## **Chapter 1**

## In which we determine the losers

Starry knew that his ears glowed when he used magic, but he'd hoped no one would be watching his ears since his cousin had control of the ball, and his older sister had broken her leg sliding into a Farmer boy last year. And all he wanted, was a little extra cushion between his leg and Rake's chest, currently barreling towards Marble Rocksmith.

Not surprisingly Rake Farmer still bowled through Starry, who was almost on the ground, on his side, when Marble, of all ponies, shouted out "Hey! No magikeeeeef" Despite having been cut off by the blow, followed by the ground, followed by Hoe & Corn dogpiling on the much smaller filly, her cry did not go unnoticed.

"Y'all think those ears make you something special?" grumbled the eldest player on Farmer clan's team, Butternut. "You don't want to play by pony rules you can just sit out."

"I might, but our side is already outnumbered because no one else wants you to break their legs." Starry Skies replied, trying to stay calm.

And suddenly the whole field was filled with yelling. The Farmer ponies saying things like "Are you **still** all riled up about that?" and Marble trying to say "That was a freak accident" And Starry's other teammate, Damp Skies offering a snarky "They **did** pay restitution."

It was Starry's cousin Damp, that ramped things up though, pushing against Rake's rump saying "It's not like their clan can't afford to pay that again, though. And hey, your sister can nearly walk now, can't she?"

Each Farmer pony launched off into some angry angle about having only paid for a year's lost work, having paid at least a year's wages, or that none of the Farmer clan were weak boned enough to not have recovered already, or that if magic was used on the field before any legs were broken than clearly the freak was the cause of any miscalculation. The logic of Starry using his magic to somehow break his own leg during a game of mudball was daunting enough he didn't say more. Starry did levitate Rake and Corn away from his cousin who, while definitely escalating this rapidly towards violence, was his relative, and the Farmer boys were more like clients.

Starry prepared to levitate all the Farmer players as the two combatants were forcibly removed from the theatre, by about four hooves back and not quite one hoof off the ground leading to squealing that would shame any pig as their legs pumped through a full gallop pace at wild speeds. But instead of cries of battle, Butternut Farmer's face turned cold, hard, unforgiving ... and silent.

The remaining players also fell silent, with Marble Rocksmith quickly glancing back and forth between Butternut and Starry. After a breath, The two rambuctious Farmer colts realized what was going on, and they settled down. Starry lowered them to the ground, but never looked away from Butternut, who looked like he wanted Starry dead right about now. All Butternut said, however, also not looking away from Starry, and shouting as if the teams were scattered across the whole field, was "The games are over! There are no worthy opponents here!"

The Farmer clan backed away, not looking away from the disgraced runty player who didn't want his leg broken and had the magic to up his chances at a critical moment. Marble squinted at him, clearly disappointed but not sure how to say it. After a breath she grimaced, and turned to walk back to her tent, on the far side of the impromptu and currently empty food court.

Starry's cousin damp eyed him with more open disapproval. "That all seemed ... " She looked back at the finally turned away Farmer team before making eye contact again. "needlessly harsh. On both sides of the argument."

Starry nodded, and turned to gauge where his parents might be now. Walking back approximately towards the Rocksmith tent-town, he swerved instead to drop suddenly to the ground, and curl up next to an oak tree at the edge of the picnic table region. Starry was too caught up in his own pain to notice if his whimpering was leaving his head or not.

After an interminible moment, Rustling Skies' husky voice rang out from what sounded like about fifty hooves away. "Lost the game of tagball, or game of life?" Her sister was three inches, fully half a hoof taller than her older brother. Her leg still in a cast, she hobbled somewhat noisily once you knew what sort of swishing sounds to listen for. Her hooves visible within his blurred vision, Starry heard her say to some nearby pony "Are you going to be around a few minutes? I won't be able to get back up and we won't know how soon the special unicorn will be down until it's too late." A pause, no voices heard so the socially functioning ponies must be making head motions to indicate the answer. "I can't bend this leg or pull on it so I'll be stuck. Okay, thanks though."

Having no promise of help unless she pulled the "special unicorn" out of his morass, Rustling Skies nevertheless positioned herself to where she'd be able to make eye contact with the curled up psuedo-foal. Her right shoulder loudly splatted into the mud as she dropped gracelessly onto her side, cast held mostly off the wet mud by being on the leg more nearly away from the ground.

Starry clenched his jaw, and refused to open his eyes. One deep sigh later, he murmured "They're a bunch of bullies."

Rustling replied "And no one wants to play with them because of it. I actually think you really helped them see how isolated they're making their family." A fly buzzed, stopped buzzing, and Starry heard the swish of air indicating his sister had flicked an ear at it. It buzzed again, landed on his nose, and he exhaled sharply to send the irritant on its way. "I think you shouldn't isolate yourself either, though."

Now he did open his eyes, and saw her reverse blueberry-roan coat, and soft green eyes. *She could get a scholorship; go to the city, learn their sciences about plants, and get along just fine. Me?* "Know of a town of awkward, gentle, unskilled unicorns?"

A gentle smile, an easy answer. "Pony Villa." The place doesn't exist, of course. The four families of the eastern plains had no record of a unicorn existing, and didn't, he'd been told, want to believe his miscolored ears meant anything until he levitated an ear of corn off the table when he was four months old and didn't have teeth to eat food yet. *Still*...

"If I go over the mountains, they're going to wonder why I never got a destiny mark." Starry was closing his eyes again, sucking into himself to avoid the inevitable truth that his sister was right, he couldn't stay here. So it was only in his mind he saw Rustling's tatoo of two quill pens tied together with a rope.

Rustling waited for him to expend his temper, and finally exhale and relax, his head dropping to the wet earth, before chiding him. "You could get something in the mountain town. Spend a year traveling the continent, come back with whatever tale you wanted, any squiggle could mean anything you thought others should remember about your trip outside."

This topic had come up before. His father's mark was of a shovel, and he'd confided in his oldest he didn't really know what to put there but the day before, his whole class had gone out to the farrier to get their flanks shaved and he didn't want to be the odd pony out. Though three of the others had flighty hooves and didn't go to the village tatooist after all. And Rustling was an extrovert; everything she did was in light of other ponies, but being the only magic wielding pony in recorded history had forced Starry inside his own head for his whole life. "Destiny marks are supposed to be about me, not what I'm trying to haughtily teach others by brute force." he said, as he eased himself into a standing position.

And still with a leg declared not fit for walking, his sister waited for his big little bro to levitate her to a standing position, after which she added "You and your aversion to brutes." But she stared in surprise at the mud sticking to her right shoulder, as if this had never occurred to her. And so Starry rolled his eyes as he picked off the worst of it, before creating a giant magical brush to straighten out his own coat hairs.

They walked back to their family tent in silence, and while Starry hadn't quite decided on when, or under what pretense to leave the plains, he was of age and could spend some time exploring the rest of the pony world. Heck his sister Rustling was of age, in so much as anyone he'd met in their three trips to Wholesol and back had shown him. The thought in his mind had been to travel to the sand dunes to the north, then race down the coast to Wholesol, spend a day pretending to shop, maybe pretending to consider a destiny mark, then come home. Three, maybe four days away from the routine, to clear his head and help him decide where he fit into this farming community. Maybe digging wells. I can dig farther and faster then half the contraptions the Farmer boys put together. But he hadn't said anything to his parents, Open or Blue when his mother, aptly named as every aspect was some version of blue, including her nearly black tongue, announced "Fireside gathering on the sand! Lets go fillies and gentlecolts!"

It was a half hour of walking, and in his new mindset of seeing the whole world, or at least his tiny corner of it, he was reminded that other foals' parents didn't usually giggle. But as Starry carried Rustling by levitation so they could keep up, he saw, again, his parents walking shoulder to shoulder, using their chin hairs to tickle the other pony's nose, giggling and laughing like carefree young students. Five minutes into the walk, they met up with Damp and his aunt Carefree, who was in her own way as unique as Starry. Pale tan coat with vaguely round spots of metallic red, each spot a different size and shape. There were several roans in their family group, but she was the only spotted equine in recorded history, and she had grown hard and bitter about it over her years. Losing her brother and daughter to a tsunami during the daughter's last-foal trip, the same one Starry was contemplating, hadn't helped her outlook on life.

Starry had only seen her chuckle twice, and never laugh or giggle.