## Chapter 1

## 1

Starry had never had a chance, he realized in the late dawn's light, to see Fuscia's eyes. From a distance they just looked pink, but they were actually two colors. Not different, heterochromia, but there was a line of robin's egg blue at the pupil, and it faded and crackled and spread, the outer sections a deep, rich purple. *Fuscia*, her namesake was in her eyes. "You about ready Clown Shoes?"

Maize, who was he'd learned yesterday was four months older than Starry's some-day-he-hoped marefriend, was a much paler yellow of coat, and had simple blue eyes. He shouted back, having just tightened the hitch that held the cart poles to his side. "Anytime Fasciitas. You figure your cart is big enough for all your makeup?"

In truth the female cousin's cart was three quarters of a hoof narrower, and with the higher clearance had quite a bit smaller capacity than what Maize's cart, carrying all their repair tools and spare lumber and scrap metal in case they needed to repair any of the carts on the road trip. Starry Skies wasn't pulling a cart, though there was a box with grain and spices he was responsible for, but as the coastline's only unicorn he had just put the box on a single axle, and nailed in a curved piece of driftwood at the front, like a handle, but wrapped it with copper wire then counter-wound with iron wire. This seemed to make it easier for him to 'grab' it with levitational energy than the box, or even the box with a handle. He was, again as the only unicorn, much more an ousted loner than either of these Planter ponies, but he had never had a nickname applied to him, and part of him didn't know how to deal with the deliberately punitive names the Farmer colts had given these two, though the Farmer family didn't limit their disdain to just a few of the Planters.

Walking out towards the driveway, thence the road, Starry called out "Do you two want to go by those names? Or is that a privilege held by Planters alone?" His ears glowed, the box rolled ... and squeaked. His companions followed, and their contraptions did not squeak. Mentally he consoled himself that his strengths had always been in studies of the mind, though that same mind called back that even in the large town of Wholesol, ponies made more money trading their

muscle than those that had only knowledge and thinking to trade for.

The Planters called out, her comment being "No" and the deeper male voice said "Sure and it is." After Maize chuckled and Fuscia rolled her eyes. They tried again, her saying "Whatever you want" while he amended with "only on Tuesdays."

Nodding, Starry looked to the mountain range, still covered in clouds, still unlit by direct sunlight, still too distant and indistinct to be a valid destination, and spoke "The Fasciitas twins thus begin their last road-trip as foals."

Clown Shoes actually burst out with a single but hearty laugh just before the young mare blew her nose in dismissal, to which she added a verbal retort of "Starry, has anypony ever said you're weird?"

It would be far too tiring to carry it any significant way, but Starry Skies levitated the whole cart, causing it to cease squeaking. He looked back at her, having turned his head far enough to see both her eyes with both of his. She made eye contact, perhaps expecting a comment, but after half a breath her eyes shifted to the glow surrounding his ears. With a mixture of chagrin and regret, she pursed her lips, and looked back to their pathway.

Knowing all too well what it was like to be called the strange one, Maize of the way too big hooves called out into the silence, long before it became awkward, and indeed just as Starry had set his squeaking cart back down, that "I suppose if I were to interpret Open Skies' instruction literally you shouldn't call Fuscia anything because that all needs to happen later when you're formally courting her."

Starry thought about his dad's story about getting his destiny mark tattooed too early because of peer pressure to be a grown pony as soon as mechanically possible. *He would totally understand if Plantar comes back in foal.* Not that that would make it right, just that he could talk his way through the faux pas. Aloud, he said "You would have to relay all our words to each other, I guess. Tell her I'm sorry my cart squeaks, would you?"

He heard her sharp intake of breath, and could tell too she had turned to look at her cousin when she said with more energy that really was needed, "Let him know if we meet our third cousin something removed I'll court him instead and age difference be alicorn cursed."

Unlike certain ponies Starry had been fascinated to speak with, young Maize's neck did not creak or pop as he straightened to look back at the back of Starry's head, but he still felt he had the timing right to interrupt the opening of Maize's mouth with "If age and experience are her pursuits, remind her please that I'm the oldest here; I'm clearly the buck she was looking for all along."

Starry felt disproportionate satisfaction hearing the other colt's jaw snapping shut. After a breath, for he insisted on not looking back, he heard Fuscia tell her chaperone and interpreter to "Let him know that arrogant haughtiness is a Skies trait, and Planter stallions are much more down to earth."

Starry was too caught up in the guessed at timing, the briefly perked ears this time, soon to be followed by a tucked in chin, waiting for Starry to reply without the chaperone's help. *There. He should be extending his chin again, mouth about to open*. But what to say? 'down to earth'? "Yes, that's usually where they find ponies that have been buried. Down in the Earth."

And now it was Starry Skies' turn to feel the sting of embarrassment. It had scarce been a decade since Able Planter had taken this very route for his last time as a carefree foal before the Farmer filly his mother had picked out for him hitched a ball and chain to his wandering mind. Lowering his head, Starry turned his head carefully to look at Fuscia directly again. The look of shock, of hurt, was actually fairly mild but it was there. "I wasn't serious you know. About Able."

Starry tried to put on one of those small, broken smiles he'd seen his dad put on when there had been a scuffle in the Skies household. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken ill of your relative; the moreso if it we do find he's left us." Although honestly, he told himself, the resulting sense of closure would probably justify the hurt of knowing he'd been buried alone, probably by non-ponies, somewhere along the pathway.

Speaking far too soon, when an awkward pause was completely called for, Maize squinted at the place where the mountain should be and said "Honestly if I find the complete reason why he never came back, I'd be satisfied with this whole trip. Even if I'm lost in the same way, I'll be so glad to never have to be called Clown Shoes again that I wouldn't mind this being my last run." This time there was a definitely awkward silence lasting nearly a full breath before he looked around, nervously making eye contact with his traveling companions to forcefully add "Present company excluded, of course."

## Chapter 2

2

The first half of the day everything still looked much the same. The skinny deciduous trees interspersed with larger evergreens, both the straight into the sky kind and the broad, everbranching trunks kind. Grasses, scrub brush. According to the tales of this particular run, there was a line of dense jungle just below the mountains that no one had crossed. Starry could see at times a dark green line fading to a steel gray that was probably that brief line.

By mid-day the group realized they had brought no water, and they had crossed no streams either. There were a couple families that had expanded out this far, so the group could beg a cup of water but that sort of went against the general understanding that this trip was in part, about learning to trust yourself.

"With all the rainwater coming off those mountains, there should be at least a few streams between there and the ocean behind us." That was Maize, suggesting we all tough it out. Oddly Starry thought he looked the most sweaty.

Fuscia seemed to retreat to a snarky defense, explaining "That could all be handled by one big river, and never come this way." She wasn't strong, clearly struggling already with her lighter load, but she had to rely on her muscles, they way all ponies of the farming community needed to.

Well, Starry thought. All the earth ponies. "There are four creeks running through Wholesol. And I don't know of any big river, so I don't think that's it." He looked around at the fairly nondescript land around him. There were a few divots where a burrowing animal had abandoned its home, but no clear indentation caused by an underground river. "What if the water is right here? Where would you look for it?"

Maize wiped the dripping sweat off the underside of his neck, and did a shimmy shake just with his head to get his forelock out of his vision. He looked, but didn't see anything more than Starry had. Fuscia though pulled the cord to drop her cart, and, harness still across her back, she started running to and fro, mostly looking off in the direction of the mountains but slowing as some of the trees blocked her view. Finally she stopped in front of a particularly scraggly alder,

having already outgrown its usefulness and simply not died and fallen over yet, to point at the mountain through it. "These trees have straighter, thus deeper roots. And while they zig zag a bit there is definitely a line here that isn't elsewhere."

Starry walked slowly, looking at the implied line of deciduous trees, and after walking back more carefully to his starting point, he agreed. So he unbuckled his saddle and let it slide next to his 'cart' and now looked at this particular line of soil. *That, there is the softest point, at least for the first ten hooves down*. And he focused his levitation, not as if it were a strong fetlock joint, picking up once, but as a wolf's paws, forever unsatisfied at the lifting, only lifting more just to put it down again.

Maize had seen this once, a couple years ago when the colts set up a tree fort in the middle of the ocean sands. Starry had flung all the sand out of the way to bury a single post so they would have something to secure their fortifications to. Fuscia had not been there, and it was tiring enough that he hadn't done it aside from one other time, which Fuscia also had not seen. But at the sight of the fountain of soil, sand, a mole, and small rocks erupting like there was a hot-springs geyser was so impressive that she laughed, and reared up and danced around, still laughing at the sight of it.

It had probably been eighty five hooves down, and Starry's head was starting to ache when what was being flung was not soil, but water. Once he had cleaned out enough of a passageway, barely half a hoof across, and knew he could grab just water, he stopped, and closed his eyes, and let feeling drift back into his face, up his forehead, and finally his ears tingled like he'd slept on them and were waking up now.

Eyes still closed, he could hear his traveling companions' packs jingling as they fished out empty canteens. Taking a deep breath, he looked back to see they had gotten his, too. Somehow they'd just forgotten about water, not packed much storage for it, but this would do now. "So I don't have to do this again soon, get a bucket or something, and I'll fill that too."

Fuscia had a suitable trough by unlatching the 'roof' of her cart and turning it upside down. It wouldn't hold water for hours, but should for a few minutes. Setting it next to the newly dug well, she said to him "The air changed color when you did that. Took a bit of time regaining its normal color after you stopped, too."

To which Maize asked "That must be why you stop, when you do that. Any serious magic and you act like you can't breathe, and the air seems to just drift back to you, almost but not quite visibly."

So, magic is a physical thing. So common we don't know we're seeing it. Which makes sense since nothing eats magic except my ears. Aloud, he said "Something like that. Anyway, we all ready?" And with everything in place, he 'grabbed' the water again, and a geyser sprayed out above everyone's heads and mostly landed in a predictable stream. Canteens full, as he was watching this time, he redirected his efforts a bit, and filled the top of Fuscia's cart.

And proceeded to drink it right back down.

So, he filled it again, and then Fuscia drank almost all of it, and then Maize took his turn, stopping before slurping the damp wooden frame but clearly would have downed more. So he filled it again and drank it all again, but felt he'd had enough, even with the exertion of the levitation. But Maize, polite Planter colt he was, never quite greedily gulped but had two more fillings of the lid after the other two had drunk their fill.

Properly provisioned, they proceeded on their way. By early afternoon they were as far in as any pony would normally travel, and the ground had no trails. Sometimes it was moss covered and their hooves sank in, leaving what seemed to Starry like permanent gouges in the virgin soil. Other times it was almost sandy, though covered with dust, and only larger examples of scrub brush withstood the sheer indifference of this soil.

The cousins held most of the conversation. They didn't exactly share any interests, as Fuscia was curious about how particular plants would thrive here and die there when it looked the same to her. And Maize was interested in how strong the wood fibers were from tree to tree versus the change from tree type to tree type. He had helped his uncle build rocking chairs, and the grain of the wood needed to cooperate with the build or it would crack before its time. They would try to pull him in, and that there was such engineering knowledge as to make these conversations work did fascinate him, but the tree fibers themselves did not.

"Why don't we come out this way more? I feel that every step makes the air sweeter and we've been trying to farm the ocean sand for generations" His companions sniffed the air but didn't seem convinced.

"We have what we need, even so." Maize offered, in a somewhat conciliatory tone. "The hay grows pretty well in the soil we live on, so there's no need to get into the forests where you can't see past the next hillock."

The ground was gently rising to meet the mountains, and it's true the lack of cultivation had allowed the ground to exist in a state of incivility, but there were no hillocks to speak of and the trees had never been thick enough to hide a monster of old. Though Fuscia added in, much more conspiratorially than any form of conciliation, "They say monsters roam these parts."

"Giant, pony eating purple coated flying monsters?" Starry's words didn't elicit shock, or laughter, but every family had at least one purple coated member, and also some large examples of ponykind, such as Maize was some day likely to grow into. The colts would sometimes discuss the stories out of earshot of the grownups, whether maybe the monsters were just bad ponies. But that would mean large plus purple tends to equal bad. Which I refuse to believe, even if we were chased out here by our own kind, and they were giant purple ponies.

At mid afternoon there was a break in the clouds that surrounded most of the middle of the mountains. And clear as day if you squinted hard enough, there was a trail, straight up the side of what looked like a cliff. *And a box a third of the way up?* "Hey is that a village?" Then realizing

the other two might not know at all where he was looking, he pointed at the mountain and said "right against the side of the mountain."

Fuscia saw it and immediately added "That far away, it's big enough to be a meeting lodge of sorts."

"Gryphons?" was Maize's comment, as he raised and lowered his nose, trying to find just the right angle for extra detail. And then Starry understood what he was talking about, as he saw two dots, again a great distance away, float in a spiral down, and turn, and slow, and spiral the other way, eventually disappearing against the box. "I suppose being eaten by gryphons would not be an unreasonable end to my story."

Both Starry and Fuscia exhaled noisily, dismissing his notion and poking him firmly in the side with a hoof to indicate he should stop such silliness.

The trio chuckled, and walked out, continuing their journey, but Starry had no doubts that had not been gryphons. Gryphons have wings, and those seemed to have four legs, but no wings. *Could I fly if there was enough magic?* It was not asked again, because the clouds had returned, and the box, whatever it was, had disappeared along with its dots of mystery.

## Chapter 3

3

It was well past the longest day of the year, but it wouldn't be too dark to walk for another four hours. Still, the group was feeling just a bit claustrophobic, as the trees were starting to gather in numbers; mostly the alder, which grew like weeds and fell over from its own unsupported weight, but trees made a better door than a window, to coin a phrase.

Then they came across a stream. Small, but fast and clear. No fish but no algae either. And they drank their fill again and decided to follow it up, changing to the right a bit, now going due east and the evening sun warming their tails. Whether because they weren't directly approaching the mountain wall or because the stream had moved the soil, or none of these, within a short time the going was wavy. Not hilly, but the ground went up, and down, by different amounts each time so finally, it seemed to Starry, they had found something different than the plains and beaches he'd always walked on.

With no discussion the matter, they all continued this way, never crossing the stream, still getting asymptotically closer to the mountain and its flying villagers. But they dropped over another section and the trees vanished, leaving a mile wide stretch of grasslands. And with a little discussion they decided to cross here, as the grasslands were as large to the north-ish, across the stream.

It wouldn't have been safe to start a fire here amidst all this forgotten grass, but the trio huddled a bit and chatted about where they thought their life would go when they went back. And so, even facing inward in a three-part circle, it was effectively behind all of them that the ground exploded with a 'fwump'.

Starry had already summoned a wall of force around himself, which shimmered slightly as he tried to calm himself and find understanding. Most of that came from seeing the large bird flying back up into the air, away from the trio. It sounded like the bird said, as it turned its empty beak to the right, like it said "Campers!"

Much closer than the first fwump, a rabbit leapt into action, running away from the 'campers' and also not towards the last dissapearence. This rabbit was grabbed, not by rear talons, but the

taloned front legs of a pony-ish thing, flapping its wings silently until it had grabbed the rabbit. The explosion of soil was the back legs, cats paws, launching the flying cat back into the air. This time it was more discernable as the flying companion called to the first "Yeah I see 'em."

Ponies don't often think to look up. Starry dropped his shield, and looked up. There were no other fliers visible, and the sky was plenty bright enough to illuminate them. Turning so his body faced Maize, he pointed a hoof at the retreating forms, and explained "**That**, is what gryphons look like."

Starry explaind how the blobs they'd seen before didn't seem to have any wings. Fuscia's response was "I've never seen a gryphon!"

Maize explained "That's because there aren't any." He glanced up at the mountain wall, much closer than it had been that morning, and added "or there weren't, at least."

The trio couldn't decide if camping for the night in the open hunting grounds would be safe enough, or if the sparse forest, such as it was, even housed predators. They ended up deciding to refill their water containers at the creek, then walk in for an hour angling towards the far side of the clearing while going somewhat toward the mountain. After that they piled theil belongings together and set out to graze on the open meadow and try not to worry about carnivorous fliers.

Starry Skies was much more an indoor, domesticated sort of pony. So by half an hour after dark, he pointed himself back to the piled-together carts, and planned on sleeping there. He had slept on open ground before, but he found this first night away from his routine, it was his soft bed he missed most. So he laid somewhat upright, on one elbow, and listened to his companions still crunching on the wild hay.

There was a lightening flash, coming out over the very top of the mountain wall. Starry remembered to start counting right away, and got to eighteen before the thunder reached the now reunited trio. Fuscia was trotting and shaking her mane to try and relax and focus, where Maize was just panting, and was the one to blurt out the obvious "Didja see that?"

"There weren't any storm clouds when the sun went down." Fuscia, standing now, not sweating at all by the smell - just poor Clown Shoes, ever the butt of everyone's jokes, needed to stay on high alert over any anomalous happenings.

Despite the name, unicorn, the old books that talked about unicorn ponies depicted them the way Starry was. No 'horn' but the hairs on the outside edge of his ears were white, and glowed when he levitated something. But just now, about a minute after the thunder clap, Starry Skies felt a breeze. It washed across his face, and his ears tingled almost painfully, and a spot in the middle of his forehead ached, and Starry was feeling 'feedback' like when he levitated something heavy; the sensation told him there was a cone pressing hard against his head, and it refused to move. For just a brief moment it felt like something white-hot had brushed against just the tips of every hair in his coat.

As this was fading, in order of strength: coat-fire first, then the tingling, and it took two or three seconds for the cone to stop pressing on his head, he had done two things. One was jump up to standing position, and he bucked and kicked at the fire went by. He also tried shaking his head to dislodge the cone, but it continued in its place, unaffected by his movements.

Then it was over. "Did you feel that?" Surely the lightning wasn't some kind of unicorn-storm'

But his companions, faces dimly lit by the stars, looked at him oddly, and shook their head. "Feel what?" Fuscia asked.

It was while Starry was trying to put his thoughts into words that the group heard two mares screaming from somewhere above them. Shortly after that, a 'fwump', repeated, several hundred hooves from them, towards the mountain.

The group started walking, but spread out with maybe thirty hooves between each pony, as they walked toward the sounds, which were now more like disgruntled ponies, as if they'd just been unceremoniously dumped into the refuse heap.

Maize called out "Hello? Ponies?" which caused a pause in the other conversation.

Definitely coming from a mare, a voice rang out "Yeah! You alright over there?"

The other voice seemed also to be a mare, followed up with "And what by the cloud cities are you doing flying at night?"

Fuscia firmly, almost a challenge, responded "Grazing."

The trio was only a little over a hundred hooves from the two mares by this time, and so everypony, or at least certainly Starry Skies, could see two shapes lift from the ground, and undulate towards them both at rapidly increasing speed, but also climbing to a height of easily fifty hooves from the ground. The pair overshot the trio, and one pulled up short, hovering in mid-air, back legs dangling as if in mid-rear Starry thought, as the other slowed, turned, and spiralled back. The first one to stop, which sounded like the second voice, said "Uh? Hello?" clearing expecting the trio to be fifty hooves up as they were.

Starry made a quick visual check with his traveling companions. They looked guarded, confused, but also helpful. Not furious, not frightened. They seemed to him, willing to meet these flying ponies. So Starry made things easy, and focused his magic into a light spell. For a brief moment the coat-fire sensation returned, and he found his spell was twenty times brighter than he'd ever made such a light before.

The mare that was had circled around, facing the mountain now, saw the source of the light first, and put a hoof to the rearing mare, who looked behind her with her neck only, and even in the artificial illumination saw their ears were glowing, or else they had strung glowing spider silk between their ears.

It would leave them all blinded, but the over-powered spells were starting to worry Starry so he dropped his illumination and waited to see anything. He heard a soft thump, then another, both about ten hooves away. Hoping they were as blind as he, Starry casually greeted the darkness, pointing his nose in turn to each of the thumping sounds. "I'm Starry Skies, my companions are from the Planter clan, Maize and Fuscia, who is normal sized."

"Hey now. I'm normal." Interjected Maize

To which Fuscia added "For a giant."

The first mare's voice, which was to Starry Skies right, said, still invisible, "Autumn Breeze, and my neighbor Breezy Blue."

Breezy grumbled "You lit a flare or something? Why can't we see now?"

Breeze said, almost in awe, "That was, like, a spell or something, wasn't it? I've never heard of a pterippus that could make light. Did you like, just fly in your head, or something?"

Starry felt a hoof set gently on his right rump. By its size, and where they had all been a moment ago, that would be Maize, silently cautioning him not to reveal his secrets. But Fuscia had no such misgivings, blurting out "What's a terra pus?"

Breezy thoughtlessly asked 'really?' but Breeze responded "One pterippus, two pterippi." In exchange, Starry focused on just dribbling the smallent amount of magic, barely even a spell; the waste energy glowed as brightly as the spell proper.

Autumn Breeze seemed to have a light purple coat and red eyes. Also the white hairs on her ears were along the inner edge. She was looking at his ears, eyes dodging back and forth between the left and the right. "The hairs are on the outside. You can evert your magic onto everything else." More gently this time, Starry let his light spell fade, and Breeze explained "We can only apply magic to ourselves."

Sounding like she was rolling her eyes, Breezy Blue snarked "We can evert wings, is what we can do with our ears. But it's like a unicorn's horn. Nobody can see any of that."

Fuscia apparently had walked up close to Starry, as her voice sounded closer than Maize; her voice erupting directly above his spine. "So, what were **YOU** doing, flying at night by the cloudy city?"

Autumn Breeze giggled and turned away, probably blushing in the dark. But Breezy Blue offered a distracted "Oh, you know. Surfing. Cloud surfing, is all."

Nose down, pulled in to her chest, Autumn Breeze amended "Storm cloud surfing." Raising her head again, she admitted "Only happens at dusk. Or, I guess a time after dusk if you're staying at Post." His vision having partially adapted, he could see now that Breeze was looking around at their surroundings. "So, we're not going to make our way back without some light. Can we, I guess, sleep with you?"

Breezy snorted, and said "Those hoarding thieves are going to charge us full price for not coming back, aren't they?" to which Autumn whispered something about it being four silver.

Starry Skies perked up at the mention of currency. "Silver bits? You guys have printed money? All the families I know trade family-chits, that ostensibly are based on the copper standard, unless you're bringing out the actual bits."

Fuscia 'ughd' and dropped her head onto Starry's spine as Maize whispered the bits had been slave equipment. These comments caused Breezy to perk up, asking "Really? You still have slave bits?"

Breeze started estimating out loud, "Two and a half copper, probably, melted and reformed. There are collectors, though. Something like three silver the last time I heard of a museum buying one." When Starry asked about the different coin values, she explained "Copper chips are just these little slivers; some folk make their own they don't need to have a stamp on them just have enough copper. About fifteen chips to a copper bit. The ratio of copper to silver drifts a bit, but I think it's 19 copper to a silver, then officially it's twenty four silver to a gold bit; there are gold chips too, but they do have to be stamped at most establishments. A silver, two copper, and three copper chips to a gold chip."

"Plus the osmium coins." Added Breezy, which earned a verbal stare from Breeze, so the other mare continued "The royal treasury, and some other major players, have a few osmium coins to save space. Fifteen gold to osmium, I think?"

Breeze shook her head; Starry could definitely almost see the pterippi now. "They're larger so no one can confuse them for a silver; so it's 18 gold to an osmium. But you're right there's supposedly only forty five in the whole cauldron."

"Cauldron?" Asked Maize, trying to follow the conversation

Breezy offered "Yeah. The inside. Where ponies live."

Breeze suddenly looked at the two earth ponies, or tried to, and asked "Speaking of which, how did you get down without breaking your legs?"

Maize would probably have recommended saying as little as possible here, but Starry did a quick guesstimate and decided that if they all were curled up around their packs, and the two flying ponies knew the first three had never been 'inside' they wouldn't use that to steal from the traveling trio; they'd use the fact they could fly and not worry about why ocean-ponies were visiting the mountainside. "We grew up down here. No leg breaking needed."

There was no response for a moment. After that there was still no speaking, but the two mares were exchanging looks, or trying to in the dark. The silence following that was about to grow awkward as well as taut. Maize had just started to shift his weight repeatedly, antsy about the notion of ponies from communities outside the known world. But he held his breath, literally, for the two flight capable mares to finally say something to them.

Breeze was so quiet as to almost be murmuring, dejectedly. "You wouldn't know how to get back, then, would you?"

Breezy Blue was angry, and was directing her outburst to her flight companion, proclaiming "These are descended from the canibal outcasts! Drifter ponies that lived somehow!"

It's true, Starry Skies thought to himself. We don't know how to get in. Able Planter seemed the type to have died trying, if he met someone, but surely a routine pony wouldn't just be able to climb **THAT**. Aloud, he said "No, we didn't know that was ever a thing a pony could do."

Maize finally lost control, and practically exploded in a burst of exhalation, shouting "Drifter ponies?"

Starry could see that Breeze had turned her head to the voice and nodded. But it was Breezy who explained "maybe two hundred years ago? I guess? There were six families. Well. There were a dozen ponies and half were mares and half were stallions and half were related and I think it worked out to six families."

Fuscia asked, head still resting on Starry's spine, "Do you know their names?"

Breeze, still sounding washed out and hopeless, provided what answers she had. "Planetir, Fermirrin, Skagtail, Starswhirl, Mossy, and..." Here she faltered, her nose dropped to try and snuffle it out of the ground.

"Bossy." provided Breezy.

Which caused Autumn Breeze to snap her head up and say "Yes! Wait no." Turing back to Breezy she said again "No be serious." And back to the unflightful, to explain "Court. The extra, lone stallion with no mares, was called Mares. Mares Court, but he was born to Fall Court and Ball Court. Odd naming with that crowd, I guess. We." Here she faltered again, not sure if she should explain to the strangers her strange history lessons. Or wherever she heard this first.

"Fall & Ball had a son and named him Mare. Oh they were courting something, but it wasn't a sound mind." Breezy seemed angry at the tales, as her sharp voice wasn't directed at insulting the trio here in front of her in the dark, but still at her flight companion.

Autumn Breeze went back, sounding a bit wistful as she tried to put the story back together. "They had said they had been enslaved by an evil force. But as they made their way to the somewhat maintained stairway coming down the outside of the cauldron, the Alicorn said the families all owed a huge debt to a unicorn, and they had killed him and his son to fraudulently escape their debt then eaten the remains to hide their guilt.

"And so the court died." This, from Maize, back to Starry's right and back a ways, but the words caused Fuscia to snap to alert, head suddenly no longer on his back.

Fuscia whispered at Starry's ears, though clear and loud enough Breeze would probably have picked most of it up. "it's a Planter saying; about how cruel the world can be, no justice, that sort of thing. But we don't know where it came from because it's older than the courtroom in Wholesol."

For Fuscia's sake, Starry Skies added his own take on those names. "Skag, and Whirl used to be first names, long ago. Star and it's variant not so much. But I've heard it told, family lore

alone no paperwork, that the Skies family actually came from two clans that sort of merged." Here, Starry had to admit the evidence was too plain. The farming families had fled as fugitives from justice out of this ... *mountain wall*, and made a point of crushing all references to that former life. "They did that because of what they saw in the Moss clan. From the first mare and stallion, they never let their seven foals marry out. I guess, and this is possibly a cruel rumor to discredit what was seen of the Mosses, but the first three generations were supposedly all cross-bred up and down the line. Grampa Gray Moss taking turns with his grand-fillies so that by the time the fourth generation were adults and burying the first seven ancestors there were sixty Moss ponies but." Starry had always assumed it was distrust, some clever lies, and the embellishment of ages that had made the tale turn the way it had. But it also could be true, which was horrible in its own right. "But they were so inbred, and never changed their clan law about marrying out or in, that three generations after that they were not only crazy, every last one, but also generally unable to have any more foals by any attempts."

Maize's voice sounded like he was actively nodding as he added "The Farmers used to talk about the crazy moss, like it was a plant some ponies would eat if they walked too far up the way, into the woods and away from the fresh ocean air."

"Such lovely dinner conversation." Spat Breezy. "You don't eat ponies, ever?"

Which earned a disgusted cough-snort sound as the trio negated the thought. Bu with that, Breeze asked, sounding almost worried at what the answer would be, "You guys didn't happen to bring any food with you, did you?"

Fuscia almost purred, saying "We've been grazing. You are standing on a fairly lush field."

Breezy sighed through her reply of "Of course you have."

Breeze leaned back, lifting a hoof and staring down, then switched hooves for a moment before a soft glow lit up the hairs on her face as she lifted all four hooves to stare at disbelief at the ground she'd been standing on. "Can you ... I mean, really just eat the plants I've been walking on?"

Starry blinked. "If you've never done it, it might be best to wait until it's light out. But yes, you can eat the grass here."

With that revelation out of the way, the two mares retreated to what they must have figured would be a suitable distance to discourage midnight snacking, and Starry's friends decided rather than graze and nap, they would help put the new friends at ease by trying to sleep through the dark. So they all curled up around their packs, and hope no gryphons mistook them for giant rabbits.