

Another Grey Day

A Royal Destiny / Worlds Apart crossover story by Aien Hime

“Jowy? Jowy, where are you! Get back here immediately!” Jowy could hear his mother yell, but he was sure she would never find him in his safe hiding place. Nobody had ever been in this place, except for him. When he found it, he didn’t dare to believe he had been this lucky. Hidden in the rocks of the hill that protected his house from the elements was a small cave, barely visible because of the large tree that was blocking the entrance and the stones that hid it. For years now, it had been his hiding place whenever he wasn’t able to bear it anymore. It was the place where he could pretend his current self didn’t exist, the place where he could dream of a life somewhere else.

But for now, he knew he had to face reality once more. He had to return home, or the results would be... He didn’t dare to think about it. So Jowy carefully pushed the branches aside, and checked the surroundings. No glimpse of his mother. He saw the lights of their little house burning in the distance, and quickly slipped out of the hole. He carefully covered his tracks and trotted towards the house. When he got closer, he could see his father talking to his older sister.

The door made too much noise to Jowy’s liking when he entered the house. Only a few moments later his mother stood before him, yelling.

“Jowy! Why didn’t you come when I called you! You have to learn how to obey your mother, young man!”

“I... I’m sorry mother, I...”

“No apologies! Now go to your room- no food for you tonight!” Jowy knew he had to move, but his body simply didn’t let him. He felt paralyzed, unable to move or obey his mother’s command.

He knew the blow was coming even before he felt it. It was always like that.

“To your room. NOW!” His mother’s yell woke him up. He had heard it before, and he knew worse would come if he didn’t act quickly. He acted swiftly, but not fast enough to avoid another hit from his mother. He rushed up the stairs and the next stairs, until he ended up in the small attic where his tiny room was.

He only had space for a bed, and the ceiling was so low he almost had to crawl. There was a little window which looked out over their fields. When he was smaller he could stick his head out and see the large hill where his hiding place was. Now, however, he was not able to do so anymore; his head simply had become too large. This place always felt like a prison to him, and in many ways it was. He only went to his room when his parents forced him to. He had no freedom in here at all, and there was no way in which he could escape.

As Jowy fell down on the bed he heard his belly roar. He was hungry, but he didn’t dare to go downstairs to ask for some food. All he would get was another beating. He felt tears appear in his eyes, but he didn’t want to cry. Not again. Once more he wondered what he had done to be treated like this, but he knew, which was the thing that hurt the most. After all, he was born like this... A boy. His parents had wanted to have another girl so badly. His mother’s family used to have close connections to the royal house. And while his oldest sister was supposed to take over the farm, if he had been a girl, they could have proposed an engagement of him and the prince.

But he had been a boy. And while giving birth to him his mother had become ill. It had taken weeks for her to recover, or so he had heard, and afterwards she had not been able to conceive anymore. His parents blamed him for this, and he blamed himself, too. If only he had been a girl... His life would have been so different now. His parents would be proud of him, and he would actually have a function in the household. Girls were wanted... Nobody needed a boy.

He didn't know how long he had been in his room before his parents called him. He was surprised; every time they send him to his room he had to stay there for at least a day. But it was still dark outside, meaning it was still night. He dreaded to go down; he knew it couldn't be good news. But bad news could only become worse if he disobeyed.

He came down the stairs as slowly as he could, and when he entered the living room he saw his parents standing there, together. His sister was nowhere to be seen.

"Jowy," his father stated.

"Yes... father?" he asked as politely as possible. Better not give his parents another reason to get mad.

"Considering you have disobeyed us so many times, your father and I have decided you will go work out of the house," his mother said, without any emotion in her voice. Her eyes looked as cold as drops of ice.

"Out of the house?" Jowy didn't really understand what she meant, or at least he was trying his best not to.

"Yes. We have decided you will go work in the mines with your uncle Yuku."

Just like that. No emotion at all, in his parents eyes. They just stared at him, probably wondering why he wasn't thrilled by the idea. The mines... They had been there a couple of times, and he didn't like it there at all. It was dark, dusty, boring...

"But... I don't want to!" he stammered. Why would they send him there?

"I'm afraid you should have thought of that before you disobeyed us so many times. You will go work there. Yuku needs new workers, and there's nothing else you can do anyway. Now, back to your room until we call you."

Paralyzed, Jowy moved his way back up the stairs. Working in the mines... No, he didn't want to do that at all! His uncle was a bully, and he had seen the way he treated the ponies that worked for him. Besides, the work was extremely dangerous. More than one pony had lost it's life down there. How could his parents do that to him? Did they want to get rid of him that badly? Was he not his child as well?

He didn't want to go, he couldn't... How could he get out of it? It was the only thing he could think of, until he realised the sun was already setting again. With a shock he realised he had been up all night, pondering over what to do. He didn't want to leave, even though his parents were so mean to him all the time... Working with his uncle Yuku was about the only thing he could think of what was worse. Of course, he could run away from home, but... what if they found him? No, that was no option, at least not until he had thought it through completely.

Yet, he knew, the only place where he could find the rest to think clearly was his hiding place. It was the only place in the world where he felt safe enough. He slipped out of bed and once again walked down the stairs as softly as he could. His parents were still asleep, he noticed, as was his sister. The door made way too much noise to his opinion, but he was able to slip out unnoticed. He knew he would get punished severely if his parents found out about this, but he just had to get out. His little room was choking him.

He galloped through the high grass towards the hill. His hole was still the way he had left it, and he sneaked inside quickly. Nobody had seen him... good. He sighed with relief when he was inside and felt his entire body relax. Just when he was sitting down, he heard some movement outside. His heart skipped a beat. Had someone seen him leave? Had they followed him? If they had... No, it couldn't be any worse from what it was right now anyway. He would get send to the mines... How much worse could it get?

Slowly he sneaked towards the entrance, and peeked outside through some holes in the branches.

"Hello? Are you there?" a female voice said. He noticed the pony, standing almost right in front of him. She was snow white with beautiful purple mane. Her symbol was a moon and

some stars. He had never seen this pony before, but he was entranced with her. It was as if she was from another world.

“Please?” she begged. “I need your help... I have to get home.”

The poor pony was almost in tears. Jowy didn't really know what moved him. If his parents saw him with this strange girl... They would find a way to punish him. But he didn't want to leave her alone there, either.

“Here,” he whispered, and again a little louder when he noticed she didn't hear him.

“Where?” she asked when she heard his voice. He put his hoof through the branches, and the pony noticed him. She trotted towards him and he opened the branches so she could slip in.

“Thank you...” the pony whispered, and Jowy realised it was the first time in his life someone actually said those words to him.

“What’s your name?” Jowy asked, not sure what else to say. His hideout seemed very small, now that he was sharing it with someone else.

“My name is Lunarstar,” she whispered. Lunarstar... a fitting name, for such an extraordinary pony as her.

“And yours?” she asked.

“Jowy,” Jowy answered.

“That’s a nice name,” Lunarstar said, smiling.

“You said you were lost?” Jowy asked, not sure what else to say.

“Yes, I am... where am I, anyway?” Lunarstar asked, as if she suddenly remembered.

“You’re near Guare village.”

Lunarstar looked as confused as ever. “So where is that?”

“This country is called Kin. You didn’t know?” Jowy was surprised. It made sense to get lost inside a country, but how could she have crossed Kin’s borders without actually knowing where she was? That was impossible, right?

“No, I didn’t know,” Lunarstar admitted. Jowy was at a loss for words. Where did this pony come from? He looked at the pony again, and he realized he had a hard time looking at her. She was so beautiful, he felt as if she hurt his eyes.

“Do you live here?” Lunarstar asked.

“Yes. I live right over there,” Jowy answered, pointing in the direction of his house.

“Or I used to,” he added with a soft voice.

“You used to?”

“I... guess I ran away from home.” Jowy admitted, not only to Lunarstar but also to himself.

“What did you do that for?”

“Because I hate it there!” he busted out. “My parents will never like me for I am not a girl, and because I’m not “fitting in” they decided to send me off to my aunt, to work in the mines! But I don’t want to, I don’t want to go there...”

Jowy was ashamed to cry, especially in front of a girl, and such a beautiful one at that. But he could no longer stop his tears. He felt so sad and defeated. Maybe he never had any hope for the future he had wished for, but now that his parents would send him away...

“So where are you going now?” Lunarstar asked, before Jowy could even ask himself that question.

“I don’t know. Nowhere. What are you going to do now?” he asked, trying to change the subject. He really didn’t feel comfortable talking about himself.

“I think I should try to find a way to get home. But there’s no way I’m going to get there, unless I can find some...” Lunarstar fell silent, as if she was doubting whether she should tell Jowy.

“Some what?”

“Well, I got here through a gate. I mean, I went through it to get somewhere else, but it went wrong I think, and I ended up here.”

“Right. You lost me.” How could you go through a gate and end up somewhere completely different? Jowy began to doubt Lunarstar’s sanity, because he could see no way in which that would be possible.

“Well, it’s just... I can go through a gate, which can bring you from one place to the other, but I guess something went wrong because I didn’t end up where I thought I was going to be. And now I’m stuck here, without a way back.”

Jowy eyed Lunarstar suspiciously. “So that’s like... a magical gate. Right?”

“Yes, something like that. You probably never heard of anything like it, right?” Lunarstar asked hopeful. Jowy could see in Lunarstar’s eyes that even if this story was utter nonsense, at least she believed in it herself. And there was something about Lunarstar that felt... otherworldly.

Yet her story triggered something in his memory. Something from long ago. He had heard of something like that... in a fairy tale of something, what his mother used to tell him and his sister when they were still really small.

"I know!" he exclaimed so loud that Lunarstar got startled. "You know what," he said, "I heard of something like that! I mean, it wasn't a gate, and it was only a story that my mother told me when I was a little boy, but, you know..."

"Great! Tell me!" Lunarstar was so excited that Jowy felt like he couldn't tell her that it was only a fairy tale, based on nothing but a pretty story. Still, he began to tell. "Well, the story is about a princess. Her mother is a powerful queen and had recently expanded her powers to the north, into the ice. But the one who ruled there did not agree and kidnapped the princess, and she would only return her if the queen gave up her claim on the north. But the queen did not agree and valued her territory above her own daughter. So the old ruler of the north took the princess with her to her own home, an island covered in ice called the isle of infinity. The queen's troops couldn't find it and the old ruler raised the princess as if she were her own child. But as the ruler had lost her rule over the north the power of the isle of infinity were lost, slowly but surely, until the only way for them to escape was to leave this world completely, and move on to another. Some say they died, but others believe they found a way to continue living in another dimension."

Right, this is ridiculous, Jowy thought. There was no such thing as the isle of infinity, and besides, the north was just a barren wasteland covered in ice all year long. No one lived there, right?

"Okay, so how do I find this isle?"

"I'm sorry?" Jowy could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"Well, it sounds about right. To move on, another dimension. I have to find that place and get home." The determination in Lunarstar's voice shocked Jowy. *She's totally crazy.*

"Right. Well, it's in the north, obviously, but otherwise... no one has ever seen it. It's a fairy tale, Lunarstar. If you go there alone you'll probably end up killed before you even can begin looking."

"You're not coming with me?" she asked, disappointed.

"What? No!" Jowy exclaimed.

"I... I've got to get home. I'm moving soon, right? There's no place for me out there, and there's no way I'm going to the north like this. I'm sorry, Lunarstar. I hope you will find your home again, but I can't help you." After saying this, Jowy realized there was nothing left for him to say. He slowly crept out of his hiding place, and Lunarstar followed him.

"Well, I guess this is where we part ways, then," he said, and Lunarstar nodded.

"I guess so."

"Good luck, Lunarstar."

"Yeah... you, too." He didn't watch to see Lunarstar leave.

Jowy turned around and began to walk back to his home. Or what would be his home only for a few more days... before he would be sent off to the mines. That would be his future... He hadn't even realized he had stopped walking. The wind was toying with his hair now, blowing away from his house, as if it was telling him to leave, to go his own way, even if that meant for him to go north...

"This is insane..." he whispered to himself as he turned around. He could still see Lunarstar walking, somewhere in the distance. He galloped towards her. He couldn't just let her go like this. He couldn't go back home. He couldn't go to the mines, and he wouldn't. Jowy had almost caught up with her when he tripped over a rock and crashed on a stone and fell on the ground, making a lot of noise that made Lunarstar startle.

"What? Jowy!" she yelled as she raced towards him. "Are you hurt?"

Jowy tried to get up, but almost tripped again. “Are you still going to the north? To find the isle of infinity?”

“Yes... unless I hear of something better,” she answered.

“I’m coming with you,” Jowy said resolute.

“You are? But weren’t you...?” Lunarstar asked, confused, but Jowy shook his head.

“No. I’ll choose my own future, and for now, that is to help you get home safely. And if that means us traveling to the icy north, looking for the isle of infinity that only exists in a fairy tale, than that’s what we’re going to do. You with me?” He smiled, and Lunarstar smiled back.

“I am. Let’s go.”

“So, you know it’s like, extremely cold in the north, right?” Jowy asked as they walked along the stone trail, like they had been doing for the last two days.

“Yes... you’ve told me like a gazillion times. I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to forget that,” Lunarstar replied.

“Okay. Right. But, you know, we’re going to freeze if we go there like this. We need something to keep us warm,” Jowy continued.

“You mean, like, a hat or a scarf?”

Jowy smiled. Lunarstar was so innocent sometimes. He had to admit that even though he had decided to go with her, he still had some trouble believing she really was from, well, some other place he would never be able to visit. But during the last few days he began to realize Lunarstar was indeed special, somehow... Sometimes she seemed to know so much, and sometimes he couldn’t help but wonder how she had ever survived up until now.

“That alone won’t do, Lunarstar. It’s not just like winter over there. It’s icy. I’ve never been there before...”

“...Like you told me like ten times already today...”

“... but if the stories are true, and let’s hope they are otherwise we’re totally doing this for no reason, we need more than a hat and a scarf to protect us from the cold. We need warm cloaks, special ones, made for the north.” Jowy sighed. When was Lunarstar going to take this seriously?

“Okay... so how are we going to get those?” Lunarstar asked. Of course, Jowy had been thinking about that as well. Those special cloaks would be very expensive, he knew that much...

“I think we need money. But I don’t have any.”

“Neither do I. Well, not any that’s valid over here, anyway.” “Right. So we got to work to earn some money,” Jowy proposed, and he saw Lunarstar watching him, something that the last few hours seemed to make him unable to grasp what exactly he was talking about.

“Right. Okay. Well, I was thinking, we might want to work on, you know, like, a farm, or something. Or, I don’t know, maybe you...”

“A farm would be okay.” Lunarstar saved him from further embarrassment. “But where do we find one?”

“Further down the road is a village, according to the signs. Maybe they know where we can find a farm. Or work.”

“Good. So let’s go there.” Lunarstar winked and trotted away.

“Hey! Wait up!” Jowy yelled as he began to pursue her.

It didn’t take them long to reach the village. It was quite lively, but Jowy had no idea why. There was nothing but rocks and mountains around here, and a few fields occupied by farmers. There was no reason for so many people to be here, right? But no matter how many people there were, none of them seemed to have a job for them. Only in the very last inn left of the village they seemed to have a little luck. They met a farmer whose neighbor’s hand had fallen ill, so they could try there.

“Well, at least we probably have some work,” Jowy said, trying to lift Lunarstar’s spirit. She didn’t look happy at all.

“Do we? We don’t know yet.”

“Well, of course we do. Didn’t you hear what the guy said?”

“Yes, well, he still has to hire us.” Jowy sighed and decided not to reply. He furiously hoped they would get hired so at least Lunarstar would have a reason to start smiling again. She was so beautiful when she smiled...

It didn’t take them long to reach the farm, but it was not like anything Jowy had expected.

There weren’t any green fields for animals. Instead there were only long, grey plains of some kind of soil. Half of them seemed like nobody had touched them in years, while the other part

looked like someone had recently worked on them. They were greeted by a nice old lady when they walked to the farm house. They explained they were looking for work and the lady was so extremely happy that she actually began to cry.

She explained her own two sons had left the farm for a long trip around the continent about six months ago but her husband had fallen ill not long after. If they wanted to harvest the next summer they would have to put the seeds in the ground about now but her husband was too ill and she couldn't do it on her own, either.

They got even luckier when they explained they wanted to earn money to buy some winter clothing for a travel to the north, as the lady's specialty was creating coats just for that purpose. They agreed they would work two weeks on the farm and in exchange they would receive food and shelter and one cloak each. Needless to say they both agreed enthusiastically.

The shelter wasn't exactly what they had expected, though. Instead of a nice warm bed like they were both used to they were to sleep in the attic on a bed made of hay and under a blanket that smelled like it was a thousand years old.

"What do they need the hay for? It's not like this farm has any animals," Lunarstar sighed when she saw her bed.

"Well, you should be glad, otherwise we'd be sleeping on the cold wood."

"Or they might put some effort in providing us a good bed." Lunarstar commented.

"Oh, look who's back, it's ms. Grumpy!" Jowy said sarcastically.

"I... I'm sorry." Lunarstar shook her head while they sat down in the hay. It was night already, Jowy noticed through the little window. They had been talking all evening with the sweet lady and her husband, and tomorrow morning they would start helping with the farm work.

"It's just that," Lunarstar continued, "I had wanted to get home so much sooner. I had hoped I'd be there by now. There is just so much I have to do, and last time I was lost in this world I was back home within a few hours thanks. My parents... everyone must be so worried."

"Well, maybe it doesn't work that way," Jowy said. Lunarstar looked as if she didn't understand, so Jowy began to explain.

"Well, last time you were lost here, it was like, more than a hundred years ago, right? But now you're here, and it hasn't been hundred years in your world," Jowy said.

"Yes, so?"

"Well, maybe time goes faster here. So when two weeks have passed here, maybe it's only two minutes in your world."

"That does make sense... When I got back last time I felt like no time had passed at all."

Lunarstar agreed.

"You see, there you go. You don't have to worry about things like that. And I'll get you back home, I promise."

"Thank you, Jowy. You're really sweet," Lunarstar smiled with her most beautiful smile, and Jowy felt like he was melting inside.

Half an hour later they were both lying in the hay. Lunarstar was asleep quickly; her emotions and all the change of that day had worn them out. But Jowy was still awake, staring at Lunarstar's beautiful sleeping face. She was so pretty, so beautiful... She was from another world indeed. He couldn't help but think that maybe she was an angel fallen from the heavens.

But she was going home. And he was sure that once she did, he would never see her again. It was so unfair. She was the first person he had ever met who was so nice to him, and the only reason she was staying with him was because he would get her home. So he had to stay with her on her journey to the north. But maybe... he could escape this world with her. It had

brought him nothing but pain, after all, and the only good thing that had ever happened to him was about to escape from it.

It was cold. And not just cold like in winter, when you have fun with snowballs and ice, no, it was ridiculously cold. Around them there was nothing but ice and snow covering the ground. Everything was white. Jowy still couldn't believe he was actually here. For the last two days he furiously began to wish he had never mentioned this place to Lunarstar before.

The two weeks they had spent on the farm had been the best two weeks of Jowy's life. Of course they had to work hard every day and they had little time to relax, but he had loved the time he spend with Lunarstar. They had spent hours upon hours working on the soil so that it was ready to receive seeds, they had helped the farmer with chores around the house, they had spent evenings looking at the stars in the sky, wondering if Lunarstars home was one of them. After two weeks, however, the farmer and his wife had decided they had helped them enough. Lunarstar had been delighted to finally be able to move on, but Jowy had dreaded that day. He had not wanted it to change... and it had come so much sooner than he had expected. Still, to see Lunarstar so cheered up, it was worth it. Her bright smile that day had lit up the entire sky. They had received not only two warm cloaks, but also two thick scarves and two snow hats. It was more than enough to shield them from extreme cold, or so they had thought. They had been going straight north for a week now, and it only got colder and colder. Still, there were still ponies living here, in these remote places, so they probably could not be north enough. Didn't the story tell about an island so remote even the guards of the queen herself could not find it?

They walked on and on along the road that was now barely visible beneath the layers of snow and ice that covered it, not knowing where they were or what lay ahead of them. This deserted land should never have been penetrated by ponies, Jowy thought. Why were they here again?

"Maybe we should go find a c...cave. F...for the night," Lunarstar said, shivering.

They were both covered in the clothes they had earned on the farm, but it just didn't seem to be enough anymore. They could easily freeze to death if they could not find a place to sleep and make a fire, Jowy realized. He looked around, and saw some snow-covered evergreens here and there. At least there would be some wood... for now. The more north they went, the less trees they saw.

Jowy was sure he reached the end of his luck when he spotted a cave. A small hill ahead of them had a cave at the bottom, and its black walls stood out against the snow that covered the hill. "Over there!" Jowy said, and he began to walk faster. An actual cave... Hopefully, at least this night, they would not freeze.

They rushed towards the cave, and as they entered it they found it was deep enough to shield them from the snow. At the back there were some bundles of dry wood, and on the ground they could see scorch marks.

"Apparently this cave is used for travellers to spend the night," Jowy said. "When we leave tomorrow we have to gather wood and put it back there, so that any other travellers will have the same comfort as we do," he explained, wondering who on earth would want to travel to this remote place.

"Right," Lunarstar said, while carrying some wood to the centre of the cave. They soon managed to get a fire going, and slowly they were warming up, while outside the light of day slowly faded.

"Darkness sure comes swiftly, up here," Lunarstar observed.

"It does," Jowy agreed when he saw it was all but dark outside. Here they were, in the dark, cold north, chasing a fairy tale. It was almost laughable.

After they had eaten a little bit of the small amount of food they had still left, they lay down on the cold, hard floor, covered by their cloaks and an extra blanket. Lunarstar had suggested they should crawl up to each other to preserve their warmth, which made Jowy unable to sleep. He slept with his back against Lunarstar, looking outside over the cold snowy field. He was aware of her breathing, her body warmth touching his... how was he supposed to fall

asleep like this? Yet he refused to move away. He liked... being close to her. More and more, he had realized he wanted to go with her. Away from this world. He wanted to go... to a place where he could be who he was, without being punished for it.

While sleep overtook him, Jowy realized he saw movement outside. He shook his head to wake up, thinking he had imagined it, but right when he wanted to lie down again, he saw it again. *There is someone out there.* Jowy slowly got up, trying not to wake Lunarstar. It was tricky, as they had been sleeping so close, but he managed to get away from her without waking her.

Jowy sneaked out of the cave, and once outside he hurried towards the place where he had seen... whoever, whatever it was. As he got closer, he saw a person standing there. He didn't even try to hide himself. The closer Jowy got, the more he could make out the person's features. The pony's coat was all but grey, and his long mane were that also, only they were a shade darker. His face was wrinkled, and his eyes looked pale and lifeless.

"Good night," Jowy said carefully, when he stood in front of the old pony. The pony smiled, revealing yellow teeth of which more than one was missing.

"Good night to you, stranger." Now that he was standing in front of the old man, Jowy wondered why he had rushed out. It is not like he had any reason... but maybe this person could help him find their way to the gate.

"Do you..."

"I know why you are here," the old man interrupted him.

"Sorry?" Jowy asked, staring at the old man, who was still smiling.

"I know why you are here," the man said again. Jowy wished he had stayed in the cave, for he did not like the look in the old man's pale eyes.

"You... and your friend who is not of this world." Jowy's heart skipped a beat. How did he know that?! "You are looking for the gate so many have searched before you."

"They have?" Jowy asked, surprised by this.

"Oh, so many have come here, perished here, looking for a gate that would lead them out of this world. But none found it. None knew where to look. None knew, that they had to ask the gatekeeper for its location before they could even hope to find it," the old man said.

"The gatekeeper eh... I suppose that's you," Jowy said sarcastically.

"Are you willing to pay the price?" the old man asked, the smile vanishing from his face.

"Price?"

"The price for the location of the gate, are you willing to pay it?" he asked again. He's a complete nutter, Jowy realized.

"Sure," he said, out of curiosity what the old man would say.

"Good," the old man said, smiling again.

He did not tell Jowy. He stood there, for a few moments, and Jowy almost wanted to walk away when he was blinded by a strange light. He looked around, trying to see where it came from, but he could not see it. It took him a few moments to realize the light was not coming from anywhere. It was *inside* his head. He closed his eyes, trying to drive the light away, but when he did, he saw it. A forest made out of white trees, and inside it, in the middle, a purple arched gate, with runes carved into the stone of the arch. The vision zoomed out, went south, southeast, and at the end, he saw himself standing there.

The vision disappeared, and Jowy opened his eyes. Everything was dark around him. Behind him, he saw, Lunarstar was still sleeping, and the fire was still burning softly. He wanted to ask the old pony what on earth that was, but the pony was gone, vanished into the darkness of the night.

“Um, so, okay, how come you’re so sure?” Lunarstar asked while trying to keep up with Jowy.

“I... I just am. Just follow me,” Jowy lied. He had no intention of telling Lunarstar of the strange old guy. Somehow, he felt, it would do more bad than good. He didn’t even believe it himself, but what other lead did he have? At least now that he seemed to be sure where to go, the journey didn’t seem as hopeless as before.

Still, as they went on, Jowy recognized things. He noticed a strangely shaped rock, the remains of a fallen tree... He had seen this. The night before, in the vision the old man had given him, he had seen this. And if he recognized this, he guessed the gate he had seen, and the white forest, might also be real. Still, the gate had just looked like a normal gate, something old, something ponies had made long ago but didn’t seem to hold any real powers. Well, they would see. It was the only chance they had.

All day they walked through the snow, further and further north. The trees had all but disappeared and the only variation in the landscape was an occasional rock. The road was barely visible. No ponies had been here in recent days, Jowy was sure, and as such there were no hoof marks in the snow, nor anything else that distinguished the road from the rest of the world. The only reason he was sure they were still on the road was a rare sign he had seen earlier and his memory of the vision.

When night came, Jowy began to panic. There was still no sign of the forest, or the gate, and he could see nowhere where they could stay for the night.

“It’s getting cold,” Lunarstar said, “and dark.”

“I know. I thought we would make it before night falls. I’m sorry, Lunarstar, I...”

“What’s that?” Lunarstar interrupted him. Jowy looked up and saw, far north, a bright white light shining on the horizon.

“It can’t be...” Jowy said, thinking it was a village, or a house.

“Let’s go!” Lunarstar exclaimed. They rushed towards the light, hoping for a warm house, a bed, hot chocolate... But as they got closer, they saw it was not a house, nor a village.

“What... is this?” Lunarstar gasped. Jowy, however, knew perfectly well what it was.

“The white forest...” he whispered.

As they got closer... the outlines of the trees grew stronger. A forest full with evergreens with white needles...

Now that he was here, he could see the trees were not covered in snow... they were actually white. Only their trunks were a greyish brown colour. The branches, the needles... they were perfectly white. They were so white, in fact, that they gave off a glow of the purest white light Jowy had ever seen.

“Is this... a fairy tale?” Lunarstar gasped.

“Most likely.” Jowy agreed, remembering the reason why they had come here.

“It’s in here... the gate. I know it is... let’s go, Lunarstar,” Jowy whispered. He stepped forward, and he heard Lunarstar following him. The road led them into the forest, where it was much clearer where the road was and where it was not. The borders of the road were decorated with a long line of white stones, and neither of them dared to cross them. The forest was so pure, so white, with snow covering the earth that they felt guilty leaving prints in the snow where they walked.

The road led them on and on, but Jowy had no idea how long they had been walking. He had forgotten all about time, cold, or any of the other things that had bothered him before. He was enchanted by the beauty of the place, and he was sure, so sure, that this place was too beautiful to actually exist.

In the end, the forest gave way to an open space. The ground was white here as well, but in the centre stood a large, purple arched gate. In the stone of the arch Jowy saw ancient runes that he could not read. The gate was miraculously free of snow.

“This is it...” Lunarstar whispered. “Does it look like the gate you know?” Jowy asked.

“Well... a little, I guess. It is different... but it is a gate. If there is anything like it in this world, this is it.”

“Let’s try it then!” Jowy said, “go on, walk through it!” Lunarstar nodded, and trotted towards the gate. She ran through it... but nothing happened. She ran through it once more, this time coming from the other side, but once again, nothing happened. Disappointment filled Jowy. Was this not the gate after all? Would they not be able to go to whatever world Lunarstar called home?

“Maybe we were wrong,” Jowy said.

“Yea, maybe...” Lunarstar whispered.

“I guess this gate needs magic to work. Or maybe it’s not real after all,” Jowy said, staring at the gate.

“Magic?” Lunarstar said, looking at him.

“Yea, I know, that makes no sense. There is no such thing as magic,” Jowy said, feeling stupid for saying such a thing.

“No, no, it makes perfect sense,” Lunarstar said.

“I’m sorry?” Jowy asked, not understanding Lunarstar.

“I was not supposed to show you this,” Lunarstar whispered, “In fact, I thought it would be wisest to keep this a secret for everyone in this world, but I guess I have little choice now. It’s the only hope we have left.” Jowy had no idea what the white pony was talking about, but he soon gasped when he saw a light coming from Lunarstar’s body.

She closed her eyes, and her purple mane and tail slowly began to change into silver. What was more, a horn was appearing on her forehead and her back was now carrying a pair of snow white wings.

“You... you are...” *A princess from a fairy tale.* It was the only way Jowy could describe Lunarstar.

“A Pegasus... and a unicorn,” Lunarstar finished for him.

“But that...” “Doesn’t exist in this world. I know. That’s why,” Lunarstar said.

“I will try it this way. Maybe the gate will recognize that I do not belong here, so that I can get home.” Jowy was still amazed by Lunarstar’s transformation, but he could see what she meant. Maybe... maybe it worked.

“Take me with you,” he said.

“What?” Lunarstar whispered, obviously unsure if she heard him correct.

“Take me with you to the other side of the gate,” he said again.

“Jowy... I cannot do that. This is your world. Not mine. I have to go... I have work to do,” she whispered.

“Please, Lunarstar, please! Take me with you. This world has been nothing but painful for me. Please!” He begged.

“I... okay. Hold on to me.”

“Thank you!” Jowy exclaimed, suppressing the urge to hug her, to hold her, to... Lunarstar smiled.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Jowy quickly grabbed hold of her tail.

“Okay. I’m going to run fast, so keep up,” Lunarstar warned, and she started to run. Jowy ran after her, as fast as he could. They neared the gate, and as they went through, a flash of light blinded Jowy. *This is it!* He thought. He tripped, fell down, and for a moment or two, he did not dare to move or open his eyes. *I’m in a new world!*

“Lunarstar?” he whispered, realizing he was no longer holding her tail. He slowly opened his eyes, and he saw the white of the snow, of the trees, and in the corner of his eye, the purple gate.

“No...” he whispered, quickly getting up. “Lunarstar!” he yelled, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Lunarstar!” he yelled again as he walked through the gate. “You’d take me with you! We didn’t even say goodbye!”

“Your friend is home,” a voice said. Jowy looked up, and between the white trees, he saw the grey, old pony, grinning as he had before.

“Where is she?” Jowy yelled. “Why am I not with her? She promised to take me with her!”

“She may have... but you said you would pay the price. Not even another world could take you away from that promise.” The price... Jowy had all but forgotten. He hadn’t even asked what it was.

“Yes... you will pay the price,” the old man said again, grinning.

“What price?” Jowy asked.

“To dwell here for two hundred and fifty years, until the next gatekeeper will accept to pay the price, and you will be allowed to rest. That is how I came here, all those years ago...

looking for the place out of the legend, trying to find it so that fortune would be mine. Yes, my reasons were less noble than yours, but it matters not. You accepted. Can you not feel it? Or rather, can you not *not* feel it? The change?”

Jowy gasped as he realized, he did not feel it. The cold of the snow he had just laid down in, the ground under his hoofs, the cold wind against his face.

“Thank you, gatekeeper... for allowing me to pass on to the next world,” the old man said, and Jowy saw his body began to fade.

“Wait!” Jowy yelled. “You cannot do this to me!” But it was too late. The old man had faded into the night, his smile lingering on his face.

“You cannot... do this...” Jowy sobbed.

He looked back at the gate, and gasped when he saw the change. The gate radiated a strange purple light, and in between, he saw a golden curtain slowly moving in the wind.

“The gate...” he whispered.

He ran towards it, sure that he could pass it this time... but he only ended up on the other side.

“*The gatekeeper cannot pass the gate until it is his time,*” a voice in his head said. “*You made your sacrifice. Your friend is home. Now, you will dwell the icy north until your time comes.*”

“No...” Jowy said. He walked, walked away from the gate. He began to run, run, run. But he did not notice that his hooves did not leave any prints in the snow. He did not notice that he never seemed to be out of breath. He did not notice that no matter how far he ran, he could not escape the snow plains. Slowly but surely, as he ran, the only thing he noticed was the gate he would now protect from harm, until he was allowed to pass on to the other world he so longed for.