Off the Edge of the Map
Daetrin

Table of Contents

PONY FICTION VAULT
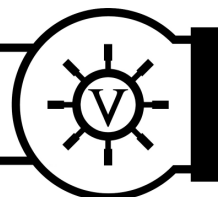
"A-are you sure you know what you're doing?" Fluttershy's voice was frayed by the wind as Rainbow Dash whipped back and forth over the clouds.

"'Course I know! I know this is gonna be awesome." She paused a moment in her work to give Fluttershy a broad grin. "So don't go away. I'm almost done." The blue pegasus darted off again, pushing black clouds ahead of her.

"But isn't it dangerous?" Rainbow Dash outdistanced the sound of Fluttershy's voice before she'd gotten out the second syllable, and the yellow pegasus sat back on her haunches. "Oh dear," she said to herself. A long tube of thunderclouds rumbled unhappily as Dash packed them into shape. There was enough room inside the tube for a pegasus to fly through - assuming one wanted to brave the lightning-licked interior.

Fluttershy's vantage point on top of a nice, safe, fluffy white cloud gave her a view through the tube, to the small circle of blue sky on the other side. Rainbow's head appeared there briefly as she pushed the last cloud into place, making sure it was properly secure. The yellow pegasus blanched as a particularly loud rumble of thunder came from the packed-together clouds.

"Okay!" Rainbow Dash swooped around in front of Fluttershy. "This should work. The 'Rainbow Lightning!'"

"Um..." Fluttershy only got that much out as the blue pegasus began sweeping around her thunderstorm tunnel, flying tight spirals around it and starting it spinning. Lightning flickered ominously throughout as the clouds blurred, and Rainbow Dash sped to the other side, lining herself up for a pass through the tunnel.

Fluttershy leaned forward anxiously. There was no way to do this anywhere near the ground, and Rainbow Dash wasn't really supposed to have all those extra stormclouds anyway. That left her as the only real audience Rainbow Dash could summon. She was rarely comfortable with Dash's continual daredevil antics, but the other pegasus was so passionate about it that Fluttershy couldn't help but support her.

Dash started her run. Her wings flapped furiously as she aimed herself through the tunnel, her wake pulling the clouds after her. The rotating, flickering storm bunched itself up behind her, growling as she compressed it even further. Then she was through, a rainbow streak darting out of the eye of the storm, and Fluttershy ducked as Dash's wake whipped through her mane.

Rainbow Dash slewed around in midair to see if the idea had worked. The storm, whipped into a frenzy, was a nearly solid sheet of lightning, and Dash's wake had dragged water out of the storm in her passage. The result was a field of dancing multicolored shards, lighting-fueled rainbows sparkling in the air. "Yes!"

Dash flew back to Fluttershy's cloud and dropped herself down in front of the yellow pegasus. "See? I told you it was going to be awesome." She flashed a broad grin at Fluttershy, but sobered when she saw the other's expression. "Er...wasn't it?" Fluttershy was looking less impressed and more shocked, her eyes huge.

"Um...Dash?" Fluttershy raised a hoof and pointed back at the storm. Rainbow Dash twisted around and looked obediently.

The storm was moving toward them, and quickly, from the momentum Dash had given it. It was grumbling and growling, but what was most threatening was the vortex of solid lightning that was rushing to engulf them. It gaped like a hungry maw full of electric teeth, scant seconds from devouring them whole.

"Oops." Rainbow Dash took wing again. "C'mon, Fluttershy, let's get out of here!" But Fluttershy was frozen solid staring at the onrushing storm, and Rainbow Dash dropped back to grab onto Fluttershy. "Come...on!" But her wings were locked tight against her flank, and she could only give a tiny squeak.

"Oh boy." Rainbow glanced up. There was no time left. She flung herself on top of Fluttershy instead, shielding the other pegasus as the jaws closed around them. There was a resounding boom of thunder, a gust of wind that shredded their perch, and they were sent tumbling through the air.

Rainbow locked her forelegs around Fluttershy and pulled her upward, or at least what she guessed was upward in the pitch black cloud around them. The yellow pegasus finally stirred, her wings starting to beat just as the blackness cleared. There was just enough time to see a mass of white before they plowed headlong into an enormous swath of cloud.

There was a moment of silence, and then Rainbow Dash wriggled her way out of a mound of cloudstuff. "Fluttershy?" She glanced around, and a pink mane appeared out of a nearby drift.

"I-I'm here." Fluttershy carefully pulled herself out of the full-body hole she'd made on impact and looked up as Dash glided over to her.

"Sorry about that, Fluttershy, I guess I got a little carried away..." The blue pegasus gave her a nervous chuckle and an uncertain smile.

Fluttershy looked at her for a long few seconds, then dipped her head briefly and gave Dash a gentle smile. "Oh, it's all right, Rainbow Dash. It turned out all right, didn't it? Although it *was* scary..."

Dash's expression eased slightly. "Well, don't worry, I'll be a lot more careful next time. And, uh, we won't have the audience so close." She swiveled her head around, ears perked. "All right, I'll just go put those clouds back and...um. Where's Cloudsdale?"

Fluttershy blinked and looked around too. They were surrounded by the big, pillowy mounds of a cumulus cloud, but the familiar features of the cloud city were missing from the horizon. "Um...maybe we're too high up?" She stretched her wings and flew to the edge of the cloud, glancing down to try and get her bearings.

Rainbow Dash drew up beside her, and they stared down at a vast, wind-ruffled expanse of blue. Water stretched from horizon to horizon, with only a few puffs of cloud scattered throughout the sky. Even this far up, the tang of salt scented the air, and the only noise was the sound of wind on water.

"Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said in a very small voice. "Where are we?"

• • •

Fluttershy watched as Dash flew in ever-widening spirals out from their cloud. Her darting about became more and more frantic until she finally came back and dropped down next to Fluttershy. "I don't know!" The blue pegasus had an edge of panic in her voice. "I don't see any land at all."

She began pacing back and forth in front of Fluttershy. "I mean, I guess the storm could have carried us *some* distance but not this far. I mean, it's ocean forever and even I can't fly fast enough that we'd be this far this fast. But it *had* to be the storm because that's all that happened!"

"It's okay, Rainbow Dash."

The blue pegasus blinked and looked over at Fluttershy. "It is?"

"Sure it is. No matter where we are, I'm sure you'll get us back." Fluttershy gave Rainbow Dash a hopeful look, and the blue pegasus couldn't help but smile back. "Yeah...yeah, I'm sure it'll be no problem."

"I'm just worried about Angel Bunny and my chickens and birds and all my animals. Who will take care of them if we don't get back soon?" Fluttershy's ears drooped and Dash trotted over to put a hoof on her shoulder. "Hey, we've got plenty of friends in Ponyville. You know they'll take care of things while we're away. Spike's done it before, remember?"

"I-I suppose you're right." Fluttershy looked up. "So, um...which way do we go?" She looked around them. There were no landmarks or signs of life in any direction, not even birds.

Rainbow followed her look and shrugged. "Let's just go with the wind. West." The pegasus really didn't have any idea which was the right one, but Fluttershy was not nearly as strong a flyer as she was. If they were constantly fighting against the wind, they wouldn't get far.

Fluttershy bobbed a nod to her and spread her wings. Rainbow Dash followed, itching to set a fast pace. But she had to consider the yellow pegasus. If she were by herself, she'd be a lot faster...but she was glad she wasn't by herself. Even if she felt guilty for dragging Fluttershy into this - however it happened - at least she wasn't alone.

They flew in silence for a while, soaring from cloud to cloud. Fluttershy spent most of her time looking down at the expanse of ocean below, and finally Rainbow Dash had to break the quiet. "So...what are you looking at, Fluttershy? There's really not much down there."

"Oh!" Fluttershy was surprised to be broken out of her reverie. She glanced over at Dash and blinked, her ears going back shyly. "I was just thinking about all the new animals that must be somewhere under all that water. I've never been to an actual ocean before."

"Well, as soon as we reach dry land we can take time out for that. I'd like to get somewhere we can find something to eat first." On cue, Dash's stomach gurgled and the blue pegasus gave Fluttershy an embarrassed grin. "Ah-heh. See?"

"Oh. Yes." Fluttershy nodded. "I'm getting a little hungry myself. But I suppose we must wait." She sighed as they touched down on yet another cloud. The yellow pegasus trotted over to a projection of cloudstuff and took it between her teeth, tugging and straining out the water. Dash followed suit, even though there wasn't that much in the white clouds.

It was an old survival skill from the dusty history of flight camp. Dash's history with flight camp was...troubled, and she had to admit to herself at least that she probably wouldn't have thought of it. It was also clumsy and messy, and by the time they'd gotten their fill, both pegasi had their muzzles soaked and their manes plastered against their necks.

Dash looked over at Fluttershy whose mane was flattened over half her face, and couldn't help but snicker. She didn't look much better herself, with what seemed to be a rainbow-colored helmet plastered over her ears, and the yellow pegasus smiled hesitantly back. They grinned at each other for a moment and both started laughing. Fluttershy's quiet giggle was almost lost under Rainbow's raucous cackling, but it was there.

It was good to laugh. Fluttershy was still nervous and worried, and hunger gnawed at her belly, but it released some of the tension there. And it was good to see Rainbow Dash laugh. She knew that Dash was much stronger and tougher than she was, and as long as Dash thought they were okay, they probably were.

Once the laughter had died down, Dash smiled at Fluttershy. "We should go on, try and cover as much air as we can before the sun sets." Indeed, the sun had slid through the sky while they were flying and was well on its way to the horizon.

"Whatever you say, Rainbow Dash." Fluttershy's voice was absolutely trusting, and Rainbow Dash hoped she deserved it. The blue pegasus took a deep breath and took off from the now-diminished cloud, navigating by the sun alone and hoping that they were making progress over the featureless sea.

"So, um," Fluttershy spoke up after a while. "I've never really been far from Ponyville. Where do you think we are, Rainbow Dash? The Maneterranian Sea? Or maybe the Ponific Ocean?"

"I don't know," Dash replied. Fear - and it was fear, deep in her heart - gave her voice an edge she hadn't meant, and the yellow pegasus flinched back from her. Dash sighed and softened her voice. "I'm sure we'll find out soon enough. We can't be that far from land."

We can't be far was a mantra that Fluttershy repeated to herself as they flew on, though her wings were beginning to ache. She was unused to flying so far for so long, and she envied Rainbow Dash's effortless glide. Fluttershy looked over at the blue pegasus, who didn't seem to be anywhere near tired, and bit her lower lip, looking back at her own wings and putting forth a renewed effort to keep up with Dash.

The sun was nearing the horizon when Fluttershy spoke up. "I...I have to stop. I can't fly anymore. I'm sorry." Dash had noticed Fluttershy beginning to flag, but didn't want to say anything. It wasn't Fluttershy's fault they were so out of their depth.

"Hey, don't worry about it. We needed to stop anyhow, with the wind picking up." Dash pointed at a nearby puff of white. "Let's just rest there." The wind was indeed beginning to freshen, driving the clouds scudding before it. Fluttershy dropped gratefully onto the puffy surface, her wings drooping. She took a few steps toward the middle of the cloud, dropping down to lie on the fluffy surface, and Dash landed next to her. "How about I go take a look real quick? I'll be back in a flash!"

Fluttershy nodded and Dash took off again, speeding out ahead of the wind now, surveying the water below for even the slightest hint of solid ground. She went far enough out that the cloud with Fluttershy on it was a mere speck in the distance, but she dared not go any farther. If she lost the yellow pegasus in the endless blue, she would probably never be able to find her again.

Rainbow Dash had to return defeated. The wind had picked up even more, turning it from merely brisk to actively chilly, and when she landed Fluttershy was huddled into herself in the middle of the cloud. She was also crying. The faint keening sounds were barely audible over the breeze, and Rainbow Dash trotted over to her.

"Fluttershy! What's wrong?"

The yellow pegasus sniffed and looked up at her. "Oh, I'm sorry, Dash. I'm just cold and hungry and tired and worried that we'll never see home again and that my animals won't be taken care of..." She sniffed again. "I know. I'm just being silly."

Dash looked at Fluttershy, then settled down next to the other pegasus. "Hey, no. It's not silly, Fluttershy. This sucks and it's all my fault." For emphasis, Dash's own stomach growled unhappily, but she put a comforting wing over Fluttershy. "But I promise I'll get us home safely. All right?"

After a moment Fluttershy leaned in against her. "All right," she said in a small voice, and in the falling dark Dash couldn't quite make out her face.

"Don't worry, Fluttershy. Let's just get some sleep. By morning we might be over land, with this wind."

The yellow pegasus bobbed a nod and tucked herself close down against the cloud. Dash followed suit, the two of them huddling together. Despite the doubt, worry, and hunger gnawing at her guts, Rainbow Dash closed her eyes and slept.

• • •

A low, mournful whistling and groaning woke them. Dash clawed her way out of the cloudstuff and lurched sleepily to the edge of their perch, followed closely by Fluttershy. Below them was a pair of enormously long blue shapes cutting through the water. Dash was at a loss, but Fluttershy squeaked excitedly. "Whales!"

"Creepy," Dash muttered, as the basso rumble echoed choppily from the waves. Fluttershy threw Dash a look of disappointment and then launched herself off the cloud to spiral down toward the waves. After a chastised moment, Dash followed.

The yellow pegasus dropped down to a few feet above the water's surface, and Rainbow Dash circled warily, not trusting the creatures. "Um, excuse me," Fluttershy said, trying vainly to be heard above the noise. "But we're lost. I was wondering if you could help us find where the nearest land is?" Her stomach gurgled loudly and Fluttershy flushed. "Or, er, where we could find some plants to eat."

The whale rolled in the water, revealing one enormous eye. It fixated on Fluttershy, and she smiled nervously at it. After a long, long stare, it rolled back and an enormous fountain of salty spray jetted from its back, incidentally soaking Rainbow Dash.

"What? Hey!" The blue pegasus spluttered and dived down toward the whale's head. "What was that for? You can't -" She was cut off as the other whale performed the same maneuver, though this time the plume wasn't aimed directly at her. Dash glowered at them and Fluttershy tittered softly. Then with a flash of flukes, the whales dived under the surface.

Dash switched the glower to Fluttershy. "Well that was a waste of time. And now I'm all salty wet! Ick." She shook herself, and Fluttershy backwinged to keep from getting sprayed.

"Well... maybe we scared them."

"Scared *them*?" Dash looked at Fluttershy with disbelief. "Did you see how *big* they were? I could swear they were bigger than the dragon, even."

"But whales are harmless!" Fluttershy said earnestly. "*You* weren't scared, were you?"

"What? No! Of course not!" Dash folded her hooves over her chest. "I just don't trust anything that big."

"Well, that's silly, Rainbow Dash. I'm sure that - eeep!" Fluttershy squeaked as one of the whales crested, splashing Dash yet again. The blue pegasus growled impotently as Fluttershy dipped down to talk again. "Well hello again, I thought you were gone."

The whale's bone-jarring groans made Rainbow Dash grimace, but her expression changed as soon as a long strand of leafy plants floated to the surface along with the whales. Along with another, and another. "Food!"

"See? Most creatures are willing to help if you ask nicely." Fluttershy dropped lower toward the whale. "Thank you so much. We're very grateful. But do you happen to know where nearby land might be?"

Dash started gathering up some of the plants while the whales rumbled their way through a few words with Fluttershy. After several long minutes of ear-grating noise, they moved off again. Fluttershy drifted over to her. "Um, they said the closest land they know of is to the north. Really far north."

Dash glanced in that direction. Normally it would have been a beautiful day, with only a single cloud in the sky. But they needed clouds, for water and for rest, and it was obvious that like the Everfree Forest, these clouds operated without pegasus intervention. There wouldn't be a ready depot of rainclouds to count on. "Well, I guess we have to go north, then." Dash gathered up the last of the plant and lifted it up toward their personal cloud.

The plant was bitter and salty, but at least it was food, and there was plenty of it. Dash stifled her complaints as she saw Fluttershy gamely chew her share of the leaves. It filled her complaining stomach with plenty left over, and Dash draped some of it around her neck for later. It also made her tremendously thirsty, and between the two of them they cut the cloud in half to sate their thirst.

"All right, Fluttershy, it looks like it's time to go." Dash stood on the edge of the cloud and Fluttershy joined her.

"It's just so... big." When they were just hopping from cloud to cloud, she could kid herself out of her normal agoraphobia, but standing on the edge of a vast swath of blueness she could feel her wings threatening to lock up.

"You can do it, Fluttershy," she told herself, following Dash's example as the blue pegasus leapt off the cloud. Her wings were still a little sore from the previous day but there was

nothing for it. She followed Dash, trying to focus on the pegasus rather than the rest of the surroundings, and her mind wandered to what she had planned for the week. Her sessions in the garden, the fledgling birds. Her appointment at the spa with Rarity that she never missed.

She was so focused on not thinking about her current predicament that she missed it when Rainbow Dash asked her a question. She blinked at Dash. "Oh, I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked, are you okay? You're kinda lagging behind there."

"Oh." Fluttershy flushed and flapped her wings harder, pulling up alongside Dash. "I'm just not used to flying this much."

"Yeah, you spend more time on the ground than most earth ponies." The blue pegasus snorted. "Not much good it does you here, does it?"

"No..." Fluttershy dropped her head. It wasn't exactly like she was planning to be stuck in the middle of the ocean. "But at least I could talk to the whales."

"True." Reminded by that, Dash tore a leaf off the garland around her neck and chewed. "Sha shing ish," she said indistinctly, then swallowed. "The thing is, you're just not used to distance flying. You need to glide more. Here, watch how I do it."

Fluttershy obeyed, trying to match her wing movements to Dash's. She didn't really see the difference between what she was doing and what Dash was, but she was willing to try. As the hours wore on though, it was clear that no amount of impromptu instruction was going to help. The yellow pegasus slipped closer to the waves, and Dash's exhortations became more panicked. And still there was no sight of land.

"I...I'm sorry, Dash." Fluttershy said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I can't go on. You'll have to continue without me."

"No. No way. Rainbow Dash doesn't leave *anypony* hanging." The blue pegasus ducked down underneath Fluttershy, who squeaked as Dash lifted her up. "Hang on, Fluttershy," she said grimly. Fluttershy obeyed, locking her forelegs around Dash's neck as she sped forward over the featureless sea.

Fluttershy watched the waves pass beneath them, her wings hanging by her side, aching and limp, and then buried her muzzle in Rainbow Dash's mane. "I'm sorry for being so... so..." She couldn't even finish the sentence, but Rainbow Dash stopped her anyway.

"Hey, I got you into this, and I'm going to get you out." She smiled back at her passenger. "Or my name isn't Rainbow Dash." Fluttershy managed a small smile back, relaxing slightly against Dash's back. For the first time since seeing the vast expanse of ocean, she felt safe.

• • •

She woke to the wash of waves on shore, but she didn't remember falling asleep. All she remembered was an endless blur of trying to fly, trying to fly, trying to fly. Fluttershy rolled to her feet, her wings sore and weak from overuse, and staggered in the deep sand of a beach. Rainbow Dash was sprawled out nearby, her salt-crusted coat silent testament to a struggle through the waves themselves.

She half-waded over to the other mare, bending down to nose at her. "Rainbow Dash? Are you okay?"

The blue pegasus groaned and stared muzzily upward at Fluttershy. "I told ya I'd get us here." She gave Fluttershy a rictus grin and tried to get up, only to collapse back in the sand. "Gimme five more minutes..."

Now it was Fluttershy's turn to carry Rainbow Dash, hauling her up from the beach and onto a strand of grass. She finally took the time to look around, looking for water, trees, and especially any sign of civilization. A tall cone-shaped mountain rose to a snowcapped peak, fading to a the fuzzy green of dense foliage near the base. The land sloped down toward the beach they were on, which itself curved narrowly around in either direction. It seemed obvious to her even without the benefit of an overhead view that they were on an island.

An island, but not a desert one. Where there were that many trees, there was water. Fluttershy hefted up the blue pegasus and started into the trees. It was cooler there, and the sun-dappled plant life was almost reminiscent of the forest back in Ponyville. Almost.

She stole snatches of bites from the grass before it was crowded out by plant life she didn't know anything about. In the canopy of the forest the grass was replaced by flowering shrubs and bushes, but animal life seemed strangely absent. In fact, there were no birdcalls or insects buzzing, no sounds of small creatures flitting through the trees. The realization made her stop and look around. She felt like it was the Everfree Forest all over again.

The plants were a brilliant green, contrasting sharply with vivid orange and red blossoms. Strange fruits and berries weighed down the trees and climbing vines, as brightly colored as the flowers. The air was a riot of strange scents, the verdancy only making the contrasting stillness stranger.

"It's okay, Fluttershy... maybe they're just not used to ponies," she muttered to herself, though she wanted to do nothing more than run back out. But Rainbow Dash had gotten them there, so it was her turn. The blue pegasus herself was still dazed or unconscious, and very heavy on Fluttershy's back. She was nearly ready to take a rest, no matter how thirsty she felt, when she heard the sound of water coming through the trees.

The sound gave her new energy and she ran - or at least trotted - toward the source. And stopped. Between the trees she could see the silhouette of roofs and buildings. For a moment it seemed like there could be people of some sort, too, but a second glance showed most of those silhouettes as broken and decaying, the ruins of some sort of village.

Fluttershy crept closer, and still nothing stirred. A stream of clear water cut right past the ruins, and she edged up to its bank. The buildings loomed in silent vigil as she eased Rainbow Dash off her back and cautiously dipped her head down to taste the water. It was clear, pure, and nearly sweet. She gulped some down, only now conscious of how parched she really was, then detached a large leaf from a nearby plant to serve as an impromptu cup.

Dash spluttered and coughed a bit as Fluttershy poured water into her muzzle, but she'd had plenty of practice with animals. The pegasus swallowed the water, but didn't rouse otherwise. "You just rest, Rainbow Dash." Fluttershy tenderly brushed Dash's mane away from her muzzle and looked up at the ruins crouched nearby. "I think I'm going to need your help for this one."

She didn't dare go far, not with the silent forest close in on every side, but she did nose around long enough to find a spiny seed pod to act as a comb. The salt that splashed her flanks was itchy enough, and Dash was worse off. It was certainly warm enough that the cold water in the stream was refreshing rather than chilling, and she used the water and comb to groom herself and then the unconscious Dash.

It was a long two hours as the shadows crept across the ground before Dash stirred again. "Nng. I had the craziest dream." Her eyes opened and she looked up at Fluttershy, then around the forest. "Oh man. It wasn't a dream." She tried to get to her hooves, her wings working shakily as she toppled over to her other side. "Ow."

Fluttershy dipped her head down and helped push the pegasus upright. "We're both sore after all that. I think we'll have to stick to the ground for now."

"I guess." Dash looked downcast for a moment, and then brightened up. "But you know, I bet I set a record for endurance flying with that."

"I bet you did." Fluttershy smiled at Dash. "You got both of us all the way here. Thank you."

Dash smiled back for a moment then looked around. "Wherever here is. Whew, now this *is* creepy."

Fluttershy gave a small nod. She'd been trying not to think about it, though the fact that absolutely nothing had happened was slight salve for her fears. The silent forest was clearly unnatural and she wanted nothing more than to leave it. But the ruined town might tell them where they were and, besides, the forest covered nearly the whole island.

"Well, come on, let's see if we can find anything useful." Dash started off toward the decaying buildings, and Fluttershy followed close on her hooves. The silence seemed to grow even more oppressive as they walked down an abandoned street strewn with leaf litter, broken twigs and branches. The buildings themselves, on closer inspection, were fairly sound, if overrun with vines and creepers. But every single door had fallen out of its jamb, hinges rusted into smears on the wood.

The buildings themselves were subtly wrong, the proportions off. Dash poked her head into a few doorways while Fluttershy watched worriedly, but there was nothing inside but disused tables and chairs. They seemed slightly too large and wide, the tables too low. The blue pegasus shook her head. "I hate to say it, but I don't think this town was built by ponies."

"Th-then who did?" Fluttershy looked around nervously. Without urgency driving her, the earlier bravado had faded back to her more usual apprehension.

"Maybe... monsters!" Dash grinned, attempting a weak joke to cut through the oppressive atmosphere. It did quite the opposite. Fluttershy squeaked and pressed herself against the ground, looking, if it were possible, more nervous that before.

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Oh come on, Fluttershy. Monsters wouldn't build a whole town, would they? It's got to be somepony of some sort, even if everything does look weird."

"I... guess," the yellow pegasus admitted, though her expression didn't ease even a fraction.

"I'm sure they just found a nicer place to live," Dash declared. "Come on, Fluttershy, we need to finish looking around before it gets dark. Maybe we can find a place to stay." Forgetting herself, the pegasus spread her wings and winced. "Especially since we're grounded," she added with a glower at the traitorous appendages.

"Just as long as we don't stay here," Fluttershy murmured.

"Well I'm not afraid!" Dash declared loudly. Her voice echoed back to her, weak and flat and stilted, as if the silence was actively consuming noise. "Ah-heh..." She looked at the nearest building, the façade stripped down to the wood and the windows and doors gone, leaving only the bleached bones of a house. "It's probably unsafe though, so we should find somewhere else."

Fluttershy nodded and crept along behind Dash. They made their way through the disused main thoroughfare of the abandoned town, the hush complete except for their hoofsteps and the occasional sigh of wind. Plants grew between the cobbles, as evidence of the forest reclaiming the town, and that served to further muffle the sounds they made.

They stopped once they reached the outskirts of the town. The overgrown road cut through the heart of the forest, a straight line directly toward the distant mountain. "A road's got to go *somewhere*, right?" Rainbow Dash squinted along the overgrown cobbles.

"I'd really just rather leave," Fluttershy said, looking around nervously. "I feel like we're being watched."

"What?" Rainbow Dash whipped around, staring suspiciously about them. "I don't see anything."

"I don't either, it just feels..." Fluttershy trailed off, looking at the ground.

"Oh, don't worry about it, Fluttershy. I'm sure just it's just these woods being creepy." Dash tapped her hoof against the ground impatiently. "And it's not going to be daylight forever. I'd like to get somewhere we can camp sooner rather than later."

"Um..." Fluttershy spoke up again. "Shouldn't we bring food and water with us?"

"How? We don't exactly have saddlebags and canteens, here."

The yellow pegasus lifted her head up, cheered by the opportunity to do something. "Oh, we can just make them, Rainbow Dash. Here." Fluttershy stepped off the road a few paces to pull an enormous flat leaf from a nearby bush. Rainbow Dash followed, watching as the yellow pegasus fashioned small containers from creeper and tightly rolled leaves.

"Where'd you learn to do that, Fluttershy?" Dash blinked at her. She never would have expected Fluttershy to have such extensive survival skills.

"Oh, I make them for my animal patients sometimes." Fluttershy lifted up a pair of containers and set them on Dash's back, the vines making a crude harness, then fashioned a second set for herself. "There, now we just fill them."

Some minutes later they made their way back to the road, Dash hauling water and Fluttershy burdened with grass. She still didn't trust any of the other plants to be edible. They walked along the arrow-straight road, the relentless quiet pressing in. It was enough to shake even Dash's reserve, and she finally stopped and turned to Fluttershy.

"I know I'm not usually one to suggest this, but...how about a song? All this quiet is really getting on my nerves."

"Oh. Um..." Fluttershy flushed and glanced down briefly. "All right." They started off again as Fluttershy took a breath.

Home no more home to me, whither must I wander
Hunger my driver, I go where I must

She started off quietly even for her, but gained in volume as she took comfort from the sound of her own voice. Dash relaxed too, as having something familiar seemed to drive back the formless menace of the surroundings.

Cold blows the winter wind over hill and heather
Thick drives the rain and my roof is in the dust.

The soft voice of the pegasus floated through the woods, a small pool of serenity in the midst of a nameless dread. Dash was normally immune to the effects of song, no matter that both Pinkie and Fluttershy had a tendency to break into them, but in this place it was a palpable relief to hear.

Fluttershy's song carried them deeper into the forest, the road not swaying the slightest fraction, the only concession it made to the terrain being to slope slightly upward. Small bridges supported it over gullies, and it cut uncaringly through small hills. The day

turned on toward night without the end of the road or, indeed, any other landmark coming into view.

Rainbow Dash stopped them as they crossed yet another small bridge over a sharp defile. A tall tree with a bulbous trunk and broad, fernlike leaves shaded the road there. "All right," she said. "Let's just quit for the night. Maybe tomorrow we'll be able to fly and actually make good speed through here." She flapped her wings experimentally and grimaced. "We can hope."

"Whatever you say," Fluttershy agreed as Dash took off her water harness and draped it over a low branch. Fluttershy followed suit, the two of them settling down in the sparse grass under the tree. Wind stirred the leaves above them and a few fat drops of rain spattered and spit against the forest canopy.

"...Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy whispered into the oppressive quiet.

The blue pegasus lifted her head up and looked at the silhouette of the other mare. "Yeah, Fluttershy?"

"...I'm scared." Rainbow Dash looked at the pegasus huddled against the ground and slid closer, putting a wing over Fluttershy.

"Yeah, me too," she admitted. "But as long as we stick together, we'll be fine. You'll see." There was a glint of blue eyes as Fluttershy looked at her, and then nodded, relaxing against Rainbow Dash and putting her head on the ground. She was asleep within moments. Dash looked on enviously, faintly wishing that there was someone to reassure her.

• • •

Morning brought no relief from the atmosphere of the forest, but their muscles had recovered enough that they could take wing. Not even Dash could fly far or fast yet, but it was better than hooves alone. The blue pegasus did a loop in the air, stretching her legs out comfortably. "Oh yeah, this is better." Fluttershy followed more demurely, circling above the treetops as Dash rose higher to get a view of the island.

A lazy plume of smoke drifted from the white-capped mountain, fading into the painfully blue sky. Here and there amidst the dense forest canopy, more blue sparkled from lakes and streams cutting their way toward the surrounding ocean. Below, the road could be glimpsed occasionally through breaks in trees, but it took no great imagination to extend the line toward the base of the mountain.

Along that line, near the base of the mountain, was a circular lake with smudges surrounding it that might be buildings. "Looks like we're headed there." Dash pointed a hoof. "There's gotta be something to tell us where are."

"I hope so." Fluttershy looked at the distant gleam of water and dropped back down into the trees, shouldering her makeshift saddlebags. The plants were already starting to dry out, and they'd fall apart in another day or so, but there was no reason to leave them behind just yet. Rainbow Dash followed her, grumbling under her breath as she shouldered the burden of the half-depleted water supplies.

They flew in short hops. Rainbow Dash's wings were still sore enough that she had to, no matter how much she hated being grounded. Fluttershy wasn't much better off, but it still meant they reached their destination in one tenth the time. They also spent much less time under the confines of the forest canopy, which was vastly relieving. Even though the air held that same stillness, it was not as all-enveloping under the clear blue vault of the sky.

Their destination resolved itself into a circular lake surrounded by more ruined buildings, these ones even more decrepit than the town near the beach. In the center of the lake a half-submerged stone tower rose out of the water, listing drunkenly askew. The road ran right into the edge of the lake, stopping abruptly at the edge of the water. Rainbow Dash touched down at the lake's edge, followed by Fluttershy.

"What the heck happened here?" The blue pegasus scowled at the tower, then transferred her expression to the buildings. "If there's nothing new here this is going to be such a waste of time."

"Um, Rainbow Dash...?"

"I mean, all this way and it's just more stupid ruins with nothing in them. And a stupid lake. We've got, like, a million lakes in Ponyville."

"Rainbow Dash!"

"What?" Dash turned around, and Fluttershy pointed a shaky hoof back at the forest.

The missing animal life had appeared. Hundreds of small rodents and reptiles that neither of them recognized formed a living carpet at the forest's edge. The trees were packed with birds, a raucous display of brilliant plumage. Here and there the bulk of a larger animal stood out from the crowd, eyes flashing and angular muzzles pointed at the two pegasi.

In fact, every single animal was watching them. The soft susurration of moving bodies made the lack of vocalization even more eerie. There were no chirps, no calls, no grunts from the assemblage of animals. They simply watched.

"...oh." Dash blanched at the unnatural mob. "Um...you talk to them, Fluttershy. That's your sort of thing, isn't it?"

"That's not normal!" Fluttershy quailed at the spectacle, then looked at Dash and took a deep breath. "All right, I'll try..." The pegasus took a step forward. "Um...hello?"

The wind blew. A noise like a sigh ran through the collected animals, mixing with the wind and coalescing suddenly into a roar of comprehensible words.

> *Who.*
> > *Are.*
> *You.*

Fluttershy squeaked and backed toward the lake, cringing away from the collective. Rainbow Dash bared her teeth and stepped in front of the yellow pegasus, glaring at the animals. "I'm Rainbow Dash! Who are you?"

I am.
The wind.
> > *The earth.*
The trees.
> *The life.*
> *This place.*
I am.

"Oh yeah? I just see a bunch of creepy animals!" Dash narrowed her eyes at them. "And I'm not afraid of some overblown talking wind!" Behind her, Fluttershy whimpered, covering her head with her hooves.

Fear.
> > *Is.*
Irrelevant.

Patches of the road began to glow softly - prints, Dash saw, of something that had a front set of paws and a rear set of talons. The prints walked toward them, and Dash couldn't

help but move aside as they walked past the two pegasi and across the surface of the lake. It stopped at the tower, and licked upward, limning a figure in a cool flickering glow.

It had feline forelegs, while its rear talons were that of an eagle. A scaled head with two long horns wavered in the unsteady glow, and its tail trailed off into nothingness behind. The figure stood on the surface of the water, unconcerned by the small waves lapping along its surface. The voice came again, from the animals, from the wind, from all around.

You.
        Are.
Intruding.

"Yeah, well, we didn't really have much choice, did we?" Dash glared back and forth between the figure on the lake and the semicircle of island fauna. "If you hadn't noticed this is kind of the only land nearby."

Intruders
Must.
            Be.
                    Dealt.
With.

"Now what is that supposed to mean? I - oh no you don't!" The silent crowd swept forward as one, toward the two pegasi, and Dash planted herself between the nearly comatose Fluttershy and the animals. They came claw and tooth bared, the birds launching themselves from their branches.

Rainbow Dash's advantage was speed. She wheeled and kicked the first arrival, sending it wheeling away with a muffled thump. She darted back and forth, hooves flashing as she fended off the crowd, sweeping birds from the air and silently cursing her sore wings. But she was only one pegasus, and there were too many of them.

Dash cried out as a claw scored on her hide, drawing a streak of red across her chest, and another along her flanks. She stumbled back, and the mob pressed on. Her thoughts were not of herself, but of how she had failed Fluttershy. The blue pegasus went down under the press of bodies as the creatures crested like a tidal wave.

"Stop." The word was not loud, but it rang in the air like drawn steel. The advanced faltered and stilled as Fluttershy stood up. "Stop." She said again, and even Rainbow Dash was unable to move.

"What gives you the right?" Fluttershy never raised her voice as she stalked through the mob toward Rainbow Dash. The crowd melted away before her. "What gives you the right to attack us? We are *guests*, lost and alone. We have done *nothing* to earn your hostility." Her words flensed the control of the island spirit from the minds of animals around her. Released, they scatted back into the woods, vanishing from sight.

"You claim to be the spirit this land, the creatures that live here, but you are using them. Using them to attack *us*." Fluttershy reached Dash's side, bending to help the blue pegasus to her feet. She was bleeding from a dozen cuts and scratches, but still intact. Fluttershy smiled at her and then turned to look at the figure in the lake. "You are not protecting the land, and you are not protecting them.

Fluttershy was a gentle spirit. But her gentleness was not weakness. It flowed from an adamant core, a heart that would turn even the sharpest blade without a scratch, and could cut in equal measure. "With all this power, you are nothing more than a thug and a bully. Can you really have claim to have the land, the trees, the wind? Because from what I see, all you have is fear."

The last of the creatures had fled, leaving only the two pegasi and the fiery figure in the middle of the lake. Fluttershy stepped to the edge of the lake and glared at the figure. "So are you a petty ghost, afraid of the living? Or are you really a spirit of nature?"

The pegasus stared into the flickering blue sockets of a spirit that embodied an entire island, the sum of all the life, the water, the air, and the earth thereon. A spirit that counted its age in centuries rather than years, and whose essence was in every blade of grass underhoof. In this place, it was like a god.

And the god flinched.

> *I.*
>> *Apologize.*

The wind sighed, lonesome, through the trees.

<p style="text-align:center">• • •</p>

"I accept your apology," Fluttershy said graciously. "But look at poor Rainbow Dash! You should really be apologizing to her."

"I... uh..." Rainbow Dash was nonplussed. The figure lowered its head and began to walk toward them, leaving illuminated footprints behind. Fluttershy watched calmly as the spirit walked up to them, but Dash was wide-eyed. It bent its neck until it was muzzle to muzzle with Dash, and breathed.

In a matter of moments, plants grew from the ground, wrapping smooth leaves around Dash's wounds, and then withering away to leave only the green bandages behind. Her skin tingled and the pain faded. "...thanks?"

The figure stood to its full height again, towering over them.

     What.
Do.
You.
          Want.

"We're just looking for a way home," Fluttershy said. "We're completely lost and we found your island by accident. Well, Rainbow Dash did. Do you have any idea how to get to the mainland?"

"And what's with all the creepy ruins around here? Who used to live here?" Dash put in. "Did you run them off too?"

Two.
     Halves.
     Of.
A.
     Question.

The wind keened through the trees in response to their questions. The spirit's outline flickered as it turned to look at the tower in the center. Ghostly fire dripped from its figure, pooling on the water. It shifted and slid into a model of the island itself. Rainbow Dash limped up next to Fluttershy to watch.

A group of sleek, dagger-shaped vessels slid through the lake-as-ocean, leaving a phosphorescent wake as they cuddled up to the shore. Small figures disembarked, spreading over the land. Two towns arose, one at the nadir of the island, one nestled at the base of the mountain. They briefly flourished, the light defining them growing

crisper and cleaner. Then, one by one, the flames representing the inhabitants of the island flickered and went out.

I.
Hold.
Their.
Memories.
Until.
They.
Return.

"I don't think they're coming back," Rainbow Dash muttered. Fluttershy shot her a disapproving look, and Dash rolled her eyes. "Well, it's true!" The spirit's head swung around to regard them, burning blue pupils flickering in expressionless sockets.

I.
Can.
Wait.

"Right." Dash shook her head. "Anyway, what does this have to do with finding the mainland? I mean, there's nobody around to tell us." The fiery island dimmed and died as the spirit turned around to face the pegasi.

The.
Ships.
Remember.
Their way.
To.
The land.
Of dragons.

"Dragons?" The two said it in chorus and looked at each other. It was hardly what they were expecting. Fluttershy's eyes were wide and uncertain as she stared at the blue pegasus, and then at the spirit. "Well," Dash said after a moment, trying to reassure her. "Dragons *do* seem to know where Equestria is, so it's the right direction at least."

"You're right," Fluttershy sighed. Then her expression lightened. "Maybe I'll get to see more baby dragons like Spike!"

"Uh, yeah." The blue pegasus blinked at Fluttershy and then looked at the spirit looming above them. "So, if the ships know, whatever that means, how are we supposed to find out?" The glowing figure swept by them, heading for the forest. The wind whispered through the grass, swirling about them as it trailed after the spirit.

Follow.

The two pegasi obeyed, trotting on either side of the lingering prints left behind. They passed between two trees, and between one step and the next they were no longer near the heart of the island, but at a sheltered cove on the coast. A small waterfall fell into the ocean there, bouncing down a short cliff, the wind whipping the spray into an inconstant rainbow.

"Whoah." Rainbow Dash was impressed. It was not the magic, for Twilight was proficient enough at teleporting. It was the suddenness of the transition, the lack of flash or sparkle that was showy in its own right. Fluttershy's attention, though, was captured by the half-dozen dagger shapes in the water below them.

The silver ships were low to the water, with a delicate filigreed rail all around the flat deck. They had no mast or oars, no visible means of propulsion or even anchors. Unlike the towns on the island, the ships were pristine. The waves lapping against the sides of the vessels didn't seem to even leave droplets of water.

The spirit bent its head to the vessels in a gesture of respect.

> *When.*
> *You.*
> *Are ready.*
> *One*
> *Will.*
> *Take you.*

The spirit's form flickered and faded, cold fire streaming away on the wind until they were alone again. The forest was no longer silent and oppressive, but cheerful and bustling with life. Birds twittered and called to each other; the underbrush rustled with the comings and goings of small creatures. Dash stared at where the ghostly guardian had stood. "When we're ready, huh?" Then she glanced down at herself, her blue coat striped with green bandages. "I suppose we should take a little bit to rest and heal up, ah-heh."

She glanced over at Fluttershy and was taken aback by the other mare's wide-eyed, tearful expression. "Oh, Rainbow Dash, I'm so sorry."

The yellow pegasus took two steps toward Dash, but stopped short of actually hugging her for fear of further injuring the pony. "If I had done something earlier, you wouldn't have gotten hurt. It's all my fault."

"Hey, no, Fluttershy." Dash put one hoof on her shoulder and smiled at her. "You did great. I mean, you made the island not-creepy and got us transportation...well, I'm not sure how that works yet, but still. A few scrapes and bruises don't really mean much."

"I-if you say so." The yellow pegasus still looked unhappy, and Dash pulled her into a quick embrace, regardless of her wounds.

"I say so." Fluttershy gave her a small smile in response.

The moment was interrupted by Dash's stomach gurgling loudly. The pegasi looked at each other for a brief instant and began to giggle. It grew into laughter, and they flopped back against the grass and let it come. It felt good after the unceasing oppressive atmosphere they'd endured, and it chased away the last lingering shadows of fear.

• • •

"Aw, yeah, this is better." Dash stretched her limbs as she drifted lazily just above the treetops. Her wings fanned the air, carrying her effortlessly through the clear bright sky. The plant bandages had fallen off, leaving only the smooth welts of healing skin.

They hadn't seen the nature spirit again, but in the span of a few hours a bower had grown by the side of the cliff, a tight intermeshing of leafy green vines that provided a cool, comfortable shelter. Fruit trees had sprouted around it, bearing a staggering variety of exotic food for the two pegasi. The perfection of the spot provided a harsh counterpoint to the knowledge that they were still utterly lost.

Lost, but they did have direction. Dash drifted over to where Fluttershy was working with vines and leaves, slices of fruit spread out on a flat rock beside her. "Whatcha doing?" The blue pegasus hovered above Fluttershy, and she glanced up at Dash.

"Oh, um, well, I don't know how long this boat trip will be, and we'll need food and water, so I'm making supplies. See I have dried fruit wrapped in leaves, and these hollow out gourds are for water." Fluttershy gave Dash a broad smile. "It's a lot better than dry grass and seaweed."

"Hah, yeah." Dash watched Fluttershy labor alone for a moment, then dropped down beside her. "...so how can I help?"

The yellow pegasus gave her a startled look, which transmuted after a moment to a grateful one. "Oh, I'll show you."

She scooted over to make room for Dash, and the blue pegasus took to the task of learning how to make water gourds. Dash would admit she had a habit of shirking chores, but Fluttershy's reaction hurt her. So she bent to following Fluttershy's instructions, telling herself she'd do her own fair share of the work for their journey.

In all, it took them several days to recover and put together their supplies. Simply being lost was stretching into a longer and longer journey, and Fluttershy couldn't help but think about life back in Ponyville. The day they were ready to leave, she sighed, looking at the pile of food and jugs they'd made. "Rainbow Dash, what do you think everyone else is doing? Are they still looking for us? We know we're okay, but they must be so worried."

Dash looked up from the stream, where she was filling one of their jugs. She put the jug aside and looked down at her reflection. "Yeah, I know. I was thinking about that too. I just wish there was some way we could tell them what was going on. Well, I really wish we were back in Ponyville, but a message would be nice too."

She turned around to look at Fluttershy. "But hey, I'm sure they know that wherever we are, we're together. And that means they know we'll be fine."

The yellow pegasus nodded, looking unconvinced. Dash trotted over to her and gave her a smile. "Don't worry about it, Fluttershy. Just think of how happy they'll be to see us when we get back."

"I suppose so," Fluttershy said softly, but she did give the blue pegasus a small smile.

Dash turned to look at the silver ships gleaming against the blue of the cove below. "Speaking of which, I guess we should get going. But how are we going to figure out which ship to take? Or... how to make it go?"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the blue-green fire of the island spirit kindled nearby. They turned to watch as the ghostly flames licked upward to outline the strange figure. The blue-lit sockets of its eyes surveyed them dispassionately then stepped to the cliff's edge. The wind whispered over the edge, and the ships responded.

One of the six slid closer to the cliffs, lifting further out of the water, the hull shifting slightly as windows opened in the sides. The rear half of the deck slid upward, a door appearing as the filigreed rail formed into place around the new upper deck. "Nice!" Rainbow Dash grinned at the spectacle and darted out over the cliff to circle around the vessel. The spirit turned to Fluttershy.

You.
Need.
    Only.
Ask.

"Thank you so much," Fluttershy said, ducking her head to the island god. "We're very grateful to you for all your help. Is there anything we can possibly do to repay you?"

The spirit cocked its head at Fluttershy, and for a moment silence reigned. Dash flew back up, looking between Fluttershy and the fiery specter in front of her.

Carry.
    My.
Memory.
  With.
    You.

With those final words, it disappeared for the last time, streaming away on the wind, the blue and green fire fraying and vanishing. Dash landed next to her, both of them watching until there was no more sign of the spirit. "I wonder if he's lonely," Fluttershy said at length.

"He's an island, Fluttershy," Rainbow Dash said. "I don't think that islands can get lonely. Can they?" They looked at each other, and Dash shrugged. "...We should start loading." The blue pegasus walked back over to the stream, picking up her water jug and flying over to the ship.

The silver hull was cool underhoof, the interior well-lit even where there weren't windows. The middle deck did have windows, though, and furniture. A pair of beds and couches, the linens a crisp silver-white, took up the most of the deck, with a table and chairs filling the space between. All of the furniture was familiar looking enough, but the proportions slightly off, just like the ruined towns.

The lower deck had no windows, and was full of bins and racks for storage. Dash put her water-filled gourd on a shelf and looked back at Fluttershy, who was bearing a stack of dried fruit. "So, is this what the ship normally looks like or what? It seems awfully convenient."

"Well it is a magic ship," Fluttershy said, dropping the food into a bin. "It's probably trying to be nice. Thank you, ship," the pegasus added, looking around at the hull. Dash rolled her eyes, following Fluttershy as she flew back up the ramp to the surface. But the blue pegasus paused for a moment before leaving, watching Fluttershy soar back up the cliff.

"Um... thank you, ship," she said awkwardly, before shaking her head and launching herself after the other mare.

It took them several hours fill all the water jugs and load all the supplies, but eventually they were ready to go. The two of them stood on the main deck, looking over the rail. "So... I guess it's time to leave."

Fluttershy nodded and looked down at the deck. "Um...ship, if you could take us to the land of the dragons, we'd be awfully grateful." The ship shivered softly underhoof, and began to slide away from the island. Dash had to brace herself against the roll of the deck as the craft accelerated, wind whipping across the deck as the vessel sped through the waves.

Fluttershy turned to watch the island recede into the distance. Dash stepped up next to her, the wind tossing her mane. "Are you okay, Fluttershy? You look kinda glum."

"I still think it must be lonely to be an island," Fluttershy told her. "Even if it is full of creatures."

Dash didn't really know what to say to that, so she stayed by Fluttershy's side until the island slipped out of sight beneath the curve of the horizon. Eventually, though, Dash nudged the other pegasus. "Let's go below. I'll make dinner," she added with a sudden grin. Fluttershy smiled back and followed the mare into the vessel.

Dash spent most of the time her time in the cabin, bouncing around a makeshift ball formed of tightly-wrapped vines and leaves. She occasionally took wing, zipping into the air to look around, only to circle back to the ship as her exploration revealed only more water. Fluttershy was less adventurous, spending much of her time simply watching the waves slip past.

One day turned into another, and the ocean breeze chilled as they sailed on. The first break in the endless water for the entire journey was a chunk of ice, bobbing incongruously among the waves.

"Well that's... weird." Dash scowled at the ice. "I wonder where that came from?"

"I bet Twilight would know," Fluttershy said. "I wish she were here to tell us."

"Yeah..." The blue pegasus looked out over the water. "I didn't realize I'd miss them so much," she admitted after a long pause. There was a moment of silence, and then she was surprised by Fluttershy stepping up next to her to give her a hug.

"Don't worry Rainbow Dash," she said. "I'm sure we'll be back soon enough."

"Heh. That's what I've been telling you." Dash returned the embrace as they watched the strange sight drift away. "We'll be okay."

As the light dimmed, the sky north of them flickered with color. The ponies stood on the upper deck, watching the horizon as green and orange flashed, and then swam through the sky. Slow rivers of light danced in the air and curtains of blue and green, orange and pink shimmered far above them.

"Wow." Rainbow Dash stared upward, her breath steaming in the cold air. The two of them were huddled under blankets brought from below, unable to resist the lure of the light show above them.

"It's so beautiful," Fluttershy agreed, her eyes wide as she watched the heavens. "I really wish the rest of our friends were here to see it. But I'm glad that at least we're here together."

Dash shot a glance at Fluttershy, but the yellow pegasus was still enraptured by the spectacle overhead. "...yeah, me too," Dash agreed, huddling deeper under the blankets and returning her gaze to the sky. The sky shimmered and blazed in color as Luna's night wore on, and it wasn't until color shone on the eastern horizon that Dash realized she'd stayed up all night watching.

"That was crazy. Now I'm *really* going to have to catch up on my naps." Dash grinned, looking over at Fluttershy. The other pegasus was asleep. She looked over at Fluttershy for a moment, then stood up, nudging the other pony onto her back and carrying her down to the hold. Fluttershy stirred but didn't wake as Dash put her in her bed and

draped a blanket over her. Dash stood there for a moment, just watching, and then flicked her wings, flying back up to the deck.

She watched the sky lighten, the ribbons of color above vanishing, and sighed. "This is cool and all," she said to nobody in particular, "but I really wish we were getting there faster." In response, the ship under her hooves shuddered. Dash frowned, and turned around as the silver vessel began to shift again. "...uh-oh."

Between one blink and another, a solid pane of glass slid over the deck, cutting off the wind abruptly. The front narrowed and the whole ship hunkered down closer to the water. The pegasus shook her head from a brief sensation of vertigo as the hull flowed like hot molasses, and then was tumbled from her hooves as they abruptly accelerated.

Below deck, there was a thump, and Fluttershy appeared, disheveled. "What's going on?"

"I, um, think I made it go faster. Ah-heh."

Dash clambered back to her feet, looking out through the transparent cover that had appeared. The water nearby was blurred, a plume of spray flying out behind them as they cut through the waves. "Oh. Well, I guess that's okay." Fluttershy blinked at the changed ship. "Um, thank you, ship."

The yellow pegasus looked at Dash, and she rubbed at her mane and grinned uncomfortably. "Ah, yeah, thank you ship." Then she paced to the prow of the ship and peered ahead. "I still wonder where we're going, though."

"The land of dragons, of course," Fluttershy said as she stepped up next to Dash.

"No, I mean... nevermind." She shook her head briefly. "I haven't seen anything but water and ice for days. How big *is* this ocean?"

"Um, big?" Fluttershy supplied helpfully, then yawned, swaying slightly on her feet. "I'm still tired... I think I need to go lay down."

"Good -" Dash surprised herself with an answering yawn. "Good idea."

They were woken as the ship slowed and turned, nearly rolling Dash from her bed and pressing Fluttershy against the cabin wall. "What the...?" Dash peered out the cabin window, now sealed along with the deck, and saw high white cliffs rising from an ice-dotted ocean. And far, far above, a winged silhouette glided through the air, the sun glinting off its scales. "Awesome! We made it!"

"Ooh." Fluttershy crowded in next to her at the window, since hers was now facing open ocean. "But are we going to have to fly that whole way up?"

"It's no problem, should be a piece of cake," Dash said, flexing her wings. "Just as soon as the ship lets us out."

"I wonder where - eep!" Fluttershy flinched back from the window as the ship abruptly dove under the water. As the froth cleared, they had time to see the immense floating bulks of the ice before the ship dived into a hole in the cliff under the water. The outside went pitch black.

"Oh, I don't like this." Fluttershy backed away from the window, glancing around as if expecting water to come crashing in at any moment.

"Relax, Fluttershy, I'm sure it'll be fine." Dash's voice was not entirely steady, but she turned to give Fluttershy a smile. The blue pegasus looked out the window, willing the light come back. She didn't have to wait long; it was only a minute or two before pale blue illumination filtered through, and water sluiced away from the glass. The cabin shape shifted and altered, making her eyes hurt, and a whisper of cold, damp air came from the upper deck.

"What'd I tell you?" Dash grinned at Fluttershy. "We're here."

The cavern's illumination was provided by the sun filtered through an unimaginable distance of ice above, tiny cracks casting a soft glow. At one end the ice was slicked by a small river, tumbling through a hole in the smooth dome of the cave ceiling and foaming along the thoroughfares of the underground dock.

And a dock it was. Ancient stone pillars rose from the water surface, and buildings half-swallowed by the encroaching ice defined a broad marina now rimed with frozen spray. The architecture was of the same style as the ruined buildings on the island, half decrepit and half preserved, crumbling where it wasn't held under an icy shell.

Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash stood on the deck of the ship, looking around at the blue-tinted rock, their breath curling from mouth and nostrils. The entire spectacle felt old, the press of ages writ deep into the bones of the rock and ice. The splash and burble of the river was the only thing that disturbed the quiet.

"So where do we go from here?" Fluttershy said at length, her voice even quieter than usual, as if she would disturb the hush of the sleeping buildings.

"I'm sure there's some way out," Dash said. "They wouldn't just build a city in the middle of nowhere, right?"

"I hope so. It's cold here." The yellow pegasus shivered. It was near freezing, and the water splashing over the ice made it look even colder.

"Yeah, it'd be a lot nicer if it would just let us out by the cliff." Dash glanced down at the deck expectantly, but nothing happened. After a moment, she looked back up at Fluttershy and sighed. "Okay, I guess we're stuck finding our own way out."

Fluttershy looked around again and nodded glumly, trotting down to the hold to get the remainder of their food. Rainbow Dash looked after her thoughtfully, and then went into the cabin. When Fluttershy returned to the deck, burdened with a dozen leaf-wrapped packages, the blue pegasus was busy with blankets she'd taken from their beds.

Fluttershy dropped the food in shock, sending dried fruit scattering across the silver hull. "Rainbow Dash! Those aren't ours!"

Dash looked up from where she was tearing strips off the silvery cloth and sighed. "I know, Fluttershy, but we're going to freeze to death here if we don't have *something* to keep us warm. Besides, I asked the ship and it didn't say no."

Fluttershy hesitated, shivering and visibly torn between comfort and propriety. "We *need* to, Fluttershy," Dash said in a softer tone, and Fluttershy finally sighed and nodded.

"...all right. But let me help." Fluttershy dropped her load on the deck and stepped over to where Dash was. She nudged the other pegasus aside and braced her hooves on the cloth, tearing another strip off with her teeth. In the absence of any real tools, the resultant outfits were crude and ragged, but far warmer than going without.

While Fluttershy didn't have any sewing equipment, Dash had to admit they turned out better than she would have managed herself. They wrapped the free strips of cloth around their legs, the remainder of the of the blankets draped sarong-style around their bodies with a rough hood completing the outfit. Fluttershy used the few scraps of cloth left to tie back her tail, so she wouldn't have to worry about getting it wet and frozen.

The two of them looked at each other, swathed in their improvised clothing, and Dash grinned. "Imagine what Rarity would say if she could see us in these things."

Fluttershy surprised herself with a giggle. "She'd drag us off to the boutique by our tails." They stood there for a moment, smiling, but then the mood soured as they were reminded yet again just how far from their friends they were. At length Dash sighed and started gathering up the scattered food. Fluttershy followed suit as they packed up as much of their supply as they could carry.

Dash took wing, skimming over the dock and inspecting the buildings that weren't entombed by ice. Fluttershy took a moment to look down at the ship's hull before she followed. "Thank you so much for bringing us here," she told it. "And for giving us the blankets. Say hello to the spirit for us." She dipped her head to the upper deck and flew after Dash.

The blue pegasus was only intermittently visible as she flew over the half-flooded streets of the ruined port. Fluttershy flapped her wings hard, the wind tugging at the edges of her hood. "Wait for me, Rainbow Dash!" Her voice floated softly through the ancient stones structures, reflecting oddly off the ice.

Dash's voice returned from somewhere ahead, garbled and incomprehensible by the hundreds of echoes. Fluttershy glanced around nervously and paused in her flight as the silver ship floating in the middle of the harbor vanished back beneath the water, heading out again into the trackless ocean. She shivered and flew forward again, nearly colliding with Dash as she turned around the corner of a ragged-edged stone wall.

"There you are, Fluttershy." Dash's voice had an edge of relief. "We don't want to lose each other here. This place is a maze."

It was an overstatement, but not much of one. The ice splintered sound in all directions and threw off odd, distorted reflections. The ceiling was too low to fly above most of the buildings, forcing them to flit through ice- and rubble-choked streets and alleys. One look at the crumbling brickwork was enough to deter them from trying to actually enter any of the ruins.

In fact, as Fluttershy briefly alit on a projecting platform, the rock gave way under her hooves. She gasped and shot back up into the air, a third of the balcony crumbling to gravel and bouncing down to splash in the flooded streets below. Dash glanced back at the low rumble, flying over beside Fluttershy and looking at broken stone.

"Yeah, I think we'd better find a way out of here before the whole thing falls apart on us." Dash waved a hoof at the far end of the cavern. "I think there's an exit over there, come on!" She darted away again and Fluttershy labored to catch up.

Even the remains of the port city were larger than Ponyville, and possibly even larger than Canterlot, even without knowing how much of it mouldered unseen, entombed forever behind the frozen wall of ice. It took longer than either of them would have liked to reach their destination, winging carefully between the city's bones.

Dash was right. There was an archway cut into solid rock, and an ancient ramp stretching up into darkness. While the base was slicked with rime, it became dry and solid stone before it vanished upward into the gloom. The blue pegasus darted inside to take a closer look, but Fluttershy hung back. "It - it's so dark. Do you think it's safe?"

Dash's voice floated out from the cave. "Well, it looks like our way out, so we have to take it. Come on, Fluttershy, the darkness can't hurt you." After a moment, she came back out of the passageway. "And besides, you'll be with me. What's the worst that can happen?" Fluttershy looked down at the ground for a moment and took a breath, visibly steeling herself.

"Of course, Rainbow Dash. You just lead the way." Dash gave her a grin and darted back into the passageway.

They were forced to touch down before they'd gone very deeply, the light fading quickly the further they went up the tunnel. When they could see nothing more than the vague

grey silhouettes of each other, Dash stopped. "We're should tie ourselves together so we don't get separated," she said. "You can't take chances when you're spelunking."

"Y-you've done this before?" Fluttershy asked, watching Dash's silhouette as the pony unwrapped part of her outfit.

"Yeah!" the blue pegasus replied enthusiastically. "Last time we actually had lanterns, but you still need to do things right." Dash took a strip from Fluttershy's parka and bent to tie them together. "Well, it's not rope, but it'll do." She took a step forward, then another, the tie pulling on Fluttershy midstep. She stumbled into Dash with a squeak.

"Hey, don't be nervous. Just walk with me."

"Okay..." Fluttershy was glad the other mare couldn't see her flush in the darkness. She took a few quick steps forward, rubbing shoulders with Dash. Their hooves tapped out a syncopated rhythm as they climbed the ramp, the dim glow from behind fading to an utter black. Now that they were no longer flying, it seemed even colder, and Dash bent her head back to tug one of the folds over to cover her wings.

"This is... *really* dark." Fluttershy said after a while. In fact, she couldn't tell the difference between her eyes being open or closed.

"Yeah, it gets like that." Dash's voice came from beside her. "Some of the spelunker ponies I went with swear it's a mystical experience, but I don't get it. It just makes it hard to see. I wish I had a stick or something. You never know when you're going to run into a blind outcrop or a pit or something..."

Fluttershy stopped dead with a squeak. The improvised rope pulled taught and both of them stumbled, falling into each other. They took a moment to disentangle themselves, a task made surprisingly difficult by the darkness. "Don't worry about it, Fluttershy," Dash said again. "This part is obviously cut out, and I'm keeping the wall close by so we don't get lost. As long as we keep going up we'll be fine."

"I-if you say so, Rainbow Dash." Fluttershy took a breath and stepped up to take her place next to Dash again. The other pegasus patted her on the shoulder.

"As long as we stick together, there's nothing to worry about," Dash told her, and Fluttershy nodded. It wasn't until a few seconds later that she remembered the other pegasus couldn't see her, and she flushed in the darkness.

"If you say so, Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy repeated, pressing closer to the blue pegasus. They started off again, the ramp slowly rising. It was hard for her not to flinch with each step, which her imagination now supplied with jagged rocks and deep holes. But if Rainbow Dash could do it, so could she.

The sounds of their hooves echoed far up ahead and behind, fading into the vast, unseen emptiness around them. It was impossible to tell how much time was passing, no way to tell one minute from the next or discern that they were making any sort of progress. In that place, it seemed easy to imagine being lost forever. To Fluttershy, the blackness seemed to expand with every step, the two of them isolated specks in the middle of nothingness.

Dash wasn't completely immune to the thought, but she pressed onward anyway. She didn't call a halt until her legs were just starting to ache from the climb. "Wait. Do you feel that?"

"What?" Fluttershy's voice floated from just behind Dash's left ear, low and tense, and the pegasus turned her head to reply.

"There's a breeze. A small one, but that means there's an opening somewhere around here." Rainbow Dash grinned into the black. "Maybe we're near the end of this ramp."

"Oh, I hope so!" Fluttershy sounded relieved, and Dash started off again, kicking against the wall next to her every few paces to make sure they were still on track. It wasn't until her hoof encountered nothing at all that she stopped again, the yellow pegasus trailing to a halt a moment later.

Dash felt around until she found the wall, and a smooth corner. "Okay," she told Fluttershy. "We're at an intersection, I think." She lifted her head, her ears flicking as she felt the breeze, still faint, but definitely there. "To the right, into the breeze."

It took some clumsy jostling, but they got turned in the correct direction and started into the breath of wind. Dash trotted forward, pulling their connection tight, and she strained to see any hint of light filtering down from above. Intent on that, she wasn't ready for something under her hooves to slip the moment she put her weight on it, tipping her forward.

The sarong jerked tight, pinning her wings and keeping her from recovering her balance. Her flailing legs encountered only a void as she toppled and something cracked her across the head. The blackness seemed to blur for a moment as she flailed wildly, her

hooves encountering rock walls and scraping along them as she slid to a halt, braced between them. Far below came a series of hollow thumps as the water gourds spun down into the abyss, trailing off into silence without ever hitting bottom.

"Rainbow Dash? Are you okay?" Fluttershy's anxious voice sounded as if it were underwater, and Dash shook her head to try and clear it, her hooves scraping down a tiny fraction of an inch. Cold talons crawled up her spine. Rainbow Dash was far from afraid of heights, but this was different.

"I... I think so. How far did I fall?"

"N-not far. We're still attached." Dash felt something soft brush across her muzzle; Fluttershy's mane.

"All right." Dash tried to work her wings free, wriggling as much as she dared without any support, straining against the sides to keep from slipping any further downward. After she managed to free her wings from under the wrap, she realized there wasn't enough room for her to spread them. She carefully tried to work her forelegs up, and froze as she slipped down another tiny fraction. "...can you pull me out?"

"I'll try," Fluttershy said doubtfully. The sarong pulled even tighter as the other pegasus backed away, bracing herself against the rock and flapping her wings. Abruptly the cloth gave way and Fluttershy tumbled back into the darkness.

"Fluttershy?" Dash called. She was beginning to understand the panic the other pegasus felt at times, with no way to move and her legs already beginning to hurt from bracing sideways against the rock. The breeze she had felt came from below, tugging intermittently at the edges of her hood, the cool air smelling of water and cold stone.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash!" There was a slithering sound as Fluttershy crept back, feeling carefully up to the edge of the gap, her hoof finding Dash's head and coming back wet. "Dash! You're bleeding."

"I hit my head, I'm sure it's just a scratch." The blue pegasus took a deep breath and tried to think. The gap was far too narrow for Fluttershy to get any purchase to lift her out, assuming she could in the first place. "All right, Fluttershy, I need you to not panic." Her own voice came out shaky, belying her instructions. "Can you do that for me?"

"All right," Fluttershy said in a very small tone.

"Okay. This pit isn't that wide. Can you stretch across it, right by my head?"

"I'll... try." Fluttershy groped across the gap, shrinking back from the emptiness below twice before finally gritting her teeth and stretching as far as she could, her wings waving as she supported herself, her hooves finally reaching the other side. "All right, Rainbow Dash." The blue pegasus rested her muzzle on Fluttershy's forelegs, and used them to lever herself up a little bit, hooves scrabbling against the stone as she lifted herself up a fraction. "Okay, slide closer to me," she encouraged the other pegasus.

Fluttershy nodded softly and obeyed, mane whispering across the stone in the darkness, and Dash repeated the process, using Fluttershy as a living piton and inching herself upward, bit by tiny bit. The walls seemed to become slippery, even though she knew that was her imagination, and she nearly did fall as one of her forehooves encountered air instead of rock.

"All right, Fluttershy. Nearly there. You can get back on your side now." Dash waited until she heard Fluttershy's hooves on the rock to her left, then braced herself on the lip of the rock and heaved herself upward. As soon as her wings cleared the enclosing stone, she beat them once, lifting herself out and colliding with Fluttershy, sending them both sprawling away from the unseen edge.

● ● ●

Dash lay on the floor, her heart pounding, gasping as if she'd just flown ten races without rest. Beside her, the other pegasus spoke from floor level. "Are you okay, Dash?" Fluttershy's hoof touched the side of her face and Dash found herself clinging to the other mare and trembling. After a long pause Fluttershy gave Dash a gentle nuzzle, heedless of the blood matting the rainbow mane. "It's all right," she said soothingly. "You're okay now."

Slowly, Dash relaxed her grip, feeling tremendously embarrassed but by the same measure reassured. Eventually she wobbled to her feet and coughed uncomfortably. "...thanks, Fluttershy."

"You've done the same for me," the mare returned warmly.

"A-heh... still." Rainbow Dash rubbed at her head with a hoof, which stung but seemed to be still intact, the blood drying into a tacky mess. "...I don't think we'll be going that way."

"*Yes*," Fluttershy agreed, the one word as emphatic as her soft voice could get. "Er... if there is another way."

"I'm sure there is." Dash turned to face Fluttershy's voice and something crunched softly underhoof. A package of food, dropped at some point during their misfortune. "But, um, let's take a lunch break first."

Dash first fixed the broken tie between them, not daring to get even the slightest bit separated in the endless black. They scavenged slowly and carefully, rounding up most of the scattered fruit, but the water gourds were lost forever. Dash ate ravenously, the sweet fruit washing the bitter tang of spent adrenaline away from her mouth.

Fluttershy listened to her friend eat, nibbling at the crisp tang of some dried tropical delicacy. The taste was completely at odds with their surroundings, which was suited more to moss and twigs. The strangeness seemed appropriate though, after the past few minutes. She'd never heard that tone from Dash before, even during the Young Flier's Competition. She'd comforted many, many panicked animals in her life, but never a panicked Dash. She hoped that the other pegasus was up to leading them, because she was utterly lost. After swallowing her last bite and wishing vainly after the lost water, she got to her feet, feeling the reassuring tug of the tie that kept her near Dash. "So... which way do we go?"

"Let's try the other direction," Dash's voice came from somewhere nearby. "If the breeze is coming from that... hole, it's still got to be going somewhere. The tie pulled her off to the side, and she stumbled as she fell in beside Dash, the two of them following the wall back toward the intersection.

They were both more hesitant about where they put their hooves now, but the ponies still gamely shuffled along until the ground began to rise again. "See? This has got to be the right way." Rainbow Dash's voice sounded normal now, but neither of them had covered their wings again. No matter how cold it was, it wasn't worth taking the chances, and their feathers occasionally brushed as they climbed.

She had no idea how long they ascended, but eventually her legs ached so much that she had to stop. "Rainbow Dash, I'm not sure how much longer I can go on."

"That's all right, Fluttershy. We can stop here for the night." Dash replied. "This passage can't be *that* long, we'll probably be out tomorrow."

"I hope so," Fluttershy said quietly. "I'm beginning to think we'll never find out way out."

"Don't talk like that, Fluttershy. Of course we will!" Dash's hoof found her side, and slid around to give her a hug. "You'll feel better in the morning."

They bedded down together on one of their blanket-coats, putting a layer between them and the frigid stone, and the other one on top as they huddled together to conserve warmth. The slight, inconstant breeze didn't help, as the chill air seemed to go right past their coats and into their bones. It was far from a comfortable cloud, or grass, or bed, but eventually they slept.

When Fluttershy woke, there was something subtly different about the passageway. She looked around, blinking, and realized that uphill there was an ever so slight shade of grey rather than black. "Rainbow Dash!" Her voice, hoarse from her parched throat, cracked slightly as she prodded the snoring pegasus next to her. "There's light!"

"Huzza-wha?" Dash sputtered next to her, the blanket shifting as the other mare twisted around. "What's that?"

"Light!" Fluttershy repeated. "It's lighter over there."

"It is!" Dash sounded as delighted as Fluttershy felt. "We'll be out of here in no time."

The cloth slid away as Dash stood up, bringing a wash of cold air that made Fluttershy shiver.

"Let's get going," Dash said, her voice muffled by a mouthful of blanket, and Fluttershy bent to pull the other one back over her. She couldn't wrap it properly in the dark, but it was better than nothing. The still-tied blanket was almost pulled off her as Dash started forward, and Fluttershy hurried to follow.

Step by step, the grey grew more pronounced. The tunnel walls became visible as darker shadows, then lighter ones, and eventually they could finally see each other. The two pegasi shared a broad grin, running forward toward the source of the light.

They nearly ran off a cliff. The tunnel opened out onto a sheared-away section of rock, dropping down far below to more a slab of grey-speckled granite. The view above was bounded by another immense dome of ice above, and water flowed across the rock, trickling toward tunnels on the far side. They were even brighter, promising sunlight and a way out.

Dash didn't wait. She launched herself off the cliff and into the airy cavern, stretching her wings and flying high over the cavern floor. "Aww, yeah." The twined blankets drifted down the cavern floor, and Fluttershy dived after them, recapturing them before they fell into the water. Then she joined Dash in stretching her wings, the two pegasi enjoying the

light and freedom. Fluttershy wasn't much for aerobatics, but being released from the unknown darkness was enough to make her want to fly.

The two of them circled and wheeled around each other for a while, grinning madly, but eventually Fluttershy descended to a land on a dry outcrop of stone. She bent to drink from the glacier-melt, feeling even more thirsty once she'd started. Dash landed next to her and followed suit, plunging her muzzle thirstily into the pure water.

"Now, let me see your head, Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said, after they'd drunk enough to make their bellies slosh. "I need to make sure you're all right."

"Oh, I'm fine, it's just sore." Dash waved a hoof dismissively, but on seeing Fluttershy's expression dropped her head down. "...fine."

She grimaced as Fluttershy poked expertly at her head. The blue pegasus had a large, ugly-looking scab running along her right ear, the skin next to it already starting to discolor with bruising. "Does this hurt? How about this?"

"No, no, it's okay, Fluttershy, ouch!" Dash winced and Fluttershy nodded.

"It looks like it's just a cut." The yellow pegasus sighed. "I don't have any of my medical supplies here, but you should still wash it properly."

"I think that can wait for us to get out of here." Dash looked around at the open cavern. "I don't know about you but I want to see daylight."

Fluttershy flushed momentarily and nodded, bending to help Dash re-wrap the sarong. They were both shivering from the cold air and colder water, so in her haste to get the blanket properly situated, Fluttershy took one too many steps backward. She squeaked as one hoof splashed into the stream then shook it out and looked around nervously. "Um... is the water getting higher?"

Dash frowned at the water thoughtfully. "I don't know." She flicked her wings, flying over to the face of the ice where the water was coming from, and peered at the stream's source. It seemed to be flowing in sheets down the ice from above, and when she pressed her hoof against it to check, she went right through a thin crust of ice.

The ice groaned, a deep shudder that went across the immense face. "Um..." Dash said, winging backward from the new hole and looking around nervously. Sharp pops came from above, and Dash abandoned all pretense of caution, flying directly at Fluttershy.

The roof fell in. Dash's hooves went around the other pegasus, pulling her off her feet as Dash sped for the far exit. There was a vast, booming roar as the entire cavern came apart. An unfathomable amount of water from the glacial lake that had fed their drink pushed along splinters larger than a building in an unstoppable tidal wave.

Fluttershy clung to Dash, unable to utter a single sound as behind them the water foamed angrily, immense chunks of the ice being tossed about like leaves in a stream. The noise became only louder as Dash flew into the tunnel, the stone resounding with the thunder of the water's fury.

The blue pegasus held onto Fluttershy in return, her eyes narrowed as she flew as fast as she could, twisting and turning as the tunnel bent unexpectedly, ducking pony-sized icicles, the air behind her howling as the water pushed it ahead. The light grew brighter and brighter until they suddenly burst out into another immense cavern.

Far below, chunks of ice bobbed on a deep blue lake, and the water fountained forth from the tunnels, tearing off pieces of rock as it spumed into the depths below. Visible through a large opening above them was a broad swath of blue with a few puffs of white. The sky.

Dash hauled the near-comatose Fluttershy upward, crossing finally into open air and touching down, both of them panting softly. "Hey," Dash puffed. "We made it. Told you we would."

Fluttershy summoned a smile for her, but it immediately vanished as a new voice spoke, in a low growl not so far from the glacier's voice.

"Well, what do we have here?"

• • •

The two pegasi turned around to the source of the voice. Sprawled above the cave entrance was a dragon. They had encountered dragons before, of course, or at least *a* dragon. But this one was larger, its scales a mottled grey and white, and it was regarding them with one silver eye.

Fluttershy was staring, petrified, at the beast. Dash took a breath and stepped forward and looked defiantly up at the dragon. "I'm Rainbow Dash, and this is Fluttershy. We're pegasi."

"Indeed?" The eye blinked lazily. "And what would Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy pegasi be doing in the depths of my mountain caves?"

"We're... lost," Dash admitted reluctantly.

"Two ponies, emerging from the rotted galleries of a long-dead civilization in the frozen north, with no supplies, no food or water, and wearing tattered blankets for clothing; lost? I never would have guessed." The dragon's tone was desert-dry, and Dash bristled, half-spreading her wings and glaring.

"Hey, we've gotten this far. I'm sure getting home won't be any problem at all."

"Oh really?" The dragon finally stirred, turning around to face them directly, and Dash flinched back. Its other eye was boiled-white and blind, the hide around it ridged and twisted and scarred in a swath that ran from the tip of the muzzle across the left side of its face and trailing off down the long neck. "And what makes you so sure of that?" The dragon gave them a slight hint of a smile, exposing razor teeth.

"Oh, you poor thing!" Fluttershy ran past Dash, who watched, disbelieving, as the yellow pegasus walked right up to the dragon's muzzle. She put a gentle hoof on the scabrous hide. "What happened to you?"

While Dash might have been taken aback by Fluttershy's behavior, the dragon was unruffled. It rolled the blind eye in its socket, the smile widening. "Well," it said. "If you must know, I had a slight disagreement with a friend of mine."

"Did you win?" Dash blurted it out before she could stop herself.

It reared its head back and laughed, the noise booming and echoing around them, and sending Fluttershy back behind Dash with a squeak. The two pegasi watched the dragon bellow its amusement, nonplussed, sharing a glance of mutual incomprehension. Then, abruptly as it had started, the dragon stopped laughing, his silver eye narrowed as it looked down at them. "No."

It slipped off its perch with a lithe grace, stretching vast wings and then mantling them against its back. The dragon began to prowl slowly around them in a circle, keeping its good eye facing them. "So, I am confronted with an interesting enigma. Two ponies, who have no business being in Draconia, let alone in those ancient, decrepit, and otherwise unused tunnels beneath my lair. Pegasi who, unless I am very badly mistaken, belong in the air, and not underground." It arched one mocking eyeridge at them. "Exactly how did you manage to get *this* far from where you belong?"

"Why should we tell you anything?" Dash narrowed her eyes at the dragon, keeping herself between it and Fluttershy as it stalked them.

"Because, no doubt, you wish to implore my help. What chance have two ponies to traverse this dragon-haunted land alone and directionless? How well will you survive if you can't find shelter ere night falls?" It waved a claw in the direction of the sun, which the pegasi realized was *setting*, not rising. The lightless caverns had destroyed any sense of time. "As, of course, I have nothing better to do than take in lost travelers who turn up at the roof of the world."

"...so you won't help us?" Fluttershy asked quietly, peeking out from behind Dash's wings.

The dragon whipped around quickly, its muzzle stretched into a broad grin. "I didn't say that, did I? Do you want help?"

Fluttershy cringed back from the dragon, but managed to squeak out a word. "Yes!"

Dash lowered her voice. "I don't know, Fluttershy. How can we trust it?"

"Because 'it' is not a ravening monster," the dragon interjected. "Well, most of the time. I will help you, but there will be a price."

"What did you have in mind?" Dash said warily, watching the silver eye suspiciously. They both jumped back as the dragon thrust its muzzle toward them, good eye twinkling and blind eye watching them sightlessly.

"I must know your story."

● ● ●

After the first dragon they'd met, neither of the pegasi were expecting architecture in a lair. Instead of a cave, though, their host's abode was carved from the living rock. Pillars framed a door cast from iron, with a dragons-head sigil worked on the front in gold.

Fluttershy pressed in against Dash as they entered the heart of the dragon's territory. Dash wasn't enthusiastic about it herself, but the massive shape in front of them seemed their best chance to make it across Draconia. There was no guarantee any other dragons they met would be anywhere near as friendly.

As they stepped over the threshold, the first thing they noticed was it was warm. After the endless cold of the north, they found themselves shivering anew as their skin was reminded of what heat felt like. It was also bright. Skylight shafts cut in the rock and glowing crystals served to drive back the shadows, revealing thick rugs and towering bookcases, holding tomes as large as a pony.

Even more striking was the glen visible through a far opening. The splash of green trees and grasses was shocking given the stark rock and bleak ice of the rest of the land. The dragon held the door as they walked through and let it swing back on silent hinges once they were inside.

It was no pauper's home. Dash glanced behind her as the thick metal door slid closed, sealing them off from the outside world, and then looked at their host. "So... who exactly are you?"

"You really should have asked that before you requested my help," the dragon chided them. "Not that my name would mean anything to you." He rumbled a series of liquid syllables that no pony throat could hope to duplicate. "If you want, though, you can call me Scar." He tapped the ruined side of his face with a claw. "I am many things, but you can think of me as a scholar for the moment."

"...right," Dash said doubtfully, putting a wing over the trembling mare next to her. Fluttershy seemed to have gotten smaller somehow, her deep-seated fears growing now that she was confronted with the fact of dragons rather than the idea. Her earlier concern for the dragon no longer buoyed her, which left very little in the way of reassurance.

Scar noticed. "Oh dear," he said. "While a little fear is healthy, even flattering, surely I am not *that* terrifying." It was impossible to tell whether he was being sincere. "I've only threatened you a *little*." He held two claws close together, and Dash glared at him.

"She's afraid of dragons, for your information." Dash turned her attention to Fluttershy. "It's all right, Fluttershy," she told the yellow pegasus. "He's going to help us."

"I know," she replied softly. "It's just... dragons." The yellow pegasus took a deep breath and stood up a little straighter. "I-I think I'll be okay. As long as I'm not alone."

"Hey, with me here?" Dash grinned at her, and then looked back at Scar. "So how are you going to help us?"

"Payment first. I absolutely must know how a dracophobe has ended up with an entire continent full of dragons between her and anything else worth mention."

"Ugh, fine." Dash wasn't feeling particularly charitable to this particular dragon, but it was at least being relatively reasonable. She would have flown to the grassy glade, but with Fluttershy still watching Scar with wide, nervous eyes, she had to settle for walking there.

With a small waterfall babbling in from one side of the glade, the tall green trees, and the setting sun staining the leaves orange, it could almost have been something from Equestria. The carved arches framing it on each side, and the roof of rock and glass that cast straight-edged shadows on the grass ruined that illusion, though. The two pegasi dropped onto the grass, the warmth and the sun making them both a little more cheerful.

Even Scar appeared less threatening as he brought a large book and a pot of ink to the edge of the glade, stretching out and tilting his head to look at them. "Well?" he invited.

It took some time for Rainbow Dash to tell. In fact, the more Dash spoke, the further it seemed they had come. She hadn't considered their journey in its entirety before, and now that she was talking it out she realized they had been gone for nearly two weeks with no real end in sight.

Near the end, Fluttershy had relaxed enough to add in a few soft words. Scar wrote with a clawtip as they talked, dipping it in ink and scratching it across the thick vellum. The dragon didn't interrupt them except for a very few questions, content to hear it as they told it, no matter that it was jumbled and not entirely coherent.

Luna's moon was riding high in the sky by the time they finished, silvering the grass around them. Dash rubbed a hoof against her throat as she trailed off, feeling hoarse from so much talking, and stepped over to the stream for a drink as Scar finished his writing.

"You two are either more lucky or more skilled than you know. You should hope that remains the case," the dragon said. "Tomorrow I'm taking you to our capital, Eyrie Dracones, the city of ice and fire."

Rainbow Dash spluttered into the stream. Fluttershy cringed down further against the ground. Both of them stared at Scar. "Why?" Dash asked, finally.

"I certainly don't control every tract of land between here and the sea. Unless you can get every one of, oh, two dozen dragons to agree to leave you unbothered, you'll need a more general easement. I'm sure you can find some way to convince our ruler to grant you unfettered travel."

Dash walked back over to Fluttershy, the two of them exchanging a look of disbelief as Scar rose. "And with that, I have some work to do. Have a good night!" The dragon ghosted back out of the glen, leaving them alone.

There was a long, long stretch of silence before Fluttershy spoke. "H-how are we supposed to convince dragons of anything?"

"You could always use your stare on 'em!" Dash said encouragingly, but the other pegasus shook her head.

"You know I can't control it, and with so many dragons I don't think - I don't..." Fluttershy trailed off miserably.

"Hey, don't worry, I'm sure we'll think of something." Dash put her foreleg over Fluttershy's shoulders. "Long as we're together, we're fine, remember?"

"Yeah..." Fluttershy gave her a small smile. It faded quickly though. "I really miss Ponyville."

"Me too." Neither of them had been particularly homesick before; they'd been too busy staying alive and on track. But between the tree-filled glade and actually telling their own story, they were both thoroughly ready to be home.

"I wonder if they're still looking for us." Fluttershy looked up at the moon, which somewhere else was shining down on their homes.

"You know our friends wouldn't give up on us, Fluttershy!" Dash gave the other pegasus a gentle tap with her hoof. But she wondered just as Fluttershy did how long it could be before everyone in Ponyville and Cloudsdale assumed the worst.

"I suppose not." The yellow pegasus didn't sound convinced, and she leaned in against Dash. "I just hope we *do* get home."

"We will, Fluttershy," Dash reassured her, following her gaze to the sky. "We will."

• • •

Their first real bath since they'd gotten lost came courtesy of a hot spring secreted away in one of the innumerable rooms of Scar's home. "If you're going to go to court, you need to look the part," the dragon said as he ushered them into tall, marble-fronted room. "At the moment you have the distinct air of the vagabond."

It was true. Fluttershy's mane was plastered against her neck, and Rainbow Dash's was still clotted and matted with blood. Their tails weren't in much better shape, and both of

them were covered in dust and grime from their cave ascent. The blankets were tattered and torn from chance encounters on the rocks, giving the pegasi a thoroughly ragged air.

They both could have used a day at the spa, but hot water would have to do. "Do you think you're up for this?" Dash asked Fluttershy as dirtied water drifted away from where they were scrubbing themselves.

"...no," Fluttershy sighed. "I don't like it at all, but I don't think we have a choice. What if all the other dragons are worse than Scar?"

"Yeah..." Rainbow Dash nodded and ducked under the water, rinsing out the last of her mane before climbing out onto the marble tile. "But once we're done with this we'll be almost home." She shook herself, water spattering over the tile. "Just keep that in mind."

"You really think it'll turn out okay?"

"Hey, we've gotten through everything so far." She gave Fluttershy a smile as the other pegasus climbed out of the hot spring and began the laborious business of drying herself off. "I don't see why this is any different."

Fluttershy gave her a small smile back, but neither of them were particularly confident about the upcoming visit. They had to leave the blankets, the torn and stained fabric beyond easy repair, and trust that it wouldn't be too chill a flight. Scar seemed immune to heat or cold, going from the comfortable interior of his lair to the icy day outside without a shiver.

The sun was bright, even if it gave out little warmth, and the snow of Draconia sparkled a brilliant white. The smoking peaks of three volcanoes loomed in the distance, and green bloomed around steaming hot springs and glacier runoff. The landscape held a stark sort of beauty that would have been far more enjoyable if it weren't for the scaled and winged figures dotted about the horizon.

"Now, do keep close," Scar told them. "We wouldn't want any of my fellow dragons thinking you're wandering about unaccompanied, do we?"

Fluttershy shook her head silently, and Dash merely rolled her eyes. "Let's just get going."

The yellow pegasus kept close to Dash as they trailed behind Scar. The dragon's vast wings cast a large shadow on the ground as he swept down the valley that cut into the land below his lair. The air was just as cold as they might have feared, but exertion warmed them some as they flew toward the heart of Draconia.

It soon became clear they were headed to one of the volcanoes, puffs of ash stretching lazily into the sky from the tip of its cone. Most of the mountain's base was green, stands of evergreens stretching down to ribbon of blue sparkling in a narrow valley, and the winged silhouettes of dragons flocked about it. While no other dragons had come near on their journey, as they drew closer to their destination it became inevitable.

Fluttershy squeaked and lost altitude as two other dragons fell into formation with Scar, bracketing the two of them in a narrow formation. Dash dived and helped Fluttershy back up, the yellow pegasus working her wings gamely despite her wide and frightened eyes. The two outriders spoke in the draconic language, a low rumbling and a bark of laughter.

"You should know better," Scar replied. "Our guests do not speak our language and you can certainly speak theirs. It is polite to all stay in the same tongue." His voice shifted from pleasantly conversational to something with more of an edge. "Or you can continue being rude."

The pair glanced at each other past the pegasi. "Where did you find these two?" one asked. "Are ponies even allowed in Draconia?"

"And does the king know you're coming?" the other one added.

"The first question is my story, bought and paid for. As for the other two - no, and no." Scar turned his head to favor all of them with a wide grin. "Won't this be fun?"

The two dragons glanced at each other again and dived downward. Scar watched them go and chuckled; Dash was far less amused. "There's not supposed to be ponies in Draconia? Are you trying to get us killed?"

"Well, that would be telling." Scar winked at them and Dash growled in disgust.

"Look, let's just get this over with, okay?"

"Indeed." Scar flicked his tail and headed downward.

The city of Eyrie Dracones did not so much come into view as resolve itself slowly from the icy flanks of the volcano. It was cut from the living rock, a vertical city composed of a series of plateaus, each with a broad spread of buildings and an open square. A stripe of blue and a stripe of orange cut through each plateau, cascading downward from one level to the next; water and lava flowing through the heart of the city. The base of the city was

bracketed on one side by the water, forming an ice-dotted lake, while magma simmered in an identical parenthesis on the other side.

Snow dusted the roofs of the buildings, while sunlight glinted off gold and silver, copper and steel. Metal defined the doors and windows, streets and alleys, fountains and pools. It resembled Canterlot in many ways, though the scale was enormous and the looming bulk of the volcano kept it from looking too familiar.

There were even more dragons here, as was to be expected, and Fluttershy made small noises under her breath as she tried to talk herself out of mindless panic. Dash put a reassuring hoof on her shoulder as they followed Scar down. "We're almost there. Just one stop and then we can leave."

It wasn't until they dropped down into the city proper that the scale became apparent. Everything was constructed for dragons; even the smallest window was large enough to fit Fluttershy's cottage through it. They alit on a layer of the mostly-vertical city between two channels; one carried lava and the other water. Even across what was to the pegasi a vast courtyard, the heat of the molten rock was palpable.

Fluttershy immediately collapsed to the ground, covering her head with her hooves and trying to pretend there weren't a half-dozen scaled figures watching them curiously. Dash trotted over to her and bent down to nuzzle her reassuringly. "It's okay, Fluttershy. They're not going to hurt us, all we have to do is explain what's going on. Now, where do we go from here, Scar?"

There was no response. Dash turned around to see that their guide had vanished. She gawked for a moment, surveying their surroundings wildly, but she couldn't see any sign of the grey-and white scales. The two pegasi were alone in a city full of dragons.

"That... he..." Dash was speechless. "...okay Dash, finding a palace shouldn't be too hard. Just look for the biggest building around." She started pacing around, staring at the various buildings and trying to ignore the small crowd of scaled and winged figures stopping to watch. "Why are they *all* big?"

"Dash, what are - " Fluttershy squeaked, unable to finish the sentence as she saw the predicament they were in. She scuttled backward from the watching crowd, and it wasn't until her rear hooves splashed into the aqueduct that she stopped. Dash followed after her with a few beats of her wings.

"Yeah, it looks like Scar left us behind," Dash said breezily, as if it weren't an issue at all. "We can just head to the palace though, shouldn't be too hard. A-heh."

"But... the dragons..." Fluttershy pointed behind Dash.

"Oh they don't seem to be..." Dash turned to look at the watchers, and was greeted by the sight of an armored and gimlet-eyed dragon pushing through the crowd. "...oh boy."

The dragon stopped, its steely blue against the dark grey and gold armor, and lowered its head to stare at them. It rumbled something in draconic, making Fluttershy cower back against the water's edge, and Dash smiled nervously at it. "I don't speak the language, pal. Maybe you speak mine?"

The dragon looked back and forth between them, and then reached a paw out to pick up the cowering Fluttershy - only to jerk back as Rainbow Dash planted her hooves against the back of the paw at full speed. "Don't you even dare!" Dash shouted at it.

There was a pause as the two pegasi and the guard dragon took stock of what had just happened. Then the dragon made a swipe for Rainbow Dash. "Fluttershy! Run!" the pegasus called as she dodged the claw, rising higher into the air.

"W-where?" Fluttershy stared around, panicked, and Dash followed her gaze. With the vast scale the city was built on, there weren't many pony-appropriate hiding spots. On the other hand, what was merely a narrow crack for a dragon was more than large enough for a pony to pass through.

"There!" Dash pointed at the aqueduct where it passed among buildings, flowing out of a pipe that ran somewhere deep into the city. It was only half-full of water, but that meant there was more than enough space to fly. Fluttershy needed no further urging; she darted into the pipe and vanished from sight.

Before Dash could follow the guard lunged in front of pipe, glaring. It raised its head and bellowed, then growled at some of the watchers in its own language. There was an outburst of laughter, but one of them stepped forward to grab haphazardly at Rainbow Dash. The pegasus winged away easily, but saw three more of the guards flying toward her in a tight wing.

"This isn't good..." Dash shot upward toward the next city level, trusting that Fluttershy would stay hidden. The trio altered course to intercept her, the lead one opening its mouth and letting out a long blast of concentrated fire. Dash veered wildly, the flame

following her as the dragon tracked her movement. The heat roiled the air, jostling her flight and leaving her flank feeling half-scorched.

Then the dragons were nearly on top of her. Dash dodged upward, away from claws and teeth, and their flying wing split apart, the three dragons moving off away from each other to try and corral her. The pegasus hung for a moment, watching them, and allowed herself a small glimmer of hope. None of the dragons were as fast as her, or as agile. She wouldn't have bet herself against Scar, but she was almost sure she could outfly these guards. Almost.

Dash darted from between the larger, clumsier dragons and out into the open, rolling to the side to avoid another blast of flame and reversing course, slamming as hard as she could into the nearest wing. The dragon grunted, and she veered away from another swipe, her eyes narrowed as she passed between the other two. The three guards nearly collided, but recovered and turned after her again.

She laughed and sped ahead of them, giddy from adrenaline. "Hah! Losers!" The pegasus grinned maniacally as she outdistanced her pursuers, but the grin slid away as she spotted two more sets of guards approaching from above. "Okay, this is getting a little crazy." She paused for a moment, hovering and trying to figure out where to go.

Far, far below was a speck of yellow and pink against dark blue. Dash squinted and saw it was Fluttershy, peering out of one of the pipe exits and staring up at her. And coming up from behind her was the original guard, prowling across the stone.

"Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash dove. The wind whistled past her as she arrowed down toward the pair, leaving the nine hunting guards behind. The dragon didn't see or hear her coming, and it was just reaching for Fluttershy as she cannoned into its head with all four hooves.

The momentum smashed its head into the pavement with sickening thud, and the dragon shuddered and collapsed. Dash herself bounced off the dragon's skull and skidded along the pavement before recovering. She stared at the felled dragon for a moment. "Whoah."

"Rainbow Dash..." Fluttershy peered over the top of the pipe. "Did you...is it..."

"I'm sure it's fine," Dash lied, flexing her wings and flying over to where Fluttershy hovered. "But we need to get going. Now," she added, looking up at the incoming figures of additional guards and bystanders.

Fluttershy bobbed a nod and they ducked into the pipe again, flying along the narrow gap between roof and water. Narrow grating let in pools of light, keeping it from becoming too dark, but only giving a view of building walls.

"*Now* what do we do?" Dash sighed. "I guess we'll have to try and go overland by ourselves after all."

"...yeah." Fluttershy agreed. "But at least we don't have to talk to the king of dragons now."

"Heh. True." Dash looked around. "Do you know where we're going?" There were dozens of intersections, and it seemed impossible to avoid getting lost.

"Upstream," Fluttershy told her. "There's a pool and a waterfall that feeds this so if we just follow the water, we'll get to it eventually."

Dash blinked. Sometimes Fluttershy surprised her with what she noticed and how much she could draw from it. "Heh, I guess it's your turn to lead."

Fluttershy gave her a shy smile and they flew on, tracking the water to its source. By the time they reached the pool, the pipe's ceiling had lowered enough that they couldn't help but get their hooves wet, the water numbingly cold. So it was with great relief that they emerged into the light, far away from all the dragons.

All the dragons but one. A grey-and-white scaled specimen stood watching them with a single silver eye. "You're later than I'd thought," Scar said mildly. "You must have taken some wrong turns in there."

Fluttershy stared, jaw gaping, and Dash stormed toward the dragon. "You! What are you *thinking*? You said you would help us but you almost got us killed back there! What is your *problem*?"

"You are alive, are you not? And whole? No bruises or scrapes?"

"Yeah, no thanks to you!" Dash's ears lay flat, her eyes narrowed at their erstwhile helper.

"I have done more than you know." Scar cocked his head at the swarm of dragons flying around the city. "Well, it seems it is time. If you would follow me, there is a final act."

"Follow you?" Dash spat. "Yeah, right. I don't think so, chump."

Scar leaned down, and the amused, indifferent façade slipped away. "I swear by my good eye," he said seriously, "that if you come with me you will come to no harm. And you may get what you're asking. If you leave now, you will surely be hunted every league of your journey."

Dash gritted her teeth to bite back an instant rejection, breathed, and turned to look at Fluttershy. "...what do you think?"

"...I don't know," Fluttershy said miserably. "I... would we have to talk to any other dragons?"

"No," Scar said quietly. "I'll do the talking."

"All right, but the first sign of anything funny, we're out of here," Dash warned him.

"I would expect nothing less." A smile flickered over Scar's muzzle. "This way."

It was a short flight upward, and the pegasi expected to be stopped at any moment, but there was a strange lack of dragons as Scar let them in a door on the side of a gold-fronted building. They winged quietly through richly tapestried hallways as Scar padded ahead of them, and the sound of draconic voices washed over them as Scar opened another iron-bound doorway.

The hall beyond had a dozen guard dragons in iron pectorals, and a dozen more dragons of various hues in gold and silver accoutrement. Conversation stopped as Scar swept in, and the two pegasi paused on the threshold. The one-eyed dragon looked back at them and winked, gesturing them forward as he turned to face the individual who occupied the far end of the room.

That dragon was as large as Scar was, perched on a silver dais with a heavy golden chain around his neck. His patterning was similar to Scar's as well, though blue and green with steel grey eyes, and he growled something incomprehensible as the three of them entered the room.

"Now, now, you should know better than to be rude to guests in your own court," Scar said, sitting down insouciantly in the middle of the room. "But I suppose you haven't worried about that for some time." He gestured back at the two pegasi. "You should know who our guests are. They're the two ponies half the city is looking for right now."

"...he is absolutely insane," Dash whispered to Fluttershy. "What does he think he's doing?"

Fluttershy crouched behind the blue pegasus, watching the scene over Dash's shoulder. "I don't know!" she squeaked, trying to be as invisible as possible.

"You've sent all your guards to find them - and yes, I say your guards. These that are left belong to me." The tone in the room changed as the dragons in question stepped forward a pace, grim-faced.

Scar stood again and paced forward, turning to look at the assembled dragons. "So, we have two ponies. *Ponies*," he said again, with heavy emphasis, "who have evaded capture even when everyone was looking for them. One of whom engaged four of our royal guard and not only escaped unscathed but defeated one of them." He gestured at the pegasi again.

Dash grinned nervously at all the pairs of eyes that fixated on the two of them. "A-heh...hi?" She waved a hoof.

"And still came here on the strength of their will to go home, rather than simply turn and run." Scar paused, looking around at his audience, and turned to the king. "Too long have you kept us isolated from the rest of the world. If two ponies can make us all look like fools, how much has the world changed? How much have we missed, keeping to ourselves?"

"They are the strongest possible proof you have been wrong. You -" Scar was interrupted as the dragon king launched himself out of the dais directly at Scar. But the one-eyed dragon simply grabbed the other dragon's muzzle and slammed him to the floor. "You haven't learned," Scar said, pinning the other dragon down and pulling the chain off his neck. "You may have beaten me once, long ago, but this is not long ago."

The king said something muffled from between his clamped-together jaws, and Scar smiled. "Oh, I'm sure some will object. But I have more support than you, these days." He nodded to the guards and stood up, the other dragons bracketing the now deposed ruler as Scar ascended the dais.

"Now," he said to the pegasi, and all the watching eyes swung back to them. "I suddenly find myself in control of every tract of land between here and the sea. I believe I can help you."

• • •

"So this is pretty cool." Dash tapped the pendant hanging from her neck, the metal ringing under her hoof.

"I guess..." Fluttershy looked down at her own medallion as she walked. They each had one, a disc of steel suspended from a fine chain, with a dragon's-head insignia worked in gold on the face. They were gifts from Scar and, if the dragon were to be believed, would keep anyone from bothering them on their journey south. Wearing it made it Fluttershy uncomfortable, to be associated with something so closely tied with dragons, and the strange warmth it radiated didn't help.

"I'll just glad to be out of here." The yellow pegasus shivered. "Too many dragons." She had to admit, though, that the favor of the new dragon king was helpful. They had been provided with a map, supplies, and new coats to go with their pendants. Fluttershy wasn't entirely certain what the coats were made out of; the fabric was thin, but like the pendant generated its own warmth.

Wondrous though the suits might have been, the stark white outfits would never have met with Rarity's approval. It gave Fluttershy an obscure sense of cheer to know that no matter how powerful and mysterious the draconic arts might have been, they couldn't produce something to match the talents of her friend. That thought made accepting the dragon's gifts somehow more palatable.

What Scar didn't offer was an escort to the edge of draconic territory. Fluttershy was relieved; her nerves were frayed enough from her time in the city. She didn't know if she'd be able to handle the days of flight south with one right there. Fortunately Dash didn't seem to be any more eager for an additional companion than Fluttershy.

In fact, after a day and a half ensconced in a private and almost pony-sized room at the back of the castle, she was even more eager to leave than Fluttershy. Now, with the last-minute gift of the pendants, they were finally ready to depart. There was just one last encounter.

Scar was waiting as they emerged from the interior of the palace. The thick gold chain around his neck bore a dented and scratched ouroboros in iron, faint remnants of delicately worked scales hinting at detail lost to time. He was flanked by a pair of guards, and Dash scowled at him, her ears laid back against her head.

"C'mon, Fluttershy, let's just go."

"Wait, Rainbow Dash." She would have liked nothing more than to simply leave. But she summoned up her courage and took three steps toward Scar, bobbing her head to him nervously. "Um, thank you for your help, Mister Scar. We're really grateful that you..."

She trailed off as Scar shook his head. "I merely fulfilled a bargain, and used you to my own ends. Less than honorable perhaps, but I can't say I'm sorry for it." The dragon chuckled softly. "Do have a good journey. Our land might not hold much for ponies, but enjoy what you can."

Fluttershy gave a small nod and backed away, then extended her wings and rose into the air next to Dash.

"One more thing before you leave," Scar called from behind them, and Dash rolled her eyes.

"Now what?" she muttered, refusing to turn around and give the dragon the courtesy of her attention.

"Oh, Rainbow Dash, you could at least be polite," Fluttershy whispered, before turning to look apprehensively at the dragon.

"Do remember me to your friends when you get home." His grin was full and toothy now, silver eye gleaming. "I think I shall be visiting soon. I'm looking forward to renewing an old acquaintance."

"Um... all right." Fluttershy quailed back from the smile, but the dragon just winked and turned to go back inside. She watched him for a moment, before Dash tapped her on the shoulder.

"We need to go, Fluttershy, it's a long flight south."

The yellow pegasus nodded and followed after Dash. They flitted around the bulk of the volcano, making their way toward warmer and greener climes. According to the map, they'd ended up very near the top of Draconia, and much of it was even less hospitable than glaciers and snowy mountain peaks.

The best route they had found cut across a small isthmus of active lava flow, avoiding sulfuric swamps on one side and storm-swept mountain peaks on the other. From there, a river supplied a small ribbon of green as it cut through toxic scrub and skirted the edge of a vast desert. At the southernmost tip there was a symbol for a bridge. Even if it were no longer intact, it would lead them at last into Equestria.

The bitter wind smelled of ash as they made their way through the sky. In the distance, a tall mountain belched black clouds into the sky, and the occasional rumble, as of thunder, could be heard echoing through the air. Far below, steam and smoke rippled

away from the front of a black-crusted spill of lava, the thermal buoying their flight. "I don't see how the dragons can live in this," Dash muttered.

"I don't either," Fluttershy agreed. "But I'm glad they're here and not in Equestria. I don't think they would make good neighbors..."

Rainbow Dash laughed. "You can say that again!" Then she chuckled, talking to herself. "Bad neighbors. Heh."

Fluttershy looked askance at the other pegasus, but Dash just seemed happy to be on the move again. That was something she certainly understood; without the dragons it was like a heavy weight was lifted from her back. So she smiled back as they made their way over the charred and blackened land.

The small isthmus turned out to be a vast lake of churning rock, dotted here and there by a blackened spire rising from the maelstrom. It would have been almost impossible to find somewhere to land, so it was just as well the hot air rising from below made gliding effortless.

But as day turned into night and they left the orange glow of blasted lands behind them, Dash began to flag, dipping lower toward marshy banks of the winding river unrolling beneath them. Fluttershy followed her down, concerned. "Rainbow Dash, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Dash waved her hoof dismissively. "Just kinda tired. Probably from kicking dragon butt!" She grinned and looked around. "So where are we crashing for tonight?"

Fluttershy looked doubtfully at Dash, then gave a resigned toss of her head and looked around. The river bubbled down out of the foothills, falling in dozens of small waterfalls as it poured toward the sea. While there were no nearby trees, and the unstable weather made clouds an unlikely proposition, with the hilly terrain it didn't take long to find a cave to shelter in for the night.

"Hello, is anyone in here?" Fluttershy called into the cave, but it seemed to be vacant. The white coats kept them warm on the rock floor, and the draconic supplies consisted mostly of a strange, sweet-spicy berry that neither of them had ever seen before. Dash ate ravenously and stretched out to sleep, and Fluttershy followed suit, though with a vague worry lingering at the back of her mind over the way Dash was acting.

That worry was given life when, in the glimmering predawn, Rainbow Dash staggered outside the cave and was noisily sick. Fluttershy sat up, blinking muzzily, and tried to focus on Dash in the faint light of the eastern sky. "Wha-what's wrong?"

"I dunno," Dash mumbled, shivering as she ducked back into the cave. "Don't feel good." She was flushed and shivering, wobbling a bit as she stood.

"Oh my goodness. Sit down, Dash." Fluttershy pointed a hoof at the cave floor and the blue pegasus obeyed. Fluttershy peered closely at Dash's face, putting her hoof on the sick pony's forehead. It was hot to the touch, and she winced as she pushed back Dash's mane to reveal the scabbed-over cut on her head.

The bruising was an ugly purple and green, and the skin around it was tight. The wound itself was streaked with angry red and splotched with white. "Oh my goodness. Fluttershy, you should have insisted on making sure it was clean."

"What?" Dash blinked at her and Fluttershy shook her head.

"Dash, your cut is infected and I don't have any medical supplies and oh my goodness." Fluttershy's wings quivered nervously. "You stay here."

"Wasn't planning on leaving," Dash said blearily. Fluttershy ducked a nod and stepped out of the cave. It was true she didn't have any medicinal tools with her, and she didn't know any if the local plants would help, but she could still improvise some things.

By the time she returned, saddlebags full, Dash was asleep again, curled up and looking miserable. Fluttershy gave her a worried look and dumped out the contents of the bags just outside the cave, kicking stones into a rough circle around the leaf litter and twigs. She pulled off her amulet and sorted through the flint she'd acquired until she found a proper piece, biting her lip as she focused on getting a fire started.

It wasn't a practiced skill, so it took her some time, but eventually the tinder blazed to life. Fluttershy fed the fire with dried limbs from the bushes nearby, which burned with a green and smokeless flame. She used makeshift leafy bowls set around the periphery of the fire to boil water. While the leaves crisped down to the water level, as long as there was liquid in them they wouldn't actually burn.

A larger piece of flint had a sharp enough edge to serve as a knife, and she grimaced as she laboriously sawed a piece of fabric off the back of her coat. That went into one of the heating containers of water while she held the knife blade in the flame itself. Once she was certain everything was ready, she stepped into the cave and nudged Dash awake.

"All right, Rainbow Dash, we need to get that cut cleaned out. Come on." She escorted the blue pegasus out to the fire, the green light casting ruddy shadows in the early morning light. Dash's fever-blurred eyes widened and she stumbled to a sudden halt as she saw the crude knife and leaf-jugs of water.

"Wait wait, what are you going to do?"

"We need to clean out your cut. You'll have to trust me, Dash."

Rainbow Dash looked at Fluttershy for a moment, her eyes wide, then gave her a nod. The yellow pegasus pulled the other mare up next to the fire, bracing Dash's head against her foreleg as she brushed back the rainbow-streaked mane. The infection looked even worse in the greenish light, and Fluttershy winced as she picked up the knife with her teeth and cut away the scab as cleanly as she could.

Dash snorted softly, her teeth clenched, and Fluttershy stifled a cough as the smell of the discharge from the wound reached her nostrils. She set the knife aside and picked up one of the containers of sterilized water, pouring it over Dash's head. The bloody water spattered over the ground, and Fluttershy picked up the knife again, letting the blade edge sizzle in the fire briefly before quenching it and using it to remove the last clinging bits of debris and dead skin.

After a final rinse, she tied the strip of boiled cloth tight over the wound. It wasn't as good as a real bandage, but it would have to do. "All right, Dash, I'm all finished."

"...ow," the pegasus said after a moment. She was somewhat muffled by the cloth having to loop under her jaw. Dash reached up to touch the bandage and Fluttershy gently pushed her hoof away.

"Just leave it alone for now, Dash," Fluttershy said gently. "You should just go back to sleep, and try to get rid of the fever."

"Sleep... sounds good," Dash agreed. She nearly fell over from the simple act of standing up, and Fluttershy rushed to help her back into their cave. The yellow pegasus made sure Dash was as comfortable as possible before going out to clean up.

As the sun rose, so did Dash's fever, and Fluttershy made several trips to the river for cold water to wash the sick pony's forehead. The blue pegasus tossed and turned restlessly, but she didn't wake until midday, hoarse and delirious. "Dragons, Fluttershy!"

The yellow pegasus flinched back from the shout, crouching down beside Dash as the other mare raved on. "Gotta fly away... coming after you." Dash's wings flapped arrythmically as she tried to get up.

"It's all right, Rainbow Dash." Fluttershy put a hoof on Dash's brow. "You kept me safe."

Dash looked at Fluttershy, eyes wide and searching, and her expression eased somewhat. "...oh. Gotta... gotta keep going."

"Dash," Fluttershy said firmly. "Rest now. We're safe."

"I..." The blue pegasus struggled to articulate something past the fevered haze on her mind. "If you're sure..."

"Trust me," Fluttershy smiled at Rainbow Dash, and the blue pegasus finally nodded. Her rainbow mane flopped limply as she dropped her head down onto her forelegs, short panting breaths stirring the hairs of her coat.

"Right... gotta... gotta trust Fluttershy. S'okay."

The pink-maned pegasus watched Dash worriedly, trotting out to get another container of water. "Here, drink this," Fluttershy urged. She held the water up to Dash, who gulped it down unquestioningly.

"Thanks..." Dash mumbled as her eyes slid closed again. Fluttershy stayed by her side, watching the sun arc through the narrow view afforded by the cave entrance and occasionally nudging Dash awake to give her more water.

It was a long, interminable wait. Fluttershy didn't get much sleep through the passing hours of day and night, making Dash eat and drink as much as possible and fretting over the mare's condition. The supplies of berries and leaves provided by the dragons began to look sparse as they dropped behind their intended schedule by one day, and then two.

On the morning of the third day, the fever broke. Dash woke, gasping and sweat-soaked, but coherent. "I feel like I've been pushing thunderheads for three weeks straight," she groaned, looking up at Fluttershy. "What happened to me?"

"Oh, Rainbow Dash, thank goodness," Fluttershy said, giving the blue pegasus a tight hug regardless of her sweaty coat. "I was so worried. Your head got infected and I didn't have anything to treat it and I just had to hope you'd be okay on your own."

"So that's where this bandage came from." Dash reached up to gingerly touch it and winced. "...I wasn't really on my own. I don't remember much, but I do remember you were here. Thanks, Fluttershy."

"I couldn't leave you by yourself, Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy chided her. "You know that."

"Heh. Yeah, I guess." Dash wobbled to her feet, flapping her wings experimentally. "We should probably get going, but..." The blue pegasus sighed. "I don't know how far I can make it today."

"Oh, Dash," Fluttershy said fondly. "I don't expect us to go anywhere today. You can just - " A yawn interrupted her and she shook her head. "Just relax right now, eat and try to get your strength back."

"Right." Dash took an immediate interest in the nearest saddlebag, and Fluttershy stretched out to sleep for the first time in days.

• • •

They ventured southward in short jaunts, occasionally seeing a winged shape in the far distance but remaining unbothered. With the delay, their gifted food supply ran out far before they reached the isthmus, and they had to resort to eating the too-shiny grass growing along the riverbanks. It was only barely palatable, leaving a copper tang in the back of their mouths.

As Dash's strength returned, their flights became longer, and the bare rock and ice faded into a more familiar scape of greenery. The river dropped below them to carve a deep canyon, winding slowly to the sea beneath steep walls of banded rock. They took one break on an outcropping poised above the spectacle, looking out at the multihued rock cliffs.

"I'd still like to be home, but there is some really amazing scenery where we've been," Fluttershy said. "You'd never see anything like this in Ponyville."

"Yeah, we're going to have a totally awesome story to tell when we get back," Dash agreed. "They're going to be so jealous."

"They really shouldn't be," Fluttershy said softly. "You almost died. More than once."

"...still an awesome story." The blue pegasus grinned broadly, and Fluttershy couldn't help but smile back.

The sun was just touching the horizon when the bluffs dropped away to the sea. The river fell downward in cascading rapids, creating a narrow patch of green where dwarf trees and moss clung to the rocky face. More commanding a sight than that though, was an ancient bridge stretching on massive pillars out from the bluffs.

It was worn smooth with age, any trace of decoration or gilding eroded away, leaving only an uneven slab of rock reaching out into the sea. The water frothed around the base of the pillars as they stretched in a straight line away from the shore; those that were whole. The first three were intact, but the fourth and fifth had been toppled, leaving only jagged stumps peeking over the tops of the waves.

The bridge appeared to have been smashed at some point in ancient history, an enormous break leaving the two halves dangling in the air. Past the break, on the far side, the stone continued to a distant smudge of land. Equestria.

Fluttershy let out a sigh of relief as her hooves finally touched Equestrian soil. They had only the word of dragons that it was Equestria, of course, and there were no familiar landmarks in sight. Still, it felt safer here, with the land of Draconia only a dirty smudge on the horizon. "Finally."

"Yeah, we're almost home!" Dash didn't bother landing, peering out above the treeline at the northern forest that stretched away from the scrub of the coast. It was all but trackless, and although there were birds wheeling here and there above the trees, no sign of any real civilization. "Well, maybe."

Fluttershy extended her wings again, flying up to share the view with Dash, then dipping back down to the treeline. She cast about among the trees for a moment before finding a nesting hole. "Hello, is anyone in there?" She rapped on the tree with a hoof and smiled at the small brown rodent that popped its head out.

"Hello there, little friend. I was wondering if you knew of any places around here where there might be ponies like us." The animal cocked its head one way, then the other, skittering out of its burrow. It leapt the tree trunk to another, extending its arms and legs and gliding on a furry patagium to another tree some distance away. Fluttershy blinked and looked back at Dash. "See? We're not lost anymore!"

"Awesome. Let's go." The two ponies trailed behind the flying squirrel as it glided from tree to tree, leading them deeper into the forest. They passed between evergreens, hooves silent on fallen needles where they landed to fit under the canopy. Their guide scampered ahead, the grey squirrel pausing to look back at them, whiskers twitching as it waited for them to catch up.

After a few bushels of minutes, the trees began to thin, and after clearing a final stand of pines the two ponies stumbled on a grassy rut cutting through an open field. An odd scent wafted from the far trees, sweet and faintly spicy, and Fluttershy pawed uncomfortably at the ground, looking around for their guide. "Dash, I don't think this is-"

" - civilization!" Dash exclaimed. They stood on the edge of a clean-cut highway running through a prosperous town, the buildings proud and clean and crisply painted.

"Thank you, little friend!" Fluttershy waved at the squirrel as it vanished back into the trees. The two ponies watched it go, then Dash flew over to an approaching earth pony hauling a cart full of persimmons.

"Hey there!" Dash waved, grinning. "Can you tell us where we are?"

"Well, hey there stranger!" The grey colt waved back. "Welcome to Cantrot. As pretty a town as you ever will see! Who might you be?"

"I'm Rainbow Dash!" The pegasus held a hoof to her chest, then waved it at her companion. "And that's Fluttershy."

Fluttershy drifted over as she was named, giving the persimmon-hauler a shy smile. "You see, we're -"

"-not in a town at all." The yellow pegasus shook her head, dazed from the vision or hallucination - she wasn't sure what it was. "Rainbow Dash, what's going on?"

"I... don't know." Dash looked over at where the buildings of Cantrot had seemed to stand just moments before. "But I think we need to get out of here."

"Y-yeah." Fluttershy nodded, and the two of them turned to head back the way they'd come. She shivered as the breeze blew again, wafting the scent of fruit trees over them. "I -"

" - would love to show you around!" The pony shook their hooves vigorously. "I'm Simon, by the way. Come with me!"

The town was almost exclusively earth ponies, they saw, and the affluence of the couples strolling about and the elegance of the storefronts bespoke significant wealth. Genteel colts and elegant fillies walked from store to store, and there were even a scattering having a picnic in a grassy sward near the middle of the town.

Simon pulled into a side street next to a large restaurant, sliding out of the halter and rapping a hoof on a back door. Fluttershy dropped down to the ground, with Rainbow Dash hovering overhead as the door opened. "Delivery for you, Simms."

There was a grunt from inside and Simon waved. "I'll be right around." The colt turned to them and gestured at the restaurant. "Let's go inside. The Watering Hole is the best juice bar in Cantrot."

"Oh yeah I could use a drink." Dash was enthusiastic, but Fluttershy was less so. Something about the situation seemed subtly wrong to her. She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came to mind and she ended up just following Simon and Dash into the bar.

It was anything but a dive. Chandeliers hanging from the ceiling spread polished bronze arms like tree branches, illuminating the dark wood of counters and tables. The Watering Hole was less than half-full at that time of day, and Simon headed directly up to the counter. A dour colt with a silver coat and even paler mane nodded a greeting to the other earth pony.

"A pair of mugs for my friends here!" Simon grinned. "And some of your famous tarts. Something tells me these two have never tried persimmons."

Simms was not impressed. He grunted again and vanished into the back, reappearing with the victuals. Dash plunged her muzzle into the mug, and Fluttershy shook her head at the other mare. "Manners, Dash!" The yellow pegasus bent to bite into one of the tarts herself. It tasted -

- bitter. Fluttershy spat unripe fruit, backing away from a low mound in the earth that hinted at the remains of a building. She looked around wildly, and Rainbow Dash met her gaze, standing stock-still in the same position she'd had in the false Cantrot.

Dash reached a hoof up to scrub at her mouth, making a face. "I can still taste that drink," she said, her voice shaking a little. "But... that wasn't real. Was it?"

Fluttershy just whimpered. This wasn't like the dragons, where she could at least see them and run away from them. This was a threat she couldn't locate or understand - or count on Rainbow Dash to deal with. In fact, Dash's obvious fear was more disturbing to her than what had caused it.

The blue pegasus shook herself, an all-over shiver, and tentatively stepped over to Fluttershy. The two of them looked around, afraid that they might disturb sleeping ghosts if they put a hoof wrong. "Let's just... fly," Dash whispered.

Fluttershy nodded softly, spreading her wings and following Rainbow Dash into the air. They flew upward as quickly and quietly as they could, getting an aerial view of their location. Below them was the broad, clear area where maybe-Cantrot stood. It was covered now with grass and dotted with bushes, but ripples in the terrain hinted at the long-buried bones of a town.

They were a good distance from the road they'd been guided to, the shore and stone bridge now long out of sight behind a screen of tall pines. In the distance green-carpeted hills smudged the sky, shadowed by a few puffs of cloud. It was warmer than the

surroundings would suggest, to the point that their dragon-made vests were growing uncomfortable.

To the south and west stood groves of persimmon trees, overgrown and wild but still marking neat rows. Even this far up, the scent of the fruits wafted through the air, and Fluttershy's eyes widened as the smell reached her nostrils. "Dash," she said urgently. "I think -"

" - that you should stay the night." Simon called up to them. "It's a little wild out there."

"We don't want to impose..." Fluttershy began, but Dash interrupted.

"Sure we do, Fluttershy! It'd be our first real bed in almost a month!" The blue pegasus dove back down to the level of the town, perching insouciantly on The Watering Hole's sign. "Where are we staying?"

"Well... if it won't be any trouble," Fluttershy conceded after a moment, dropping down after Dash. "It would be nice to have a bath and mattress. And blankets."

"Just come with me." Simon waved for them to follow, heading down the main avenue. The setting sun cast purpled shadows over the polished wooden façades of the storefronts and the grass of the town center, and bathed the roofs of Cantrot in a ruddy glow.

The colt stepped through the glass-paned double doors of a tall building with H-O-T-E-L in enormous letters projecting from the outer wall above the front entrance. Fluttershy poked her head in, and Dash nudged her the rest of the way inside as she followed after. Like the bar, it was all polished wood, oil-rubbed and gleaming.

A young, nervous-looking green colt in a badly clashing red bellhop's uniform and hauling a two-wheeled cart sprang forward to assist them. "Take your bags, mares?" he squeaked, voice cracking.

"Oh, no thank you..." Fluttershy began, but Dash snorted.

"Come on, Fluttershy, it's his job." The blue pegasus pulled off her saddlebags and dropped them on rickshaw. Fluttershy, with some hesitation, followed suit.

"Room Three-Eighteen, Figs," Simon called back as he stepped up to the counter to talk with the concierge.

"This is awesome! I love hospitality." Dash grinned as Simon turned to toss them keys to their room. The blue pegasus snagged them out of the air and turned to trot after Figs. Fluttershy glanced after them, then turned to Simon.

"We... don't really have anything to pay you with," Fluttershy said, her left forehoof scuffing nervously at the lacquered floor.

"Don't worry, this one's on me!" The colt waved cheerfully. The yellow pegasus ducked her head in thanks and followed Rainbow Dash with a growing feeling of unease. The elevator clanked softly as it lifted them to the third floor, soft music playing tinnily from the speakers overhead, and Figs fidgeted in place until the doors slid open again.

"This way," the bellhop said, hooves silent on plush carpet. The hallway was full of gleaming brass and dark wood, and the paintings hanging from the walls depicted Cantrot through the years. It started out small, the building spreading outward and upward as the wealth of the town grew, and always in the background were the groves of persimmons.

"Rainbow Dash," said Fluttershy after looking at the paintings. The blue pegasus paused as Figs went ahead into a room with '318' carved on the door.

"Yeah, Fluttershy?"

"Do you remember finishing dinner?"

"...huh." Dash frowned thoughtfully. "You know, now that you mention it, I -"

" - don't know what's going on." Dash tumbled through the air. Startled, she stretched her wings, braking to a halt as she tried to get her bearings. Below her, Fluttershy thudded to the ground with a squeak. "Fluttershy! Are you all right?"

"I... I think so." The yellow pegasus struggled free of entangling ivy and got shakily to her feet. Luna's moon above cast the forest and groves and the surrounding fields in a silver light that seemed all too ethereal. She looked up at Dash's silhouette, watching as the other pegasus dropped down beside her.

Fluttershy looked around nervously, huddling against Dash. "Our... our saddlebags are gone..." She shivered and shrank down against the wall. "I... I don't know what's real."

"Hey." Rainbow Dash put a reassuring hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder. "I am. And I promise I'll stay right here. We can get through anything as long as we're together, remember?"

"Yeah..." Fluttershy summoned a faint smile. "But... how *are* we going to get out of this?"

"It can't be too hard, right? All we gotta do is remember -"

"-to wake up." Fluttershy prodded Dash. Sunlight streamed in through the window, reflecting off the wooden walls and bedposts, the thick carpets and coverlets, giving the whole room a burgundy glow. "You want to go home, don't you?"

"Nnh." Dash squinted up at Fluttershy. "...right." She slithered out from under the covers, hitting the carpet with a muffled thud before wobbling upright again. "Right." She yawned hugely, her mane rumpled and frizzed. "Hey, we might even get to Ponyville today!"

"That would be nice," Fluttershy agreed. She donned her saddlebags again, the two pegasi making their way back out of the hotel. The day was bright and clear, with a hint of crispness to the air. Dash had just spread her wings when a voice called to them.

"Hey there! Where are you off too in such a rush?" It was Simon, the blue-maned pony trotting enthusiastically in their direction.

"We're, um, headed home."

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash added. "We've got so many cool stories to tell our friends, I can't wait!"

"What's wrong with Cantrot?" Simon asked. "After all, everyone you remember is here."

"...what?" Rainbow Dash frowned at the colt, but her attention was jerked away as a voice called from the side.

"Fluttershy! Rainbow Dash!" The sunlight framed four ponies standing in the middle of the main avenue. Their four friends, exactly as they remembered them; Twilight and Rarity, Pinkie Pie and Applejack. Twilight was waving at them.

The pegasi exchanged a startled glance and rushed over to the other ponies. "Hey, when did you get here?" Rainbow Dash asked, grinning widely.

"Silly Dashie!" Pinkie bounced in place. "We've always *been here!"*

"Good to see y'all." Applejack put in. "I -"

"-miss them so much." Fluttershy burst into tears. "Why did it have to show us that? We're never going to see them again, are we?"

"Shh. I'm sure we will." Dash put her foreleg around the yellow pegasus, looking at the empty field where the phantoms of their friends had stood. "We just have to figure out how to deal with this. If we can remember what's going on in the other place, we might be able to just walk away, right?"

"I... guess?" Fluttershy was willing enough to let Rainbow Dash take the lead. Despite being on home soil, she felt more lost among the ghosts of the Cantrot ponies than among dragons or on the trackless ocean.

The sun stood high in the sky, midday already slipping past them. With every transition they lost time, and Fluttershy could feel hunger and thirst fighting for attention past the taught anxiety filling her. "I hope you're right, Rainbow Dash."

"Sure I'm right." Dash helped Fluttershy to her feet, the blue pegasus stretching her wings The wind blew through the nearby grove, rattling the branches and tossing the leaves in a soft sussuration. "And if we start moving now, we might get - "

" - you to hold still, dear." Rarity's horn glowed softly as the fabric slithered over Fluttershy's shoulders. "Otherwise we'll never get this fitting done."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Fluttershy ducked her head in chagrin. The view out the window caught her eye, and she blinked slowly. Past the immaculate interior of the boutique, the framed glass looked out on the sun-soaked streets of Cantrot. There was something strangely wrong about it, and Fluttershy frowned, thinking.

Outside the window, something kindled alight. Flames licked upward, hazing the view between the boutique and the rest of the buildings. Fluttershy squeaked and backed away from the sudden inferno. "Ra-Rarity! There's something on fire!"

The unicorn gave an exasperated sigh and the pins floating in the air returned to their cushion. "I'm sure it'll be fine, Fluttershy. You're making it difficult to work here."

"I..." Fluttershy shook her head, and the flames were gone as abruptly as they had appeared. "...where's Rainbow Dash?" She felt suddenly and unaccountably alone, even though Rarity was right there.

The fashionista gave her a blank look. "Out flying around somewhere, I'm sure. Why -"

"I-I'm very sorry, Rarity," Fluttershy said, backing toward the door. "But I, um, have to go." The pegasus turned and fled, winging up into the sky above Cantrot. She looked around frantically, surveying the town for a flash of rainbow mane and tail.

She spent several minutes casting about the buildings, attracting surprisingly few glances from the richly attired ponies walking below, but with no success. True panic was just starting to set in when the blue pegasus bolted out the window of a nearby store, nearly colliding with Fluttershy on her ascent.

"Fluttershy!"

"Rainbow Dash!"

They spoke simultaneously, and Fluttershy flushed briefly, putting her hooves over her muzzle. After a brief pause the blue pegasus continued. "I think there's something weird going on, Fluttershy."

"Did... did you see fire too?"

Dash gave her a startled look. "Yeah, actually. Nopony else seemed the care though."

"What's happening, Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy looked around warily, as if expecting to see the air itself ignite.

"I'm not sure. But I bet Twilight would know!"

The two pegasi glanced around, and Fluttershy spoke again. "Um, shouldn't there be a tree that she lives in? I remember-"

"-that we're doing better," Dash said encouragingly. "We almost had it that time."

Fluttershy blinked at the clear sky, shaking the last remnants of Cantrot from her head. "...I don't know, Rainbow Dash, that just seemed worse." They were deep in the persimmon groves now, the tree canopy providing patches of shade across the grassy rut of the road.

The orange fruits weighing down the branches would have normally looked delicious, but now the very sight turned Fluttershy's stomach. Rainbow Dash helped her to her feet, and the yellow pegasus leaned against the other mare. "We've got to keep it together," Dash said.

"I'll try."

"You'll do more than try. I'm not leaving you behind."

Fluttershy smiled faintly at the strength in Dash's words. It seemed the blue pegasus always had a boundless reserve of energy and optimism, even in the worst situations. And this certainly qualified as one of the worst.

The rows of persimmon trees stretching out over the hills were like some strange mockery of Sweet Apple Acres, and Fluttershy could almost see a phantom Applejack trying to buck down the fruits. The involuntary thought made her wince, and she stared fixedly down at the ground instead.

"You know," Dash said after a moment. "It's like every time we try to remember-"

"-me to your friend." Fluttershy blinked at Simon, something itching at the back of her mind.

"What did you say?"

"I asked if you were going to introduce me to your friend." The colt grinned broadly, looking from her to Applejack, but Fluttershy shook her head. "No... it was..."

"Remember me to your friends," a deep voice rumbled, giving voice to her thoughts. Fluttershy stared in shock at the massive bulk of a scarred dragon, crouching among the fruit trees, barely noticing the flames flickering at the edges of her vision.

"Wh-Scar!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, the blue pegasus startled into the air, wings fluttering as she hovered in place. "When did you get here?"

"I have always been here." The dragon blinked languidly, tail flicking and rustling among the trees. Fluttershy backed away from the apparition, only to stop with a squeal as flames licked at her flanks. She bolted back away from the sudden boil of fire, belatedly spreading her wings to rise above the trees.

Cantrot burned. Thick smoke boiled away from the buildings, blackening the sky and fouling the air. Dash flew up next to her and they stared at the sight. The long streets of glossy wooden buildings withered and cracked under the heat, paint peeling and floating into the air as it turned to charcoal.

The horrifying vision persisted until Applejack called up at them. "Hey, what are y'all looking at?" The flames winked out as if they had never been, Cantrot standing whole and undamaged against the first faint stars of twilight.

"You didn't see the fire?" Fluttershy asked incredulously.

"Don't know what you're talking 'bout there, Fluttershy," the earth pony replied, tilting back her hat with a hoof as she looked upward. Their friend looked incongruous standing next to the scaled paw of an enormous dragon, and the yellow pegasus felt something was profoundly wrong.

"Rainbow Dash," she said quietly. "There's something here that isn't... isn't right."

"You can say that again." Rainbow Dash scowled at Scar, who arched an eyeridge at them inquiringly. "It's all like a dream. Or a memory."

Fluttershy nodded miserably as Applejack gave them a confused tilt of her head. "I have no idea what y'all are on about. Have you spit your bit or somethin'?"

"Nah, we just -"

Dash was interrupted by Pinkie Pie bouncing into view, fairly bubbling with the cheery joy that she gushed forth like an endless fountain. "Applejack and Simon and Scar and Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash! We're going to have a party!"

Fluttershy sank down to the ground as Pinkie capered over to them. "Are you going to come and have fuuuuuuun?"

"...no, Pinkie." Fluttershy sighed, and Dash dropped down to hover overhead.

"Yeah, we're real sorry, Pinkie, but... not this time."

"Aww, why not?" The pink pony stared at Fluttershy with big, blue, soulful eyes.

"Because, Pinkie..." Fluttershy found tears streaming from her own eyes as she looked at her friend. "I don't think you're real."

Smoke streamed away in the breeze, staining the early morning sky. The ground wavered underhoof, the yellow pegasus faint from lack of food and water. She took a step, and felt Dash supporting her from the left. "Thank you, Rainbow Dash." Her voice was hoarse, and Dash's was equally ragged as she responded.

"We're getting out of this together." Dash looked around at the endless groves around them. "Just keep walking."

"Where's all the smoke coming from?" Fluttershy coughed, turning her head away from a particularly dense swirl threatening her already abused throat. There didn't seem to be any fire, any evidence of heat on the grass and trees, the blades green and lush under their hooves.

"It's got to be coming from that fire in the... other place." Dash followed Fluttershy's example, snorting and spluttering at the smoke curling about her muzzle. "I don't know if that's good or bad." The two ponies stopped as orange tongues curled up ahead of them.

The fire surrounded them, rising like a wall on every side. Steps came from behind the pegasi, and Simon approached them. "Please don't go," he begged. "You are the first ones to remember us in so long."

"What's going on here?" Dash took a step forward, baring her teeth at the earth pony. "Why is everything on fire?"

Simon sighed, dancing flames reflected in his eyes. "It took everything," he said softly. "The fire consumed the forest, the groves, the entire town, colt, filly, and foal, down to the bare earth. All that was left was the memories of the earth and the trees."

"What does that have to do with us?" Dash demanded. "We're not from Cantrot!"

"No." Simon took another step toward them, and the flames roiling in his eyes seemed hungrier somehow. "But you can carry -"

"Carry my memory with you," Fluttershy said softly. Another flame kindled, but this one was green and cool, and no smoke came from it as it grew to a towering figure, with a lion's forepaws and an eagle's claws, a scaled head and two long horns.

Blue flickered in the empty sockets of the god as it surveyed the two pegasi, and turned to look at the phantom pony. Simon flinched back from the empty gaze, but to Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy the presence of the spectre was a welcome relief.

"Aww, yeah. We've got a god on our side now!" Dash grinned, and the enkindled spirit gave the blue pegasus a look of non-expression that was somehow quelling. It breathed in and out, and the fire died away, leaving the ghosts of Cantrot. They surrounded the small

group, couples and children and foal carriages, and behind them the buildings stood in stark relief.

Fluttershy could see Figs and Simms in the crowd, as well as some of the ponies they'd run into here and there. Every single one was watching with wide eyes. The earth pony standing in front of them finally found his voice with a question. "What will we do?" he asked, helplessly.

All.   Things.
     Must.
                End.

In this place, the god's voice was the roar of surf on sand, bringing with it hints of the tropical island that was its home. Simon shook his head. "We don't have anywhere to go."

Fluttershy was not a complete stranger to death, not with all the sick animals she dealt with. She had no more knowledge of what came after than anyone else, but it was obvious to her that these ponies were stuck somewhere between. "...isn't there anything you can do for them?" she pleaded with the god.

Blue lights flared in empty eyesockets. The spectre surveyed the lost inhabitants of Cantrot, the lingering memory of a town long dead.

          You.
     Can.
               Wait.
With.
          Me.

"Wait... for what?" The expression on Simon's face was mirrored by every single Cantrot pony in a moment of eerie synchronization, and the god's two-word response made Fluttershy shiver.

     The.
          End.

Simon looked at the fiery being for a moment, then around at the watching crowd. Finally, he bowed his head in a gesture of assent. Fire spread outward again, but this time it was the cool, soothing foxfire of the god's own essence that engulfed the ghosts, and not the inferno of their own tragic past.

"Wait," Rainbow Dash said. "So... are you a memory too, or are you actually here?"

The answer came as a sigh, rippling from somewhere far away.

Yes.

• • •

Reality slammed into them like a thunderbolt. Two days without food, water, or sleep drove Rainbow Dash to her knees and Fluttershy to the ground. The blue pegasus panted, dazed for a short while before helping the other mare to her feet. "Come on," Dash croaked past her parched throat. "We should go."

No ghosts stopped them as they stumbled downhill toward a small rill that trickled through the grass. They more collapsed than stopped, slurping up the precious water in greedy chorus. Once they'd slaked their thirst, Rainbow Dash grinned and poked the yellow pegasus with a hoof. "Hey. Told you we'd get out of there."

"Heh." Fluttershy gave her a tired smile. "Yeah. I'm going to have nightmares for years, though..."

"Don't worry, Fluttershy. We're okay now." Dash put a hoof around Fluttershy, and the mare leaned back against the blue pegasus.

"I thought we were almost home," Fluttershy murmured. "I don't know how much more of this I can take, Dash." She closed her eyes, drawing comfort from the presence of the other pegasus. "I'm not strong like you."

"You're just as strong as I am, Fluttershy," Dash told her. "And don't let anypony tell you otherwise."

The yellow pegasus opened her eyes, looking over at Dash. The mare gave her a trademark grin, and Fluttershy smiled back. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

Rainbow Dash almost flushed, but instead shook her head at her companion. "They haven't been traveling with you. We *are* almost home, Fluttershy, and the last thing I'm worried about is you not being strong enough to make it."

More days slipped by as they recovered, eating grass and drinking water. It was a rest not just of body but also of soul; more than once did Fluttershy jerk awake in the middle of

the night, and more than once did Rainbow Dash reach out and touch the other pegasus to make sure that, yes, she was really there.

Neither of them were disposed much to linger, though, and it was not too long before they were off again. South was the only direction they had in mind; neither pegasus had even a vague knowledge of the shape of the continent this far from Ponyville. They didn't stumble across any other overgrown roads or ruins, there was only a seemingly endless stretch of virgin forest and field.

Whenever Fluttershy spotted an animal, squirrel or rabbit or bird, she inquired after the presence of ponies. It availed them not at all until they crossed a series of rock-littered hills, the deep grooves of a glacial moraine providing a network of tiny lakes. There, finally, a bluejay chirped and danced as it talked to the yellow pegasus, and she broke into a broad grin.

"What'd it say?" Dash peered over Fluttershy's shoulder.

"Southeast," Fluttershy replied. "I don't know if it's Ponyville, but there are *some* ponies there!"

"Awright!" Dash whooped, looping around in the air in sheer exuberance. Fluttershy giggled and followed the other mare's example, albeit with far less daring aerobatics. The airborne dance went on for some minutes, until Dash finally stopped and chuckled. "We should get going."

"I suppose so." The yellow pegasus stopped and followed Rainbow Dash back up to cloud level. The two of them went from cloud to cloud, gliding more than flying in an energy-conserving, long-endurance technique that had become familiar to them over the journey.

The shades of green in the panoply spread below them shifted slowly throughout the day, until the vegetation looked nearly familiar. "I think," Fluttershy said at length. "That this is part of the Everfree Forest." She looked around, but the haze hanging in the air obscured anything beyond the nearby trees.

"I think you're right." Dash waved a hoof at a dark smudge to the east. "See that? I bet it's one of the storms that the forest makes, and they're not as well-behaved as ours."

"Oh." Fluttershy peered at the dark smear nervously. "Is it coming this way?"

"Can't tell yet. But we're headed toward it, so either way we'll probably have to take shelter somewhere tonight."

The yellow pegasus nodded, then smiled briefly. "After all that we've been through, the Everfree Forest doesn't seem quite so frightening anymore."

"You can say that again." Dash squinted at the storm. "I think it is getting closer. Come on, let's find somewhere to stay."

The two of them circled down into the trees as the wind began to pick up, hissing through the branches of trees and sending leaves tumbling through the air. The Everfree Forest was riddled with caves and burrows and it didn't take them long to find an abandoned grotto scraped into the face of a nearby hill. Even so, thunder growled spitefully in the distance and the first few drops of rain spattered against the rock just as they entered the shallow cave.

"Even the animals are hiding," Fluttershy observed, peering out of their hiding place.

"Yeah, the storms can get kind of lively." A flash of lightning and a sharp crack of thunder punctuated Dash's words, and Fluttershy took a few steps back from the cave entrance. There wasn't much room; the shelter provided little more protection than an overhang. That was no doubt the reason it had been abandoned, but it was enough to block the wind starting to gust through the trees.

"Um... how lively?" Fluttershy asked apprehensively as the gusts turned into a keening howl, the clouds turning the evening sky nearly black. The rain drummed on the ground, falling in sheets before the sudden gale.

"We might get a little wet," Dash said, waving a hoof dismissively. "We've been through worse."

Fluttershy giggled softly. "Yes, we have. I think we can survive that."

The blaze of nearby lightning and accompanying booming of thunder wiped the smile from Fluttershy's face, but didn't entirely erase her sangfroid. It wasn't until the intermittent flashes illuminated a looming funnel shape that the yellow pegasus became restless. "Um... Dash? Is that what I think it is?"

"...yeah." The sound of the wind became a rumble, vibrating the ground underhoof. Dash took her own step back, bumping against the back wall of the cave. "Let's hope it doesn't come this way." While the blue pegasus may not have paid much attention to flight

school, she was an undisputed expert on weather. She'd seen enough storms, pony-made and otherwise, to realize that this was dangerous.

Fluttershy huddled against her, the two of them staring out of the cave entrance at the storm's fury. The rumble became a roar, and suddenly their hideaway became a pocket of harsh wind, the air raking its talons across them. Dash braced herself against the floor as the currents dragged her toward the opening, hooves scraping against the stone.

"Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy called, her voice high and panicked, barely audible over the noise. She was slipping even faster than Dash was, drawn inexorably toward the screaming vortex just outside the cave. The blue pegasus freed a hoof long enough to lock her foreleg with Fluttershy's, but they only slipped faster.

Dash made a decision. "Hold on, Fluttershy!" Her words were whipped away as soon as they left her mouth, but the yellow pegasus looked at her and gave a quick nod. Dash launched herself off the floor, grabbing onto Fluttershy in the process as she tumbled into the maelstrom. Rainbow Dash was the best flier to ever come out of Cloudsdale; if anyone could escape an Everfree tornado, she could.

The sound was something beyond noise. It shook her bones and rattled her teeth, leaving Dash completely deaf as she struggled to get her bearings, wings working hard as she fought against the gale. She could feel Fluttershy's legs tight about her as the other pegasus clung close, though she couldn't actually see the mare except during brief flares of lightning.

Small debris stung the blue pegasus, fast enough that there was only impact and numbness. Nevertheless, she forged outward though the walls of wind, the world swinging by in a vertiginous rush until they finally broke free. The two pegasi went tumbling through the air, and Dash shouted exultantly. "Hah!"

And then the storm flung an entire tree at them, roots still clinging uselessly to rock and dirt no longer connected to the earth. Dash's world came apart in an explosion of stars and pain. There was a moment of blurred uncertainty, and the blue pegasus found herself tangled in the canopy, soaked with rain and shivering. In the next stroke of lightning, she saw that she was alone.

She opened her mouth to call for Fluttershy, and she realized that she couldn't even hear herself. She struggled free of the branches, peering around wildly for the other pegasus. The angry funnel was still uncomfortably near, and the blue mare searched frantically for any sign of her companion.

In the inconstant light of the storm, she saw a patch of pink amidst a litter of branches. "Fluttershy!" This time her voice was tinny and distant, but there was no response as she darted downward, pulling off the remnants of a tree's crown. The yellow pegasus didn't move.

"Oh no. No no no." A rumble underhoof and a fast-moving branch leaving a bloody welt across her flank forcibly drew Dash's attention back to the tornado. It curved sinuously up to the dense clouds above, twisting around on itself as it changed direction. Toward them.

"You have *got* to be kidding me." Dash stared in disbelief, but not for long. There was no time to be careful, so she simply gathered Fluttershy up and spread her wings.

It was as nightmarish a flight as she'd ever taken. She had to fly low, to stay out of the lightning-licked clouds, and the tops of trees reached up to clutch at them like claws. It was nearly black, illuminated only by the arrhythmic strobe of the storm, and the wind gusted unpredictably, as if trying to send them crashing to the forest floor below. Dash was soaked to the bone, and the sky couldn't decide whether rain or hail was more appropriate, pelting her with both as she darted away from one, two, then three gluttonous funnels.

The storm chased them. Black clouds pregnant with rain swirled and roiled, gaining a malevolent green cast as the wind whipped them. Blinding flashes of electrical discharge made the air smell bitter and tense, coming uncomfortably close to striking Dash in her headlong flight.

Abruptly, Dash broke into an eerie calm. Moonlight streamed down over tumbled stone and shattered glass, and the blue pegasus knew where they were. The storm piled up angrily at some unseen barrier, unwilling or unable to cross the gorge that surrounded the looming spires of the ancient Palace of the Royal Pony Sisters.

Dash dropped into the shattered courtyard, laying Fluttershy down on a patch of grass showing through the cracked flagstones. "C'mon, Fluttershy," she urged, patting the mare's cheek with her hoof. "Wake up." The silver moonlight bleached the color from the world, giving Fluttershy a monochrome palette of white coat and black blood.

After a long, long moment, Fluttershy stirred, and Dash let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "Fluttershy! How are -" She stopped herself. Neither of them were in good shape, bruised, battered, and bloody, and asking Fluttershy how she was struck her as supremely stupid.

"Can you stand?" she asked instead, looking worriedly down as Fluttershy's eyes flickered open, glazed and unfocused.

"...hurts, Dash," Fluttershy whispered, barely audible over the rumblings of the frustrated storm.

"What -" Rainbow Dash looked over Fluttershy, gut twisting as she saw where her companion's left wing was crumpled unnaturally against her body, bloody gouges along her flanks bearing testament to where the tree had impacted. "Oh, no..."

Dash ducked her head down to Fluttershy's muzzle. "Fluttershy," she said urgently. "You're hurt and I, I don't know how to fix it."

Fluttershy visibly struggled to focus on the other pegasus. "B-be calm, Dash." She shivered and winced. "M-maybe a fire, first." "Fire. Right." Dash swiveled her head, looking around for any likely prospects. "Don't move," she added unnecessarily before zipping off. There would have been no chance of igniting any timber from the forest, but within the palace grounds it was dry.

Over the weeks of their journey, Dash had learned some things from Fluttershy, so it wasn't long before a fire was burning to drive off the cold and damp. The firelight brought color back to the world and made both their injuries look even worse, but it also gave Dash time to start thinking properly again.

She nudged Fluttershy back to full wakefulness. "I don't know how to splint a wing, Fluttershy. You'll have to tell me."

The yellow pegasus glanced back along her own body and shuddered. "A-all right, Dash. You need to f-find some wood. Flat wood."

"On it." Dash was off again, casting worried glances at the pegasus huddled miserably by the fire. While Rainbow Dash had, on occasion, been tended to by Fluttershy after some mishap or another, there had never been any need to learn much first aid herself.

Now, though, she wished she had. It seemed fundamentally wrong that Fluttershy should have to coach her own care. Dash hunted through the detritus of the tumbled palace, trapped by the hostile storm rumbling and roiling just outside the encircling gorge, restless with feelings of frustration and useless. It was exactly how she felt when she lost.

She finally pried some wood veneer off the paneling of a half-destroyed staircase, the wood so thickly lacquered that even after a thousand years it remained untouched by

damp or mold. The blue pegasus flitted back to the circle of brightness cast by their fire, dropping her findings next to Fluttershy. "How's this?"

"Perfect." Fluttershy looked pale underneath the yellow fur, but Dash couldn't tell whether it was due to the moonlight or her imagination or shock.

"So what's next?" Dash shivered slightly as the heat of the fire stole into her skin.

"P-padding," Fluttershy said faintly, but her next words came out louder. "You'll have to pull my wing straight and I -" She swallowed. "I might not be conscious a-after that so I need to tell it all now."

Rainbow Dash winced. "Fluttershy, I'm sorry. I should have learned all this before instead of making you -"

"It's all right, Rainbow Dash." The yellow pegasus put a hoof on Dash's foreleg. "You can't do everything yourself." She smiled softly. "We'll just work together. We're getting pretty good at that."

"Heh. Yeah." Dash tried to smile back, but it didn't reach her eyes. After a long pause, Fluttershy continued.

"You'll need to put padding between the boards and the wing, and then tie it in place somehow. I'm not sure what we h-have..."

"Don't worry, Fluttershy, I got this." Rainbow Dash eased the saddlebags off Fluttershy and then shed her own. The coats they'd gotten from the dragons, indelibly white even after all they'd worn them, went onto the boards as padding. The saddlebags themselves she cannibalized for their straps, laying them out next to the boards. "All right. Ready."

Fluttershy nodded and ducked her head down, closing her eyes. Dash slid the bottom board into position and then carefully took the wingtip in her mouth, pulling slowly. The yellow pegasus whimpered softly, then went limp, but Dash continued, blinking back tears. The sight of bones shifting into place was nauseating, and her stomach twisted as she brought the wing to full extension.

Rainbow Dash had to pause a moment to fight back her bile before continuing the splint. She fastened the buckles around the top piece of wood, careful not to let it squeeze the injury. The splint slipped briefly as Dash laid the splinted wing back against Fluttershy's body, and she bit her lip, glad the other pegasus was already unconscious.

Dash tore apart the saddlebags themselves to provide straps to secure the wing to Fluttershy's body. She wasn't sure what the material was, but with the amount of effort it took to make it into strips, she didn't think it would fail. It was the very last scrap of their supplies, too, so it would have to do; it only had to last long enough for them to get back to Ponyville.

The blue pegasus began feeling shaky as the adrenaline high faded, but mindful of her own experience with untreated wounds, made the trek to a small rivulet she had noticed earlier. It was by now practiced habit to make a cup out of leaves, and she brought back several to tend the worst of Fluttershy's cuts and scrapes.

The storm rumbled and growled around the periphery of the palace, but the moon and stars were clear above. Dash lay by her unconscious companion, looking upward, and felt suddenly and unaccountably sad that she would never see the strange skies of the north again. "Don't be silly," she told herself. "You should be glad to be home."

Still, it was melancholy that kept her company while she waited through the long night for Fluttershy to wake up. She fed the fire twigs and branches, listening anxiously to the injured mare's breathing and watching the dome of the sky wheel slowly overhead. As it lightened from black to purple, the stars vanishing in anticipation of a new day, the storm ebbed away, fleeing before the dawn.

Fluttershy finally woke when the light stained the retreating clouds pink and orange, lifting her head up and blinking slowly. "Rainbow Dash?"

"I'm here, Fluttershy." Dash trotted back bearing another bundle of wood for the fire. "How's your wing feeling?"

"Well, it hurts less." The yellow pegasus favored her companion with a weak smile. "You did a good job."

"Heh. Thanks." Dash scuffed the ground briefly, then walked over to help Fluttershy up. "Come on, the storm's gone so we should be able to make it to Ponyville today and get it seen to properly."

"What?" Fluttershy looked around, startled, only really seeing their surroundings for the first time. "Oh, we're almost home! Actually almost home!"

"Yeah!" Dash grinned. "So long as nothing else happens." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Dash slapped her hooves over her muzzle and looked around, but fate didn't seem tempted enough to present them with another immediate obstacle.

Fluttershy giggled, then rose shakily to her feet, wincing from innumerable aches and pains gained from her misfortune. Dash sported a similar array of bruises and scrapes, but they were both well enough to move. They made their way out of the ancient palace, and into the dawn-quiet Everfree Forest.

It was extraordinarily quiet in the wake of the furious storm, as if the land itself were exhausted and sleeping. Fluttershy stepped carefully, trying to ease the jolting on her broken wing, and Dash alternated between flying low to the ground and walking beside the other pegasus, as all her limbs ached equally. Finally, she broke the silence. "What do you think they'll say when we walk into Ponyville?"

"Umm... welcome back? We missed you?" Fluttershy hazarded, and Dash snorted in reply.

"We've been gone for like, over a month, Fluttershy. I hope they'll be more excited than that!" Dash waved a hoof, and winced as muscles twinged. "On second thought, a quiet welcome might be a good idea."

Fluttershy nodded softly, glancing around the forest. "It's strange to know where we are..."

"Heh, first time in a while I've recognized a place." Dash tapped the dirt road underhoof that led out of the forest and into Ponyville. "I bet I could fly home in less than a minute!"

"Why don't you?" Fluttershy glanced over at Dash. "You don't have to wait for me to walk there."

"No way," Dash said emphatically. "I'm not leaving you behind, not for any reason."

Fluttershy ducked her head briefly and flushed. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"We started this together, we're going to finish it together." The blue pegasus dropped down next to Fluttershy with finality.

● ● ●

They returned home, not triumphant, but bruised, battered, and a bit bewildered. Ponyville held the same streets, the same buildings as when they had left. The same ponies went about their same duties. The sun shone, birds chirped, bees buzzed. But it seemed somehow smaller and more fragile than they remembered, even though it hadn't changed at all.

The two pegasi attracted glances and murmurs immediately. Most of the ponies seemed to be too shocked to do more than look, but a purple earth pony with a flowery cutie mark stepped up to them right away. "Oh, you poor dears!" She didn't seem to recognize them, but after a month, surely nopony expected them to simply walk into town, let alone in that condition. "You stay here, I'll go get Nurse Redheart!"

"Thanks, heh." Dash gave the pony a nod before she galloped off, feeling strangely awkward simply standing in the middle of the road. "Come on, Fluttershy, let's find somewhere to sit."

"All right," Fluttershy agreed, but they didn't make it two steps before a pink blur interrupted them.

"Dashie! Fluttershy!" Pinkie Pie fairly vibrated with the effort it took to not tackle her injured friends. "You're back! You're *alive!* Where have you been? What happened to you oh my gosh you look terrible are you okay oh Fluttershy what happened to your wing?" Tears streamed down her face even as she beamed at them. "Oh I was so *worried!*"

"It's... it's good to see you too, Pinkie," Fluttershy managed to get out past the emotion in her own throat, and spread her forelegs for a hug, heedless of the bruises. The earth pony let out a noise of glee as she enfolded Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash in the same fierce embrace. Fluttershy closed her eyes, savoring the contact. "...I'm glad you're real," she whispered.

"Of course I'm real, silly! Why wouldn't I be?" Pinkie Pie giggled and released them.

"Long story, Pinkie." Dash sighed. "We're just glad to be back."

"I'm glad you're back too! We spend days and *days* looking for you and Twilight went to Canterlot to get help and do research and there were search parties and *everything*." Pinkie bounced in place. "Where in Equestria did you vanish to?"

"We're... not sure actually." Dash rubbed at her mane with a hoof. "Somewhere in the middle of the ocean and..." She trailed off as the purple mare from earlier returned with Redheart and, it seemed, half of Ponyville in tow. Two unicorns headed the froth of interested ponies, charging forward heedlessly.

"Fluttershy! Rainbow Dash!" Twilight Sparkle looked terrible, her mane unkempt and eyes ringed with dark circles from lack of sleep. Spike clung to her back, the small dragon nearly asleep himself. "I've been looking *everywhere* for you! Where have you been?" she demanded, in a voice that bordered on hysteria and tears wetting her cheeks.

"And where did you get those, darlings?" Rarity added, pointing a hoof at the dragon-crest medallions still hanging about their necks, somehow unscathed from their travels. The white unicorn was elegant as ever, beauty untarnished in sharp contrast to the ragged-edged Twilight, but her mane was more tightly curled than usual in subtle evidence of her distress.

"Now, now," Redheart interrupted. "Questions later. I need to get these ponies to the clinic right away. You, you, and you." She picked several colts out of the crowd. "If you'd be so kind as to carry them?"

"I can walk!" Dash protested, but she had to secretly admit she was sore and tired enough to be grateful. Fluttershy, by contrast, just ducked her head in acquiescence.

"Not while you're under my care," Redheart informed her bluntly, and the two pegasi suffered themselves to be picked up. Their bearers carried the injured ponies through the crowd, and the two unicorns trotted to keep up. Pinkie bounced along behind, humming something to herself.

The clinic's interior was a cool, soothing blue-green. They shed most of the watchers at the door, and while Redheart frowned at Twilight, Rarity, and Pinkie, she allowed them to stay near Dash. The nurse crossed over to Fluttershy's bed and began inspecting the splint while her companion, a blue pony, tended Dash's scrapes and bruises.

"So we know what happened when you disappeared," Twilight began, "but - "

"Well, we don't." Dash interrupted. "We just appeared somewhere. How'd that happen?"

"Oh." Twilight blinked and then smiled, horn glowing as she slid a bundle of scrolls out of the grip of the now-asleep Spike. "Well," she said, thrown into lecture mode. "After looking through hundreds of books, I found that you'd accidentally made half of a lightning gate. We haven't used them for nearly a thousand years, mostly because they're so dangerous."

She flipped through the scrolls until she found the one she wanted, stretching it out above head-height so both Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash could see the sketches on it. "Pegasi would stabilize the lightning clouds, and once you had enough of them, close enough, a unicorn could use them to create a gate to somewhere else for a short period of time. Without the stability, and without a unicorn, you could end up anywhere... and not all in one piece."

The blue pegasus looked guiltily at Fluttershy, who smiled. "It's all right, Rainbow Dash. You didn't know." She winced from Redheart's prodding, the pink-maned nurse already bringing bandages over for Fluttershy's cuts.

"I just thought it'd be a good trick," Dash muttered.

"It's a *really* good trick to vanish for a month!" Pinkie exclaimed. "You probably shouldn't do it too often though. You'd miss all the other fun."

"Pinkie." Rarity's look bounced off the earth pony without a mark, and she turned to Dash. "Dear, I know your practice is important to you... but please don't *ever* worry us like that again." Rarity pleaded with her. "Please."

"Heh. Don't intend to." Dash grinned. "Next time I try something like that, I'll clear it with Twi first."

"Like that would stop you," Twilight shook her head in amused exasperation, sorting through her saddlebags and coming out with quill, ink, and empty parchment. She stopped and set them aside, then turned to the pegasi. "I'm... really, really glad you're back. I was just so worried, especially when I found out what had happened."

Twilight opened her mouth but another pony swept in, breezing into the clinic room with the sweet scent of fresh apples. "Whew!" Applejack tilted her hat back with a hoof. "They said y'all were back but I had to see it with my own eyes. It's good to see you safe, you two." She looked from one injured pony to the other and shook her head. "Looks like y'all have been through quite a rodeo, though."

"You could say that," Dash agreed. "You wouldn't believe what we've been through."

Twilight unrolled the parchment, dipping quill into ink. "I want to hear all about it." "As do I," a new voice added, serene and mellifluous. "It's not every day two subjects of mine disappear into nowhere and then return."

"Princess Celestia!" they chorused. Those ponies capable of it bent to their knees, and Celestia waved a hoof for them to rise. "Nurse Redheart," she addressed the clinician. "I've brought Doctor Fillyston to attend to your patient."

The mare in question strode past, a grey unicorn with an asklepian for a cutie mark and a white mane framing pince-nez glasses. The nurse looked flustered. "It's an honor, Doctor."

Fillyston gave Redheart an absent nod, her horn glowing as she unceremoniously unbuckled the splint and discarded the top half, peering at Fluttershy's broken wing. "...passable," she admitted grudgingly. "Nurse, prep her for surgery if you would."

"S-surgery?" Fluttershy squeaked. All the ponies stared the injured pegasus.

"Nothing major," the doctor said dismissively. "Removing bone fragments and fusing the ends."

"Doctor Fillyston," Celestia said, drawing the attention back to her, "is the Wonderbolts' own wing surgeon. Fluttershy will be in good hooves."

After a pause Rarity trotted over to Fluttershy. "It's all right, dear," she told the pegasus. "We'll be here waiting for you."

"A moment." Celestia crossed over to Fluttershy as a pair of retainers brought in a cushion for the princess. The alicorn's horn glowed as she lifted the dragon-crest amulet. "May I?"

Fluttershy nodded meekly and Celestia slipped it off her neck, inspecting it closely. "Well." She shifted her gaze to Fillyston. "Take good care of her."

The surgeon snorted, unimpressed, and waved for the Redheart to wheel Fluttershy into the next room. They all watched her go, the room silent until Celestia broke the pause. "Miss Rainbow Dash. I think we all would like to hear where you've been." A smile played about the corners of Celestia's mouth as she looked from Fluttershy's medallion to the one Dash still wore. "And who you've been talking to."

Additional cushions and seats appeared for the rest of the ponies as Dash began her tale, brought by the remainder of Celestia's entourage camped outside the clinic. "We went through the storm and just sort of plowed into a cloud bank." This part the blue pegasus had already rehearsed when she'd told Scar, so it flowed easily enough.

Pinkie had somehow procured a bag of popcorn from somewhere, and munched on it interestedly as Dash spoke. When she passed it to Celestia, the princess took it with perfect aplomb. Nopony stirred otherwise until Rainbow Dash described the first appearance of the island god.

"Sirrush!" Twilight blurted out, eyes full of wonder.

"What?" Dash blinked, startled.

"The sirrush civilization was... very old. There aren't very many books on them because they predate the dragons, even, let alone written records here in Equestria. I'm surprised there is anything left of them."

"That's right, Twilight." Celestia nodded to her student. "Even I did not know there was any remnant of their race worth mentioning, let alone a guardian of that magnitude. I haven't seen a sirrush for a long, long time." She looked thoughtful. "I wonder if it was anyone I knew."

"Well, I never got its name." Dash shook her head. "It mostly talked to Fluttershy, anyway."

"Fluttershy?" Rarity lifted her eyebrows. "It sounds disturbing enough to *me*, I can't imagine what it would have been like for her."

"She can be really impressive sometimes," Dash grinned. "Wait 'til you hear how she handled it."

"She handled it?" Applejack cocked her head at the blue pegasus. "It sounded like you were all saddled up to do the fighting."

"Um, yeah, that didn't turn out so well." Dash gave Applejack an embarrassed smile, but continued with the story. The reaction as she described the way Fluttershy had faced down the island god was gratifying. Even Celestia looked impressed.

The audience was appreciative, as she went on, of her description of the northern lights, though Twilight looked tremendously jealous. It was the introduction of Scar, however, that gave Dash a reaction she wasn't expecting. Celestia threw back her head and laughed.

"Oh, Scar," she said in tones of amusement. "I thought it might have been him."

Dash stared. "You *know* him?"

"Oh yes." The princess smiled in fond reminiscence. "I knew him from before Draconia isolated itself. We've kept in some contact since, though. Spike's egg had to come from somewhere, after all."

Twilight Sparkle prodded the sleeping baby dragon. "Spike, wake up! We're talking about you."

"Huzza-what?" Spike blinked awake. "What about me?"

"The dragon that Dash met is the one that sent your egg to Equestria!"

"What, so he's my dad?" The purple dragon squinted up at Twilight, who in turn looked at Celestia.

"Simply a distant relative," Celestia answered. "But now I understand how you got these." She lifted Fluttershy's medallion.

"So what exactly are they?" Rarity asked, staring at the steel. "Other than rather heavy jewelry."

"They're many things," the princess replied thoughtfully. "And not to anticipate the story, but in this case I believe the important thing is it marks the bearers as the personal agents of the dragon king."

"He didn't tell us that." Dash frowned. "He just said it'd keep us safe from dragons."

"Which is true." Celestia let the medal drop back to the cushion. "Please, continue."

"Um, right." Dash picked the thread of storytelling back up. Spike blinked sleepily, trying to pay attention as the pegasus described his ultimate homeland, but the next to interrupt was actually Pinkie Pie.

"What a meaniepants!" she exclaimed, tossing down her third empty popcorn bag. "He just left you behind like that?"

"Yeah, he's kind of a jerk," Dash said. The corners of Celestia's mouth curled in a small smile, but she didn't object to the appellation. "I guess he did help us, but he's still a jerk."

The remainder of their time in Draconia was quickly told, and Dash took a deep breath as she began the tell them about Cantrot. Even after so much time and distance, it gave her chills to think about the ghost town, let alone try to describe the shifting, uncertain reality that hung over that place.

It had an effect on her audience, too. Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie drew closer together, as if to ward off the attention of Cantrot. Twilight, though, frowned all through the tale, despite the way Spike clutched at her neck, wide-eyed, and finally shook her head as Dash finished. "But... there's no such thing as ghosts!"

"Twilight," Princess Celestia said mildly.

"Yes, Princess Celestia?" the unicorn asked, instantly contrite.

"There are mysteries in Equestria not yet covered by your books," the alicorn chided gently. "Even if it was not, precisely, ghosts, there was something very real there. I don't know what it was either, but it seems you are owed something for laying Cantrot to rest."

"I'd love more time with the Wonderbolts." Rainbow Dash grinned incorrigibly. "...but you already brought someone to help Fluttershy, so I'm happy." The blue pegasus cast a glance toward the closed door of the surgery room. "I hope she's okay."

"As am I," said Rarity. "Whatever happened to you two after you left Cantrot? You made it all that way without any serious injury."

"We ran into a really bad storm in the Everfree Forest," Dash said. She didn't really want to tell them that the storm had seemed to chase after them, as, examined in daylight, it seemed unreal, even compared to Cantrot. "We ended up taking shelter in the old palace, but... not before we got thrown around a bit."

Dash sighed. "And that's it. We walked into Ponyville and here we are."

"That's quite an adventure, Rainbow Dash." Princess Celestia stood up. "And it tells me I need to get ready for visitors. I suspect that Scar will want his amulets back."

"Oh. Right." The pegasus blinked and pulled hers off, watching as it sparkled with Celestia's magic. The two pieces of jewelry floated through the air, disappearing with a brief flare of light.

"Do give my regard to Fluttershy," Celestia said. "I'll leave a coach for Doctor Fillyston."

It wasn't long after the Princess left that Redheart wheeled a groggy Fluttershy back into the room. Her wing was now dressed in a snow-white cast in a more natural position folded against her body. Bleached bandages swathed her flanks and side, mirroring the dressings Tenderheart had applied to Dash's cuts and scrapes.

"Fluttershy!" The ponies crowded around her bed. Dash stepped over, tentatively flexing her new bandages as she made her way to Fluttershy's side. "How are you feeling?"

The yellow pegasus blinked up at the ponies gathered around her bed. "M'better," she said muzzily. "H'ws D'sh?"

"I'm fine, Fluttershy." Dash gave her a smile, but backed off a bit as Redheart moved forward and shooed them away.

"She needs to rest and recover," the nurse said, as Fillyston strode past with no concern for her prior patient. "You can come back later. And you're fine," Redheart added, waving at Dash. "Just take it easy for a few days."

"I suppose I could use some sleep..." Twilight said grudgingly.

"And I just left my chores half done," Applejack added. "But don't worry Fluttershy, we'll be back."

"Come on, everyone," Rarity lifted her head. "We must give her time to rest."

The five ponies filed out, Rainbow Dash casting one last glance over her shoulder at Fluttershy before leaving the clinic.

• • •

Hours later, Fluttershy roused at the sound of hoofsteps.

"Rainbow Dash!" She smiled at the other pegasus. "You came back."

"Of course I did." Dash stepped up next to the bed, looking down at her.

"I'm glad." Fluttershy ducked her head with a slight flush. "I missed you."

"...I missed you too," Dash admitted, kicking at the clinic floor. They looked at each other, the unspoken knowledge that their relationship had changed over their journey hanging in the air between them.

"...where do we go from here?" asked Fluttershy, at last.

"I don't know," Dash admitted, then suddenly gave the yellow pegasus a wide grin. "But as long as we're together, we'll be fine."