

Chapter 4

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Starry actually felt pretty good as the sun warmed his hide. The east was partially blocked by the forest, but it was still very early by city-pony standards, and Starry himself never aspired to work the soil directly that he needed to precede the morning. Stretching, eyes still closed, laid out flat, he focused his mind on what his ears told him, and he couldn't make out the sound of breathing. Of course, that would make a bit of sense as both his companions were much more likely to rise with first light as this trip called out to graze freely on this untouched field.

Starry opened his eyes to find his cart still against the other two, undisturbed. So he got up, shook himself, and looked into the eyes of a giant bird, sitting no more than nine hooves from where he'd been sleeping moments ago.

The bird's tail twitched methodically. It took far too long, but he realized this was a gryphon, though he had no idea if it was one of the rabbit hunters from yesterday. Starry suddenly worried about his companions but even without turning his head, only thinking about his peripheral vision he found the cousins off a few hundred hooves away, heads down, grazing happily. It took a moment of thinking to look, but he found the Breezes too, still out flat just over there, farther from the mountain than his camp, perhaps a hundred and fifty hooves. There seemed to be only the one gryphon.

Starry thought to look up. There were four gryphons circling lazily, high up; mere dots in the sky with tails and twitching wings. There was another, something like six hundred hooves in the sky, over the forest and angling up to the mountain but farther to the north-east, and the upper half of the forests were all shrouded in fog, and the mountain was a wall for much of the horizon. But the top third, or so, was clear as was this strip of bare grass.

Starry focused his mind again on the bird in front of him. The feathers were brown, too light to be mud or wood colored, but not bright enough to be called orange or yellow. The beak had a wicked curve, with a sharp hooked upper lip, or bill, or whatever the word would be. The eyes were, for a bird, huge. Even large for a cat of that height, though this specimen would be as large as pony at the shoulder, and those eyes were decidedly too small for a pony, and too far forward

