great! If you need a place to stay, you’re more than welcome to take some of the guest rooms in the palace. The servants will be more than happy to guide you to them—when you’re ready, that is.” Hurricane smiled sheepishly as though he felt he had offended his parents, but Thunder Gale shook it off and stepped proudly up to his son.

“That’s very nice of you, Hurricane. It sure beats staying at an inn down in the city.” The elder stallion placed his hooves on Hurricane’s armor, running a foreleg through the red robe that covered his left shoulder. “I always knew you’d be a commander one day, but I never expected you to go all the way. Then again, I should have suspected as much. You’re a brilliant pegasus, my boy, and you’ve grown up to be a fine stallion.”

The Emperor ducked his head in embarrassment. “I got lucky, what can I say. It’s just been one hell of a ride so far.” He extended a foreleg to his side and wrapped it around Twister, who had walked over to lean against her big brother. “So what’s been new with you guys while I’ve been gone? Dad looks better than ever.”

Thunder Gale chuckled easily. “That’s because I feel better, son. This is the best I’ve been able to breathe in years. Granted, it’ll never be as good as it used to, but I feel like a new stallion. I even flew a week ago.”

“It was only for a hoofful of seconds, Dad,” Twister interjected. Thunder shook it off with ease, shooting Twister a playful look. Hurricane, for the most part, was simply happy for his father.

“Let the old man dream, dear. You take so much for granted these days you don’t understand what it’s like to be grounded.” Thunder Gale rose his head and identified the two pegasi standing in the background, observing the affair. “Ho, Silver! Why don’t you two come and join us? Don’t be strangers.”

Silver Sword and Swift Spear exchanged glances and began to advance, wide smiles painting their faces. Silver quickly stepped into the circle, pounding hooves with Thunder Gale and saluting to Rain Cloud. Swift stood outside the circle awkwardly until Hurricane pulled her closer.

Turning to his family, Hurricane placed a hoof across Swift's back. "Guys, this is Swift Spear. Swift Spear, this is Thunder Gale, Rain Cloud, and Twister. They're my family back in Zephyrus." Swift smiled as she shook hooves with each of Hurricane's family members in turn, then withdrew back to Hurricane's side.

"Pleasure to meet you. Hurricane's told me so much about you all." The mare slightly flared her restless wings as she bashfully stood against Hurricane. The black pegasus, for the most part, seemed not to notice Swift's shyness.

"The pleasure's all mine," Thunder Gale returned. Twister cocked her head to the side as she observed Hurricane and Swift, and then a dawning realization manifested on her face in the form of a mischievous smile.

"So, she's your fillyfriend, right?" Hurricane felt his cheeks grow red under his sister's accusation. A quick glance at Swift revealed her thoughts on the topic.

"You could say that, yes," Hurricane replied cautiously. Rain Cloud advanced to the pair and wrapped them both in her embrace.

"Oh, that's great! I'm so happy for the both of you." Upon receiving that note of acceptance from Hurricane's mother, Swift Spear allowed herself to loosen up ever so slightly. Rain Cloud squeezed the two lovers together in her powerful hug and then released. Brushing her mane back into alignment, Swift tittered lightly.

"We won't be getting any younger standing around here. What do you all say to some food?"

A gray blur moved past the group and pried open the doors. "I thought nopony was going to ask!" Silver Sword exclaimed. Barely waiting just long enough to allow the family to go ahead of him and take up his Emperor duties by Hurricane's side, the steel pegasus followed the group out and began to trot to the dining hall. A pair of guards began to shadow Hurricane, but he waved them back with his tail. He was finally reunited with his family, and he wanted to enjoy it without extra party members.

Walking past the open forum at the very entrance to the palace, Hurricane inhaled the fresh air deeply. The rainy skies and damp air imparted a cleansing and refreshing smell

as opposed to the dark and gloomy feel of a few hours earlier. The skies had even marginally brightened.

The Emperor smiled to himself as he resumed his trot. The world was finally kind to him for the first time in a long time.

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The rain pattered softly against the window of Hurricane's study. The sun had long since sunken into the western horizon, leaving only the lustrous moon to watch over the serene night. The Emperor found himself distracted from the scrolls arranged on the massive table before him by the sky more than once.

Every facet of the Empire's military strength and numbers were spread before him. Deployment orders, Legion listings, and casualty reports were stacked in a jumbled mess to one side of the table, while intelligence and dossiers on Gryphon generals and army strengths dominated the other. Spread across the middle were crumpled scrolls carrying discarded or revised orders in Hurricane's mouthwriting.

The stallion sighed as he looked over the numbers again. The shadows from the furled edge of the paper danced over the fine text on the casualty reports as the candle flickered. Cross-referencing those numbers with the list of active duty legions, Hurricane calculated for the tenth time the strength of Cirra's remaining armies.

According to the documents drafted three months into the war, the Cirran Legion had peaked at about eight hundred and fifty thousand Legionnaires, immediately prior to the attack on Hengstead. Three new legions had been drafted from then until now, bringing the number to well over a million pegasi drafted into the war so far. Pushing that scroll aside, Hurricane pulled up the casualty reports again.

One hundred thousand lost at Hengstead. Three hundred thousand lost in the griffon counter attack. One hundred and fifty thousand lost at Nimbus. An additional three hundred thousand lost in the Waldren. Skirmishes between major battles brought in an additional fifty thousand casualties. Altogether, the Legion had lost nine hundred thousand soldiers of its 1.1 million enlisted Legionnaires. The draft was hammering away at the deficit, but Hurricane only had two hundred thousand experienced soldiers to work with; barely a little more than two legions.

Pounding on the table in frustration, Hurricane pushed the scroll away from him and placed his head into his hooves. How was he going to defend an empire with two legions?

He could only guess at the strength of Gryphus' armies, but he knew they hadn't lost anywhere near as many soldiers as Cirra. It was only a matter of time before they smashed what was left of Cirra to pieces or slowly bled its generations dry of soldiers. Either way, the future was frighteningly bleak for the pegasus empire.

How he wished he could sink back into the day's bliss. He had enjoyed a nice lunch with his family, sharing his stories in as honest a way as he could while dancing around the more sensitive parts. He was able to talk about Hengstead, Nimbus, and Waldren in a way his father easily understood and was able to relate to, which made Hurricane feel much better. Then he showed his family around the palace before letting them wander the city on their own. He wished he could have gone with them, but he had too much work to spend time sightseeing.

There was a knock at the door, and Hurricane straightened up. He quickly realigned his wing feathers and took a deep breath. "Come in."

The door opened slowly, and a manila face peeked around the corner. "May I?" Hurricane waved his hoof at Swift Spear and turned back to his desk. The mare pushed open the door and closed it behind her, looking over the room. The armor of long-dead emperors gazed back at her, and the blades of those legendary figures caught the flickering candlelight.

"I've never seen the emperor's room before," Swift thought aloud. "Looks like a nice place."

Hurricane sighed and crumpled up yet another scroll. "Yeah. Haysar sure knew how to decorate." The flame from the candle flickered and nearly died against the stub of wax remaining. Hurricane cursed to himself under his breath and pulled a new candle out of a drawer, lighting it with the flame of the old. He then blew out the old candle and left its husk next to the fresh wick, which was struggling to gain a foothold on the untested wax.

Swift looked about the room one last time and pulled a chair next to Hurricane. She gave the paperwork a shallow stare, tracing the curves and folds of the yellowed parchment as it tumbled over itself. Her hoof clicked nervously against the floor as she thought.

"It's a big change," Hurricane continued, signing his name to another document. "I always kind of marveled the emperor when I was younger, looked in awe at the Senate and how lucky they were to be able to lead the country. Now..." he exhaled slowly as he returned the quill to the inkwell. "Now I think we were the lucky ones. I didn't have to worry about whether I was doing the right thing; I could just follow my moral compass

in Zephyrus. From my perch in Stratopolis, though, what's morally right isn't always what's best for my subjects."

Swift Spear felt the urge to touch Hurricane, to reach out and embrace him and tell him he was doing alright, but she suppressed it. If Hurricane needed time to vent, she should give it to him, and if he desired companionship, then she would give that to him as well.

"Things were so simple then. No war, no responsibilities, just me and my work and my family. Silver was about my only friend, but that was okay with me. I didn't need other ponies." The shell around the stallion's heart was slowly unfurling, but Swift was hesitant to reach out to it. The only thing she could do was wait and listen.

Hurricane paused to seal a letter and pushed it into the finished pile. "I guess things really only changed for me when Silver asked me to go to the Day of Empire celebrations with him. I was hesitant at first, but my father encouraged me to go. Little did I know it would be the start of something bigger. The attempt on Haysar's life, the beginning of the war," Hurricane's eyes flickered briefly to Swift's, "meeting you." The chair creaked loudly as the stallion leaned back in it. "I can't even begin to imagine what my life would be like if I hadn't gone."

Swift nodded her agreement. "Me neither. I'm glad you came, Hurricane." The Emperor smiled softly and looked out the window to where the last of the clouds were fleeing, revealing the stars spread above the world like lonely sentinels. It didn't take much imagination to believe that they were the only two pegasi in the world.

"I'm glad I came, too." A falling star blazed across the sky, bringing a wistful smile to Hurricane's lips. "It's so peaceful up there. So quiet, so peaceful."

The chair slid a little closer to Hurricane. "Very. Our worldly troubles mean nothing up there, nothing to the tranquility of the Gods." Swift looked longingly at Hurricane before speaking again. "Imagine if we could go to them. It would be easy for a pair of pegasi to get lost up there, wouldn't it?"

Hurricane felt Swift's foreleg by his side, and he lovingly twined it with his own. "Yeah, it would."

"To go someplace very far away, where you could spend the rest of your life... in peace."

Hurricane leaned over and kissed Swift's neck, wrapping her in the embrace of his wings. Her body melted into his, and he caressed her head softly. "Right now... there's no place I'd rather be."

The two pegasi looked into each other's eyes, peering into the depths of their souls and the feelings contained within. Magenta and blue met, not in a collision, but in a spirited dance of color and emotion. They blinked, and then closed as they approached each other. Hurricane and Swift Spear exchanged a passionate kiss, the first they had shared with each other in a long time.

Swift pulled away first and pressed her forehead against Hurricane's. Their eyes met again, and a small smile crept onto the mare's lips.

"I love you."

Hurricane smiled and nuzzled her gently. His wings still enveloped Swift's body, and he pulled her even closer. Their two coats blended together, light with dark, in perfect harmony.

"I love you too, Swift."

The two ponies kissed again, and Hurricane allowed his wings to retract slightly so that they could stand up. On their hooves, they embraced again. Swift rested her neck across Hurricane's shoulder and smiled contentedly, bringing her muzzle to his ear.

"Show me."

Hurricane smiled and caressed her lovingly. The two pegasi flitted towards the center of the room, resting upon the massive bed.

A gust of wind through a cracked window extinguished the light, leaving only the silent moon to bear witness.



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*If you could only save one, who would you choose? If the final say in your nation's affairs falls into your hooves, and you have the choice of protecting a few loved ones or thousands, what would you do? And when it's all said and done, how can you be sure you made the right choice?*

—Excerpt from Commander Hurricane's journal  
28th Long Night, 401 After Empire

Massive stone arches sprouted from columns scattered throughout the room, straining to keep aloft the ceiling held a hundred feet above the floor. Enormous barred windows provided dim illumination for the solid oak table in the center of the room. The doors were locked tight, their thick mass deadening any sound that may try to escape. The imperial war room was, for all intents and purposes, a bunker.

The spacious table itself weighed close to five hundred pounds, and across its worn surface were spread innumerable maps, rosters, and reports from all branches of the Cirran Legion. Surrounding the table were a dozen of the most brilliant military minds in the entirety of the pegasus race, trying to establish some order to the information before them. Hurricane stood at the head of the table, flanked on either side by Silver Sword and Swift Spear.

“Pileus reports a force of two hundred thousand griffons organizing outside of their walls. They only have fifty thousand Legionnaires to defend them.” A golden hoof tapped lightly at the northernmost coast on a map of Cirra. “The city's Governor has sent half of the defenders back to Stratopolis to escort as many refugees as possible, realizing that theirs is a lost cause.”

The Emperor tapped his hooves together in meditation and exhaled. Pulling the map closer to him, he compared it with the dwindling list of combat-ready units available to the Legion. “Can we spare units from the Third Legion to assist them?”

Commander Gold Moon shook his head. “Negative, sir. The Governor requested that no additional lives be wasted in delaying the inevitable. He and the volunteers who stayed intend to fight to the end and buy time for the rest of Cirra to build its defenses.” The weary commander absentmindedly flexed his crooked wing as he laid the letter on the table. “The report was written four days ago. In that time, Pileus has likely been crushed.”

“I see.” Hurricane nodded towards Gold Moon. “Organize the survivors into a division and station them along Windcrest River. The griffons will have to cross it to get to their next targets. Are you fit to oversee this operation?”

The golden Praetorian had only recently returned to active duty after recovering from the wounds he had sustained in Waldren. The winds produced by the volcanic eruption had badly wrenched one of his wings and nearly tore it loose before he was able to land somewhere safe from the ash. The appendage had healed awkwardly, causing it to misalign with his body when folded, but the stallion hadn't complained once about it. True to form, he alleviated Hurricane's concern with a curt nod of his head.

He was loathe to hear more bad news, but that was all the table contained. There were carefully drawn maps detailed in blue and red that his eyes passed over, and everywhere the red was inevitably pushing westward. The few advances by Cirran counterattacks were quickly quashed and did little against the red mass except delay its progress. The noose was rapidly tightening around the Empire, and half of its lands already lay in Gryphon talons.

“What's the situation in the south? Last I heard the Thirteenth Legion was making some progress.” The Emperor's eyes searched the faces of his subordinates excitedly, looking for some glimmer of hope in Cirra's future.

Blank stares returned his agitation. One commander, a green and yellow pegasus named Hammer Down, began to speak softly. “The Thirteenth's Legate surrendered to griffon forces yesterday at noon. Magnus and his elite guards had begun to attack Procella with the rest of the hordes in the south. Rather than fight to the end, the sixty thousand remaining soldiers have been taken to Gryphon prisoner of war camps, leaving the city to burn in their wake.”

“There are no such things as Gryphon prisoner of war camps,” Hurricane muttered. “Another sixty thousand KIA.” Slamming his hoof on the table in frustration, he released a string of curses aimed at the legion's cowardly Legate. When he sat back in his chair, he almost collapsed entirely in exhaustion. “How many do we have left?”

The question had been a frequent one in the past month and a half, and Silver Sword read the week's updated military reports. “Cirran 1st Legion operating at full strength in Stratopolis. Cirran 3rd Legion reports seventy-five percent combat readiness across the central front. Cirran 12th Legion reports thirty-two percent combat readiness across the northern front. Cirran 13th Legion... killed in action.” The scroll was set down, and the

Imperator's tone accordingly darkened. "Roughly two hundred thousand Legionnaires remain on all fronts."

Two hundred thousand. The number was received by the assembled officers akin to a death sentence. Hurricane couldn't tell how many griffons that Magnus had under his control, but he could infer a rather accurate number from the information available to him. Gryphus was a smaller nation than Cirra and had half as many citizens, so they were in all likelihood straining to put an end on the war as well. The reports indicated that Magnus was known to have half a million griffons in his armies, and Hurricane doubted that he was holding anything back. Still, that figure outnumbered Cirra's strength by a five to two margin. If only they hadn't lost so many at Waldren...

"Orders, sir?" Hurricane snapped out of his thoughts at the sound of Swift's voice. The rest of the officers were hanging onto the edges of their seats, ready to execute the Emperor's every word. They had to wait, however, as Hurricane fought with himself over courses of action.

Finally, the black stallion's shoulders collapsed as he made up his mind. Reaching for a scroll of parchment, Hurricane scratched his orders onto its grainy surface with a tremendous amount of effort. Signing his name to the document, he furled it and placed the emperor's seal in the center. He gave the document to a messenger and summoned the strength to address the committee.

"Pull everything back. Defend the major cities only; Stratopolis, Cumula, and Nix. Everything else can be abandoned. Empty whatever reserves we have left so we can delay until we hear a response." Hurricane saw his words register a few points on the commanders' faces, but there weren't any hints of surprise. He was aware they knew that it was the only thing the Empire could do. But something else struck them as well. Gold Moon was the first to speak up, raising his aged voice into barely more than a whisper.

"Response for what, sir?" It was the inquiry Hurricane had been dreading to answer, but there was nothing he could do. He flushed the air from his lungs as his shoulders collapsed in defeat.

"Negotiations to end this war. Cirra will surrender on the condition that our remaining sovereignty is unharmed. It is the only way." The Emperor's weary magenta irises fell to the table, avoiding the shocked looks he was receiving. Soon enough those died away as well, replaced by a grim acquiescence to Hurricane's final statement. It was the only way Cirra could survive.

The session soon moved to break, and the commanders split off to address their dwindling responsibilities. Hurricane, Silver Sword, and Swift Spear trotted along the path between the palace and the senate chambers. The snow was already several inches deep, but they didn't feel the need to elevate themselves above its lustrous surface.

Hurricane put his hoof on the chamber doors but delayed in opening them. Motioning for his friends to sit, Hurricane allowed himself to collapse against the marble walls.

"So... we're actually going to surrender?" Silver Sword tried to soften the impact of his words against such a sensitive subject, but there was little he could do. Hurricane took one shuddering breath and hung his head in submission.

"We have no choice. Cirra is on its last legs. We're already running out of food and it's barely halfway through winter. We're also running out of soldiers, and I'll be damned if I have to send any more young ponies to their deaths. Our generation has already lost so much." Hurricane's hoof traced lazy patterns in the snow, the disheveled black fur contrasting sharply with the white drifts. His time as emperor had already taken a massive toll on the stallion, and the light in his study was rarely extinguished in the long hours of the night.

Swift Spear laid her head on Hurricane's shoulder and rubbed his chest, trying to soothe the distraught pegasus. "Hurricane, you've done more than any Cirran could ever have asked of you. Most ponies would break under this kind of pressure, but I'm glad to see that you haven't."

"I just wish I could produce something for it. I haven't been able to do anything against the griffon advance." The Emperor took the golden wreath of feathers off his head and examined the metallic quills. "And I may not be broken yet, but I'm stretched and bent well beyond the breaking point. It's only a matter of time."

A snowball shattered against one of the senate's marble pillars. Silver Sword began balling another together, adding a bit of ice for good measure. "I can't say I envy you, Hurricane, but if you can't do it, no pony can. If I were running the Empire, it would have fallen in a week. You, you know how to keep it running. I just have to do the dirty work."

"Just be glad that the dirty work's all you have to do," Hurricane countered. "It's a lot simpler, and you don't have the fate of millions of Cirrans hanging over your head."

Silver Sword raised a hoof in assent. "True, but I have to get my hooves bloody quite often—and not in the metaphorical sense, either." Flinging the snowball hard against the

pillar, the Emperor let loose a disappointed sigh. “And speaking of which, I have prisoners I’m supposed to interrogate. They’re from Magnus’ southern army group, taken in our last counterattack.”

Rising to her hooves, Swift Spear arched her back and stretched her sore wings. “And I have a meeting with the rest of the Praetorian to attend. We’ll be discussing the distribution of our remaining rations for the next three months. Fun stuff,” she added with a sarcastic breath.

There was a groaning of a massive weight on old hinges, and the chamber doors swung open. A senator clad in golden bands around his neck and forelegs stuck his head out of the door and looked at Hurricane expectantly. With a sigh, the Emperor lifted himself off the snowy ground and shook the white flakes out of his coat.

“Duty calls,” Hurricane remarked, the cynicism unmistakable in his voice. Waving a wing to his dispersing companions, he began to trot into the doorway. “I’ll catch up with you guys at lunch then.”

His friends both nodded in agreement as they vacated the area. The doors then swung shut behind them, abandoning the outside to the howl of the wintery winds and their icy ferocity.

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“I’m not going to ask you again. What is Magnus’ next objective in the south?” Silver Sword looked over the bored hoof he was resting against his chin at the miserable creature before him. Beaten and bloody, a brown griffon sat hunched over and gasping for breath in the chair it was bound to. Blood poured from numerous cuts along its face, dripping past a swollen eye and a fractured beak to where it pooled below him.

Receiving no response, Silver flicked his tail and turned away. There was a cry of pain as a Praetorian delivered a solid blow to the griffon’s chest. As Silver let his soldiers soften the target for his interrogation, he scratched at a piece of the dungeon wall. Half an inch of thick brown and black grime coated the cloudstone walls, falling away in a filthy mess where Silver’s hoof passed. That there were no white walls in a dungeon made entirely of cloudstone was an impressive testimony to everything that it had witnessed.

A strangled laugh brought Silver Sword’s focus back to the task at hand. The griffon’s shoulders were heaving in its twisted pleasure, and the two Praetorians stepped back to

allow Silver to advance. The griffon spat out a dagger of a tooth and locked its enemy in its gaze.

“Then stop asking, pony. If I have not answered you by now, what makes you think that I ever will? You just give me something to focus on in between periods of boredom. Now, can we move on with it, or shall we continue beating around the bush?” A crooked smile filled the griffon’s face, and it spat a glob of blood onto Silver’s coat.

Inhaling slowly, Silver wiped the blood off of his shoulder and made as if to walk away. The prisoner began to laugh again, but couldn’t enjoy its pleasure for long. There was a sharp crack, and the steel pegasus smashed both of his rear hooves into the griffon’s beak. Splinters of bone and keratin flung themselves about the room, and the griffon howled in agony through the remains of its bill.

“Bring in the next one.” One of the Praetorian nodded and left the room. The prisoner’s screams had lessened, but its bloody tongue still felt around the sharp stubs of its mandibles. The Praetorian returned with another struggling griffon in tow and bound it to the seat across from the first battered prisoner.

“Gunther? Was haben sie getan, um Ihren Schnabel?” Unable to get a response from his agonized friend, the second griffon turned its wild eyes to the three pegasi in the room.

Silver placed a hoof on the griffon’s shoulder and spoke softly. “Sprechen Sie Cirran?” The griffon scowled at the pegasus, but his eyes fell towards his friend again. There was a flash of anxiety in his eyes, and he gulped nervously. Silver saw it, and nodded his head towards the griffon known as Gunther. The message was clear.

“Ja, wenig. I-Ich weiss genug, um durchzukommen.” Silver raised an eyebrow, and the griffon took a breath as it tried to piece its words together in the Cirran tongue. “I know... little. Enough to... get by?” This time Silver Sword nodded and released his grip on the griffon’s shoulder without doing any harm. The prisoner released a breath of relief.

“Good. That will do. Now, first things first. You were part of Magnus’ Army Group South, or am I mistaken?” Silver paced around the prisoner as he waited for an answer. It came as barely a whisper.

“Ja.”

“Speak up. You have nothing to hide from us...?”

The griffon bit its tongue before deciding that the inquiry was harmless. “Jens. Ich heisse Jens.”

Silver nodded and bent down to Jens’ level. “Jens. Nice name, rolls off of the tongue smoothly. Now, Jens, you were part of the southern army group, operating in the Procella-Nix region, am I correct?”

“Ja. We were Third Army, Eight Division. Nineteenth regiment, seventh—” Jens’ response was cut off by Silver waving a hoof in front of his face.

“We have the information from when you were first tallied. But, since you are from the Third Army, perhaps you can answer my other questions?” Silver raised the pitch of his voice into what he hoped was an agreeable tone to griffon ears.

Gunther began shaking his head, but a punch from a Praetorian silenced his actions. Jens glanced nervously from pegasus to pegasus, then nodded.

A slight smile appeared on Silver’s lips. “Good. Your cooperation will be noted in your file. First, let’s start with something objective. How many soldiers make up Army Group South?”

Jens averted his eyes, instead choosing to focus on the floor and mumble a string of gibberish. Silver Sword slammed a hoof against the gritty cloudstone floor as a warning. This elicited a more concrete reply from the griffon. “Methinks one hundred und fifty thousand. I had no access to roster in army.” There was a scribbling of a quill against parchment from somewhere behind Jens, but the griffon was unable to turn his head and locate the source.

“Good. And your army, it was fully rationed and well-equipped?”

Gunther was glaring at Jens, but the skittish griffon answered anyway. “Ja.”

“Describe the resistance you encountered by Cirran forces in your advance.”

“Fierce at first. Cost us many griffons to advance. Crossing over plains was worst. Seventy thousand dead that day. Many more wounded. After that, not so fierce. Cirrans retreat within hour of engagement. Twenty thousand lost next three hundred miles. Procella surrender without fight.” His response was met with more scratching of pen against paper.

Silver wasn't sure whether to be pleased or angry with the news he was hearing. Jens had revealed that the griffon horde in the south was smaller than previously thought, but he also revealed that the Cirran officers in the south were giving up too easily. No wonder the griffon advance had been so swift; the Cirran legions weren't fighting.

There was still the pressing question to attend to. Silver Sword squatted down and removed his helmet in the hopes of disarming his appearance. The good cop routine was working so far with Jens, and there wasn't yet a need to change to bad cop. "What was your army's next target?"

Jens hesitated but opened his mouth to speak. He was interrupted by a frantic shrieking from Gunther, who was spitting his words out through his broken beak. "Sagen Sie ihnen nicht, sagen Sie nicht ein Wort! Sie wissen, was Magnus zu Verrätern macht!" Silver snapped his head up angrily and swished his tail to the side. One of the Praetorians removed Gunther from his seat and dragged him out of the door. The griffon continued to struggle and scream after he was removed from the room, and then the noise stopped. The Praetorian returned, a new shade of crimson added to his coat and armor.

That color was all Jens could focus on. His heart rate was climbing and his breathing was quickening. The sweat was pouring through the feathers along his head and neck, even in the frigid dungeon. Silver began to pace before him, his friendly demeanor gone.

"Now that we are rid of distractions, I will ask you again. Where was your army heading to? Think carefully before you respond." A flick of Silver's wing loosened the strap on his blade, an action that did not escape Jens' attention. The pegasus writing down the information behind him was almost caught unprepared for the flood of information coming his way.

"We press west, strike at small towns! Captain said we need destroy Cirran food supply, bring defenders to knees! Spread remaining defenders thin, wear them down for later assault! We—!"

Silver Sword placed a hoof on Jens' shoulder and stopped him. "Towns. I need the names and when you were going to strike."

"The attacks began today at sunrise. I d-don't know all the names, but my regiment attack town named Zephyrus!" His interrogator stood up abruptly, and he began to panic that he had said something wrong.



Instead, Silver walked a few steps away from his prisoner and towards the pony taking notes. “Did you get all that?” There was an affirmative grunt, and Silver looked back over his shoulder to the trembling griffon. His words were low and carefully measured, if a bit distracted. “Take him back to his cell. There are matters I must attend to. Hurricane needs to know...”

Without warning, Silver galloped through the halls and out of the dungeon, soft flutters of his wings accompanying the clapping of his hooves against the cloudstone as he struggled to put on additional speed. There was no time to lose. Every second he wasted here was another that Zephyrus was in danger.

He just hoped he wasn't too late.

• • •

The fact that Cirra was barely functioning was hammered into the minds of every pegasus in the senate, time after time in statement after statement. The Empire's coffers had been emptied, food shortages were crippling every remaining part of the nation, and the draft had to be expanded again. The Legion was having severe difficulty in acquiring armor and weapons for its new recruits, iron shipments had slowed to a trickle, and critical economic sectors were beginning to shut down. There had even been a series of violent riots in Nix that nearly brought the city to its knees with the griffons on its doorstep. If the griffons didn't take down the Empire, the reports gave the once proud nation only three months before it completely descended into anarchy.

The Senate was afraid, and even with the fear-induced passing of legislation to try and avert the looming crisis the nation was only accelerating towards its collapse. Rumors about griffon treatment of political prisoners circulated widely, and an increasing number of senators were absent from all but the most essential meetings. Many had begun carrying a short blade around their necks, not for defense, but as the means for a final release.

Hurricane had hoped that by taking deliberate stands on issues he would be able to rally the jittery politicians around him, but even that plan was falling apart. The Emperor commonly found himself on one side of issues opposing a small knot of the eldest senators, while the remaining body of lawmakers passed between them like a flock of sheep with two shepherds. Unless Hurricane agreed with the policies of the senior group, it was impossible to get anything done.

One bad event followed another. While Hurricane and the leading senators were discussing the intricacies of accelerated training for draftees, the meeting was interrupted by a winded pegasus smashing through the chamber doors. The senators rose in alarm, and Hurricane sprinted to see what the problem was.

He was surprised to find Silver Sword stumbling off of the snow drifts and struggling to put his bloody armor back on. At first thinking that his friend had been attacked, Hurricane pulled Silver to his hooves and supported him.

“Silver?! What happened out there? Are you hurt?”

Silver flipped his helmet back onto his head and shook it. He brushed off a few bloody griffon feathers to remind Hurricane where he had been as he recollected his breath. Deciding that he could wait no longer, the Emperor gripped his friend’s shoulders in worry.

“Griffons... Zephyrus... we have to...”

Hurricane didn’t wait to hear anymore. He nodded to Silver and escorted him out the door, pausing only long enough to make sure that he got into the air. Flaring his massive, black wings, Hurricane allowed the wintery gusts to accelerate him into the sky and begin the trek to the south. Carrying only his ceremonial armor and a short sword, he briefly considered stopping to properly arm himself but decided against it. Time was of the absolute essence.

The ever present contingent of guards managed to catch up to Hurricane to argue otherwise. “Sir, shouldn’t you wear your armor? There could still be griffons about!”

Hurricane merely accelerated in response. “No time! My family is there, I need to save them!” As more guards took off after the Emperor, Hurricane focused all his energy into speed and efficiency. “Keep up if you can, but I’m not turning back!”

Swift Spear and Silver both managed to pull alongside Hurricane before the edge of the city limits, and together the three flew towards Zephyrus. How reliable the prisoner was who gave Silver Sword the information was inconsequential to Hurricane. He needed to see, he needed to know, and there wasn’t any time to think about the possibilities.

The distant southern horizon was darker than usual, and carried with it a tinge of red against the gray, winter noon.

• • •

When his family had left Stratopolis over a month ago, it was only after Hurricane spent the better part of an hour trying to convince them to stay. They would be safer in the palace with him, and he couldn't bear the thought of being separated again. But there were duties and obligations even his own family had to fulfill.

Zephyrus' mayor had resigned to join the fight a week before Thunder Gale and his family visited Stratopolis, and the town council had unanimously elected the old stallion to take up the mantle. The former commander was responsible for organizing what little means of defense Zephyrus had, which he admitted to Hurricane amounted to little more than an early warning system. Coupled with the fact that his flight was limited, making life in an airborne city either dangerous or secluded, and there was little that Thunder Gale could have done to stay in Stratopolis, as much as he wanted to.

Naturally, Raincloud and Twister had escorted their father home, and it was with a heavy heart that Hurricane had watched his family leave. They exchanged daily correspondence, but that was nothing compared to being in each others' presence. Hurricane had promised to visit Zephyrus as much as he could, but the daily duties of an emperor left little time for such a journey. Now he finally had his chance, but under much darker circumstances.

Hurricane could smell Zephyrus long before he saw it. Even through the frozen clouds that bit at his ears and nose, the stench of burning wood and wheat was profound. Visibility was abysmal in the gray afternoon, but the sudden appearance of a warm updraft told Hurricane he was above the town. Folding his wings, he descended in a steep nosedive through the cloud layer.

When Hurricane punched through the smoke above the town, he was barely fifty feet over the ground. Striking his wings out sharply to the sides, he managed to marginally soften his impact on the snowy streets before sliding into the side of a building. He immediately recoiled from the burning surface, collapsing onto a snow drift as the rest of his contingent landed around him.

"Zephyrus..." Silver Sword whispered above the crackling of flames. "No, oh Gods no."

They had descended in the middle of town square, essentially falling through the center of a ring of fire. Every building lining the square was engulfed in flames, coughing smoke through warped and shattered windows. Balconies on the larger houses began to collapse as the fire ate away at their supports, and even the Cirran flag in the middle of the square was ablaze in a brilliant orange light.

Hurricane scrambled onto his hooves and began running through the burning streets towards the distant hills where his house was situated. Ponies were screaming in terror as they galloped past him, too panicked to take to the air. There were bloody and burnt equine bodies lying against buildings or in the middle of the street. They were all pegasi that Hurricane recognized, faces that he had seen his entire life, but he could not stop to help them.

Breaking past the edge of town, Hurricane and Silver Sword slid to a stop. Their jaws hung open and wings flared to their sides, stunned. In their minds they hadn't expected anything different, but their hearts had yet to accept what they knew was coming. Now they had no choice but to look in disbelieving awe at what lay before them.

Everything was burning. The fields Hurricane had plowed for years stood like a scalding blister on the surface of the earth. The tree he had often napped under had been turned into an unholy torch. Even the barn vomited flames through unnatural holes in its roofing, and as the pair of Zephyrians watched, its walls began to collapse in upon themselves. Silver Sword then turned his attention to a neighboring farmhouse caught in a similar state of destruction.

They were speechless. Both their homes were destroyed and burning. Placing a hoof on Silver's shoulder, Hurricane pointed to the steel stallion's home. "Go." Silver Sword nodded and immediately took flight, disappearing into the haze in the air. Hurricane then turned to address his guards.

"Sweep the area for any more griffons, then help out whoever you can." He gulped nervously and began to spread his wings. "I need to see... I need to know..."

The Praetorians nodded and separated out of a combination of obedience and respect for their emperor. Only Swift Spear was left with Hurricane as they flew towards his homestead. Every agonizing wing stroke put him closer and closer to the only home he had known, miraculously untouched by the fire. That didn't mean it was free from harm however, as Hurricane saw the front door bashed in and shattered into a dozen fragments.

"Dad! Mom! Twister!?" The stallion couldn't bring himself to step through the doorframe, instead hoping that his family members would come out to greet him, completely free of harm. Such delusions were short lived, and Hurricane took unsteady steps into his home for the first time in nine months.

The interior was in shambles. The dining table had been flipped and split, and shattered planks from the chairs were strewn about the kitchen. The cabinets had been ripped apart and the cupboard was a mangled skeleton of its former self. Utensils and knives—some bloody—made the floor hazardous to walk upon.

The living room was no better. All the windows had been kicked out and the picture frames would serve better as kindling than holding portraits. What little furniture there was had been disemboweled and hacked apart. Blood and feathers defiled the carpet.

Hurricane couldn't find the energy to speak. He fell to his knees in the doorway, despair written across his face. It was all he could do to not bawl like a foal there and then.

Swift paused to let Hurricane have his space, then began a more productive search of the house. Entering the living room, she flipped over one of the gutted couches. Her brow rose noticeably in surprise, and she motioned for Hurricane to come over. Reluctantly, the black pegasus approached her.

“Griffon. Very professional kill, if somewhat crude.” She pointed towards the fork lodged perfectly in the center of the griffon soldier's throat. The dead warrior's face still bore an expression of shock, as if he hadn't been expecting his killer to dispatch him so suddenly and so violently. There was even a piece of lettuce still clinging to the prongs of the utensil.

The sight instilled a new resolve in Hurricane. If his family had fought back, there was a chance they could still be alive somewhere. There were only a few more rooms in the house to check anyways.

“Mom! Dad! Twister!” Hurricane shouted again as he stuck his head in different rooms. A shriek of pain from down the hall perked Hurricane's ears. Turning about, he slid into the hallway and sprinted towards his parents' room. He nearly tripped on another griffon body before he smashed the door open.

The lack of carnage in the other two rooms was doubly repaid for here. Portraits were smashed, bookshelves were flipped over, and the windows were broken out. The bed had been torn apart, the feathers from the pillows scattered across the room. Even Thunder Gale's armor lay in pieces away from its stand. The notched sword Thunder kept above his bed was impaled in the wall, the hilt dripping blood. Griffon bodies dotted the room.

This mattered little to Hurricane. His attention was drawn to the three figures in the room he recognized. Two of them were slouched against the wall, while the other still stood. A rather large griffon corpse separated them.

“Twister!” Hurricane nearly tackled his sister as he rushed to embrace her. The beginnings of tears were starting to fall down his face as he wrapped his neck over her shoulder. She was shaking violently, and her beautiful golden eyes were red and swollen from her own sobs.

“H-Hurricane... you came...” A bloody knife clattered to the ground as she spoke. Her brown coat was matted with blood and sticky feathers, none which was her own. “Mom... D-dad...” She descended into another wave of weeping before she could continue.

Hurricane had been so elated to see his sister alive that he had overlooked his parents. Raincloud’s gray head lay across Thunder Gale’s chest, a trickle of blood leaving the corner of her mouth. Deep gashes from claw and beak wounds decorated her chest and neck, each dripping a profuse amount of blood. Her chest and eyelids were still.

Thunder Gale was decidedly worse off. He still had enough energy left in his body to gently stroke his wife’s mane, but it was rapidly leaving his body. More wounds covered his entire coat, and the scar along his left side had been ripped open again. Not one or two, but four daggers were stuck in his chest, the hilts covered in glistening blood. For the first time, Hurricane noticed a pair of graying wings laying against the far wall.

“No...” Gently releasing his grasp on Twister, Hurricane knelt down beside his father. He reached out a hoof to touch Raincloud’s head, to feel the face that had kissed him goodnight through his entire colthood. It was already hauntingly cold. Thunder Gale’s glassy eyes slid to hold Hurricane in their focus.

“I’m... so sorry...” Thunder grunted as he released his raspy breaths. The blood around the daggers was bubbling with the air that escaped his lungs. The old stallion hacked once or twice, scattering large drops of blood and saliva across the floor. It was only with great difficulty that he could even keep his body in an upright position.

“Dad, I’m sorry, I should have been here, I should have done something! How could I not see this coming?!” The thought of pressing a dagger to his own neck crossed Hurricane’s mind in his frenzy, but the thought was quickly shunted away.

“Hurricane... son... don’t blame yourself. There was nothing... gah!... you could have done.” The stubs where Thunder’s wings used to be twitched in agony as another

haggard cough wracked his body. Hurricane heard shuddering breaths from behind him, and wrapped a foreleg around Twister's neck. The poor filly was locking up in shock, and the simple action was all Hurricane could do to try and help her.

"How many?" Hurricane was desperate for information to haunt his mind in his sleep. He shouldn't have let this happen; he shouldn't have left them to die.

"Five. A sergeant and his squad. I knew they were coming... I got one with my fork as soon as they entered the house. The surprise was barely enough time for Raincloud and Twist to get to my room... I tried to hold them off as long as I could, but they drove me back... Killed all but the sergeant with my sword before he de-winged me. Had fun stabbing me to death, but when your mother tried to stop him..." Thunder's eyes squeezed shut and his jaw locked in pain. "He killed her. It was... quick. Painless. She died instantly."

The wounds around Raincloud's neck and shoulders suggested otherwise, but there was no reason in arguing about it.

Thunder Gale's shaky hoof had come to a rest on the gray mare's neck as he lost the energy to move it. The paralysis of death was creeping over his body; it would soon reach his lungs and the unnatural wounds that lacerated them. There was precious little time left for Hurricane and his father.

Coughing painfully, Thunder Gale began to speak again. "Twister finished him off though... grabbed a Gryphon dagger lying on the floor... I've never been more proud of her resolve than today, regardless of what she thinks of herself. I'm proud, proud of both my children." He laughed nostalgically, despite wincing in pain again. "I remember when you two were just foals... sure you got in fights and all, but deep down, you loved each other. You did everything together, no matter how much at times you pretended to hate one another. I'm glad to have watched that kindred spirit blossom in the waning years of my life. Hurricane," the young stallion's ears perked up at the sound of his name, "she probably won't tell you this, but every day while you were gone, Twist would sit at the eastern window and wait. She didn't speak, she didn't move, she just waited. She was waiting for you to come home, waiting to see her big brother again."

Hurricane felt the tears coming, and with a few snuffles managed to suppress them for the time being. Twister was still lost in thought, having retreated deep within herself. Hurricane hugged her closer, hoping that his warmth would be able to penetrate her shell.

A weak smile formed at Thunder Gale's lips. "And then you became emperor. She was so excited, she couldn't wait to fly up and see you. Her enthusiasm alone pulled the cart for the better half of the journey." The smile quickly faded from the old stallion's face, and the light in his eyes began to dim. "You're a fine stallion, my boy. No matter what happens, Cirra will be better with you at the helm." Thunder unceremoniously grunted as his body began to lean to the side, and Hurricane rushed forward to steady him.

"Dad, please, don't go! Don't leave me!" Hurricane was sobbing now, the tears openly streaming down his face.

A final twinkle manifested in Thunder Gale's dying eyes. With a final, drawn-out breath, he spoke his final words: "You did good, son. I'm proud of you. Know that you'll never be alone. The two brightest stars at night burn for you and you alone. May you look to them in times of trouble... and know that we are there..."

Hurricane's black hooves blurred in his teary vision. Thunder Gale's eyes fluttered shut, and his breaths had slowed to almost nothing. "No, you don't have to go! You don't..."

"Goodbye... my son."

The old stallion's head supported its own weight for a second longer, but no more. With a final bob of fate, Thunder Gale's soul was allowed to escape from its ruined body and join the Great Skies above.

"Goodbye... father..."

There was no strength left in Hurricane's limbs. His knees gave out beneath him, and he collapsed onto the bloody bodies of his parents. There he lay, his heart in pieces and his mind in agony, whimpering quietly.

A gentle hoof tapped him on the shoulder. Reluctantly, he took it and allowed himself to be hauled off the ground. Swift Spear looked into Hurricane's eyes, searching for the essence of the resilience that was such an integral part of the stallion she loved. Hurricane sought for it as well, and collecting his breath, he nodded slowly to the mare.

Bending down, Hurricane lifted Twister's head and wiped a tear from her eye. She managed to focus on Hurricane and throw herself into his outstretched forelegs. She cried over his shoulder, finally finding the strength to formulate words.

"Why? Why, Cane, why?" Her golden irises sought for the answer in his magenta eyes, unable to stem the flow of tears.



Hurricane thought back to the words a dying stallion had once used to console a friend as he lay in a pool of his own blood deep underground. “Because he did it for us. Because he loved us. He would rather die as he did than see us hurt in any way. And I would too, for you.”

Twister nodded, hearing the truth in his words. “What happened to us, Hurricane? What happened to the two happy pegasi whose biggest worry was whether or not we’d get our work done in time to head to town together?”

He had no answer.

The filly acknowledged Hurricane’s silence with a short exhalation. Releasing herself from Hurricane’s grasp, she bent over and began to hoist her mother’s body onto her back. Swift Spear offered to help, but Twister silently rejected it. She had to do this alone.

Hurricane followed his sister’s example and picked up Thunder Gale’s body. Together, the two of them left the house—the house they had lived in for their entire lives—for the last time.

They found a stretch of clear land on a hill overlooking the village. The flames had been extinguished with assistance from the Praetorians, but the smoke still polluted the skies. Hurricane remembered just how cold it was outside as he gently set his father’s body down on the dry grasses. Swift Spear deposited Thunder Gale’s wings by his sides, and Hurricane nodded to her gratefully.

There was a single shovel that escaped the destruction of the homestead, and Hurricane gripped the rusty handle in his mouth. The shovel scraped aside the dirt with ease—their farmland had always been one of the most fertile in the Empire—and soon Hurricane had dug a wide grave. Twister gave her parents one last hug, and Hurricane kissed his mother’s forehead before lowering her into the grave alongside Thunder Gale. Together, he and Twister pushed the dirt back into the grave.

A suitable headstone was found, and Hurricane drove it into the dirt at the head of the grave. He didn’t have a chisel, so he delicately carved out an epitaph with the tip of his sword. When he was finished, he stood back and wrapped Twister under his wing as she began to sniffle again.

The sun made a brief and fiery appearance in the western horizon behind them. One by one, the Praetorian returned and formed up around their Emperor. Silver Sword

returned shortly afterwards, his own hooves stained with dust and earth. Nothing needed to be said between the two stallions.

When his company was assembled, Hurricane gave his father a crisp salute, his lips trembling as he fought back tears. It was the finest salute he had ever delivered; not even Haysar had received a more disciplined action. It was fitting that it be given to the greatest stallion he had ever known. Thunder Gale's old sword was then planted into the ground by the tombstone.

There was nothing left for Hurricane and Silver Sword in Zephyrus. They each accrued a small bundle of possessions from their households, and then Hurricane sparked a fire of his own doing. Within seconds his old home was ablaze, and he and Twister watched it burn silently. They would never use it again; it was best to take it down by their own doing in their own memory than let the wrath of time prolong the house and its suffering.

As the sun descended, the pegasi from Stratopolis flew to the north with one additional member. The former town of Zephyrus was left behind them in its misery. All the buildings had been destroyed; it was no longer capable of supporting life.

As the shadows finally overtook the land, the sun struck at one last body of stone, a memorial that would stand as an oracle to all who would come after. The short message was roughly carved onto its face, but carved deep so it would survive the tests of time:

*Here lies Thunder Gale and Raincloud  
Father and Mother of Twister and of Hurricane, Twenty-fourth Emperor of Cirra.  
Look on these lands and know that they died not for them, but for those they loved.  
Twenty-Eighth of Long Night, Year Four Hundred After Empire.*

*The emperor's life is a sad life, consumed only with loss and toil and regret. Power is not a blessing, but a curse; everything that goes wrong is our fault. Only death releases us.*

—Parchment found amongst Hurricane's belongings.  
Dated 10th Shivering Rains, 401 After Empire

The coldest day in recorded history. That was what the so-called experts were claiming. The storm system that had dominated the past month had finally reached a pause, and instead of rain it imparted thin flakes of snow in the late winter. The mercury had dipped to the single digits and was even threatening the negatives.

A lone figure sat on the balcony high above his city. The frost clung to his black feathers, and a beard of frozen moisture surrounded his snout. The pegasus' body did not move, and the dim morning sun glinted off of the wreath of gold feathers around his head. The only sign that the stallion was alive were the regular bursts of vapor his nostrils produced.

The cold did not penetrate Hurricane's coat, no matter how much he wished it did. The struggles of being the emperor of a dying nation were eating away at his soul. His wings hadn't been preened in days, and the short fur of his black coat was matted and in desperate need of a good grooming. His bloodshot eyes watched the east, willing the sun to return to its nest.

It had been just over a month since Zephyrus was razed, but Hurricane knew the images would never leave his mind. Since then, Cirra had all but collapsed. There was no money and no food left to keep the nation running. Desertion was frighteningly high among the Cirran 1st Legion, the most disciplined of all of Cirra's armies and the last standing legion. Cumula had been sacked and razed by the griffon hordes, and Nix had succumbed to a violent riot that left the city burning long before the griffons showed up to finish the job. There was nothing left of Cirra except Stratopolis and whatever small towns separated it from the coast.

And there was nothing Hurricane could do about it. That was what bit him the most; that whatever he did, none of it seemed to matter. He had pulled troops back to save them for later battles; he had sent them back to the front in a desperate counterattack against the Gryphon armies to delay their advance; he had even signed bills allowing the Legion to draft anypony and everypony into its dwindling ranks to stop the advance of

the hordes. With a lack of iron to make swords and armor from, however, even that measure was restricted in usefulness.

Therefore Hurricane started watching the sunrise every morning in the frigid atmosphere. It was the one thing in his life he could always count on, and one of his few remaining anchors to the mortal world. The star's determination to rise each morning regardless of what had happened the previous night gave Hurricane the strength to do the same. Without it, there wasn't anything else that could have the same effect.

He heard the door to his balcony open and close gently. The scent was very familiar to him, and a brief smile touched his lips. Maybe there were a few other things that could give him the strength to carry on. And two had just stepped onto the balcony to join him.

"Good morning, Hurricane." Swift Spear brushed away some of the snow with her tail and sat down next to him. She planted her head on his shoulder, and he returned the connection by wrapping a wing around her back. He allowed her warmth to defrost his coat and feathers.

"Hmm. Yes." While the morning wasn't exactly good in Hurricane's opinion, there was no sense in starting the day off on the wrong hoof. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, taking the time to admire the barely noticeable bump below her stomach. Swift was already over two months into her pregnancy, though they had only found out a week ago. The mare noticed where Hurricane was looking, and she too smiled.

If it wasn't for Hurricane's friends and surviving family, he would have taken his own life after Zephyrus was destroyed. They gave his life purpose, and that was all he had to cling onto as the world fell around him. He would not die until Twister and Swift Spear and his unborn foal were safe, and he would not leave Silver Sword until the end, whenever it came.

His dreams were still haunted with the faces of his parents. He had stopped blaming himself, but he wished he had spent more time with them. Ever since he left Zephyrus to go to Fort Updraft and begin his Legionnaire training, he had only seen them for what amounted to little more than two days. They didn't know they would have a grandchild, and Hurricane would never see the pure joy on his mother's face when he told her, or the silent pride his father would carry with him as he stood off to the side and watched them. Those moments would have to wither away in the realm of what could have been.

There was so much that could have been. Hurricane and Swift Spear could have lived a peaceful and quiet life in Zephyrus, away from the problems of the larger cities or the

border. His parents could have seen their first grandchild. Twister could have married and had children of her own. But war had dashed all those hopes and dreams.

He kissed Swift's forehead again as she happily closed her eyes. They had never gotten married in an official ceremony, and it was likely that they never would. Hurricane was too busy trying to hold onto whatever pieces of his dying nation he could, and Swift was busy executing plans with the Praetorian. There were no resources left to hold a wedding ceremony or the lavish feast that came with it. A simple exchange of vows with Silver Sword as witness had had to suffice for the young couple.

Swift gently fluttered her wings against the cold, and Hurricane was given a glimpse of the golden band around the base of her left wing. He could feel his own band around his left wing as well, snug but not too tight against the arm. It was with great difficulty that Hurricane had been able to procure wedding rings for Swift Spear and himself, but at length he had succeeded.

There was a gentle rapping on the window panes behind them, and a sigh escaped in the form of a steamy exhalation from Hurricane's lungs. How he wished he could return to the days when his responsibilities were limited to his family and his chores. But as pointless a struggle as his was to try and lead a broken Cirra, he had no choice. The continuation of the emperor and the Senate was the only thing that the surviving Cirrans had left. If that were broken, they were already defeated.

With a gentle push, Hurricane helped Swift Spear to her hooves. They both had busy days ahead of them, although those days were limited. They might as well give them their best and hope that something of their legacy will be left for the future generations.

If there would be any future generations to come.

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"...and the north is cut off as well." Silver Sword knocked over a blue flag twenty miles to the north of Stratopolis and replaced it with a red block. Hurricane spread his hooves across the edge of the table and released a pensive breath. That breath quickly transformed into a frustrated hiss of air between teeth as he placed a hoof on the map.

Three blue flags and one large blue block were clustered on the western edge of the map amidst an ocean of red. There were five red blocks surrounding Stratopolis itself, and a forest of white flags dominated the middle of the map before transitioning to red. The sight made Hurricane sick to his stomach.

“Magnus is obviously going to encircle and crush Stratopolis. That push to the north is just the start of it. I’d expect a prong from the south before nightfall.” Hurricane placed his hoof over the blue block, but there was little he could do with it. In the end, he simply left the First Legion garrisoned in Stratopolis like it had been since the start of the war. “I need numbers.”

Silver Sword nodded and pulled a scroll out of a pile. He unfurled it and traced a hoof to a heavily annotated and studied section. “The Legate doesn’t have a firm grasp on the numbers, but he suspects twenty-five percent of his soldiers have deserted. Morale is abysmal, and fights are becoming more common. A quarter of Updraft was burned down just last night, and the culprits are suspected to be among the deserters.” Silver placed the scroll to the side and took off his helmet to study his haggard reflection. “The Legion has all but given up. I really wish we could just surrender at this stage, but...” The Emperor’s words trailed off as he recalled the griffons’ response to Hurricane’s offer.

“And I doubt they’ll be as generous with us as they were with him.” Hurricane was just glad that Twister wasn’t there when the pegasus messenger returned—or, rather, was discovered. His wings and legs had been removed from his body with brute force, and the tattered white truce flag he had carried with him was stood erect amongst a pile of ravaged organs in his hollowed-out chest. Magnus’ personal seal adorned what was left of the Hurricane’s offer. The pegasus had not been able to eat for two days after seeing such an example of griffon brutality.

Silver Sword’s coat adopted a slight shade of green as he dwelt on the topic. “Yeah. Hmmp,” Silver Sword set his helmet on the ground and walked over to the window. “If you look through the clouds you can see the griffon camps. They’re that close already.”

The news was another weight for Hurricane to carry on his already encumbered shoulders. He shifted a few blocks around on the map before sitting back wearily. “Tomorrow at dawn.”

The steel pegasus turned and raised an eyebrow.

Hurricane gripped a quill in his mouth and scratched out a few orders on a scroll. “Magnus isn’t one to wait. He’s quick to act, and borderline impulsive. His generals help temper that impulsiveness, but that isn’t going to matter now. His prize is in sight, and the only reason he’s not attacking now is because he has to wait for his armies to get in position. By nightfall they’ll be ready.” Hurricane rolled up the scroll and stamped it before extending it to Silver Sword. “Tomorrow at dawn.”

The Emperor grabbed the scroll and read the summons order before sticking it into his saddlebag. "I see. I'll assemble the soldiers." Saluting, Silver Sword gathered his belongings and left the room.

It was another five minutes before Hurricane moved from his seat. There was one scroll in particular he had received earlier in the day but had been hesitant to open. It was stamped with the seal of the Cirran 1st Legion, 7th Regiment, 30th Platoon. The very same platoon that he had sent on a reconnaissance mission to the west three months prior.

Balancing the scroll between his hooves, Hurricane took a slow breath. The information in this scroll would likely determine Cirra's future. The hammer was already swinging at the final stronghold of the Empire, and there was no way to avert it. Hurricane hoped that the report would contain a way out.

There was a light snap as the wax seal was broken. Hurricane steeled himself as he began to read the first of the scribbled lines:

*A report on the expedition to the western lands.  
5th of Shivering Rains, Year Four Hundred and One After Empire.*

*On the 10th of Bare Trees, my platoon was assigned the task of locating and exploring lands across the ocean to the west of Cirra. Stocking up on food and supplies, my platoon embarked on this journey on the 13th of Bare Trees, Year Four Hundred After Empire. At the time, we had no idea how far we would have to travel to find these distant shores, if they even existed. There was much debate amongst the soldiers as to when we would have to draw the line to turn back.*

*For the first week of the journey, there was nothing but calm seas and a steady tailwind to hasten our progress. Clouds were plentiful over the ocean, and the platoon was able to rest comfortably at night upon their surfaces. Our biggest concern, however, was rationing the limited food and water we had brought with us, as there was little we could do to acquire sustenance in our trek. By the tenth day, the soldiers were losing heart in the crossing and began to insist that we turn back.*

*Despite their complaints, I continued to drive my platoon onwards, and my stubbornness paid off in the end; on the 25th of Bare Trees, Legionnaire Hazel Hoof sighted land on the western horizon. With several additional hours of flight, we were able to plant our hooves on solid ground for the first time in twelve days.*

*While the platoon was busy gathering food and materials to construct a camp, I was able to explore and make some observations about the land which we found ourselves in. First and foremost, the climate was relatively similar to ours at the time; the weather was cold, being in the winter months, but habitable. The abundance of trees and plants of every kind leads me to believe that the soil is fertile in the spring and summer months. There was little to recommend in animal life for consumption.*

*On the eve of the New Year, one of our scouts discovered traces of civilization in the form of an abandoned campsite. Investigating, I concluded that the site was not more than two days old, and that a good number of equines had rested there, judging by the hoofprints in the thin snow. Spreading my soldiers out, we searched every corner of the sky for these mysterious natives. My eyes were so focused on the sky that I did not search the ground at that time.*

*After several hours of searching, our platoon found no trace of the mysterious campers, despite covering close to a hundred square miles of sky. The foliage of the trees was so thick that we knew pegasi wouldn't bother attempting to fly through it. That was why we did not find anything that day, or in repeated searches since.*

*Our orders were to find land, determine its survivability, and return to Cirra immediately, but I could not let something like this remain unanswered. Perhaps ten days after the first evidence of civilization, my intuition led me and a small group of my most trusted Legionnaires to the south-southwest. Luck would be with us that day, for we discovered a settlement at the edge of the forest.*

*My soldiers were eager to descend and investigate, but my caution led us to stay in the skies and watch. We pushed several cumulus clouds together to form an observatory, and there we waited. The cloud mass was large and immobile, enough so that any pegasus would have noticed its unnatural lack of movement and investigate of their own accord.*

*That was why I was surprised when after an hour, no interest in our presence had been noted. I could see colorful figures, most assuredly equine in nature, trotting through the streets of their town and the fields that they worked, but never once did I see one take off, or take the time to observe the sky for that matter. Deciding for a more direct approach, I descended my platoon towards the center of town.*

*Our appearance caused quite a stir among the townsfolk. After initially recoiling in fear from our sudden descent and our armed countenance, they began to draw closer in interest after realizing we displayed no hostility. It was then that I noticed that none of these ponies had wings. Shortly thereafter I also noticed that their tongue was very close to New Cirran,*



*as if they were two dialects of the same language. Needless to say, this made communication much easier between our two parties.*

*It so happened that the leader of the 'Earth Ponies', as they referred to themselves, was about to meet with an important leader of a neighboring pony tribe known as the 'Unicorns'. I had the opportunity to talk with the earth pony leader, Chancellor Muffintop (an odd name in my opinion, but many of the earth ponies I conversed with possessed names based off of food items) and his son, a colt named Baron Puddinghead. I learned that the earth ponies produced food for themselves and the unicorns, and were in fact so adept at it that they could grow small amounts of food even in the dead of winter, when our farms would be shut down.*

*While the earth ponies were a relatively silly and harmless group of equines, the unicorns commanded a fair deal of my respect. Their monarch, King Lapis, was a mighty, blue-coated creature with a long horn protruding from his forehead. He was accompanied by a contingent of unicorn Honor Guards, not unlike the Praetorian Guard in manner. His young daughter Platinum stayed glued to his side with a childish air of superiority instilled from years of catering and spoiling from her many servants and nannies.*

*What was interesting to note is that the unicorns are capable of telekinetically manipulating objects through magic focused through their horns. King Lapis was happy to demonstrate this ability to me and my platoon, although I sense his enthusiasm was more political in motive. I gathered from the meeting that both the unicorns and the earth ponies detested each other and were both fascinated in the regimental appearance of the first pegasi they had ever seen. I may have dropped a few hints pertaining to the existence of a mighty pegasus empire far to the east that they had never heard about during the meeting.*

*We lingered for an additional two months afterwards, strengthening Cirra's position in future negotiations with the tribes and getting to know the land better before returning home. A document describing these further activities will be included with the main report for the sake of brevity. However, I would fully recommend these western lands as suitable for Cirran colonization at a future time.*

*Lightning Blitz*

*Centurion First Class*

Hurricane reread the scroll before gently rolling it and setting it on the table. A small chuckle escaped through parted lips. There was hope after all.

Grabbing a fresh piece of parchment, Hurricane began to write down an order. When he was finished, the paper contained a platoon number, a pair of coordinates, and a time. He stamped it twice with the Emperor's seal for urgency, and rushed it out of the room to where a secretary was waiting.

"I want copies delivered to the throne room in half an hour. This is important." Hurricane didn't wait to see if the secretary had acknowledged his command or not. He quickly spun about in the air and rushed back into the war room to gather the report and the other critical information he would need for the briefing. Pausing to look out of the window, Hurricane could see row after row of dark tents standing on the very edge of the eastern horizon. The sight drew a quick scoff from the emperor.

"You may have come this far, Magnus, but you'll be too late. As long as one of us lives, Cirra can never truly be destroyed. I know this, and you know it too. But you forgot one thing." Hurricane began to walk away from the window, his hooves echoing loudly on the marble floors. He gave one last jeer over his shoulder before leaving the room and closing the doors.

"The pegasi have always been faster."

• • •

The Plaza of the Emperor buzzed with worry. Every remaining soldier in the Legion had been summoned to this one spot, leaving the perimeter undefended. Thousands of civilians drew into the space reserved for them before the statue of Roamulus. It was no overstatement to say that the entire population of Stratopolis was clustered in the plaza.

The Cirrans had been waiting for half an hour for something to happen, and the crowd was quickly growing restless. Rumors had been circulating earlier in the day about the proximity of Gryphon forces to the capital, and the dispersion and mutation of those rumors only increased with density. By the time Hurricane and the Praetorian emerged from the palace, the Legion was having problems suppressing the fear and agitation from the crowd.

"Silence!" The Emperor's voice rang out across the crowds clearer and louder than any crash of thunder. The chilly winds only helped to propel Hurricane's command to all present until the square was deathly quiet. Hurricane waited for the right timing, and then began to speak.

“I have heard the rumors spreading through the city. You fear that the griffons are on our doorstep. You fear that death is upon you, do you not?” There was a low murmuring of consensus, which Hurricane stopped with a hoof. The next few lines had to be handled properly to prevent panic.

“I will not lie to you. The griffons are at our doorstep, and they are coming. Stratopolis *will* fall, and there is nothing we can do to prevent it.” The Cirrans assembled before Hurricane began shuffling their hooves nervously. Acting on some primal instinct, several foals in the crowd began crying. Shouts of alarm and fear rang out from the edges of the square.

“Cirrans!” The city grew silent again. “Are you so quick to believe that the fall of our capital means the destruction of our Empire?! Let me tell you something: there is more to Cirra than just our land, our wealth, our skies! Cirra is not merely a physical entity defined on a map! It is the spirit of the pegasus race that defines our empire! And if that spirit cannot be crushed, then Cirra shall never be destroyed!”

A sense of order had been instilled into the crowd through Hurricane’s voice. The pegasi of Cirra were desperate for an anchor, and they found it in their emperor. In that moment, Hurricane had become something more important than even the Gods themselves: he was loyalty, he was power, he was hope. The legend of Hurricane was born on that day, in the death throes of a once mighty empire. It was the start of a legend that would never be forgotten by the pegasus race.

Spreading a salty and tattered map before him, a map that had seen lands that few pegasi had ever witnessed, Hurricane came to the climax of his address. “We are no longer safe in these lands; the Gryphon emperor will hunt our kind to the ends of Dioda to ensure our eradication, but no further. There are lands across the western ocean that we may settle on; lands where the root of Empire will take hold again, where Cirra shall rise from the ashes and start anew. Magnus and the griffons will never find us there.” His head dropped and so did his voice. “Perhaps we may find peace.”

Correcting his stance with a nervous flutter of his wings, Hurricane spoke loudly again. “Tomorrow at noon the griffon hordes will be upon us. Any pegasus who remains within the city walls will be slain by the hybrids. If you wish to escape with your life, you must fly to the coastal town of Altus, to the west of here. From there you will make the crossing tomorrow at sundown to your new home. Gather food and water for the journey and whatever you wish to carry on your back. The carts cannot hold your personal belongings, as they will be tasked with holding additional supplies for the crossing. Today will be your only chance, while we wait in the eye of the storm.”

The crowd had begun to disperse, but Silver Sword stopped them with a shrill whistle. Hurricane nodded his thanks, and stepped a pace closer to the edge of the platform he had been speaking from. “But there are still duties that we must uphold. If we do not delay the griffons tomorrow, they will be upon our embarkation at Altus before we can take wing. Legionnaires, I understand your desire to go with your families, to live to see another day. If you choose to abandon your posts and follow them, then go with my blessing. But I ask you, I beg you, to remember your oath. Remember who you are fighting for, and what you are fighting against. My place is here in Stratopolis at the end of a bloody era, but I ask of you: who will stand with me?”

The Legion had stood separate from the civilians, and Hurricane could see the dilemma on the soldiers’ faces. He already had the three hundred of the Praetorian Guard behind him, but as skilled as they were, they would still be wiped aside within minutes. Hurricane needed five or ten thousand to stand with him tomorrow.

A disconcerting amount of time passed where no soldiers stepped forward. Hurricane was about to hang his head in defeat when a young Legionnaire separated himself from his regiment.

“I’ll fight for you, sir. May we find peace in being the last pegasi to die in our homeland.” There were incredulous whispers from the crowd behind the soldier, but the Legionnaire held his head high, his gaze unflinching as it met Hurricane’s. The black stallion nodded gratefully, and turned his head as more soldiers began to emerge.

“Me too, sir.”

“And me.”

“You have my sword.”

“And my bow.”

“And my axe!”

Hurricane raised an eyebrow upon hearing that last remark. Axes weren’t common weaponry in the Legion. But when he realized where it came from, it began to make sense.

Not only were hundreds of Legionnaires stepping forward to give their lives for Stratopolis, stallions and mares alike were leaving the crowd of civilians to pledge their support to Cirra in its darkest hour. The young Emperor’s eyes began to tear as nearly

fifty thousand pegasi, soldiers and civilians alike, neatly arranged themselves into regiments. There was cheering from the crowds as they honored those who would give their lives for them.

Hurricane struggled to swallow his emotions, lowering his head several times to wipe away the tears. “T-thank you. Thank you, my fellow Cirrans, for standing by me in our time of need. May the Gods welcome us all to the heavens with open arms.” There were still roughly thirty thousand soldiers who had refused to join Hurricane, and he turned his attention to them next.

“Soldiers... though it pains me to see that you have not joined us, I respect your decision. My final order is that you escort the civilians to Altus, and spread across the countryside to gather those from the small towns who do not know the danger they are in. Protect them at all costs, for they are the future of Cirra.” The few officers who had not stepped forward nodded their heads and saluted to Hurricane. Then, one by one, they split off with their platoons, dispersing throughout the remainder of Cirra’s lands. A large portion would remain in the city until nightfall, when they would begin escorting civilians towards Altus.

Hurricane uttered another round of thanks to the volunteers, and began to fly back to the palace to make final preparations. He left the Praetorian Guard to assist the Legionnaires in organizing the volunteers into suitable units for the coming griffon offensive, trusting their intuition and experience over his own.

Upon entering the grand foyer of the palace, Hurricane turned to Silver Sword and Swift Spear, who had accompanied him this far. He was momentarily at a loss of words to phrase his wishes, and so they stood in a comfortable silence together.

Finally, Hurricane summoned the resolve to speak. “You know you don’t have to do this, guys. You can go to Altus with the rest of them, and I won’t think anything less of you for it.” His black hoof pawed the ground nervously as he awaited their response.

Silver Sword stepped closer to Hurricane and placed a hoof on his shoulder. “I’m not going anywhere, Hurricane. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t stand by you now?”

Hurricane looked into Silver’s eyes, blinking once or twice in incredulity. “Silver, I—”

“Don’t worry about it Hurricane. We’re in this together. From the beginning to the end, Hurricane and Silver Sword. Friends, comrades.” Silver leaned closer to Hurricane, nodding to him as he spoke. “Brothers.”

Realizing he would not be deterred, Hurricane lowered his head and gave his friend a hard smile. “Heh. Silver, you bastard, always trying to get yourself killed, eh?” When Silver smiled back at him, Hurricane’s gaze softened. “I couldn’t have asked for a better friend.” He turned his eyes to Swift, his beloved, the light of his life, and opened his mouth to speak.

Swift placed a hoof over it before he could utter a syllable. The corners of her eyes were glistening, despite her best efforts to suppress the tears. “Hurricane, please, don’t. I want to fight, I want to stand by you...” Her throat shook as a choking sob fought its way out of her lungs. Leaning forward, she collapsed around Hurricane’s neck. “I don’t want to be alone...”

Hurricane lowered his head around her shoulder and rubbed her wings with his hoof. “Swift, please. I don’t want to see you hurt. You need to go. If one of us is to live, it needs to be you.”

The distraught mare shook her head as the tears fell from her cheeks to Hurricane’s back. “No, Hurricane, it should be you! You’re the only leader these pegasi have left! They’ll need your guidance if they’re going to survive in this new land you’re sending them too!”

Leaning his head back so he could look in Swift’s eyes, Hurricane imparted a sad smile. “No, Swift. My place is with the Empire. What kind of leader would I be anyways if I ran away from this? No.” He placed a kiss on Swift’s forehead. “If you won’t do it for me, do it for the foal. Let it have a future for both of us, and you’ll never be alone.”

Swift looked at the slight bulge in her abdomen with a mixture of love and sadness. Finally, sniffing and wiping the tears from her eyes, she managed to produce shakily: “O-okay, Hurricane. For the f-foal.”

“Thank you, Swift. I’m sure it’ll grow up to be a mighty leader one day.” He hugged his wife, then looked over his shoulder to a distant corridor. A dim light glowed through the cracked door, and the gentle sound of tapping hooves could be heard from within. Gently releasing his grip on Swift, he gave her another kiss. “There’s one more pony I have to talk to.”

Silver Sword and Swift nodded their heads and followed Hurricane at a distance as he approached the door. He knocked twice before pushing it open, taking a step into the library. A light-brown coat and golden irises greeted him as he entered.

“Hurricane! I was busy looking up some history on the Golden Dawn war in one-eighty-seven, the one that got Cirra the northern territories. One of the commanders was able to hold off a force nearly thrice his size with some clever tactics. I was trying to find out how, so maybe we could do something similar in the coming weeks.” She turned her excited smile to Hurricane, who returned its shadow. The filly’s ears drooped as she sensed the melancholy emanating from the three pegasi. Setting down her books, she walked closer to her older brother. “Hurricane... what is it?”

The black stallion placed a hoof over his sister’s shoulder. “Twister... the griffons are coming. They’ll be here tomorrow, and Stratopolis will fall. I need you...” He gulped and braced himself for the doe-eyes his sister was giving him. “I need you to go. Go to Altus, and the Legion will take you somewhere safe.”

Twister’s large eyes blinked once as the words began to settle into her mind. Her ears were completely lowered, and her mouth articulated silent words as she slowly realized what Hurricane was telling her to do. But instead of responding with wails and horror as Hurricane expected, her lips tightened up into a level of understanding and acceptance far beyond her years.

“Hurricane... I’m sorry.” She placed herself into Hurricane’s forelegs and hugged him, solidly. “I can’t imagine what it must feel like... to have everypony’s well-being placed on your shoulders, and to be expected to die for them. I wish I could help, but...” She sniffled for the first time, and squeezed her brother’s neck tighter. “I’m just a filly. But I know how much you love me, and how distracting it would be to you to worry about my safety. And I know how much I love you, because I’m willing to go because you care for me and only want the best for me. And no matter how much it hurts us both to part this way,” she leaned back, wiping a trickling tear from Hurricane’s face, “I know it’s better than dying because I wanted to die with you. It would be a dishonor, a disgrace to all those who have died, to mom and dad, to you, to throw my life away. There’s so much more for me to do with my years, so much more waiting for me out there, and it’s because of ponies like you, Hurricane.”

The power of Twister’s words had broken through the meager shell Hurricane had put up around his heart, and he began to cry. The filly hugged the stallion, whispering soothing assurances of her gratitude and love for him into his ears. They remained like that for a long while, with Silver Sword and Swift Spear watching from a distance.

When Hurricane recovered the strength to speak, he gently separated himself from Twister's embrace. "Look after Swift Spear and the foal for me. It'll be your niece or nephew anyway, aunt Twist." Smiling weakly, Hurricane tousled the filly's long, black mane. Twister took it and smiled too, before giving Hurricane one last embrace.

"I will, brother. I promise." She looked up at the black stallion's face, looked at the scars and the wrinkles of premature age brought on by nine months of unimaginable hardship. Hardship he had taken so that she may never have to. "Remember when you left Zephyrus for the first time, when I told you to kill some griffons for me?"

Hurricane nodded slowly, his breath tickling Twister's face. "I remember."

Giving a faux laugh, Twister leaned her head against his chest. "Give 'em hell, Hurricane."

"I will." They held the position for a second and an eternity in the same instant. It would never be long enough for the two siblings, but they still attempted to memorize each other's scars and contours, the invisible patterns of fur of their coats, the smells of each other's breath. But it would never be enough.

There was a whistle from outside, and Silver Sword nodded his head in response. Turning to Hurricane, he barely raised his voice loud enough for the stallion to hear. "The Legion is ready to begin evacuations, Hurricane."

Hurricane and Twister separated, giving each other short nods. It was time to go. Together, the pegasi left the library to go to the Plaza of the Emperor. There were already flights queuing for takeoff, and Hurricane guided his loved ones to the next group.

"Please, stay with the soldiers. Don't come looking for me... You know I won't be coming." Twister and Swift Spear nodded, and Hurricane leaned over to kiss Swift for one last time.

"I love you, Swift."

"I love you too, Hurricane."

There was a barking order from one of the Praetorians, and the group Swift and Twister were in began to move to take off. Hurricane walked with them, wishing to stay with them as much as he could before they left. As the Cirrans began to fly away, Twister and Swift Spear both turned to face him.



“Give them a good fight, Hurricane,” said Swift.

“Make them pay for what they did to us,” said Twister. Hurricane nodded and saluted them as they took off. He withheld the tears while they spiraled higher and higher before finally disappearing into the clouds, leaving Stratopolis and Hurricane behind forever.

Then the tears came, and it was all Hurricane and Silver Sword could do to remain strong for the remaining populace of Cirra.

• • •

*Hurricane couldn't tell where he was. Tall, bare trees, whose branches were coated in gloomy white snow, stretched up around him for as far as he could see. A dim gray light fell through the skeletal canopy from an unseen source high above.*

*A thin trail cut into the earth from years of walking stretched out from under him and into the distant mist, twisting around trees and stumps. Hurricane tried to fly upwards, but the trees climbed towards the sky infinitely, and when he looked down, the path was never more than twenty feet below him. If he tried to walk to the sides and through the trees flanking the path, he'd soon stumble across the trail again. His subconscious offered him nowhere to go except forward.*

*As Hurricane walked, whispers began to reach his ears through the trees. At first they were too low for him to hear, but as he pushed forward, they steadily grew in volume. He could make out distorted voices talking to each other, mentioning something that was always just out of earshot. Several times he caught mention of his name, and sometimes it was paired with 'emperor' or 'commander'. Once, he heard a word that gave him chills: legend.*

*Black shadows manifested out of the mist, taking on forms pony or griffon in equal measure. They grew in depth as he approached, but would burst into wispy trails whenever he came within a few feet. The further along the trail he progressed, the closer the shadows came to taking on recognizable appearances, but as with the whispers, he could never come close enough to determine their faces clearly.*

*Suddenly the path came to a stop, and the whispers and shadows disappeared. Instead, two stallions approached him from the front. One of the stallions, a fiery red pegasus with equally fiery eyes, had a deep slash along his throat. The other stallion, a gray soldier with only one wing and one eye, stood next to the first. Together, they blocked Hurricane's progress.*

*Hurricane inhaled sharply at the sight of the two figures before him. It took his mind a few seconds to recall their names, but he remembered them all the same. They had haunted him so much in the past months.*

*“Fire Star... Red Tail...” Hurricane gulped nervously, instinctively reaching to his side for his sword. He found nothing there.*

*Fire Star took several steps towards Hurricane, leaning his sneering face closer to the frightened emperor. “Hurricane!” Half of the stallion’s breath escaped through the slit in his neck, dripping blood onto the ground. Hurricane saw this, and fell onto his haunches in terror.*

*“Fire Star, please! I didn’t mean to! It was an accident!” The black stallion held up his hooves, shielding his eyes from the horrifying pegasus that threatened him. Fire Star only advanced farther, his words dripping venom—and blood.*

*“You did this to me, Hurricane! You killed me in cold blood! And while you’ve gone on to better things, mighty emperor, I’ve been forgotten! Do you think it’s fair that you prosper from murder? Do you think it’s fair that I die for absolutely nothing, left to rot in some Godsforsaken place between the Great Skies and the Earth? Do you?!” Fire Star pressed his face right up against Hurricane’s, his gaze burning through the black stallion’s irises. There was a crack of fire, and a few sparks freed themselves from Fire Star’s mane.*

*But the red pegasus had pressed his position too far. The terror left Hurricane’s eyes, and he stood up, pushing the stallion away. “No. It’s not fair. I’ve regretted my actions ever since then. I could have ended our disputes without bloodshed, but my rage got the better of me. And you,” he pointed a hoof towards Fire Star, who was beginning to retreat, “you are only here because you haven’t let go.” He stepped forward, placing a hoof on Fire Star’s shoulder. “I am sorry, Fire Star, and I forgive you for your actions.”*

*Fire Star tried to bring a hostile scowl to his face, but it quickly fell away into an expression of release. He hung his head as his form began to disappear, fading away into the mists that surrounded it. “I’m sorry too, Hurricane. I’m sorry for everything...”*

*The red pegasus dissolved, presumably claiming the peace he had earned.*

*Hurricane turned towards Red Tail, who had been quiet the whole time. He expected the Legate to have his turn at throwing his anger against Hurricane, but the stallion simply turned around and began to walk further down the path. When Hurricane hesitated to follow, Red Tail beckoned him onwards before advancing again.*

*They walked onwards in silence, Hurricane doing his best to ignore the dripping stump of Red Tail's wing or the gash through his chest. The path twisted and turned, snaking through trees and mud. They passed a smoking house of Gryphon construction on their left, the remains of the doors hanging onto stressed hinges. They passed several crumbled pillars of cloudstone, the Nimban crest clearly etched onto their surfaces. Suddenly the path turned to ash, and Red Tail stopped.*

*"You know where this brings us, Hurricane." Red Tail's single eye surveyed the fine dust that covered the trail, watched the tiny flakes of fire descending from the sky. Hurricane was too nervous to advance or retreat, instead only able to listen to the deceased Legate.*

*Red Tail turned to face Hurricane so that he could see the black stallion with his eye. "You know what happened here. An emperor dead, a coup failed, and the beginning of the end. Whether my actions hastened or delayed Cirra's destruction I know not. But it gave us a new emperor, one who will become legendary." Seeing the surprise on Hurricane's face, Red Tail began to walk again. "You were expecting me to attack you like Fire Star? I am far too old and learned for that. I have been watching you from here, Hurricane, and I know that you have done a better job as emperor than many would have ever thought. And I am not so spiteful of my death that I wish to see you destroyed and Cirra wiped out for petty vengeance. No," he came to a stop again, gesturing for Hurricane to take a look, "I wish only for your success."*

*Hurricane stepped forward to take a closer look at the object before him. It was a large slab of stone, partially buried into the earth. On its surface, a simple sketch of a three-tone lightning bolt striking through the center of a cyclone was plainly visible. Hurricane blanched at the sight, taking two nervous steps back.*

*The ghostly Legate rested a cold hoof across Hurricane's back. "You think this is your destiny, that the end will come for you tomorrow. You may think it's your duty to die in the coming fight. Although it is not my place to guide you, I ask that you understand that more paths are open than one would think."*

*Hurricane felt the presence of Red Tail's foreleg disappear off of his back, and when he looked to his side, the Legate was gone. Instead, the path diverged sharply to his right, bypassing the tombstone completely.*

*Setting his hooves in a line, Hurricane began to walk down one of the paths. He may or may not have agreed with the Legate's words, but his decision was made. Letting the dice be cast, Hurricane advanced down a path until he disappeared into the nothingness that lay beyond.*

*In a game with no rules, far be it from us to judge who wins and who loses. Sometimes, even the dead can be victorious.*

—Message found carved into the ruins of Stratopolis  
Author Unknown

Hurricane awoke to a gentle nudge against his shoulder. In the dark, pre-dawn hours, it was nearly impossible for his eyes to spot the contours of objects. What little light there was from the east fell through the open windows of his room, reflecting off of the armor of the pegasus standing beside him.

“It’s time.” Silver Sword dropped Hurricane’s armor on his bed and waited for the tired emperor to get up. Rolling out of the cold and lonely covers, Hurricane stretched his back and his wings before taking up the first piece of iron and gold. In a few slow minutes, Commander Hurricane, the last emperor of the Cirran Empire, stood fully cloaked in gold and iron armor.

There were no candles to light the halls as they navigated corridors and descended staircases. The usual early morning bustle of servants and secretaries was gone, replaced by a deathly emptiness and the empty echoes of hoofsteps as the two pegasi approached the grand foyer.

The rooms they passed on either side were barren, devoid of value and purpose. Priceless artifacts had been taken and delivered to Altus, although Hurricane knew that they’d be left behind in the end. Wood and metal had been scavenged throughout the palace to be used to form barricades and weaponry. The library had been dissected by numerous servants tasked with preserving Cirran knowledge and history, and they had left the books and scrolls deemed unimportant in a central pile that covered two tables. Paintings of mighty Cirran emperors had been cut from their frames and rolled up to be taken to new lands. The palace had been turned into a museum of antiquity, holding those things that a generation had forgotten in a mad race for survival.

Arriving in the foyer, Hurricane was greeted by the top commanders of the Praetorian Guard. Commander Gold Moon approached him first, saluting and opening a scroll for the Emperor to read. Hurricane took the scroll and spread it on the ground before rolling it back up and returning it to the officer.

“The regiments have been divided up and given their assignments. The most experienced units have been placed along the eastern walls, with ranks of less equipped units arranged

in lines behind them.” Gold Moon signaled to two of his subordinates, and the messengers flew away to ready the soldiers. “We designed for maximum delay to give our civilians time to escape from Altus.”

Hurricane nodded and touched Gold Moon’s shoulder. “Excellent, Commander, well done. Have the regiments aware that they should fall back when they become overwhelmed and let the next line take their place. Hopefully by alternating who is engaged and who is recovering we can buy time at the cost of ground.”

Gold Moon nodded. “Already accounted for, sir. Our soldiers have been working all night to fortify every building between the eastern walls and the palace. I imagine Magnus is going to want to be sure of his victory and fight his way up building by building rather than leaping for the decisive blow.”

“Agreed. This is all just a game to him, and he knows he’s winning, so he wants to savor the victory. He expects us to defend this city with everything we’ve got, when instead we’re getting as many civilians as we can out of here. Although Stratopolis will fall, we will sour his conquest with our survival.”

“Indeed.” The aged commander looked to the distant horizon, waiting for the sun to come up and the hordes it would raise with its appearance. “It’s been an honor fighting with you, sir. May the Gods welcome us as heroes in the coming hours.”

Hurricane touched Gold Moon’s wing with his own. “Likewise, Commander. Just don’t be so eager to claim your reward in the Great Skies that you’re out of the fight before it gets good. We’ll need your tactical eye and authority if we’re going to make the bastards pay for Stratopolis.”

A hollow laugh brought a small smile to Gold Moon’s lips. “Noted, sir.” A small ray of light pierced through the morning clouds and haze to perfectly strike the commander in the eye. Turning, he raised a hoof towards the rising sun. “This will be it. I better go tend to the soldiers.” His eyes flicked to Hurricane. “Will I see you on the front lines, sir?”

A determined grin revealed Hurricane’s teeth. “You can count on it.”

“Good to hear.” Giving one last salute, Gold Moon spread his wings and took to the skies, taking the rest of the Praetorian Guard with him. Hurricane and Silver Sword were left by themselves on the mighty stairs that led down to the city below.

“Shall we inspect the troops?” Hurricane asked as he rose into the air. Silver Sword grunted his approval, and together the two of them flew towards town square, where the regiments were forming up.

Gold Moon was not kidding when he said that they had fortified nearly half of the city. Planks of wood covered the windows to abandoned houses, and piles of crushed cloudstone rubble lay against locked doors. The only access points to these houses were through the chimneys or balconies, which would force griffons to transition from flying to fighting in an extremely confined space. Assuming the pegasi would be able to fall back quick enough to make use of the fortifications, Magnus would have to pay a heavy price to push his way through the city.

The ugly side of the Legion’s fortifications was that they had driven the remaining elders who were too old to make the trip to Altus or simply had refused to leave their homes out onto the streets. Small clusters of senior pegasi wandered the cloudstone roads and alleys, having their homes and possessions stripped from them by their own government. Although Hurricane felt for them, there was nothing he could do to help. The Legion needed everything it could get to prolong its survival, and in a short while, those elders would be felled by Gryphon steel. It was a morbid and uncomfortable thought for the young emperor, but that did not make it any less true.

The Plaza of the Emperor had been turned into a sprawling campsite for the fifty thousand Cirrans who would give their lives to defend it. The massive clearing was filled to the brim with temporary shelters, with some of the haphazard canvas structures spilling out into the streets. However, a respectful clearing around the statue of Roamulus had been maintained despite this.

The bustle of last minute preparations pervaded every inch of the campsite as ponies rushed back and forth between their tents, the rations table, and their officers. The pleasant smell of meat and charred plants filled the air as the volunteers ate their final meal. Hurricane had ordered the last of Stratopolis’ food reserves be emptied for the soldiers, and so they dined on a feast of a breakfast before they would lose it to Griffon blades. The morale boost was most certainly a positive thing to the defenders.

Hurricane and Silver Sword landed at one end of the camp and began to walk through it in a wide arc, hoping to show themselves to as many of the volunteers as possible. The outer edges of the camp were home almost exclusively to the volunteers, and many lounged under their tents or conversed with their neighbors. The defenders covered a healthy span of young and old, stallions and mares, of all sorts of colors and sizes. It seemed to Hurricane that they were a more personable sort of Legion as opposed to the

emotionless Cirrans the military trained its soldiers to be. Personable or not, however, they still had to be able to put up a fight if they were going to be useful.

The Legion had run out of swords and armor to equip the bulk of the volunteers, so many had simply brought whatever tools or objects they could use to defend themselves. All sorts of weaponry from axes to cutting knives were holstered in makeshift leather scabbards along the flanks of the civilians. Rough plates of scrap iron or wood served as armor for those who could find it. Hurricane even saw a blacksmith sharpening his tongs over a roaring fire, the ends glowing a deadly shade of orange.

Wherever the Emperor and the Imperator ventured, ponies stopped the tasks they were doing and looked on. The discomfort or uneasiness mixed with copious amounts of awe slowed their hooves and caused them to regard their leaders with mystical wonder. Deciding that it would be better if they lent a hoof and regarded the volunteers as equals rather than officers and subordinates, Silver and Hurricane pitched in with the mundane tasks wherever they could. Such tasks involved the moving of debris from one fortification to another, the distribution of food and weaponry, and the ordering of troops between sectors. They maintained an open and friendly atmosphere, and soon enough civilians were coming to speak directly to them.

“Sirs!” a young stallion shouted from across the street. Hurricane and Silver Sword waited as the pegasus approached, clutching a collection of cloth strips between his jaws. The saddlebags against his flanks were filled with bottles of lantern oil, some of them with cloth sticking out of their tops.

“Morning, citizen,” Silver Sword began politely. “What is it that you need?”

The stallion set down the cloths he was carrying. “Nothing that I need, sir. Just something I would like to share with you.” Reaching into a bag, he pulled out a jar of lantern oil and set it in front of the two leaders.

Hurricane picked up the jar and examined it. “Lantern oil. Is there anything special about it?” Not seeing the point, he gave the bottle back to the stallion.

The Emperor’s lack of enthusiasm did little to slow the young pegasus. “Not in material, sir, but in form. I spent the last night gathering up whatever lantern oil I could find because I discovered something.” Grabbing a wooden splint out of his bags, he struck it against his hoof and ignited it. Transferring the flame to the end of the cloth in the bottle, he carefully balanced it between two hooves. “Observe!”

He barely gave the pegasi near his target enough of a warning to avoid harm. Tossing the bottle against the side of a building, the stallion watched as his invention slammed into its pearly white surface. The lantern oil exploded on impact, being ignited by the flame from the cloth and expanding into a deadly wall of fire. Hurricane took a step back as a wave of hot air pushed aside the chilly winds for a second.

“Well? What do you think?” The stallion was brimming with excitement, and his wings fluttered expectantly. Hurricane looked again at the bottles he had carried with him. It was a simple design, but very effective.

“That was... excellent.” Hurricane answered. “These will be a big help to us in the fight. How many do you have with you?”

The stallion’s ears lowered a degree when he looked at his bag. “I’d only say about fifteen or sixteen. I didn’t have enough time to make more, or I would have. Like I said, I only discovered this last night.”

Hurricane gave the stallion an approving pat on the back. “Well, we’ll make do with what you’ve got. Distribute the bottles to the officers and explain how to use them. They’ll know best when to deploy this weapon.” The stallion’s ears perked with pride and he made to take off. Silver Sword stopped him, however.

“Hey, you think you could leave one for me? I’d like to start a griffon roast of my own if I get the chance.” The young inventor nodded and set a bottle onto the ground before flying off to deliver the rest of his cargo.

Hurricane held the bottle up to his face as he observed it again. “Pretty impressive, huh?” Smirking to himself, he set the lantern oil back on the ground in front of Silver Sword.

The steel pegasus whistled as he watched the still-burning brick of the building. “That’ll give the griffons a nasty surprise, I reckon. Think we’ll be able to peg Magnus with one of those?”

“If we ever see him, I’m willing to give it a try. Come on, we better get to the walls. The attack will begin soon.” Hurricane lifted off of the ground and began to fly towards the rising sun. Silver Sword paused to collect the bottle left behind for him before flying after the black stallion, overtaking him about halfway to the eastern fortifications.

The bricks of the walls were cold when they set their hooves down, but already the temperature of the white surface was escalating with the sun. The winds were howling over the ramparts, and Hurricane had to lower his ears against the shrill cold. Still, with a



face carved from the same expressionless stone that had built the imperial palace, Hurricane looked over the lake below Stratopolis to the distant shoreline and waited.

Thin clouds drifted across the sky, sailing either above or below the massive pegasus city. Hurricane spread his wings to test the air currents sailing over the walls and into Stratopolis. The air pushed through his feathers, generating crisp yet firm pressure on his wings. Today would have made a good day for stunt flying.

Suddenly, the two thousand soldiers on either side of Hurricane tensed and lowered their spears with the first signs of activity along the distant shoreline. Sure enough, thousands and thousands of black specks were rising through the cloud layer, taking the time to assemble into pristine military formation before beginning a charge towards the walls. Gold Moon caught Hurricane's eye from farther down the wall. The two pegasi nodded, and Hurricane rose into the air to address his troops.

“Cirrans! The decisive moment is upon us! Today we join our ancestors in the Great Skies, but not before we drench the clouds with Gryphon blood! Let your hearts be strong, your resolve unshakeable, your wings steady and your swords swift! The future generations will look upon this moment with wonder and awe, and know that we, the few, stood and died so that Cirra could live! Make yourselves proud! Make each other proud! Be brave, for the Gods smile upon us! For the Empire!”

The roars from the throats of thousands of Cirrans answered Hurricane. Lowering themselves against their spears, the front line of Stratopolis' final defense braced itself against the griffon charge. Behind them, two thousand Legionnaires assembled to provide top cover for the spearponies, their bladed wings glinting in the morning light.

If the shouting from the Cirrans was mighty, it was thundered down with the demonic shrieking of thousands of birds of prey. Magnus had thrown everything he had into the assault, and the defenders along the walls were outnumbered ten to one. All the Gryphon blades had been sharpened, and the gleaming of thousands and thousands of steel weapons advanced against the pegasi and their iron swords.

Hurricane spun on his hooves and addressed the platoons of pegasi sitting in the guard towers along the length of the walls. “Archers, on my signal!” He could see the tower walls instantly bristle with hundreds of arrows and the archers drew their bows. Since the wind was blowing in their faces, their range was shorter than what Hurricane would have wished for. He had to wait until the first wave of griffon soldiers was uncomfortably close before he gave the command.

“FIRE!”

A momentary dimming of light fell over Hurricane as a cloud of arrows rocketed towards the griffon advance. One advantage of the range that they had fired in was that the horde had little time to adjust its course to avoid the incoming volley. The griffon war cries turned to screams of pain as large bodies fell out of the air. Their steel armor deflected glancing shots, but the arrows that flew true and struck necks or wings sent their targets tumbling out of the skies. Already the first precipitation of blood was falling into the lake below.

“Reload and fire at will!” Hurricane shouted as the archers knocked their next arrows. Gripping his sword between his teeth and spreading his stance wide, he prepared for the incoming wave of griffons. Silver Sword assumed a similar position next to him, and the two Cirrans nodded in unison. Let the griffon hordes throw themselves at the Cirran walls, and see how many fall!

The second volley of arrows was released immediately before the griffons struck Cirra’s line. Griffon bodies were sent tumbling over the walls, the blood spraying along the shafts of arrows lodged in their necks or skulls. It was a forty foot drop from the wall to the city streets below, guaranteed deadly for a griffon without any flight control. Several dead or dying bodies collided with pegasi along the walls, knocking them off balance or onto their backs. Hurricane had to sidestep a flailing griffon as it tugged at the arrow in its shoulder before it screamed in terror as it fell to its death.

The first of the Gryphon regulars were already on the walls, throwing themselves against the line of spears that stood erect in the assault. It was a suicidal notion as hundreds of griffons impaled themselves on the spearheads, but it served its purpose. By sticking their bodies onto the points of the spears, the long weapons were rendered useless and forced their wielders to discard them in exchange for swords before the next rank of griffons approached. What manner of zealotry Magnus had stirred up to rally a suicidal force of such readiness, Hurricane would never know.

With the fury of an emperor wronged, Hurricane charged at the first griffon to challenge him on the walls. The adrenaline pumping through Hurricane’s blood was laced with the flavor of vengeance, guiding his motions and empowering his limbs with a quickness he had never before experienced. Every griffon throat slit would be a point for Cirra; every bastard disemboweled would be another body to pay for those taken from him. Swords would slice, heads would roll, and feathers would fly, and not until Hurricane had toppled a horde with his blades and hooves would he ever consider the score settled.

The griffon soldier was unprepared to face down an attack of such might. Losing its initiative, the beast had to block a slash from Hurricane's sword and then two jabs from his wings. The pegasus never stopped moving forward, pushing his opponent back until it ran into the wall behind it. The sudden appearance of cloudstone behind its back unsettled the griffon, and before it could adjust its position Hurricane had already split its neck. The body crumpled to the floor, blood turning its white neck feathers red.

There was little respite for the Emperor, for no sooner had he dispatched his first assailant was he attacked from above. Pressing his body flat against the cloudstone top of the walls, Hurricane felt two sets of talons slice through the air above his body. The griffon yelled in frustration and attempted to kick Hurricane with its powerful feline legs, but Hurricane was too fast for such crude attacks. Spiraling up and to the side, he managed to wrap a foreleg around the griffon's paw and drag it to the ground. Screaming again, the hybrid delivered a solid kick to Hurricane's nose, but the claws failed to meet skin. Standing up from under the extended leg, Hurricane jammed his sword into the abdomen of the griffon warrior, directly below the ribcage where the armor ceased to protect. Failing to die at the first stab, the soldier swung its clawed hands at Hurricane, which the black pegasus avoided easily. Withdrawing his sword, he stabbed the creature twice again in the chest to neutralize it and once in the neck to silence it. The sticky scent of blood clung to his nostrils but was barely acknowledged by the mighty Cirran. He had fought in too many battles and slain too many griffons to be disturbed by the taste of foreign blood.

Silver Sword was in the process of mopping up his opposition when Hurricane turned back. Spinning wide right of a griffon's frustrated sword swing, he gripped onto a brown wing and yanked the beast to the ground. The griffon turned and used its heavier weight to try and throw Silver into the air, but the steel Imperator adjusted his grip to grapple with the soldier's neck. Using the momentum that the Gryphon had supplied him, Silver let the weight of his armor bend the griffon's neck backwards against the movement of its spine. There was an audible crack and a set of talons clutched desperately at the air before the body fell to the ground, unmoving.

The rest of the wall was not sharing in Hurricane and Silver Sword's success. The defense had broken down into scattered pockets of the finest soldiers trying to fend off swarms of griffons assailing them from all sides. The Praetorian Guard had lost only a hoofful of pegasi, and they were attempting to compensate for the collapsing front of the rest of the Legion by spreading out. Hurricane was able to catch a glimpse of Gold Moon dancing around two large griffons, turning their clumsy blows into painful mistakes. It was comforting for Hurricane to know that the Guard's most experienced commander was still one of the best on the battlefield despite his wing injury.

A quiver of arrows and a bow clattered against the ground next to Hurricane. Looking up, he saw the guard towers under siege by a platoon of Gryphon regulars. The fractured remains of Cirra's assigned air support flew to the towers to try and relieve the pressure, but it was too late. Well over half of Hurricane's archers soon lay dead, with small rivulets of blood running off of the roofs. With the next wave rapidly approaching the crumbling defense, Hurricane was left with little choice but to proceed to the next stage of the plan.

"Legionnaires, fall back! Get those volunteers up here, now!" Sliding under a brown blur of a griffon, Hurricane leapt off of the walls, dozens of Legionnaires following him. He let the whistle of wind flowing past his ears satisfy him for a brief second before snapping out his wings and landing on the rooftop of one of the nearby houses. He ducked under the bodies of Cirran volunteers emerging from behind the buildings, knocking cloudstone tiles off of the roof as he did so. Silver Sword slammed onto the roof next to him, cracking several shingles as he secured his footing.

Hurricane and Silver watched in remote horror as the volunteers flung themselves at the griffon advance while the actual soldiers escaped to set up the next line of defense. He couldn't deny their resolve and the ferocity with which they attacked the griffons, but the lack of training was evident. If they were lucky, a volunteer would manage to wound or kill a griffon before being stabbed from behind or simply overwhelmed. The large majority of the civilians were sliced and gutted before they could even ruffle a regular's feathers.

"They're getting ripped apart out there!" Silver exclaimed. Hurricane nodded his agreement.

"I know! But once the Legion's done, the city will fall in a matter of minutes! We have to prolong the collapse as long as possible, even if it means sacrificing the volunteers!" Seeing the next line of the Legion settle itself in the defensive barriers around the houses, Hurricane nodded to Silver Sword. The steel pegasus took a horn out of his bags and blew into it, signaling the surviving volunteers to fall back and prepare for the next retreat. As the haggard and bloody survivors of the civilian group made their way back to the Plaza, new regiments of Legionnaires took their place in the skies almost seamlessly.

One of the civilians, a large stallion wielding a woodcutter's axe, thundered onto the roof next to Hurricane. Pieces of griffon intestine were draped over his shoulders and neck, the blood almost invisible against his scarlet coat. Whether they were placed there intentionally or inadvertently Hurricane could only guess.

“Ha ha! The feathery bastards don’t know what hit ‘em! Get me back up to the front when you’re ready for round two, sir! I got a few more logs to split!” With that, the woodcutter grabbed his bloody axe between his jaws and flew away to the statue of Roamulus. Hurricane and Silver exchanged a confused look, unsure of what had just transpired. The time for reflection was cut short with the arrival of the next wave of griffons.

Hurricane strained to make his voice audible over the screams of death and war. “Archers, fire at will! Fall back if you get overrun, ‘cause we’ll sure as hell need you later!” There were faint flashes of acknowledgement from the archers nearest him as they began to release volleys of arrows, and Hurricane could only hope that the message would spread to the rest of his ranged units.

Shattering tiles under their massive paws, Gryphon regulars began to engage the pegasi scattered across the roofs. Hurricane tried to press the griffons away from his rooftop by rushing them before they could land, but several of the beasts managed to get around his and Silver Sword’s offense. Forced to combat on the slippery cloudstone tiling, Hurricane rushed to get to the peak of the sloped roof before his opponent.

Nearly tripping over his hooves as he crested the tiling, Hurricane threw his body weight into his sword lunge. The griffon managed to block his blade with one hand and used the other to grab onto his wing. Hurricane allowed his body to twist with the direction that the griffon was wrenching his wing arm in so that it wouldn’t break, attempting to strike his opponent in the face with his blade as he passed. The beast easily leaned out of the attack and threw Hurricane towards the edge of the rooftop.

It took Hurricane an uncomfortable second to right himself, using his wings and his forehooves to keep himself from falling off of the roof. Sensing an opportunity, he feigned a struggle to lift his body back onto the cloudstone tiling. The griffon took the bait, rushing forward to drive his sword into Hurricane’s face.

The Emperor didn’t give him a chance. With a sudden burst of speed, Hurricane rocketed straight into the air, smashing a hoof into the griffon’s beak as he passed. The stunned creature blundered across the rooftop as it struggled to focus, giving Hurricane enough time to change his direction and drive at its head. With a solid, resounding crack, the black pegasus smashed the griffon’s skull into and through the cloudstone roofing, ignoring the blood and brain that splattered his forelegs. With a quick shake, the offending organs were flung away, and Hurricane rushed to provide Silver Sword with assistance.

The steel pegasus was holding his own against two of the beasts, diving underneath attacks and delivering blows to unprotected areas. Despite his agility, he could not gain the momentum he needed to drive his blade through the griffons' steel armor. Before he could complete a swing, he would have to roll to the side to avoid a stab from a hooked beak or the slice of steel weapons.

His hooves drumming across the tile roof, Hurricane tackled the larger of the two griffons. Their bodies tumbled towards the edge of the house as they swung their limbs at each other while struggling to hold on. Hurricane flipped onto his back as he approached the edge of the roof, using his hind legs to slow himself. The griffon screeched as it slid off of the side of the building, and Hurricane knew he couldn't let it get away. Raising his legs away from the roofing, he used his wings to launch himself off of the edge.

He caught the griffon just as it was about to right itself. Shouting past the sword clenched in his jaws, Hurricane wrapped his legs around the griffon's wing. It was only a three story drop, offering a small margin for error. Grappling with his opponent, Hurricane managed to pull open a wing to flip the griffon underneath him as they approached the ground.

There was a sickening crack of cloudstone as well over two hundred pounds of iron and steel smashed into the street. Hurricane felt the vibrations travel through the tips of his body, from his tail to his jaw. Taking a moment to collect his breath, he managed to rise upon shaky hooves.

The griffon soldier was much worse off. Its tongue hung out of the side of its open beak, and its dazed expression failed to focus on anything. Whispering breaths of pain escaped from its crushed body, and the tips of its wings twitched. Picking his blade up from the street, Hurricane mercifully ended the soldier's life.

There was a grunt from above, and another griffon body fell off of the roof. The hulking mass nearly crushed Hurricane, and only a quick backstroke of his wings saved him. Frowning, Hurricane stared daggers at the pegasus on top of the house.

"Heh heh... fore?" Silver Sword rubbed the back of his helmeted head awkwardly, grinning at Hurricane from his perch. Hurricane returned his sword to its scabbard just as more griffons began slicing over the rooftops.

"Silver, we have to get inside! The skies are swarming with the bastards, they'll cut us down if we stay out here much longer!" Using his powerful wings, Hurricane made for

the nearest open balcony with Silver Sword right on his tail. Immediately upon entering the house, however, a sword swung from around the corner to greet him.

The blade was fast, but Hurricane was faster. Using his already extended wing, he caught the sword between two scales of his wing blades. The resounding ring of metal filled the room, accompanied by a lighter chime as the tip of the sword briefly contacted the wreath Hurricane wore over his head. Taking no notice of his near death, the black pegasus lowered his shoulder to disarm his opponent and swung a bladed wing in the direction of the attack.

Equine eyes met each other, and Hurricane managed to angle his wing away from the Legionnaire's face and into the wall above it. The blade left a deep notch in the cloudstone, which took Hurricane a second to struggle free from. When he finally did, he turned and glowered at the soldiers in the room.

"Check before you swing, damn it! If I had been any slower, you would have ended up killing your emperor!" Pointing a hoof at a centurion leaning out from behind a corner, Hurricane spat furiously: "You! You should be the one in the open here, guiding your soldiers as enemies try to get their way in! Griffons don't use bows up close, so the only thing you'd have to worry about is making sure your soldiers cut them down as they enter before they can get to you!" The centurion nodded, and Hurricane watched him walk into his prescribed position.

A chorus of cries detached itself from the main body of screaming, and Silver leaned his head out of the doorframe before rushing in. "Griffons incoming! Everypony, get ready!" Coming to a stop by Hurricane's side along the edge of the room, Silver drew his namesake weapon and readied himself. The soldiers on either side of the doorframe leading out onto the balcony slunk back against the walls, the tips of their swords twitching as they awaited the order to swing.

The first of the griffons landed on the balcony, their armor already covered in pegasus blood and feathers. Sighting the centurion in the back of the room, the beasts began to sprint towards what they thought was cornered prey. They were soon proven wrong when at the soldier's signal, pairs of blades swung around the corners and dropped the first two hybrids. The Legionnaires' slices had been too low and crashed off of steel armor, wounding the griffons but not killing them. Before they could finish their opponents, additional griffon forces barged their way into the room and began to engage the Cirrans inside.

The sickening humidity of sprayed blood stained the walls as the room became congested with fighting and dying bodies. There was hardly enough room for Hurricane to tangle with his opponent, although the larger griffon was even more handicapped by the proximity. Both combatants realized it was nearly impossible to find the space for a powerful sword swing, and their fight devolved into a series of short stabs and jumps to make the most of their tight space. The griffon was extremely fond of using its beak, a powerful short range attack that Hurricane had no counter for. The most he could do was sidestep it and swing a wing at the foe, but without the space to build up momentum his strikes were useless against its armor.

Sensing the room began to open up as more bodies hit the floor, Hurricane took the chance to backflip away from the griffon as it jabbed at him again with its beak. The arrangement of soldiers in the building had shifted, with the griffons now occupying the back of the room and the Cirrans being forced off of the balcony. Then he saw the centurion fooling with a bottle of oil, striking his wing blades against the cloudstone to produce a spark.

“Out! Out! Get out now!” Hurricane screamed to the building. Silver Sword was at his side in an instant, not taking the time to question his friend’s orders. Legionnaires fast enough to respond to Hurricane’s order dove off the side of the balcony, while the others insisted on fighting their way out. The griffons inside the building were struck with a moment of confusion as their hated foes withdrew without warning, but only a moment. A single glass bottle with a flame at the mouth was lobbed into the room, shattering amongst the Gryphon soldiers.

The screams were collective, agonized, and above all, unbearably loud. In a mere second, the far wall was engulfed in an inferno of oil and fire. The griffons and unlucky pegasi who were too slow to escape were consumed in brilliant light, their screams drowned in the crackling of the flames. The odor of burnt feathers and fur caused Hurricane to throw a wing over his face as he gagged. Silver Sword and the centurion both shielded their faces from the blast of heat as the blaze inside devoured all.

Despite Hurricane’s anger with the centurion for callously wasting the lives of two of his soldiers, he recognized the need for action over words. Similar flames were emerging from some of the other larger houses, and Legionnaires began withdrawing back to the Plaza. Seeing his second line collapse as anticipated, Hurricane rose into the air and whistled for the volunteers to once again provide their screen. The ferocity and willingness to face death still existed in the same magnitude as before, but in a sizably smaller capacity. More than half of the volunteers had gone down in the first screen; it was likely that the remaining survivors would fall with the second.



They had a minute at the most to fortify whatever they could in the open plaza. Legionnaires from all over the eastern edge of the city were filing back to the square, along with the soldiers defending the northern and southern walls. The griffon advance had finally begun to flank the defenders, squeezing them into a smaller and smaller space in a three pronged attack. Platoons dove out of the skies at adrenaline-fueled speeds, their centurions claiming spots of open street and rallying their troops around them. Spears and javelins were quickly passed around with a rising sense of urgency. What few archers remained, numbering no more than twenty at this point, congregated on the roof of a tall building adjacent to the square. With breathless precision, the final volleys were fitted to their strings.

All the while, Hurricane flitted to and fro across the plaza, making sure his units were ready. This would be the biggest bloodbath in the entire assault, with twenty-five thousand pegasi trying to hold off well over two hundred thousand griffons. The majority of the Legion would fall in the next few minutes, and what few survivors there were would retreat within the palace walls and await their demise. Hurricane knew that if he survived the next fight, there would be one griffon in particular waiting to drive a gold sword through his chest.

The volunteer screen fell apart into nothingness in a matter of seconds, and the few remaining survivors recognized the uselessness of continued struggle and quickly dove back to the plaza. From there they joined ranks with several platoons and turned their bloody weapons to the skies, awaiting the strike of the hammer that was the Gryphon Horde upon their scarred heads. Hurricane, Silver Sword, and the Praetorian Guard took to the air to provide whatever support they could for the bloodbath about to unfold below.

Stratopolis was filled with the howling and shrieking of birds of prey descending upon their next meal. Innumerable brown bodies dive-bombed the Cirran defenders below, quickly congesting the plaza with all manner of fighting. The statue of Roamulus stood tall in the center of it all, a proud monument asking every Cirran to bring forth their finest and drive their opponents to the grave. His bronzen sides were soon coated in crimson vitality as death reigned supreme around him.

Hurricane had led the Praetorian into a desperate charge against the descending griffon masses and now found himself surrounded and attacked by the flying beasts wherever he looked. He and Silver Sword flew close together, the steel pegasus shadowing Hurricane's agile movements as they searched for vulnerable targets. Griffons were easy enough to come by in the massive aerial fight, but slowing and fighting stronger targets while outnumbered spelled death in a matter of seconds. The most they could hope to do was

dive a griffon and take out its wings without slowing themselves down, allowing them to avoid the attacks of their slower opponents.

The blades along Hurricane's wings had long since turned from gold to scarlet, and the sticky vitality clung to his feathers and hampered his movements. A few vigorous shakes of his wings momentarily parted the primaries, but with more kills and the addition of fresh blood they only continued to grow in uselessness. After circling the skies for five minutes and taking down a half dozen griffons, Hurricane was straining to keep up his agility.

He paid for it when he felt a claw grab onto his leg and pull him down. Silver Sword yelped in alarm and dove to try and help Hurricane, but the griffon accelerated away from him and increased its velocity towards the ground. Struggling to break free of its grasp, Hurricane kicked and flailed his wings at his assailant, but the Gryphon always remained slightly out of reach. As the cloudstone streets approached with frightening speed, Hurricane braced himself for impact.

The collision with the ground was harsh and slammed the air from his lungs. The world spun before Hurricane's eyes, and it took his head smacking against the street again for him to realize that it wasn't just because of dizziness. Tumbling head over hooves, the Emperor came to rest in an alleyway, his back knocking over several discarded buckets of rubbish. There was incredible pain in his right foreleg, and he yelped when he attempted to put weight on the limb. A quick examination revealed that an extra joint had been added to his upper leg in the form of a broken bone.

Hurricane's sword and one of his wing blades lay in the middle of the alleyway, their bloody surfaces covered in grime and refuse. Every hobbled step towards them sent spears of pain through his body, and he did his best to raise his foreleg off of the ground and minimize the agony. The best he could do was dangle the limb a few inches above the ground as a result of the high fracture and fight through the pain.

And fight would be what he had to do. Not a moment after he had grabbed his sword did griffons begin to spill over into the alley from the square. Gripping the hilt between his teeth, Hurricane slowly backpedaled as they advanced. His eyes were searching the skies for any sign of Silver Sword, but the steel pegasus was nowhere to be found. It looked like he would have to fight off the five griffons before him without a wing blade and down one limb. He just hoped he could keep his balance on three.

The predatory nature of the griffons sensed that they had cornered injured prey, and they were content to advance at the pace of Hurricane's retreat. Their gleaming eyes watched

his limbs; the ears their feathers concealed listened to the coarseness of his breath; their tongues flickered under their beaks in anticipation of fresh blood. Hurricane dared not blink and dared not stop moving, lest they pounce on him. It was when his rear hooves clicked against the side of a building did he cringe under their advance.

“Hey, featherbrains!” The griffons’ attention was diverted from Hurricane to a diving steel pegasus for just a moment, but a moment was all Hurricane needed. Planting his rear hooves against the side of the building, the stallion bucked with all his might and propelled himself at the lead griffon with blistering speed. The two figures bowled through the other four hybrids as they rolled down the alley, and Silver Sword slammed down from the sky to crush the neck of one as a hammer would strike a nail. Two of the griffons immediately recovered and began to engage him, while the third followed Hurricane and the lead griffon as they finally separated from their tumble.

Pain and red. Hurricane came up screaming, clutching at his broken foreleg. His vision was a strained and bloody crimson, and he failed to get onto his hooves after attempting to stand, twice. The griffons were closing in on him; he could hear their breathing, sense the approaching of razor beaks that thirsted for blood. They would be on him in a second, and he needed to be ready.

Finally summoning the strength to stand, Hurricane rose to his hooves with a grunt and a scream. The first griffon had already left the ground, his outstretched talons aimed directly at Hurricane’s throat. The pegasus clamped his jaws around the hilt of his sword and swung, not caring where he hit, so long as he stopped the griffon in its tracks. His eyes were clenched shut through the pain, but so were his teeth, and the agony was transitioned into force along the glistening blade.

The shock of the sword coming into contact with metal vibrated through Hurricane’s sore teeth, and he drew his lips back away from the shaking blade as it continued to slice through his opponent. Steel, feathers, flesh, sinew, and bone were all ripped asunder in the powerful strike. A long, pain-laden scream sounded less than a foot away from Hurricane’s ear. Then the weight on his sword was released, and the remaining momentum nearly toppled the injured pegasus.

When he opened his eyes again, the griffon’s body had been very neatly cleaved apart. Hurricane’s blade had entered through the steel plating around its neck and exited out through the opposite shoulder. The griffon lay in two pieces by Hurricane’s hooves, the blood staining the three in contact with the ground red. Another strike of pain wracked his body, and he ended up collapsing onto his side just as the second griffon approached.

The beast thundered onto Hurricane's side, placing a scaly hand over his neck. Its talons dug deep into flesh, drawing blood from either side as it strangled him. Hurricane tried pushing off with his wings and left foreleg, but the griffon grabbed his right leg and twisted. The stallion's efforts were completely drained as the pain left his body in the form of a choking shout. His lungs were burning, and his eyes focused helplessly on the griffon crushing his life away from him.

A flash of recognition lighted in the pegasus' eyes. To him, most griffons had seemed alike, but this face was incredibly familiar to him. Broken thoughts tried to put themselves together in Hurricane's oxygen-deprived mind, and the visage of a burning city came back to him. A life spared in the dead of night over the burning ruins of a Gryphon metropolis. Just a terrified kid, dragged to fight a war his country started.

The grip on Hurricane's neck loosened, and the griffon backed away slowly. The strangled pegasus took the opportunity to shuffle back two paces and recover his breath, watching the familiar face study him intently. Understanding at its most basic level passed between them. The maxim 'a life for a life' has commonly been coupled with death, but it carries equal meaning in mercy. And so it was in the burning city of Stratopolis as the griffon flew away to find different victims.

His meditation on philosophy was interrupted by a cry of fear and despair. Somehow finding the balance to get to his hooves, Hurricane hobbled back down the alleyway to where Silver had been fighting. As he pierced through the shadows, the eviscerated body of a griffon greeted him, a sword still lodged in its chest. Grabbing Silver's weapon, Hurricane rounded the corner to where he heard his friend shouting.

The Emperor was pinned beneath the weight of his remaining assailant, pushing desperately with his hooves to try and shake the figure sitting on his back. The griffon had grabbed one of Silver's wings between its scaly hands and was occupied with stretching the arm to its breaking point. The wails of pain easily eclipsed whatever pain Hurricane had felt when he broke his leg, and with good reason. A pegasus used his wings for sensing the air currents, temperature, and all manner of weather, and as such they were the most sensitive limbs on his body. For one to be stretched and twisted in such a way would induce crippling pain that would cause many strong pegasi to black out.

"Silver!" Hurricane's hobble turned into a loping gallop as he rushed the griffon, trying to ignore the pain in his own leg. Silver's weapon was clenched firmly in his teeth, and he quickly drove the blade into the griffon's neck. The beast gasped around the intrusion through its windpipe as it died, but that didn't stop Hurricane's savage redemption. He

withdrew the sword and stabbed the griffon again. And again. And again. Only until its blood had been sufficiently pooled around it did Hurricane consider the griffon's brutality equally repaid.

"Silver! Silver Sword, are you alright?!" Hurricane abandoned Silver's weapon next to the griffon corpse and knelt down next to his friend. The steel pegasus was writhing in agony, gripping the base of his wing with his forehooves. The wing arm had been snapped in two, and tears of pain fell along Silver's cheeks. Hurricane could feel a shadow of the pain in his own undamaged wings simply because of the magnitude of agony it was causing Silver.

"Hold still, Silver. I'm going to bandage it." Reaching into his saddlebag, Hurricane pulled out the red Imperial cape that he had folded up and stored before the battle. Placing the cloak on the ground, Hurricane grabbed a corner between his teeth and pulled. The fabric ripped apart easily, and Hurricane fashioned a sling for Silver to rest his wing in. Gently twisting the wing into a folded shape, the black pegasus managed to secure Silver's wing against his side. The Emperor lay on his side and whimpered in pain while Hurricane took the time to fashion a sling for his own broken limb.

After both pegasi were sufficiently bandaged, Hurricane nudged Silver to his hooves. The steel pegasus reluctantly complied, his weak whimpering roughened up into short grunts of pain through clenched teeth. He took the time to retrieve his sword from the body of the griffon and sheathe it, and then together they leaned on each other and walked out of the alley.

They were greeted by a very gruesome sight. They had landed in an alleyway near the staircase that led up to the palace, and with no small amount of luck they happened to be on the side of the square still controlled by the remnants of the Legion. The price both sides had paid for the square was evident even from the ground. Bodies filled the massive plaza by the thousands, and the porous cloudstone had already slightly expanded with the saturation of blood from all the corpses on top of it. The Legion, now numbering no more than a few thousand, was still arranged into a solid line that was steadily retreating up the hill and towards the palace. They were under assault from griffons in the sky, and their numbers were falling at an alarming rate.

A golden pegasus in onyx armor stood not too far away, and Hurricane reached out to touch his shoulder. Commander Gold Moon jumped and spun his wings towards the two pegasi, but stopped well short of their faces when he saw who it was. Instead, he trotted over and offered Hurricane his shoulder to lean upon, which the sweating emperor gladly accepted.

“Commander, we need to fall back to the palace. Get the Guard to cover us while we work our way up the hill. Silver’s grounded and I can hardly walk, so we need time.” Hurricane stumbled over a dead body in his path, and his breath escaped in ragged hisses as his broken leg slammed the ground. Gold Moon bent down and helped him back up, his face full of concern.

“Very well, sir. The Guard has taken heavy casualties in the fighting, but the few of us who are left will keep the griffons off of you. Can you walk on your own?” Gold Moon wasn’t about to leave his emperor in any sort of danger, and it took many vigorous nods and affirmatives from Hurricane to convince the elder stallion that they would be alright. Once he had done so, the officer took to the skies and rallied whatever forces he had left.

In the later years of Hurricane’s life, he would look back on the walk he would come to call ‘The Gauntlet’ with a mix of awe and horror. In the present, however, he knew it simply by one name: hell. The palace stood a full two hundred feet above the city below, and the hundreds of steps were agonizing to walk without any additional handicap. Limping on three limbs and accompanying a delirious pegasus with a shattered wing, the experience was worse than anything Hurricane had ever endured. The signs of battle were all around him, and the thin protection the Praetorian Guard was providing threatened to collapse at any moment. For the first time, Hurricane realized how thirsty he was, as the blood still trickled from the wounds to his neck.

Screams of pain and death, though weaker in number than earlier, were stronger in magnitude with proximity. Praetorians and Gryphon soldiers streaked across the sky in front of him in dangerous games of chase. Bodies and their pieces would fall to the ground around him, sometimes with another living combatant still attached. Pegasi rammed griffon heads into the hillside, splitting their spines with blades and crushing their beaks with hooves. Griffons drove battered pegasi onto their backs after dropping them from several hundred feet up, ripping apart their breastplate and opening up their ribcages while the poor equines flailed in agony, screaming. Gryphon arrows skittered along the ground and impaled themselves in the cloud near Hurricane’s hooves. Blood stained Hurricane’s coat from above, and a Praetorian had tackled and filleted a griffon not more than five feet away. And through all this, the two leaders continued their slow march up the steps, trying to contain their own suffering.

After ten minutes of pure torture, Hurricane and Silver Sword crested the palace steps and strode under the colossal doorway into the marble structure. Taking a break to sit down, Hurricane and Silver Sword looked over the remains of their once proud city.

Stratopolis had been reduced to little more than a floating torch in the sky. More than half of the city was ablaze, and the currents created by the fire were slowly forming a convection vortex overhead. The surviving members of the Praetorian Guard began to land and file into the palace while the last shreds of the Legion held off the griffons with everything they had. The remaining military strength of the Empire was probably no more than a thousand soldiers still in Stratopolis.

“Look!” Silver pointed a bloody but alarmed hoof towards the center of town. Hurricane raised a hoof towards his face and squinted. He felt sick to his stomach as he saw what Silver Sword was looking at.

In the very center of town, in the mighty Plaza of the Emperor that the griffons had now taken from Cirra, the mighty statue of Roamulus was leaning. Dozens of ropes were attached to its legs, and a hundred of Magnus’ personal High Guard were working in tandem to bring it down. The groan of straining bronze was audible even from the top of the city. There was a mighty snap as the first of the bronze bolts holding the statue to the cloudstone gave way, followed by three more as the griffons pulled and heaved. Finally, with a crash of metal and a roar of jubilation, the Gryphon invaders toppled the iconic statue of Roamulus and, with it, the last of Cirra’s defense.

There were still a few pegasi circling the air above the palace, and Hurricane shouted at them to land and come within. Many of those nearest to him did, but there were several soldiers that were too far away to make it. One of those was a golden pegasus, trapped between three Gryphon High Guards and fighting for his life.

“Gold Moon!” The Emperor’s desperate shout rang through the air, and the old Praetorian tried to dive between his assailants and retreat back to the palace. When he was only a hundred feet away, he was tackled by two of the griffons and brought to the ground.

Hurricane vaguely remembered shouting something while two Praetorians restrained him from rushing in to help the commander. Gold Moon was pinned against the ground, and a sword was raised into the air to decapitate him.

The golden stallion turned his head towards Hurricane. There was a sad and pained expression on his face, but his eyes had lost none of their signature calm and dignity.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Hurricane could barely read the words on Gold Moon’s lips as he spoke for the last time. Then, with a plunge of finality, the Gryphon steel was driven through

his neck, forcing the life out of the stallion's eyes. Hurricane cursed, then turned back to his soldiers.

"Close the doors," he growled, and the Guard swung the massive iron doors shut. Then, gesturing to the throne room, Hurricane led the final hundred Cirrans left in the city of Stratopolis into the throne room. The massive oak doors were then shut as well, and Hurricane slowly walked to his throne.

Arriving at the seat of the Cirran emperor, Hurricane traced the contours of the chair. The intricate designs carved into the wood over four hundred years ago were still there, despite centuries of wear. The cushioning was soft, and the back of the chair rose impressively to command the throne room. Massive pillars of marble on either side of the throne held aloft several tons of stone ceiling. And the beautiful stained glass window, decorated with pictures of Cirra's history, let dim light into the room from its westerly positioning. It was a beautiful room, and Hurricane knew there was no better place to die.

Silver Sword walked next to him and looked through the clear panels of the windows, towards that distant shoreline where the survivors of the war were getting ready to leave. They both thought quietly of friends and family, of those who never had to see the day their empire fell. They thought of death and of the afterlife. Of the ultimate end, the end to all things, the release from pain and suffering.

And it was when the pounding on the outermost iron doors began that Silver Sword turned to Hurricane. They looked each other in the eyes and smiled sad smiles. Twenty years of stories and memories flowed freely between the two friends, of life and death, happiness and hatred, splendor and hardship. They stood together, ready to go to the grave, ready to face down their final foes and go out not with a whimper or a shout, but with the quiet honor that accompanies the mighty and the noble to the afterlife.

Thus it was a surprise to Hurricane when Silver kicked apart the window, smashing a hole in the stained glass just wide enough for a pegasus to fly through. Hurricane looked to the hole and back to Silver, his expression betraying his confusion and bewilderment.

"What is this, Silver?" Hurricane's voice fluctuated nervously and betrayed the slightest hint of indignation behind it. But both pegasi knew very well what it meant, even if they weren't ready to accept it.



“Go, Hurricane. There’s no need for you to be here anymore. You’ve done your duty, and now you can go.” Silver Sword sadly gestured to the hole in the window, his good wing flexing ever so slightly.

Hurricane wouldn’t have it. “Silver, I’m the Emperor, not you. And I’ll be damned if I leave this city and those who died for it now. It would be cowardly!”

“There’s no shame in survival, Cane. You know that. I know that. You have the means to find your survival. Me?” He fluttered one wing gently while the other remained unmoving. “My fate is already set into stone. Take this chance, Hurricane. Think of Swift, think of Twister, think of your child!”

“Silver, what about our compact? Hurricane and Silver Sword, together to the end, as comrades, friends,” he gripped Silver’s shoulder and shook it vigorously, “brothers! There is no Hurricane without Silver Sword, and the opposite is true!”

Silver Sword smiled sadly and shook off Hurricane’s hoof. “Hurricane, I want to tell you something. In all these months, you know why I never got a mare? Not because I couldn’t find one, but because I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to have a reason to let you die instead of me. You’ve got Swift, you’ve got a family, Hurricane! Don’t turn your back on them!”

Hurricane’s voice was desperate. “But I’ll be turning my back on you then! I don’t want to leave you to die alone!”

The oak doors to the throne room began to thunder vigorously. The Praetorians in the room tensed up and kept their eyes locked on the door, oblivious to what was transpiring behind them. Silver Sword gripped his blade between his teeth and turned to face the incoming griffons. “Hurricane, just leave now, damn it! This is your last chance to see your family!”

The Emperor’s words did not come immediately, and that was when Silver knew he had succeeded. Hurricane tried to argue further, but Silver Sword wouldn’t let him. Raising his hind legs, he delivered a powerful buck that sent Hurricane crashing through the stained glass and into the sky beyond. He leaned out the window as the black stallion landed on his back outside the palace walls.

“Go, Hurricane! The griffons are breaking in now, so get out of here!” Silver flashed a nervous glance over his shoulder as the shouting from within increased.

Hurricane sat up, cradling his broken leg. A reluctant acceptance had drifted over his face, and he nodded slowly. Rising into the air, he flew up to Silver Sword's level one last time.

"Thank you, Silver. For everything. For being the friend I needed you to be, for always being there for me. And for being the one to die so I can live." The two pegasi bumped hooves, and Silver flashed the heartiest smile he could manage.

"You too, Hurricane. You're going to be a legend someday if you aren't already. I'm damned proud to have fought alongside you, and to have called you my friend." A massive crack of wood and the sound of splinters hitting the floor drew Silver's attention back to the throne room for a second. "Keep Twist in line, and you can tell Swift I won the bet." His lips curved into a devilish grin, leaving Hurricane confused.

"Bet? What bet?" Hurricane's hoof slowly withdrew contact from Silver's as the steel pegasus set his forelegs back within the throne room.

"That I could get you out alive. She didn't think I could do it, but I did." The shouting from within escalated, and so did the cries of metal against metal. Silver Sword gave one last look to Hurricane, the desperation filling his eyes. "Now go, Hurricane! There's no more time to waste!"

Hurricane nodded and began to glide backwards while keeping his eyes locked on his lifelong friend. "I'll make sure Cirra never forgets you, Silver. May we never forget all who gave their lives here today, and above all, the pegasus of steel, the final defender of Stratopolis."

One final smile was exchanged between the two stallions. "I wouldn't have it any other way." The steel pegasus saluted his friend and emperor, and then vanished into the darkness of the throne room, never to be seen again.

And Hurricane flew as fast as he could out of the ruins of Stratopolis, his wings heavier than they had ever felt in his life.

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"I wouldn't have it any other way," Silver said back to his friend, a note of forlorn sadness to his voice. He saluted his friend, an action both regimental and casual in execution. Then he turned away. The griffons had already smashed through the door and were overrunning the last of the Praetorian Guard within the throne room. It was time he

lived up to his skill and make the name Silver Sword one that would command awe in the households of Gryphus for years to come!

There were over four hundred griffons in the initial surge into the throne room to attack a hundred Praetorians. Silver Sword grabbed his weapon as he stood in front of the throne. His duties of Emperor demanded he protect the throne, even if the emperor himself was gone. He took the time to observe the craftsmanship of his sword for the first time in a long time. The Praetorian iron was intricately detailed and finer than any steel. Even under the blood, it was a powerful weapon from appearance alone. Too bad it would be lost today.

The Gryphon High Guard was leading the charge into the throne room, and one of its captains spotted Silver Sword. Raising a hand, the beast sped through the center of the room and towards the steel pegasus. It was accompanied by four of its companions, and together they approached the wounded stallion, swords raised over their heads.

Silver Sword waited for them to approach, then cut low under the captain's strike to use his own blades against it. The griffon tried to ram its spiked shoulders into Silver's neck, but the steel pegasus was too quick. He caught the spikes with the tip of his sword and began to hammer the bulk of his good wing arm into the griffon's armpit. Three harsh and powerful strikes in rapid succession, and the captain's arm was split from its body. The griffon raised his remaining arm and clutched at the spurting shoulder, trying to stem the flow of blood. Silver then directed his sword towards the griffon's exposed neck and cut its throat.

The expedient and painful demise of the Gryphon captain gave pause to the rest of the soldiers following him. His fur matted with blood and sweat, Silver Sword stepped forward and taunted them. "My name is Emperor Silver Sword, last defender of the Empire! Throw yourselves unto my blade if you seek the same fate as your captain!"

His cocksure attitude only pushed the High Guard into a greater frenzy. Together, they rushed Silver and began to cut at him. The steel pegasus slid in between the attacks, delivering quick and painful blows wherever the opportunity was available. Blades whistled over his head and near his limbs, but nothing could contact the whirling stallion. The first griffon fell with a ravaged scream and a spurt of blood, spraying the combatants with red vitality.

A slash was blocked with a bloody wing blade and countered with a sword. The grating of metal was all Silver needed to know that his sword had pierced steel, and he pulled the weapon back out and swung it behind his head. He managed to catch a griffon blade on

the backstroke, and he lowered his neck to disarm the hybrid. Rising onto his front hooves, Silver delivered a powerful buck to the griffon and sent it toppling backwards.

Metal smashed against metal, and Silver Sword was sent tumbling down the steps. The onyx armor stood strong against the griffon steel, but the black surface still carried a dent from the powerful strike. The griffon who delivered the blow hissed at him and lunged off of the elevated platform, its serrated claws extended to cut through his neck. Silver desperately raised his legs to block it, and he kept the griffon mere inches from his body by doing so. He swung his head side to side, smashing his sword across the griffon's armored helm twice. On the third strike he managed to split its face in two, and the body fell to the side covered in blood.

As more and more Gryphon High Guards threw themselves at Silver Sword and were subsequently felled, one large griffon stood in the back of the room and watched. His gold and amethyst armor glinted in the fires already consuming the palace. The last of the Praetorian Guard had fallen with the exception of the Imperator, and the Gryphon emperor Magnus held the rest of his troops back from joining those already engaging the steel pegasus.

There were a series of snaps as the sheaths to a deadly array of throwing knives were loosened. Taking one from his belt, Magnus watched as it caught the light along its deadly blade. Spinning the weapon around so that he grasped the metal, Magnus raised it over his head and waited. The mass of bodies around Silver Sword shifted and twisted violently as the pegasus and his griffon assailants struggled to move faster and faster. An opening appeared, and faster than one could blink, the blade was loosed from Magnus' scaly hand towards Silver's body.

Silver was in the process of bashing a griffon's brains across the floor when he felt something hit his side with a solid *thunk*. The impact drew pause into his actions, and he spared a glance to his side just long enough to see the knife embedded into his flank. The pain came shortly after, but there were more pressing matters to attend to. Pivoting on his rear hoof, Silver threw up a block against a griffon's stab and countered by slicing one of its wings off.

Magnus grunted in annoyance when his target didn't fall. Pulling out another knife, he let it fly at Silver with great precision and speed. This one struck near his shoulder, but all it extracted was a quick grunt of pain before the pegasus sliced the neck of a High Guard open. Two blades were drawing blood from deep wounds in Silver's body, but he refused to be slowed.

More blades were exposed to the light, and one by one, Magnus threw them at Silver Sword. Three, four, and five knives riddled his side, and still the Emperor fought on. There was only one High Guard left in front of him, and with unhindered agility he sidestepped the beast and fought on through the pain. Then the sixth knife struck his shattered wing, and the pegasus finally caved to pain.

Eager to exact vengeance, the High Guard raised its blade to the air. But before it could strike, a throwing knife struck it in the wrist. The griffon shouted, more from surprise than actual pain, and it quickly dropped its blade and stepped back. Magnus was advancing this time, alone and furious.

“Your zealotry has been noted, soldier, but you know how I work.” He gripped the griffon’s neck tightly for a second and looked into his eyes. “When I become involved, I am the one to finish the kill.” The High Guard nodded, the movements shaky and erratic in fear. Satisfied, the Gryphon emperor released his underling and advanced towards Silver Sword.

The steel pegasus had taken the time to reach into his saddlebag and pull out a clear glass bottle. As Magnus approached, he struggled with his shaky limbs to raise it over his head. The blood pouring from his wounds was profuse, and dizziness and nausea was swiftly overtaking his head. Magnus saw the bottle rising, and he knocked it down effortlessly like he was disarming a child. The glass shattered against the marble floor, spilling lantern oil across the floor and around Silver’s body.

Malevolence spiked through Magnus’ imperial façade, and he knelt down on Silver’s chest. He clamped a scaled hand on the pegasus’ neck and squeezed, his serrated claws drawing forth founts of blood. He watched the stallion struggle before speaking.

“You. I remember you. You were there in Nimbus when I was about to kill your friend. Last I heard, he had become emperor of your pathetic nation. Where is he now?” Magnus loosened his grip on Silver’s neck, allowing him to speak.

“Gone... You just missed him... How does that make you feel?” Silver put the best defiance into his voice he could manage, despite the strangulation. His good wing was slowly rising along his side, unnoticed or unheeded by the large griffon on top of him.

“Pity. I had thought he was better material than that. And I thought he would have been eager to claim retribution for his slaughtered family and razed town. I suppose he was more cowardly than I imagined. What was his name? I want to ensure he is remembered in all of Gryphus as our most timid enemy.”

Silver laughed quietly. “No, Magnus, Emperor Hurricane was in no way timid or cowardly. He knows what you know: that as long as one pegasus lives, you haven’t won. This war wasn’t about boundaries or ideals, it was about vengeance. Vengeance against the whole pegasus race. And so he did the smart thing to ensure that no matter what you do, you will always lose.”

Magnus reapplied his grip to Silver’s throat. “Wrong. I will find Hurricane and the rest of you Cirrans. And when I do, I will place the heads of every last stallion, mare, and foal of your pathetic race on spikes around Angenholt. Now, tell me. What is your name, so that I may know who this heathen is that I send to the grave?”

Silver’s expression twisted into a confident smile. “My name is Silver Sword, Imperator of the Cirran Empire. And you?!” His wing had been razed to full height, the iron blades aimed at the ground. “I don’t care what false god you claim to be, but you will answer to the true Gods for your crimes!”

With the climax of Silver’s verdict, his good wing smashed the ground at full force. The impact of iron against stone created the smallest of sparks, but it was all he needed. The flames were greedily taken up by the lantern oil around them, stretching tall and orange into the room. Magnus’ momentary shock was enough time for the fire to catch hold, and soon his mighty coat of feathers and fur were ablaze. He pushed himself away from Silver Sword, flailing his burning limbs about his body. But it was too late. The fires consumed more and more, and there was no water to douse him.

“Help! Help me, damn it! Somebody, help!” The torch of a dying emperor advanced desperately towards the griffons around it, but the beasts retreated from the sight. Months of cruel and ruthless policies had earned him obedience but not loyalty, and the emperor found he had no allies in his death throes. There were many faithful zealots among his soldiers who hailed him as an infallible god since the day he claimed the throne of Gryphus for himself. Not a one started forward to help now. He collapsed to the floor, reaching blistered talons out to those nearest to him. “Help...”

And all the while, Silver Sword laughed as the flames consumed his body. He laughed as he watched Cirra’s greatest enemy fall to his knees, pleading for his life like a child. Gryphus might have won, but Cirra had not lost. Hurricane was safe, Swift Spear was safe, and that was all he cared about.

“Burn, you son of a bitch.”

Releasing his broken appendage from the sling, Silver spread his wings to either side of his body. Then, taking a deep breath of fire and smoke, he went to meet the Gods with a smile.

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The sun was low in the west when Hurricane's tired wings brought him towards the coast. The rays of light had turned from gray to orange as the fiery orb burnt away the clouds, spreading a dim amber glow over the surrounding countryside. To the weary pegasus, it was the perfect metaphor for an Empire in its death throes.

There had been no signs of equine life in his lonely flight to the sea. The farmhouses he had seen had been abandoned, and no smoke rose from the chimneys of the small settlements he passed by. The Legionnaires who had chosen to leave had done their job, leading whoever they could towards salvation. The thought provided slight comfort for Hurricane as he began to lower his altitude.

Altus was a small town, even smaller than Zephyrus, with only little more than a dozen houses clustered against the shore. Even so, its population had swollen to hundreds of times its size with the influx of refugees from Stratopolis and the surrounding countryside. The buildings were engulfed in masses of tired and frightened Cirrans, while the remaining Legionnaires were busy trying to shepherd them into flight groups. At regular minute-long intervals, another flight of a thousand pegasi would begin the trek across the ocean.

Hurricane landed awkwardly on three hooves at the edge of the town and began to slowly pass through the crowds. At first, no pony recognized the battered soldier or acknowledged his presence, but soon the Legion took notice of him. Soldiers began to line themselves at his flanks and escort him through the crowds, attempting to make inquiries about the battle at Stratopolis or about his wounds. Hurricane ignored them all, and eventually they sank into silence.

It took more than ten minutes to get to the docks where the flight groups were taking off, but soon Hurricane's hooves stepped off of sand and onto wood. Making his way to an unused section, the pegasus sat down and stripped off his armor.

"Food. Water." The simple commands were taken up by two young Legionnaires, who quickly left in search of the asked-for items. The rest of Hurricane's guards formed a simple perimeter around him, and the black pegasus rested his head on the floor and looked towards the setting sun.

Drink and sustenance were quickly found for the emperor, and Hurricane slowly ate his meal. The water was sweeter than any nectar to his parched throat, and the loaf of bread he had been provided with was comparable to the food of the Gods. As the strength returned to his limbs, Hurricane sat up and began to look through the crowds.

He sat there for the better part of an hour, watching as flights of pegasi left him and Dioda behind for their new home. At some point he had taken a quick nap, so it was a surprise to him when a hoof found his shoulder out of nowhere and prodded him to awareness.

“Hurricane...”

The black stallion’s ears perked up, and his head turned cautiously towards the source of the voice. His nose brushed against a soft, cream coat, plated and decorated with gold and onyx armor. Next to the mare stood a smaller filly, who was almost a mare herself.

“Swift... Twister...” Hurricane somehow found the strength to rise off of the docks and stumble into their forelimbs. The three pegasi met in a tearful embrace, Twister and Swift Spear being careful not to put pressure on Hurricane’s broken leg.

“We were waiting and hoping that you would be safe. We sat here the entire day and waited, watching the skies for any signs of you. I guess when we left to get something to eat was when you came down,” said Swift. Hurricane nodded, leaning more into their embrace.

“Silver saved my life. He made me leave while he fought off the griffons in the throne room. It was horrible, Swift. So many dead. Silver, Gold Moon. Too many.”

There was no response that Swift could come up with to lessen the hurt.

“They gave their lives because they wanted to, Hurricane, not because they were taken from them,” Twister offered. “And I’m sure Silver was happy to know that you escaped. Wherever he is now, he’ll be looking down on us and watching over us.”

A troop of Legionnaires approached Hurricane and gestured towards the skies. “Um, sir,” one began, “The griffons will be all over this place in a few hours. We need to move, Emperor... if that’s okay with you, that is.” The soldier took a nervous step back as he awaited the stallion’s response.

A tense sigh left Hurricane’s lips as he rose to address the Legionnaire. “I am no longer your Emperor. An emperor requires an empire, and Cirra has none. From now on, you



may address me simply as Commander Hurricane.” The soldier was taken aback, but a wave from Hurricane’s wing prompted him to accept the change in title and leave. He was stopped when Hurricane raised his voice again to address him. “Wait. You look familiar. Have I seen you somewhere before?”

The pegasus, who was rather small for his age, turned to look at Hurricane. His nervous eyes avoided direct contact with the commander’s, and a hoof shuffled the ground anxiously. “I’m Legionnaire Pan Sea, sir. I trained with you back at Fort Updraft. They sent me back to Altus when I was injured at Hengstead.”

Hurricane nodded. “I thought you looked familiar. The old twenty-third is all gone now, as I’m sure you know. But whatever. Legionnaire Pansy, was it? It’ll be good to have a familiar face around.” Rather than correct Hurricane’s mispronunciation of his name, Pan Sea weakly smiled and took a step back towards the rest of the Legionnaires gathered around them and waited.

Then, Hurricane turned and pressed his nose into Twister’s fur. “And you’re right, Twist. Those who gave their lives in Stratopolis did so that we could have a better tomorrow. And now,” he angled his face to where the sun was beginning to disappear into the ocean, “now we honor them by doing just that.”

The three pegasi nuzzled each other one more time, and Hurricane led them into the next flight group. With a mighty surge of air, the thousand Cirrans left the ground and flew slow circles over Altus as they increased in altitude. As they reached the stream of air flowing to the west, they began to tail off and fly out across the ocean.

Hurricane gave one last look to the lands he was leaving behind, knowing it would be the first and last time he would cross the mighty ocean. To the east, the moon and the stars were beginning to rise against the dying sun, overpowering the land of Dioda and the holds of Gryphus.

And as the sun finally fell, night took over the skies. With one last surge of shadow, the form of a black stallion melted into the darkness high above the ocean.

*14th of First Seed, 401 After Empire*

*Writing was never something that I took a profound interest in. There are things I consider more important for a pegasus to know; how to plow a field, how to navigate stormy currents, how to handle a sword and wing blades. Above all, however, I believe that a pegasus must learn how to remember, and maybe it is through this belief that I feel the need to write.*

*There are many things we must remember, being the proud Cirrans that we are. We were able to save many of the books of our history from the libraries in Stratopolis, but those will only do for us so much. Somepony must write an account of what has transpired throughout the past year, and perhaps there is no pony better qualified than me. I, Commander Hurricane, rose through the ranks from lowly pegasus farmer to the emperor of a dying nation. My actions helped to shape the future for the pegasus race, how little of actions they were. Do not mistake my claims for boastfulness, for I take no pride in my position. Rather, they are the grim truth as told from the heart of a tired stallion who has done so much in such little time.*

*My account is long, for there was much that has transpired in the year since the beginning of my story. Perhaps it would be best if I start at the end and go back to the beginning. Yes, that will work much better.*

*The Cirran Empire fell on the 11th of Shivering Rains, 401 After Empire. Stratopolis was besieged by a griffon force that was many times larger than the garrison of volunteers who had stayed to defend it. I know not the number of griffons that fell, but I suppose that my fifty thousand pegasi slayed well over one hundred thousand of the beasts. We made them pay for the city with a much higher price than we lost defending it, and still they did not win. For our civilians were safe, and crossed the ocean later that day to lands unknown to the griffons.*

*The flight took roughly twenty days for myself and my companions, for being the leader of my people, I took it upon myself to stay towards the rear and escort the young and old who could not move at as fast a pace as those in the front. Food was scarce, and many of our group succumbed to hunger before they spotted land. Only supplies of food from the fastest of our fliers who had reached the distant shores and gathered sustenance to bring back to us saved more from death.*

*When we landed on the shores of this new continent, my soldiers told me that our entire population numbered little more than four hundred thousand. Out of a nation of fifteen million at the start of the war, that number weighs heavily in my heart. The griffons were indeed thorough with the slaughter of my people, and the famine they induced in their conquest killed many more. But we were safe, and perhaps there was never a higher price paid for safety than in the Red Cloud War.*

*We had few seeds to plant and little food left over, so we approached the other two pony tribes that inhabited the area—the earth ponies and the unicorns—and we struck a deal with them. We offered them our military protection, for even with fifty thousand Legionnaires we were still far superior in the art of waging war than either of the other two tribes. In return we asked for little more than food, and both tribes happily agreed to share their supplies with us. The way the two leaders eyed each other's throats leads me to believe that they wish for us to ally with one and destroy the other, and the best way to score allies was through offering us aid in our time of need. So we arranged for the earth ponies to give us food, while the unicorns manufacture many of the goods we need to begin building a home for ourselves. In return we offered to police their towns and utilize our natural ability to manipulate the weather to encourage the growth of earth pony crops and curtail the frigid winds that consistently blister the unicorn settlements in the mountains.*

*Not more than half a month after our exodus from Dioda, we are still in the process of constructing our capital city. A strong base for the city already exists, located some miles north of the other tribes. Every day, more houses are erected. The shell of the palace has already been completed, and I write this from within the barren walls of my study, home only to a table, a chair, and a bookshelf. When the city is complete, it should be able to hold a population of two million, for I foresee the rapid growth of my ponies in this new land. As we have agreed with the other two tribes to limit our settlements to the sky so as not to interfere with their borders, I have selected a name that represents the essence of our element. Before the year is out, I hope that the city of Cloudsdale will be complete in all its glory.*

*We held an official ceremony yesterday to honor those who died during the Red Cloud War, and we praised the Gods for having directed us to this new land of plenty. Then we set down to the mundane task of rebuilding the government. The Senate is still intact in structure, but I ordered that all senators be put up for reelection in the coming days. I was reappointed by the people in an overwhelming decision to maintain my place as leader of the pegasus nation. As a result, my first actions were to axe the title of 'Emperor' from our leadership position and symbolically downgrade our standing from an empire to a tribe. Four hundred thousand does not a nation make, and I felt our current situation was that*

*closer to the days of Roamulus and the Cirran tribe. And so Cirra has gone from tribe to empire and back again, in little more than four centuries.*

*My wife, Swift Spear, and my sister, Twister, have adjusted well to the new position we find ourselves in. I have appointed Swift to oversee the reconstruction of the Praetorian and to select viable candidates from the surviving Legionnaires and officers to be promoted into the ranks of the Guard. Under her hoof, the Legion and the Praetorian will flourish once more into the powerful force they were known to be. Twister has taken a keen interest in building relations with the other tribes, and so I have made her the first Cirran Legatus, the pegasus who shall represent me when I cannot be bothered to attend diplomatic meetings. Seeing the world was something Twister always wanted to do back in Dioda but never had the chance. Now she can see more of this world than any other pegasus before her in her travels to the lands of the different tribes.*

*But perhaps I have deliberated too far. The secretaries are already hard at work cataloguing the events of Cirra in this new land, and they will probably do a more thorough and clean job than I could ever hope for. Instead, let me turn my quill back towards the past. Pegasus historians many years from now will look back on the days of the Red Cloud War and attempt to draw lines where they believe they should be drawn. Unless there is some record of what actually happened, hyperbolic interpretation and sentimentalism will take the place of the truth. Therefore I must write down what has happened, so all shall know, hundreds of years from now, the death of an empire in all its grim detail. They shall hear the account from the mouth of a pegasus who lived through it and has nothing more to add, because to add or detract would dishonor those who died for Cirra. They shall hear the truth, with no detail spared, no edges smoothed, no sins forgiven.*

*Come, you who read this, and sit down. Gather some food, a warm mug of ale, and a candle to read by. Make yourself at home, for through these words I extend my hospitality to you from the grave. Let me tell you a tale of life and death, war and peace, and the fall of a mighty empire. You who read this, open your mind and forget that which second-hoof history has taught you. These words come from experience and life in its finest detail.*

*Let me tell you a tale of Skies Long Forgotten.*