



A FIRE ON THE EAST

BY COUCHCRUSADER

LINES - RIZCIFRA | COLORS - EXPLODING_GUY

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Chapter 1

"Mama?" Beneath the glowing, ash-strewn sky, the butter-colored filly's voice did not carry far over the armored pegasi galloping past her, their hoofbeats pounding in her ears. "Mama? Where are you?"

"Fluttershy!" An ochre mare in golden armor spotted the filly beneath the confusion and raced over, tearing up bits of cloud as she went. No sooner did the mare reach her did she scoop her up and take off, pumping her wings for altitude.

"What are you doing out here?" the mare demanded. Though her peppermint mane fell into Fluttershy's face, the filly could see the fatigue hanging beneath those orange eyes. "Why aren't you with the other foals?"

"I—I couldn't keep up with them." Fluttershy's head drooped to her chest. "I w-wanted to, but I was scared, Mama. My wings won't carry me like everypony else's." She unfurled one of them as far as she could manage, and even for a foal her wings were tiny. Most of her primaries had yet to molt into pinions. Looking at them, how insignificant and weak they were, made her tear up. "I went to look for you," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

Summer Sky nuzzled her daughter's pink forelock. "Don't fret, my child. You're still growing, and Papa and I both know that one day you'll be a very strong flyer, just like the rest of us. For now, let's find Rivermay and get you safe with the rest of your friends, okay?"

Fluttershy's stomach did a funny loop. All of the other foals her age could fly, and even some of the younger ones hovered better than she did. Not all of them were kind to her about it. "Why can't I stay with you?"

"We've been over this, Fluttershy. Mama and Papa can't keep you safe while we work." Since Summer Sky kicked off from the outpost's central cloud, the homes and buildings were thinning out beneath them as they flew out west. "It's up to the ponies of Flamewithers to make sure the town holds to its name, no matter what comes over from the dragon lands."

Fluttershy looked east. Several miles out from the edge of Flamewithers, a wall of fire raced across swaths of rolling, barren land, the conflagration sustained by unknown forces. It lashed out in angry gouts of red, orange, and gold, casting ashes from its highest reaches. A formation of pegasi in gray armor flew between the outpost and the fire, their bodies like midges against the blazing landscape.

As she watched the fire spiral ever closer to her home, a chill began to pool behind Fluttershy's heart. She pressed her muzzle against her mother's collarpiece. "Will you be okay?"

"As long as you are ours to treasure, my love—I promise you that Papa and I will be just fine. We'll fly straight to Cloudsdale to pick you up as soon as we finish."

A tailwind lifted mother and daughter several stories into the sky. Up ahead, a team of five pegasi pulled a raft of foals behind them toward the main pegasus city. Fluttershy threw her hooves around her mother's neck.

Summer Sky chuckled. "Be brave for Mama, all right?"

"I—I'll try."

"How about, 'I will?'"

Fluttershy only tightened her hug.

Summer Sky pulled in next to a navy-colored mare, exchanged a few words, came to an agreement, and lowered her daughter to the raft. "Be brave, Fluttershy," she repeated. "I'll see you soon." She backwinged into the air with long strokes.

"Be safe," Fluttershy implored. By then, however, her mother had flown too far away to hear her. The filly followed Summer Sky with her eyes as the mare winged her way back to Flamewithers.

Fluttershy had never been this far out from her hometown before, so this was the first time she had a complete picture of it. The main settlement formed three descending cloud terraces facing out toward the blasted expanses of Drakkvarna, the dragon lands. Weather factories lined the rim

of the upper terrace, each of them on their own little cloud. Yard after yard of inky thunderhead cloud churned forth from their slender stacks. At the far end of the high terrace, a tapered lighthouse flashed sequences of green and blue from its apex. Pennants emblazoned with Princess Celestia's solar insignia flew defiantly from the spires of watchtowers.

Home to no less than five hundred ponies, Flamewithers was still little more than a period against the burning page behind it. All Fluttershy could do was watch as the storm twisted closer and closer to her home—the formations had long since disappeared to her naked eye.

"Double time, ponies!" Rivermay barked from the front of the raft. "That fire's less than a mile out from the town."

Between the sudden acceleration of the other pegasi and the inherent curiosity of foals, Fluttershy disappeared underneath a pile of ponies as they kicked and squeaked for a spot on the back edge.

"Move, cirrushead. I wanna see the fire."

"Can anypony see my dad from here?"

"Hey! Whirlyloo kicked me."

"That's only because you have such a big head."

"Somepony... help..." Somepony's flank pinned her wing at a painful angle, and she couldn't break free no matter how much she tried to twist or roll away. There were too many foals on top of her, and a small, dancing triangle of light taunted her just beyond her muzzle. She pushed her way toward it as her vision blurred with tears—she couldn't hang on—

And then the mass of foals above her grew silent.

Fluttershy finally worked her head out into the open air and sputtered for breath, weeping. Then she too became silent. There was only the sound of pegasus wings beating the air.

In the distance, the front edge of the firestorm swept over Flamewithers. Houses evaporated into puffs of steam. Watchtowers

buckled and fell, one by one, throwing up banks of mist as they toppled. The thunderheads clashed with the flaming wall but for a brief moment before, outsized and outmatched, they too dissolved into vapor. The lighthouse went dark.

All of this, in complete silence.

"Mom? Dad?" A colt near the top of the pile stared at the burning town with huge, disbelieving eyes. Others piped up under his lead just as the lowermost terrace began to sink away from the rest.

"My house..."

"Miss Rivermay? Are my mommy and daddy okay?"

"They told me they'd protect us..."

The voices of the other foals grew remote in Fluttershy's ears. Her eyes scanned the horizon for any signs of her parents as the blaze advanced toward the edge of the Everfree Forest. They were nowhere in sight.

"You said you'd be just fine," she whispered. "You promised."

She expected to see them, still—she held out for dots in the distance, even as the last house curled and withered into the flames.

"You promised you'd pick me up from Cloudsdale when you were finished."

It was not fair. She had had that moment of clarity. She had seen the smile on her mother's face. She knew her parents were going to do their jobs and keep everypony safe.

"Mama? Papa? I'm still here." Drops of anger like molten iron began to seep into Fluttershy's voice. "As long as I was yours to treasure, right?"

The weight crushing down on her decreased as a few foals clambered off her—if she had been listening, she would have heard them

muttering in low voices. The front edge of the firestorm reached Everfree's eastern border and hurdled the first line of trees.

"I'm still here." The air around her shimmered as more foals rolled off of her back. Her eyes turned hard as she stared into the firestorm. "That means you're still there, too. Please. Come out."

The first embers of the Everfree blaze danced into the sky. The muttering escalated into something louder. Somepony cried out with something about how hot it was getting.

"Come out!"

The air shimmered and pulsed more intensely around her. The last pony hopped off of her back screaming—and now all of the other foals were watching as her hooves lifted a couple of inches off of the raft. Flecks of light sparked across her coat. Behind the firestorm, the remaining fragments of Flamewithers, charred, twisted, and vaporized, fell one by one from the sky.

"Summer Sky! Sundown!" she yelled. "Come out of there this instant! You promised you would be fine! You promised me!"

Something popped like a firecracker the instant she finished speaking. Then she heard the other foals scream—they dashed to the end of the raft as far away from her as possible. The escort pegasi gawked at her and burst into obscenities. Then a navy mare rushed in front of her—Rivermay's golden eyes glared into Fluttershy's.

"Stay still." Those were the only words the mare spoke.

But Fluttershy was not a soldier. She was a filly, and only had the discipline of one. She looked down.

Golden flames raced up her torso and over her wings. Her hooves flared as she flailed them about. Her mane threw sparks left and right. The air was hot and bright and she was burning, burning, burning.

"Miss Rivermay, help me!" she pleaded.

Two strong hooves drove into her abdomen, and she plunged back toward the cloud raft. Everything went white.

Wood and glass crashed on tile the instant Fluttershy snapped awake. For a moment, she could not remember where she was—the padded surface she lay on was not her bed, nor were the violet, filigreed walls those of her cottage. Her heart pounded against her ribs—how did she get here?

"Fluttershy!"

The pegasus jerked her head around at the call and regretted it when her neck spasmed in protest. She suddenly had a hard time seeing. But she knew that voice. "Rarity?"

"Good heavens, darling," said the unicorn, shaking slices of cucumber from her eyes. "That gasp of yours gave us quite the shock. Are you okay?"

"I—" It occurred to Fluttershy that her friend was also lying belly-down on a padded table close by, with the hooves of a pink-coated, blue-maned mare pressed into her opposite flank. Both of them were wide eyed, their irises diminished to the size of buttons.

"Oh, Rarity, Miss Aloe—" Fluttershy's ears flattened in shame. "I'm so sorry to have scared you all." She turned to her other side, where the spa pony's sister stood against a nearby pillar, her chest heaving from recent exertion. "Miss Lotus—I'm so sorry. I—"

Yes, that was it. That was why she was here. She was at the Ponyville spa for her weekly get-together with Rarity.

She noticed an upended pedestal on the floor, the jars and vials it once held lying in jagged pieces as their former contents mixed into iridescent puddles of oils and scents. She smacked herself on the head. "I'm such a loudmouth." She turned to Lotus. "I promise I'll pay for all of this."

"Don't even worry about it," said Rarity. "It's on me this time."

Fluttershy's ears perked up in surprise. "But it was all my fault. I wouldn't feel right making you cover for me."

"Fluttershy, you cut that out at once. You are here to relax and I will not have it any other way."

"But—"

"Ah! Zip it." This the unicorn said in a low voice she rarely used, and it won her the pegasus's compliance. Faint violet auras surrounded the glass fragments scattered over the tiles and lifted them over to a receptacle along the wall, while Aloe and Lotus mopped up the rest of the mess. It did not take them long. Lotus turned Fluttershy on her back, placed her hooves under her eyes, and began rubbing the area in gentle circles.

Strangely, the look the spa pony gave her was not one of irritation, but of worry. "Mees Fluttershy," said the spa pony, "if I may be honest? Eet does not appear that you have been sleeping well lately. Your eyes feel so tired."

"I-i-i-is i-it th-that d-d-d-dream ag-g-g-ain?" Rarity's voice vibrated under the tattoo of Aloe's hooves.

"I'm afraid so," Fluttershy corrected. A wave of woozy pleasure slithered down her spine as the spa pony slid her hooves up and around to just in front of her temples. Little by little, tensions she had not even been aware of melted away from her face and neck. The same thing was happening for her thoughts. "And yes, Lotus. Lately, my dreams have been—well." Her voice grew quieter with each word. "They haven't been very, um. Nice."

Lotus clicked her tongue. "I am sorry to hear that. Here—remember to breathe, yes?"

"Oh, sorry."

Rarity rolled onto her back like Fluttershy. "I don't understand what's going on with you, darling," she said. "Your parents are still happy and in good health the last time you told me about them, and you went to visit them just last month, did you not?"

"I did." The pegasus frowned. "They even asked about you, and how the boutique was doing."

"Then why do those dreadful nightmares keep coming back?" Rarity lifted a hoof into the air and let it drop a few moments later. "I can't even begin to imagine what I'd do if I had to see my business torched like that. I'm sorry I can't help you anymore with this. I feel so unhelpful here."

"It's okay, Rarity." Fluttershy dug deep into her mind, pushing the troublesome embers of her dreams aside, and came back up with a small smile. "I didn't think they would have come back, either. For now—I'm just happy to be here with you. We're here to relax, right?"

"That is the idea." Lotus's hooves moved to the base of her skull, where she gently lifted her head a few seconds at a time.

"You're absolutely right," said Rarity. "Let's put this dreadful business aside. In fact, I have a story that might cheer you up. Would you like to hear it?"

"That would be lovely."

"Very well, then. Just the other day, I finished making a new summer dress when somepony walks into the boutique, and you'll never guess who it was. It was Applejack. Applejack, of all ponies. Wahahaha!"

The unicorn had given Fluttershy no time to guess at all, but that was the way Rarity spoke when she got rolling. The pegasus often got lost beneath all the words. At the moment, however, she was grateful to have someone fill the silence. She continued listening, inserting nods and affirmative noises at the appropriate times. Applejack had lost a bet with her brother—a bet that had apparently involved a fancy dress and a makeover...

Fluttershy stepped into her cottage just as the sun set below the horizon. Though Rarity had offered to put her up for the night after the get-together, the pegasus had declined. The unicorn was one of the most

generous ponies she knew, and that generosity could push her too far for the sake of making others happy. She remembered asking her for a hat made out of bird's eggs, by Celestia. Rarity must have felt her career going to pieces while making that thing.

At any rate, the pegasus thought the last thing she needed was to stay up all night telling Rarity everything about her dreams, and why she thought they kept coming back. She shuffled through the living room into her kitchen, where a white rabbit with beady black eyes read a newspaper at the table. At the sound of her entrance, he set the paper down and waved.

Fluttershy smiled. The dishes were stacked in their shelves and the countertops gleamed. "Thanks for tidying up the kitchen while I was gone, Angel."

The rabbit stood on his seat and bowed low. It had been his pleasure.

The two of them then spent some time discussing some of Fluttershy's patients. "Mr. Mousey's still staying off his leg? Good... Cottontail's running a fever again, so you know the regimen... Well, I wouldn't be happy wearing a brace, either, but we need to make sure Bluebeak keeps his on until his wing gets better." Being Ponyville's resident veterinarian meant she shuttled between the different areas in and around her cottage most every day. Though many ponies did not realize this about her, Fluttershy rose just as early as Applejack on most days—many of her patients disliked daylight. She even cared for a manticore kit she had found on the edge of the Everfree Forest. It came for a bowl of milk twice a week and always waited for her beneath that one fallen tree. Celestia, had her work with that creature paid off that one time!

Angel poked a paw at a place setting on the other side of the table, asking if she had eaten already.

"Oh." Fluttershy cringed. "I had dinner with Rarity earlier. Sorry." The pegasus broke into a sudden yawn, and her wings flared out from beneath her saddlebags' straps. "Goodness, I didn't realize how tired I'd be coming back from the spa. I think I'm going to call it an early night. We've got lots of work to do tomorrow."

Angel saluted and made to put away the dishes on the table.

Fluttershy sighed as she left the kitchen. She could not be like Rarity and run her ad hoc clinic by herself—Angel took care of all the little details she overlooked, and he earned every letter of his name for it.

She reached her room at the top of the stairs. Birdhouses hung from the rafters around her bed—much easier to clean that way. Earthen pots of medicine and aromatic herbs clustered in the corner near her bathroom, and several windows looked out into the purpling night sky. The floorboards squeaked as she made her way to her nightstand, where she pulled a pale green candle out from her saddlebags and lit it.

It smelled of cut honeydew and summer lavender, and the flame burned merrily in the dimness. The spa sisters had given it to her as a gift, despite her insistence on paying for it—oh, they did not have any of that. They told her it would help ease her dreams at night, and that it was the least they could do for a loyal customer. She fanned the candle flame with her wings to get the scents into the far corners of the room. If the candle did what the sisters said it would do, she would ask them for Rarity's "usual" the next time she visited them.

Just as she was about to climb into bed, a flash of bright red caught the corner of her eye from the cobblestone fireplace on the far wall. Perhaps it was because she was tired that she was prone to whimsical notions, but she shuffled on over anyway. A ledge above the fireplace held a variety of small items: an acorn cap, three mottled seashells, a pair of crossed porcupine quills, an ivory-veined obsidian, and countless others.

Rarity had come up with the idea of collecting mementos of her former patients. She had even made the first contribution to the collection with one of Opalescence's gem-encrusted collars, saying that just because Fluttershy's hard work sometimes escaped the other ponies did not mean it had to escape her.

But even though the fashionista was her best friend, Fluttershy's foremost keepsake rested upright in a glass case above the ledge. Its donor had been the only patient the pegasus had ever failed—but then again, nothing could have helped that patient but time. The memento was a pinion, one of the largest and most important feathers for flying, and it

changed from a vivid orange at the base to a bold red at its pointed tip. It glowed from within, casting a warm tint over the gray stones behind it.

Very few ponies could say they had seen a phoenix—fewer still could say they possessed one of their feathers. As far as Fluttershy knew, she was the only pony in Ponyville to have one. It had not been easy to get. Philomena, after all, had been none other than Princess Celestia's personal pet—and, like her owner, she had a trickster side to her. Fluttershy could hardly believe a month had passed since their visit.

Thinking back, she wondered how she could have once lived on the borders of Drakkvarna, where fire was just another kind of weather, without recognizing what Philomena was sooner. The adults sometimes talked about firebirds who left trails of flame wherever they flew, and a few came to roost at Flamewithers during the winters. When the nights grew cold, having a firebird in the house was a blessing worth several midnight patrols. Then again, Fluttershy had never seen one close to death, much less how they burned when they died.

An uneasy feeling pooled in her stomach. Though Philomena's feather was hooves down one of the most beautiful things anypony was liable to own, she suspected its arrival had something to do with her recent dreams. They always happened at Flamewithers. They always had her parents. And they always ended the same way—an immense firestorm would rip through her dreamscape and she would jerk awake, sweating and huffing.

Being set ablaze, though—that was new.

She suddenly wished she had somepony else to talk to about those dreams. Rarity had listened to her long enough and did not need to be bothered about it. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie talked about their dreams from time to time, but all the prismatic pegasus ever dreamed about were the Wonderbolts, and most ponies turned their brains off for safety reasons whenever Pinkie broached the subject. She was the reason why no restaurant in Ponyville served oatmeal anymore.

Who did that leave? Applejack always treated Fluttershy kindly, but the farmer pony put as much stock into nighttime dreams as she did in the fashion industry. She would probably try and convince her to ignore them.

That left her with only one option—and this one seemed the least suitable at all. She had come from the most prestigious unicorn academy in Canterlot, always carried a book or two with her wherever she went—and she had a stubborn skepticism against anything which could not be proven through scientific, methodical study. True, having Pinkie Pie as a friend taught her how accepting the unexplainable from time to time did not make her less happy or intelligent. But would she approach a dream with the same kind of openness?

She did live in the Ponyville library, however. And Fluttershy had no doubt that she had plumbed the depths of Canterlot's extensive archives during her studies. Even if she went about her days free from the concerns of dreams, she had to have a book or two on them somewhere. And even if they didn't answer all of her questions right away, at least they could point her toward an answer.

She was also a very close friend—one she had confided in during her brief foray into modelling, and one who enabled her to overcome her fear of fully-grown dragons. Yes. There was that.

That was it, Fluttershy decided as she slipped into bed. Come the next day, when she finished checking on her morning patients, she would head to the Ponyville library and speak with Twilight Sparkle.

Chapter 2

The candle helped. She spent the night loafing in a field of warm summer grass as a lavender breeze drifted over her.

The next morning, Angel helped Fluttershy ready medicines for the early patients before they ate a quick breakfast of field greens and vinaigrette topped with watercress and cilantro. When the pegasus journeyed outdoors, the sky glowed with the warm purple of an early morning. She heard low thuds rumbling over from Sweet Apple Acres—probably Applejack, she thought, bucking her spring crop while most other ponies slept. Fluttershy's morning patients kept her too busy to visit the farmpony in the mornings, which was fine. Even though they had lived close to each other for years, she hardly knew what to talk about without feeling like a nuisance to the hard-working mare.

The pegasus began her rounds with a chipmunk resting beneath the eaves of her cottage. The gash on his paw was healing nicely and only needed a fresh bandage. A little paw tapped her back hoof as she finished wrapping the wound—when she turned around, one of Cottontail's kits looked up at her with huge, quivering eyes. She smiled, telling the little one not to worry about her mother before sending her off with a packet of herbs. Behind her, a horned owl with aged, milky eyes alighted on a nearby willow, just as Angel arrived with a bottle of eyedrops in his mouth.

Pegasus and rabbit made a slow tour around Fluttershy's cottage as they worked—they checked on the ferrets by the creek and left insects and nectar for the hummingbird nests. The number of patients Fluttershy tended to kept her on the tips of her hooves—after a couple of hours, her coat had picked up a good sweat. She saved the chicken coop for last, refilling the feed trough with a smooth pass from the feed bag while Angel scampered inside for eggs.

As soon as she re-entered her cottage, Fluttershy retreated upstairs for a well-deserved soak and brush. She scattered a cup of rose heads on the water and lowered herself in, drawing wisps of fragrant steam through

her nostrils. Her mane meandered just beneath the water like roads, threading between the blossoms as they turned on the surface. She turned them into a game of sorts by pushing them around—every blossom she displaced drew two more in its wake. She continued playing with the flowers so long that only after she drained the tub did she remember—

"I was going to see Twilight today!" she gasped. She had nearly gone the entire morning without thinking about her dreams—but they were the entire point behind her visit, after all. She had no doubt her friend had the perfect book to put this terrible business behind her for good.

"Oh, I hope she's still there," said Fluttershy as she galloped through her front door. However, she did not get very far before looking up—and she ground to a halt so violently that she felt her teeth rattle in her skull.

"Wha—no, no. I—I must be seeing things. This can't be." The way between her cottage and the buildings of Ponyville opened before her—but the sky remained just as dark as when she first stepped out to make rounds. She glanced out at the clock tower at the edge of town wondering if she had finished ahead of schedule, as she sometimes did. However, both hands pointed straight at the sky studded with the pre-dawn stars.

This had happened before. Fluttershy's thoughts shuttled back to when she first met Twilight Sparkle, the Princess' personal protégée. In the course of one tumultuous night, she had ventured forth with five other brave ponies to confront an ancient, forgotten menace—one who would not rest until Equestria fell under eternal night. Even though they eventually triumphed, Fluttershy could never forget how small she felt under Nightmare Moon's vendetta. If the events of that night were beginning to repeat themselves here?

She did what she felt any sensible pony would have done in her horseshoes. She screamed, sprinted back into her cottage, bolted the door behind her, and dove beneath her couch.

"Angel," she whispered as the rabbit joined her. "What do I do? I can't fight whatever's out there. I can't."

Clop! Clop! Clop! Clop!

"Ahhhhh!" Her head knocked against the underside of the couch.

"Fluttershy?"

Though the heavy wood muffled the voice on the other side of the door, Fluttershy recognized that country twang. "A—A—Applejack?" She rushed over and opened it. "Applejack? What are you doing here?"

The farm pony gasped for breath as the brim of her hat fell over her eyes. "We need to get to Twilight's place," she said, knocking her hat back into place. "Something ain't goin' right with the sun today, and I'm sure she's already tryin' to figure out why. She'll want us all there with her, I reckon."

Fluttershy's ears pinned back. "But—but it's dark out there," she whimpered.

"You were out there earlier this morning," said Applejack, frowning. "I heard you singing to a bunch of critters."

"Well, yes. But that was when it was *supposed* to be dark. It's not supposed to be dark *now*." Fluttershy sank to the floor. "I'm sorry. Tell Twilight I won't be able to make it out there. I'll only hold you all up, anyway, just like last time."

"C'mon, Fluttershy." Applejack let herself into the foyer and nudged her friend to her hooves. "I'll be right by you the whole way there. Ain't no other pony you can rely on better than ol' Applejack. 'Sides, there ain't no dragons out there this time—even though you sure gave that last one a good talkin' to, heh heh." The earth pony held out her hoof. "There ain't nothin' to be afraid of."

Flutterhy took it. "But—"

"I mean it. Get along, little pony! Yee-hah!" Applejack galloped out of the cottage, her hat bouncing on her mane.

"Applejack, wait!" The pegasus took off after her. "I'm taller than you," she muttered.

Ponyville was not boiling over in chaos—there were no singing duck heads bursting from the flowers, or buildings uprooting themselves for a stroll. But it was confused. Ponies milled outside with their heads fixed on the stars—to preventable, yet concussive results. A trio of silhouettes on the Carousel Boutique rooftop cried, "Cutie Mark Crusaders: Sun Savors! Yay!" before a white hoof snatched them back indoors.

North of the main square, flashes of violet light erupted from various windows along the Books and Branches Library. Books flitted across the windowpanes like hummingbirds, only to be sent back seconds later by the outline of a unicorn rifling through the library's collection.

Despite making good time from the cottage to the library, Fluttershy and Applejack were not the first ponies at the front door.

"Pinkie! Rainbow! Rarity!" The pegasus pounced on the three ponies, wrapping them in her forelegs. "I'm so glad to see you girls here. Did Twilight call you over?"

"She didn't have to," said Pinkie Pie.

"We had a feeling she'd want us here," Rarity added.

"That's right," said Rainbow Dash. "I knew something was wrong the moment I woke up and it was still dark outside, and I knew Twilight would want my help to investigate." The colorful pegasus put on an ear-to-ear grin.

"You could've just risen early for once, Rainbow," said Applejack.

Rainbow gasped. "Are you kidding? I'd like to see you try that someday."

Applejack—the hard-working, hardly-tiring farm pony—let those words sink into her friend's brain. When it did was easy to tell—her eyes bulged wide, her mane went frazzly, and her ears peaked like mountains.

"You think you're so smart," Rainbow Dash growled as her features fell back into place.

Applejack knocked on the door. The top part swung open to reveal an out-of-breath lavender unicorn, her mane and tail ruffled like wrinkled saddles. The shock of seeing her five best friends on her doorstep canceled the shimmering glow around her horn, and everypony heard the thunder of hundreds of books hit the floor soon after.

"Girls!" The relief radiating from Twilight Sparkle's eyes alone could have wrapped up a small ice age. "Thank goodness you're all here. Get inside, quick."

The Books and Branches library resembled an evacuation site. More books lay scattered off the shelves than on them, papers and scrolls spilled from overextended drawers, ladders and tables lay on their sides. Candles contained within glass bowls burned everywhere, casting conflicting shadows on the ceiling and shelves.

"Sorry about the mess, girls," Twilight continued, levitating a book to flip through its contents. "I've been searching the library all morning about why the sun hasn't come up yet." Finding nothing, she tossed the book aside.

"We figured you'd be up to something like this," said Rarity, levitating a mane brush. "Be a dear and hold still, I'll get your mane sorted out in no time."

The unicorn smiled. "Thanks, Rarity. At the rate I'm going now, that's probably the only thing I'll get straight today." She looked to her friends, her expression somber again. "Does anypony have an idea on what's going on?"

Nightmare Moon's laughter echoed in Fluttershy's mind. Some of the others provided their thoughts, but none of them sounded convinced. Her pulse quickening, the pegasus steeled herself to speak her mind.

"You don't think Princess Luna's turned into Nightmare Moon again, do you?" asked Rainbow. "We haven't seen her in a year. What if she spent that time coming up with a plan to take revenge on Princess Celestia?"

"I don't think that's the case." Twilight Sparkle summoned *The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide* from a nearby pedestal. "The book doesn't say anything about Nightmare Moon after she escapes from her prison."

"The book also didn't say anythin' 'bout us beating her, either," Applejack pointed out.

The unicorn had to admit she had a point, but her tight frown showed she was far from persuaded. "Princess Celestia has mentioned her sister in some of the letters she sent me, and Princess Luna was always doing fine. But before you go questioning my mentor's perceptive capacity, do remember that she's ruled Equestria for millenia. She's seen her share of conspiracy in her time, I'm sure. And, she has used the Elements of Harmony before, including the Element of Honesty. If Princess Luna was planning something, I've no doubt that her sister would have taken notice and asked us for help."

"Have you sent her a letter yet?" Finished with Twilight's mane Rarity, moved down to straighten her tail.

"Spike sent it a couple of minutes before you all got here—oh, ouch, that's a tangle."

"Sorry."

"That means the Princess should have responded by now," said Pinkie Pie. Seeing the looks everypony gave her, she added, "What? She got back to you pretty quickly when she first sent you from Canterlot last year, right?"

Twilight suddenly looked like she wanted to strangle a bird—or else she was dying to ask her friend a question. Then she clamped her jaw shut and shook her head. With Pinkie Pie, it was sometimes better not to ask how she knew what she did.

"Pinkie's right," Twilight conceded. "The Princess doesn't take this long to answer, normally."

"So it is Nightmare Moon, then," said Rainbow Dash. "We gotta get outta here and beat her before she throws Equestria into eternal night. Again." She primed her wings for flight.

"Whoa there, partner!" Applejack chomped on the tip of the pegasus's tail. "We can't rush to conclusions, Rainbow. What if the Princess is only sick? Happens to everypony." She let go of Rainbow. "Even if she's in charge of raisin' the sun every mornin', maybe a cold's keeping her in bed."

"Applejack's right as well," said Twilight. "I know the Princess has a good reason to keep the sun down. But until we get that letter back from her, we're going to have to get our hooves dirty."

"What? Count me out of this."

"Rarity, it's a figure of speech."

"But why *that figure* of speech?" the unicorn whined.

"Because—ugh." Twilight rolled her eyes as she stepped away from her friend. "I appreciate the brush, Rarity, but there's too much going on for us to argue. Pinkie Pie, go find the book that'll give us the answer to this. You're the best out of all of us for that."

The pink pony gave her a blank stare. "Twilight, it doesn't work that way," she said, shaking her head. "You told me exactly what to look for the first time, and Dashie came zooming in and knocked everything over the second."

"So we need something really fast to hit the library again?" Rainbow Dash fired off a salute. "I'm *on* it."

"Nooo!"

The pegasus disappeared under a pile of ponies before she could fly out the window.

Having refrained from the ambush, Fluttershy took the chance to slip away to the upper floor. Was would her staying there accomplish? She had no hope of making herself heard above the others once they got arguing.

She could, however, start sifting through the books for the answer to the darkness, her original fixation on her dreams forgotten.

The titles on the shelf before her were as random as they were obscure—*How to Carpet your Walls, Volume 2*; *The Various Shapes and Styles of Confetti*; *Sea Ponies: Only a Conspiracy Theory? What the Princess Doesn't Want You to Know!* No wonder Twilight had Spike organize the library most of the time. Then again, she suspected he did not do much organizing at all—he was a *baby* dragon, after all, and babies were not known for their work ethic.

She sighed as she moved onto the next shelf. The titles here were just as useless as those on the first. Just as she looked away, however, something flashed outside the window

Fluttershy almost shattered the glass knocking it open—she certainly got the attention of the other ponies downstairs.

"What's going on up there?" Twilight called.

The pegasus ignored her as she searched the sky—the sky? She was certain that, if what she had seen had even been there, it had been flying at the time. She found nothing out to the west, and the southern skies were just as empty.

"Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy shot a chilly glare over her shoulder. "Quiet, Twilight!" Her brain caught up with her a moment too late. "Oh my goodness," she said, ears flattened. "I'm so sorry about that. I don't know what came over me—"

"Arohhhh!"

That cry! Fluttershy almost toppled out the window. She managed to catch herself against the window ledge at the last moment, though the heaving ground beneath reminded her of how close a call she had.

But that cry! She had heard it before. Certainty rushed through her as she looked out to the east—even at a distance there was no mistaking it.

The intense red and gold plumage, the whip-thin tail lashing in the air, the curls of flame trailing behind its wings.

"Philomena!" Fluttershy launched herself from the window and flew. What in Equestria was Princess Celestia's phoenix doing in Ponyville?

"Aroh?" At the sound of her name, the phoenix broke out of her loop, disoriented, before she spotted the yellow pegasus dashing right at her. "Ar-rr-aa!"

Pegasus and phoenix met midway, with the latter dropping into the former's outstretched hooves. Though Philomena did not burst into flames this time, she was in bad condition. The better part of her wing feathers showed cuts, frayed edges, and soot—in fact, many of her primaries and secondaries were outright *gone*. Scab lines covered her talons, and patches of feathers were missing from her chest.

Her breathing was slow, her pulse raced. Fluttershy could see her pupils. A charred stench fluttered across the pegasus's nostrils.

A horrible thought flooded over her. Was it possible for phoenixes to get burned?

"Fluttershy, would you mind sharing what the hay you're doing up h—ohmigosh." Rainbow Dash had rushed to her friend's side bent on giving her a lecture, but she fell silent as soon as she saw the phoenix cradled in her hooves. She reached out to take Philomena, but Fluttershy drew the bird closer to her chest.

"She needs medical attention immediately," she declared, turning toward her cottage.

"Anooo..." The phoenix lifted a trembling wing in protest.

Fluttershy silenced the bird with a furious stare. "Philomena, this time, I will *not* take 'no' for an answer. This time, I am going to treat you right."

"No, hold it, Fluttershy—"

When Fluttershy leveled her stare on Rainbow Dash, the cyan pegasus's wings snapped against her sides.

"She's here to tell us somethiiiing," Rainbow yelled as she plunged to the earth.

"Then it can wait until she's better," Fluttershy yelled back. Just before she could race off, however, a lasso snapped around her back hoof.

"I get the feelin' it's something she means to tell us now?" Applejack's voice called from below.

Fluttershy was not a very athletic pegasus. The farm pony's rope work made short work of her, grounding her in a matter of seconds. The rest of her friends gathered around and walled her off in the middle.

"What are you all doing?" she demanded, throwing her stare around. "The longer we wait, the worse she gets. Do you see how hurt she is? The others flinched as if they were being pelted by boulders, but they somehow stood firm against her onslaught.

"Fluttershy, please listen," Twilight Sparkle pleaded, stepping in front of the pegasus. "We know that it's odd Philomena came here, but she trusts you the most out of all of us—"

"She does," Fluttershy snarled. "So step aside and let me—"

"Rohhh." Philomena jabbed her wing behind Fluttershy. Everypony followed its track east.

"The Everfree Forest?" Rainbow asked.

Philomena shook her head and jabbed twice more in the same direction.

"Beyond the Everfree Forest?" Rarity ventured.

Philomena nodded.

"Is that where you just came from?" asked Twilight.

"Raa." Philomena nodded again, just before her head went limp and her eyes closed. Fluttershy determined the phoenix still had a pulse and was still breathing on her own—for the moment.

"Now may I take her?" Fluttershy's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Hold on," said Twilight. She traced a gentle hoof across the phoenix's head. "We should figure out where she just came from. It's likely the Princess will be there, too. But I can't think of any places in Equestria beyond the forest—"

"Flamewithers."

"Huh?"

"The Princess will be at Flamewithers," the pegasus continued, rising into the air. "My hometown, Twilight." She kicked Applejack's lasso off of her hoof and flew off beneath the darkened sky.

Fluttershy dropped into her couch, utterly exhausted. She buried her muzzle into the velvety fabric while trying to hold back tears—Philomena had taken hours to stabilize, but she had finally dozed off, pain-free, in the little bed by the stove. Fluttershy was grateful the burn ointments she had on hoof worked just as well for magical creatures as it did normal ones—and that they had not given the phoenix hives this time.

Just before she could fall asleep herself, though, somepony knocked on her door. She stumbled over to it, almost tripping over a washbasin on the way.

"Twilight?"

"Hey, Fluttershy." The unicorn had her saddlebags on. Fluttershy wonder what they were for.

The two of them walked over to the pegasus's newest patient. "She looks better," said Twilight. "Did she put up any fights this time?"

"None at all." Fluttershy adjusted the phoenix's pillow. "I don't understand what happened to her. How does a phoenix get burned?"

Twilight frowned. "Is that what happened to her? My gosh. Your guess is as good as mine."

"It's not only the burns, either." Fluttershy rolled the covers back a little, just enough to reveal braces wrapped around both of Philomena's wings. "She tore a few muscles on her way over here, as well—and I had to set a broken talon. And if she came from Flamewithers..." The pegasus trailed off as her eyes looked far off in the distance. She trudged over to her couch and sat down.

"What is it, Fluttershy?" Twilight settled in next to her. She swept her friend's mane to the other side of her head. "You mentioned Flamewithers was your hometown, if I recall correctly. I thought you used to live in Cloudsdale with Rainbow Dash."

"That was only for summer flight camp," said Fluttershy. "I couldn't fly very well, you see. My parents made me go there every year, and I hated it. The year I met Rainbow Dash, I was the oldest filly there, and they wouldn't take me for another year no matter how many bits Papa tried to pay them. So when I wasn't in Cloudsdale, I lived in Flamewithers. Do you know what ponies out there do for a living?"

"You've got me."

"Flamewithers isn't supposed to be public knowledge." Fluttershy continued nonetheless, telling Twilight about its proximity to Drakvarna, and how her parents kept the fires of that land in check.

"Pegasi can manipulate fire?" Twilight exclaimed. "Fire's nothing but the immaterial product of an oxidation reaction."

"We can manipulate *heat*," Fluttershy corrected. "I can roll an updraft beneath my wings when I fly, and Rainbow can do it in her sleep. Fire patrols fly low to the ground, where fires burn the hottest, and channel their heat to shoot themselves extremely high into the air, killing the flames as they went. It was a lot like pulling weeds, if you want to think of it that way."

Twilight nodded. "That makes sense. So are the dragons responsible for these firestorms, then?"

"Yes."

"And..." The unicorn sat up straight as it dawned on her. "You think Philomena got into a fight with a dragon."

Though it should not have been possible, Fluttershy sank even further into her couch. Her voice barely escaped past the cushioning. "Yes."

"This is all very strange." Twilight hopped onto the floor and paced back and forth. "First the sun doesn't rise. Then the Princess is out east instead of in Canterlot. And now we have a dragon-injured phoenix—and the dragon's still out there, possibly hurting other ponies." The unicorn rubbed her head and cringed. "None of this is making any sense—and the Princess still hasn't replied to my letter."

"Why haven't you and the others gone to Flamewithers yet?" asked Fluttershy.

"Why haven't you?" asked Twilight.

"Because Philomena is hurt too badly," said the pegasus, sitting up, "She is going to require my care for the next month or so, until she recovers I can't leave a patient like that. That's even worse than refusing to take her in in the first place."

"Don't worry about it," a boyish voice said from the front door.

"Wahhhhh!"

"Fluttershy, let go—I can't—breathe—! Ack!" Twilight's eyes rolled in opposite directions as Fluttershy released her from her inadvertent chokehold. Once her senses returned to her, the unicorn continued, "I asked Spike if he was willing to team up with Angel and take care of your patients for you, and he agreed."

"That's right." The baby dragon emerged from his hiding place and tried to calm the jittery pegasus with a few pats on her shoulder. "Don't you want to go back home again? It sounds like everypony could really use you out there."

"Oh." Fluttershy lowered her ears. "Even if they could, Spike, my home is a full day's flight from here." She paced across the room. "I can't just up and leave here like this."

"Sure you can, darling."

Fluttershy turned. Rarity and the rest of her friends stood by the doorway, all of them with saddlebags draped across their backs—and all of them with encouraging smiles on their faces. Even Rainbow Dash gave her a brief nod.

"Rarity?" She looked from one friend to the next unable to believe they were all standing there. "What's going on—why does everypony have their bags?"

"We're gonna have to be prepared if we're gonna help the Princess out," said Rainbow, striding over. "We don't know how long it's gonna take to get through the Everfree Forest, so we tried to cover all our bases. We even brought stuff for you so you can come along with us right away. Check it out."

The pegasus pointed out each pony as she listed their contribution—each in turn produced with a flourish. "Applejack's gotcha covered on food. Rarity brought her grooming supplies. Twilight got you a field journal in case you wanted to write anything down while we were out there. Pinkie has—well, I dunno what it's for, but it's funny, so we're keeping it. And I—"

Rainbow Dash unlatched one of her bags and drew something out with the speed of an Appleloosan triggerpony. It came down over Fluttershy's head—a leather strap circled around the back of her skull, and two heavy, round things settled on her forehead, just above her eyes.

"I got you my very own Wonderbolt goggles, from the first air show my parents took me to," the pegasus beamed. "Every time I wore them, I felt like I could do anything. Now that I can do anything—thank you," she

said, bowing to absent applause, "thank you—it's time I passed 'em on to some other pony who needed them more."

"I—I—" Fluttershy removed Rainbow's goggles and turned them over in her hooves. They were surprisingly sturdy for a souvenir—the lenses were dense, and crack-free despite their owner's best efforts—all enclosed within honest brass rims. Engravings along the top of each rim read, "THE WONDERBOLTS" in angular letters, with their motto, "FLY WITH YOUR DREAMS" inscribed along the bottoms.

"We've got a lot of ground to cover, sugarcube," said Applejack. "You're comin' with us."

It was not a question. Fluttershy looked to each of her friends, unable to believe the prodigious faith they put in her presence. She read the inscription on Rainbow's goggles a second time: "FLY WITH YOUR DREAMS".

She looked over her shoulder at Philomena, who continued to rest in peaceful slumber.

She was afraid of the journey. She was afraid of what the darkness meant. She was afraid she had no idea what was going on.

But more importantly, she was afraid of what would happen if she did not go with her friends. Philomena had come to her on the brink of consciousness. Though she wished she could stay behind and tend to the phoenix for however long her recovery took, she wanted to know the reasons behind why harm had come to the Princess's pet.

She wanted to know what she could do to prevent what happened to Philomena from happening to anybody else.

Her eyes flashed like newly-polished iron. "Give me a moment, girls," she declared, marching toward the staircase. "I'm packing my bags."

Soon afterward, Fluttershy returned with a curious amount of clinking coming from within her saddlebags.

"What did you pack in there?" asked Twilight.

"Medicine," the pegasus replied, "as much as I can carry. I don't know what lies ahead, so I thought I'd better be ready for anything."

"You said it, sister," said Pinkie, firing off a celebratory party popper.

The pegasus collected the other things her friends had brought her as well. "Ooof. Heavy."

"I can take some of your things if you like," Applejack offered.

"No. I mean, no thank you." Galloping for long stretches would be difficult, but Fluttershy thought she could maintain a trot without too much trouble. "I'll be fine. Spike?"

The purple dragon hopped on top of Twilight's head. "Yes, Fluttershy?"

"Please do your best to look after all the animals. Especially Philomena." Fluttershy had to resist the urge to look over—leaving the phoenix behind, and out of her care, was unbearable as it was. "I know you'll do a good job."

"No need to worry, sister," said Spike, jabbing his thumb into his chest—a little too forcefully. "I—Ow. Ow. Ohhh." He flopped over Twilight's head.

"Spike, you've got to be careful with your claws," the unicorn admonished. "Your scales are still developing, after all."

"Do y'all think Spike looks all right?" Applejack asked, walking over. "His eyes are goin' a little funny."

The farmpoony was right. Spike's eyes floated in opposite directions, and then his spines stood up on end. His whole body tensed as a familiar bulging filled his cheeks.

Rainbow Dash was the first to figure it out. "Incoming!" she yelled.

Six ponies hit the floor as the dragon unleashed an almighty blast of green fire. When it dissipated, a heavy scroll wrapped in a crimson ribbon dropped on the floor.

"The Princess!" Twilight cried, unfurling the ending. The paper glowed violet as the unicorn's eyes darted over the lines, her expression growing darker and less certain the further she went on.

"What is it?" asked Applejack, leaning in. "What's it say?"

Twilight hesitated. Her ears pinned back as her lips mouthed words her lungs would not supply. "It's—It's not from Princess Celestia." She turned the scroll around for everypony to read.

"It's from Princess Luna."

Everypony crowded in to read the letter—the lunar royal's handwriting scrolled across the page in compact, orthogonal lines. Every letter possessed precise strokes and proportions, every word stood separated by perfect pacing. Rarity let out a squeak of admiration.

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I regret to contact you under these circumstances, and under short such notice. I am Princess Luna, writing on behalf of your treasured mentor and my beloved sister. She is indisposed, but otherwise fine. However, we are not certain for how long her condition will remain stable.

We have relocated to Flamewithers Outpost, on the border between Everfree and Drakkvarna, the land of the dragons. Whether you know of it is irrelevant. We require your immediate assistance, as well as the assistance of the rest of the Elements of Harmony, and have enchanted this sending with a teleportation spell to spare you an unpleasant journey through the forest.

Please make haste. Recent events along the east have us fearing for Equestria, but I fear even more for Tia.

Princess Luna

"How convenient," said Twilight, turning the scroll over. A circular lattice of arcane filigree glowed blue on the reverse side. "Is everypony ready?"

"We're ready," the Elements of Harmony chimed in unison. Fluttershy was surprised at the conviction in her voice.

"To Flamewithers, then," Twilight cried, her horn glowing with mystical energy. "Let's go!"

A blinding flash of light engulfed Fluttershy's living room as Princess Celestia's protégée triggered the spell.

Chapter 3

To Fluttershy, teleportation felt as if somepony had squeezed her through a drinking straw. Her house had collapsed in on her in an instant, and everything had turned pitch dark. Before she could even think about screaming however, the spell spat her out on the other side, and the world dilated out from within her.

"T-Twilight." Rainbow Dash's mane had exploded into curls. "You never told us that would happen."

"I'm with Rainbow on this one," said Applejack, adjusting her hat. "I'm sorry, sugarcube, but that wasn't pleasant at all."

Twilight cringed. "Yeah. It's not pleasant to anypony, even unicorns. Most of us don't even bother learning how to do it. But it got us here. Look."

The unicorn gestured to a marvelous, ivory-colored tower that dared toward the heavens, thrusting Celestia's flag from its spire at the very stars themselves. Strange, shifting colors glowed from within a large glass dome beneath the spire. The ponies stood before a pair of white double doors as tall as Ponyville City Hall, each of them emblazoned with a massive rendition of an eight-pointed sun. A pair of armored pegasi stood at opposite ends of the doors, their gazes fixed straight ahead.

Thunder rumbled off in the distance.

Twilight's brows made a line so flat that they could have supported a drink. "You'd think the Princesses would have saved us the climb," she deadpanned. "Leave your bags with these gentlecolts so you don't have to carry them up."

"Shouldn't you keep Princess Luna's letter with you?" asked Rarity.

"That's a good idea."

The guards let them pass inside. The tower's hoofprint was just as spacious as Ponyville's central square, with a wide marble staircase rising up in spirals from the center of the floor. It wrapped around a cloud statue of a pegasus. She wore a helmet styled after a dragon's spiky head, as well as a golden chestpiece much like the one Princess Celestia wore. Her mane whipped back and forth in some immortalized gale, and her wings flared out to both sides, their primaries spread like blades. She reared on one back leg, as if preparing to kick off into the sky.

"'Our Grand Marshal'," Rarity read from the plaque at the statue's base as the group began to climb. "I must say, she's quite the impressive mare."

Rainbow Dash examined the statue from the air—she never walked when she could fly. "Even if the pay isn't good, look at that armor. I wouldn't mind having a set like that. And I'd get to call myself 'Grand Marshal Rainbow Dash.' Ah, that's tough. Sounds just as good as 'Wonderbolt Rainbow Dash.'"

Twilight smirked at the pegasus as the latter scrunched her brows in thought. "You should figure out what the job is first before you go changing your career plans." She turned to Fluttershy. "What does a Grand Marshal do, anyway?"

"It's a difficult job," the pegasus replied, brushing a stray bit of mane out of her face. "Flamewithers protects the Everfree Forest from the fires that the dragons make, and the Grand Marshal organizes all of the fire patrols so the forest and every critter living in it can remain safe. They're also responsible for keeping Canterlot informed of the conditions out here."

"Gosh. That does sound difficult. Heh heh--Rainbow Dash? Are you sure you'd want to deal with all that paperwork?"

"Not if I hired some other pony to write them for me," said the pegasus.

The stairs finally led the six ponies before a pair of guards standing by a pair of glass doors. Just behind those were the shifting colors everypony had seen within the glass dome. Fluttershy thought it was like staring at the surface of a soap bubble. It was pretty—but it also put a

strange feeling in her gut. A quarter-turn of stairs curled up to another floor behind the bubble.

Before the mares could pass through the guards barred the path with a sharp snap of their wings.

"Halt," said the one on the left. "State your business."

Twilight smiled and presented Princess Luna's letter. "The Princesses need to see us."

The guards knitted their brows as they read, and they took long enough to get Fluttershy wondering if they would let her friends and her through. But before she could start fretting, the guards backed up, furred their wings, and nodded.

"Indeed they did. Go. Their Majesties await your arrival."

Twilight nodded back. "Thank you, sirs. You heard them, girls. Let's move." The unicorn swept the doors aside with a casual arc of her horn.

"But—but—" Fluttershy stared at the soap bubble... thing as its colors swirled over each other. It was there for a reason, and she did not like it. "Are you sure you want to go through that?"

"We're the Princesses' guests," said Twilight, walking up to it. She tested the bubble with a hoof, poked it through—nothing happened. "As I thought. Whatever barrier spell they're using isn't going to hurt us."

Fluttershy had to admit her friend had a point. She watched Twilight stride through the barrier as if it were not even there. That was enough to convince the other ponies to head through, including her—and when she did so, surrounded by her friends, she felt safe, even a little bit tingly.

That was when Rainbow Dash crashed on top of her.

"Fluttershy! Are you okay? I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to do that."

“I dunno about that.” Twilight looked over her shoulder at the pegasus. Something was off about her appearance, but Fluttershy could not place what it was. “For ‘accidents,’ you always get into a lot of them.”

Rainbow helped Fluttershy to her hooves. “Lay off, Twilight. All I know is one moment I’m flapping in the air, and then I’m pancaking Fluttershy the next.”

Pinkie Pie’s eyes flared wide. “Your wings, Rainbow Dash,” she exclaimed, bouncing up and down and pointing. “You fell on Fluttershy because you don’t have wings anymore.”

“What?” The pegasus whirled on herself—indeed, both of her sides were exposed. She gasped as she turned on Fluttershy. “Your wings are gone, too!”

Fluttershy’s wings shot up in surprise—if she had still had them. She looked over at Twilight. The unicorn’s jaw hung in midair. Suddenly, the off feeling Fluttershy had earlier about her friend resolved itself. The pegasus glanced up at her friend’s forehead. Twilight’s bangs draped like a smooth curtain over her forehead—her horn had gone missing.

Rarity noticed as well. “Twilight,” she said, twitching, “would you be a dear and tell me if my horn’s still there?”

“It--isn’t.” When the lavender unicorn reached up to feel her forehead, her hoof made several smooth passes across her bangs. Her pupils shrank.

“I knew this was a bad idea.” Fluttershy bolted for the exit, but a pair of jaws clamped down on the tip of her tail.

“Whoa, nelly,” Applejack said through her teeth. “Let’s all calm down here. Y’all ain’t any worse off than us earth ponies’. Right, Pinkie?”

“That’s right!” The pink pony balanced herself on one back hoof. “There’s tons of cool things you guys can do as earth ponies. You can dance, or walk, or laugh—especially laugh! Whee!”

“Come on, girls,” said Twilight. “Let’s hurry to the Princesses. They must have a reason for why we’re this way.”

The ponies galloped up the stairs to emerge into a glass dome large enough to shelter the Ponyville library. An orange glow crept into the night sky on the opposite side of the dome. A huge brass lantern, surrounded by an array of orbiting lenses and mirrors at different heights, floated in the middle of the floor—the lantern was extinguished. Smaller lanterns of flickering indigo circled the dome’s perimeter in staggered formations.

At the base of the main lantern, a gangly earth pony with a dark coat paced back and forth. Close by, another earth pony with a light coat and a pink mane lay on a tasseled cushion the size of three fully-grown buffalo. Fluttershy noticed bandages wrapped around many parts of the lighter one’s flank and head. The pegasus had treated enough injuries to admire the bandager’s technique, and the patient was breathing on her own. A water jug stood on a pedestal close to the bedridden pony. A dark stone—oblong, like a football—hovered above another one nearby.

Hearing the mares from Ponyville come in, the pacing pony looked over at them. Though the dim lighting obscured her expression, her shoulders slumped in what could only be relief. “Twilight Sparkle,” she called.

Everypony recognized her voice. “Princess Luna?” They rushed over to her.

To the unobservant, the Princess could have passed as a normal pony—albeit a stressed one, at that. Loose ends poked out of her light blue mane. Her coat looked as if it had gone unbrushed for days, and Fluttershy noticed a shake in one of her hooves. Her teal eyes had lost some of the intensity the pegasus recalled from their previous meeting, and they appeared distant and unsure.

She was no taller than any of the other ponies. She was even shorter than Fluttershy—though the pegasus was the tallest pony among her friends, and the difference between the Princess and her could have fit between the faces of a bit.

"Thank you all for coming so quickly," said Luna. Seeing the puzzled faces before her, she added, "Tia and I can explain everything. Come." She gestured over at the unconscious pony.

Fluttershy's throat tightened as she spotted half of a sun peeking from beneath the bandages on the pony's hindquarter. "Princess Celestia."

Her injuries were very similar to Philomena's. Though the bandages hid most of the damage, she could still spot cuts and burns all over the elder alicorn's body. Like her sister, her horn and wings were absent, along with whatever magic animated her mane and tail. Thankfully, the Princess's breath came and went in long, easy draughts.

Princess Luna nudged her sister with her muzzle. "Tia. You have visitors."

The solar royal stirred. Her bandages slid over each other as she tucked her front hooves beneath her barrel. She managed to prop herself up with great effort, and while it was no sunrise, the opening of her magenta eyes cast a warmth of their own over Fluttershy's coat.

"Hello, my little ponies," said the Princess, raising her head and smiling. "It's good to see you all again."

"Princess!" Twilight bounded over to her mentor and reached up for a hug, only to stop and reconsider. She settled for a relieved sigh instead. "I'm glad you're all right."

The Princess went from pony to pony, exchanging relevant news and tidings as they came up. Yes, bearing the Elements of Harmony probably raised Fluttershy and her friends a little more into the Princess's awareness over other ponies, but the intimacy of that awareness always took her by surprise. The alicorn had somehow provided Pinkie Pie a cupcake recipe she had never heard of, much to her joy.

"Oh, Fluttershy. I have an especially important question to ask you. Did Philomena find you all right?"

The pegasus had let her mind drift while Princess Celestia addressed the others, but once her turn came around, the words came easily. "She

did, Your Majesty, and I left her stable and resting. My number one assistant will be looking out for her while I'm gone."

The smile that crossed the Princess's face at that moment could have illuminated the underworld. "Thank you, child. I cannot begin express how much I am in your debt."

"Will you be okay?" Fluttershy's cheeks flushed at her sudden temerity—none of the other ponies had even hinted at asking the question, and there she went, blurting it out. Perhaps the words had come from somewhere beneath her thoughts—she was a healer at heart, and needed to know.

Princess Celestia paused as if weighing her next words. Even Pinkie Pie grew still waiting for her to speak—but then she trundled off when she noticed her reflection in one of the lenses surrounding the central lantern.

"Luna and I don't know. I suppose that's why she called you all here today."

"Pardon me, Princess." Twilight dragged her hoof along the floor. "Don't you think it's too early to discuss matters of succession?"

"Oh, Twilight." To everypony's surprise, the Princess broke into a soft chuckle. "That's not what I meant at all. I meant to say that I wanted to tell you all what happened to me—and what we believe will happen."

"We're all ears, Your Majesty," said Applejack, sitting on the floor. The other ponies followed suit soon after.

Silence ensued as the Princess gathered her words, a pained look growing on her face with every passing second. The air seemed to coagulate as she laid her head back onto the cushion. "I apologize," she sighed. "This is a little more difficult to express than I first thought it would.

"I arrived here a week ago at the Grand Marshal's request. Even though the dragonfires build in strength as the summer approaches, her latest storm reports suggested her ponies were growing weary under the largest storms they had ever seen. I agreed to speak with Zmejirstrasz on the matter and flew to their capital to have an audience with him."

“Zi-may-ear-strazz?” Rainbow Dash scratched her head. “Who’s that?”

“You all remember that one dragon who tried to nap near Ponyville.” When she saw everypony nodding, the Princess continued. “He was only a young adult, just as you are now. That’s why he came so far into Equestria, and why you all able to convince him to go elsewhere.”

Fluttershy blushed and counted the strands in her mane.

“Zmejirstrasz, on the other hoof, is nothing less than the king of the dragons. He’s older, bigger, and stronger than the dragon you persuaded to relocate.” The Princess paused. “He received me not as a royal and an equal, but as a commoner, standing alone in the middle of his court while he looked down from his throne. I once knew him to be a focused and understanding creature, but his demeanor that day was confused and accusatory. When I asked him why he was allowing the fires to grow out of control at his western borders, he denied any role in their growth.

“But what he said after that troubles me the most: he was *glad* to see the fires advancing upon Equestria.”

“What?”

“Why would he say something like that, Princess?” asked Twilight.

“Because he blames us for the fires,” said Princess Celestia. “I know. I didn’t understand what he was saying, either, but he refused to elaborate when I pressed him for details. He insisted that I drop my charade, since I knew exactly what he was talking about.

“That was when I’d had enough and advanced on his throne. That was when he attacked.”

The silence greeting the princess's words would have held a pin aloft. It did not last—somepony broke into a keening squeal soon afterward.

"Ohmigosh. You fought a dragon? That must've been *so awesome!*"

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight threw the pegasus a withering glare.

"What?" Rainbow dragged her hoof along the floor. "I'm trying to be objective about this. The last time I fought a dragon, I got my flank served to me on a platter. On the other hoof, the Princess went wing-to-claw with the baddest dragon alive." The pegasus reared up and threw her hooves in the air. "And she *won*. Nothing can ever happen to Equestria with her in charge," she finished, folding her hooves across her chest.

The silence greeting Rainbow Dash's words would have let the pin drop in resignation. Fluttershy tried to hide behind the nearest pony she could reach—who just happened to be the other pegasus.

"I mean, okay, you got a little roughed up, Your Majesty." Rainbow shifted in place, her eyes darting from side to side. "But the dragon king is gone, right? You defeated him! Equestria's safe." Her voice dropped to a whimper. "Isn't it?"

A sorrowful look crossed the Princess' face—the kind of look to press into a pony's gut for a long time. "Miss Rainbow Dash," she said, turning to the chromatic mare. "When I attended the Best Young Fliers competition last autumn, I had the chance to watch a very brave pegasus save her friend from falling to her doom."

"That's right." Rainbow's tone began to waver.

"Could you ever bear to let any of your friends come to harm?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty." The pegasus looked back at Fluttershy, her eyes all but asking, "What's happening?"

The princess closed her eyes and smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. I feel the same way. I love all my ponies here in Equestria, but I also have friends outside the country, too."

Rainbow Dash turned back to the Princess. "You do?"

"Yes, child. And dear Zimmy is among those Luna and I have known the longest."

Rainbow Dash looked like she wanted nothing more than to melt into a puddle on the floor. "Oh. I—I didn't know. I mean, I was just-- I just wanted to—argh." She gritted her teeth and stamped her hooves on the floor. "You saved Equestria, Princess. All of us are here because you stood up to Zimmy-whats-his-mane to defend our country. That counts for something."

Princess Celestia frowned. "I'm not so sure. Even had I saved the country, I had to hurt a good friend to do so. But the truth remains. I did not save Equestria. I failed to secure even one more day of peace for you." The alicorn pointed a bandaged hoof toward the eastern side of the dome. "See for yourselves."

Fluttershy and the others complied. From their vantage point on the highest tower in Flamewithers, the outpost's three terraces fell away like the curve of an amphitheater. A mile below, the western expanses of Drakvarna formed the stage—a blasted, jagged waste sprawled between the northern and southern horizons. There the fires danced, hundreds, if not thousands of them, lashing long lines of char into the barren land. Most of them burned orange and gold, but licks of azure and lilac flickered to life every now and then. Pillars of flame erupted skyward from where the colors met.

While Flamewithers enjoyed relative safety high above the ground, the Everfree Forest had no such advantage. It put up a tenacious fight against the flames battering its eastern edge—the trees refused to burn long after other forests would have folded into ash—but they could not intercept the embers volleying over the canopy. They burrowed deep behind the border, blooming into little acres of char. Lilac flames charged the treeline from time to time, detonating parts of the forest with every impact.

"I don't understand, Princess," said Twilight, returning with the others by her mentor's side. "Why would he say the ponies are responsible for all this?"

"He is losing his way," said the Princess, shaking her head. "When Luna and I first met him as fillies, he was the liveliest creature ever hatched from an egg. The three of us often ran off together to go camping—he always provided the fire, of course. He had a compassion for nature from

the start, and it only increased with time. I remember the first moment he called flowers forth from the desert."

Applejack whistled. "Hoo whee. I'd love to have that kind of help on the farm."

"Indeed. And that is what troubles me the most." The solar royal began pacing back and forth. "News will emerge of a terrible dragon tyrant in the east who threatens to burn down Everfree. My memories of him will always be happy ones. But could I convince everypony of his goodness looking like this?"

"That does seem problematic," said Rarity. Suddenly, her eyes lit up with an idea. "If you would indulge me, Your Majesty, I could sew you a most stunning dress to hide your injuries, complete with an elegant hat to cover your head. Then you could address the country and convince them to give your Zmejirstrasz a little time to sort things out, and nopony would even suspect you of fighting a mouse."

Applejack shook her head. "Sorry, Rarity, but that's a bad idea. She'd be deceivin' everypony by pretendin' everythin's all right when it ain't. How would you deal with her missin' horn and wings?"

Princess Celestia caught everypony off guard by chuckling for the second time. "That is less of a concern than you might think, child."

"How do you figure?"

"Because of this." Princess Luna walked over to the pedestal with the floating stone. When she brushed by it, the dark surface absorbed her reflection. The stone emitted a low thrum as she put her hooves on it. "Twilight Sparkle? You look familiar with what this is."

The unicorn started. "I— I think I remember reading about these. But I didn't believe they actually existed." She circled the pedestal with a mixture of fascination and horror. "I didn't want to. The articles were light on details, and what little there was contradicted each other. But if I'm right, Princess--" She coughed. "This is a nullstone."

Pinkie Pie shuffled over and pressed her face against the floating stone before anypony could stop her. "Hmm. What does it do? It's kind of boring-looking, Twilight."

"In a way, it is," said Twilight, peeling her friend away. "Nullstones project a field that cancels magic within their surroundings. Moreover, they turn magical creatures into normal ones. Technically, we're not even earth ponies anymore. We're just ponies."

"Correct," said Princess Luna.

"I'm confused." Fluttershy stepped forward--the moment she learned what a nullstone was, a question bloomed like a weed in her mind. She checked it just in time, but instinct sent her head toward the floor in trepidation. "Oh. I'm sorry. Am I interrupting?" When nopony said she was, she started again. "Your Majesty, I don't understand why you would want this stone around if you were trying to get better. Wouldn't you heal faster on your own?"

"Normally, that would be the case," said the elder Princess. "But as I said before, Jimmy is losing his way. Weirder I had never seen him use before laced his fire as we fought. Those ill magics persisted in me long after the flames died out."

"Tia managed to fly back here by herself," said Princess Luna, picking up for her sister. Her throat tightened and her eyes grew distant, as if she revisited something she looked like she wished to forget. "I knew she needed a nullstone. Every settlement along the eastern edge of Everfree has one as a last resort. Jimmy's spells were consuming her from within, and no sooner did we deliver Tia up here did she fall unconscious."

Princess Celestia tipped her head. "I won't lie, my little ponies. This is not painless. Even now, I feel as if every passing moment could be my last. This is the hardest fight of my life."

"What? No!" Rainbow Dash's eyes had gone wide with horror. "You can't die. You're the Princess! Don't give up!"

To everypony's surprise, the elder princess chuckled. "I never said I was giving up, Rainbow Dash. I'm in this fight to live, and seeing you six

here with me only strengthens my resolve to win. But until the summer solstice, for better or for worse, I will be confined to this tower."

Twilight's eyes darted from side to side as if consulting an invisible array of calendars. "Princess Celestia," she said, "the Summer Sun Celebration is less than three weeks away."

The Princess nodded. "Eighteen days, my faithful student. In the meantime, Luna tells me she has teams refining Everfree's null ore into functional stones." She turned to the others. "The ore is what makes the forest feel so 'unnatural' to us ponies. The deposits define Everfree's borders, and they simply allow what lies within to grow without our intervention."

"Of course!" Twilight clopped her hoof on the floor. "With more nullstones in place, they can neutralize the incoming fires!"

"We hope that's the case," said Princess Luna, "With any luck, they will hold out through the solstice."

"What?" Rainbow Dash walked up next to Twilight, her brows arched. "Why do you say that?"

The Princess Sisters fell silent. They looked at each other, as if to decide who would be the one to speak. Princess Luna nodded, and her elder sister sighed.

"Because the fires grow stronger every day. Yes," said Princess Celestia, responding to the shocked looks on the faces before her, "what you all saw out there was not the highest the fires climb. They will grow and multiply until the day of the solstice." An orange glow crept up the side of the dome, the backlight throwing the Princess's face and mane into relief. "If Zmejistrasz continues to do nothing, Everfree will fold into cinders, nullstones or otherwise. And then Equestria..."

"Will be the next to burn..."

Everypony turned on Fluttershy as she finished the Princess's dire prediction. The air seemed to crystallize between them.

"You can't be serious," whispered Rarity.

"It can't be true," said Applejack.

"Then we won't let it be true." Twilight Sparkle shattered the gloom by stamping her hoof on the floor. "Your Majesties—you called us all here to assist you." She turned around to face the Princess Sisters. "The Elements of Harmony are at your command. Tell us what to do, and we will do it." Approaching the celestial royals, she bowed to the floor. "For Equestria."

"For Equestria!" Rainbow shouted, joining Twilight in her pledge. Fluttershy and the others followed suit shortly after. "For Equestria!"

The six ponies bowing before her sister and her put a proud smile on Princess Celestia's face. "Princess Luna," she said, turning to her co-ruler, "would you please retrieve the Elements of Harmony?"

Luna nodded. "Gladly, big sister."

The younger Princess made way over to the base of the central lantern. Inhaling sharply, she pressed her hooves against the brass. Panels clicked and slid aside. Another pedestal rose into view from within, this time bearing a blue chest studded with some of the most flawless rubies, emeralds, and sapphires ponydom had ever unearthed.

"Oh my," said Rarity. Her eyes grew distant and dazed, and a funny smile inched across her face. "It's beautiful."

Gripping the front handle between her jaws, Princess Luna lowered the case to the floor. The case's heavy lid flipped open at the touch of her muzzle. The five necklaces representing Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, and Loyalty sparkled from within, their condition just as pristine as the time Twilight Sparkle's friends inherited them during their victory over Nightmare Moon. The elegant tiara representing Magic sat in the center—the apex of the lavender star on its crown visible over the lip of the case. One by one, the bearers of the Elements donned their regalia. Rainbow Dash was the first, and the moment she had her Element around her neck--

"My wings!" the pegasus cried, flapping them as if for the first time in her life. "Fluttershy, your wings are back too! Wa-hoo!"

While Twilight Sparkle and Rarity hugged each other in relief, their horns restored, Applejack loosed a set of celebratory bucks, and Pinkie Pie rolled on the ground, laughing riotously.

"They're really back!" Fluttershy cried, hugging her pegasus friend in midair.

The sudden clop of stone on hard flooring grabbed Fluttershy's attention. She looked for the source of the noise--it had come from near Princess Celestia's cushion. In addition to the Elements, Princess Luna had also produced--

"Another nullstone." Twilight said, walking over to it. She peered over to the other stone. "Why do you need two of them here?"

The Princesses shared a look. One by one, the other bearers of the Elements of Harmony calmed down.

"We don't," said Princess Luna, pushing it toward her sister.

"Why have it here, then?" asked Pinkie Pie. She searched this nullstone for her reflection, but, like its twin, it refused to give her one.

"In case." Princess Celestia beckoned Twilight and her friends around the stone. "I wish that this had never come to pass at all. Sending you on this mission pains me more than these wounds ever could. It means I have failed in my duty to keep Equestria living in harmony. You are the only ponies I have left who can reach out to Zmejirstrasz, and you are the only ponies who can return my friend to the way he was before. If he will not listen to reason, you will have to overcome him—" She planted a hoof on the nullstone, and it released an ominous pulse. "—with this."

Chapter 4

Fluttershy and her friends stepped out of Princesses' tower just as the last of Flamewithers' shops closed for the night. With Twilight's cloud-walking spell active on the non-pegasi of the group, Pinkie Pie wasted no time testing the springiness of the cloud beneath her hooves.

"Hey, Rainbow Dash!" she squeaked, flailing her hooves. "Look at me! I'm flying just as high as you are!"

The pegasus cackled. "Oh, yeah? How high can you go?" With three potent flaps of her wings, she ascended to a height halfway up the Princesses' tower.

"Hey!"

While the others watched Rainbow and Pinkie play catch-me-if-you-can, Fluttershy found herself at the forefront of the group. The cloud beneath her hooves rumbled with the sound of distant explosions, and a persistent breeze warmed her wings as it blew in from the east.

She turned to the others. "Um, girls?"

A wild bounce sent Pinkie Pie tumbling end over end, releasing a shower of party props and musical instruments from her saddlebags. Only a quick sweep of Twilight's magic kept them from crashing onto the cloud.

She had not been able to do the same for Pinkie. Always one to find the bright side to things, however, the earth pony seized the opportunity to show everypony her best impression of an ostrich upon landing.

Fluttershy had to admit it was a good impression. But her heart could not shore up the same easy laughter rippling from the rest of her friends.

She turned away, setting off along a route as familiar to her as a bedtime story. It took her past the weather factories and their spiraling cloudstacks, the lantern shop on the corner, past the old kitemaker's store,

past a row of east-facing benches. After a while, it brought her to a gated, two-story house. Columns rose along its front in geometric intervals, and statues of armored pegasi lined the path to the front door. When she looked back, her friends were still talking amongst themselves, but they were following in her hoofsteps.

Their chatter ceased as Fluttershy unlatched the gate to the house. She heard something rustle behind her soon afterward—Rainbow Dash was poking a well-groomed topiary.

“This place is *weird*,” she said, gawking around the front yard. “Whose house is this?”

Fluttershy squeaked as if struck. “M-my parents’,” she said. After seeing Rainbow’s ears peak, she continued. “We moved in here a few years after I was born.”

Applejack whistled as she glanced up at the house. “Hoo-ee, girl. I know you like visiting the spa with Rarity an all, but I never took you for growin’ up fancy.” The farmpony hitched a hoof at one of the statues.

“Come now, Applejack,” Rarity protested, looking up from an inscription on one of the statues. “It’s usually not all that expensive as you make it out to be. You should join us sometime; you are truly missing out on some world-class service.”

“I ain’t never steppin’ hoof in a place that calls mud a beauty product. Honestly, Rarity, I still don’t see the difference between my mud and yours.”

Fluttershy paused before the front doors, which were situated between a pair of unlit windows. She had not put much thought into where her friends were going to stay the night. Now that she had brought them along, though, she began to see little tells pass between her friends. The sidelong glances, the arching eyebrows, the underslung pointing of hooves—they were impressed.

She was not a pony used to impressing others.

“We could stay the night somewhere else,” she blurted. “My parents aren’t home right now, so we could go to the Fairfeather Inn instead. It’s a very nice place.” She tapped a hoof on the porch. “Has... beds.”

“What?” Pinkie Pie planted her hoof on Fluttershy’s scalp, and started rubbing at it as if it were a stubborn patch of dried frosting. “He-llo-o-o! Don’t be silly, you filly! Why do we need to stay at an inn when you have this super-ginormous house all to yourself? With your parents out, it’ll be just like a sleepover, you see!”

“Ouch. Ow.” Fluttershy ducked her head, but the hoof continued its violent crusade undeterred. “Pinkie, please stop that—Pinkie, that *hurts*—”

Twilight peeled the earth pony away before the latter turned Fluttershy’s head soft. The unicorn’s brows furrowed with concern. “Is something the matter, Fluttershy? I mean--yes, this is your house, and you have every right to ask us to go someplace else if you’re not comfortable with us staying here. Right, girls?”

“Ah--!” Fluttershy wiped a wing beneath her eyes. “No, it’s--I--oh, nevermind. I’m sorry. Please, come in.” She fished a key from her saddlebags and slotted it in the lock; the doors swung inward.

“Ooooooh.”

The ponies had entered into a spacious atrium. Fluttershy nudged the chandelier hanging high above the center of the room, where crystals flared to life with soft white light. Wild Everfree blossoms reached for the air from a glass vase on a table toward the rear of the foyer. A pair of wide staircases ascended in arcs around the table to a mezzanine that wrapped around the foyer’s circumference. Open thresholds on the first floor split off to a sitting room to the left, and a kitchen and dining room to the right. The rooms of the second floor remained behind closed doors.

Along the walls hung portraits of various pegasi with groomed manes and lustrous coats. Rarity trotted over to a large painting of a stallion with dark eyes hidden behind thin-rimmed glasses and purred. “Oh my. You wouldn’t be my type normally, but...” The socialite clapped her hooves against her chest. “Say, Fluttershy. Do your parents entertain guests often?”

“Not really,” said the pegasus as she made for the kitchen. “It’s what you said earlier: they work very hard.”

“Are they on the fire patrols?” asked Rainbow Dash. “That’d probably explain why they aren’t here right now.”

“I dunno.” Twilight followed Fluttershy up the stairs. “This place looks a little expensive for a calling like that. I’ll bet they’re in administration.”

Fluttershy nodded. “You’re both right.”

“We are?”

“Oh, yes.” Fluttershy gave the first two doors a pass. “As it turns out, Mother is a high-ranking officer with the patrols here, and Father leads a team he hoofpicked himself on special missions.”

“Augh!” Rainbow Dash stamped her hoof on the floor as an open-mouthed smile stretched between her ears. “That’s so cool, Fluttershy,” she exclaimed. “I had no idea that kind of awesome ran in your family. What about your relatives? Got any aunts or uncles out there fighting the fires?” She tapped a hoof on her chin. “Would any of them happen to know any of the Wonderbolts, by any chance?”

Fluttershy chuckled. “Sorry, Rainbow Dash. It’s only Mother, Father, and me.” She stopped before a door at the corner and pushed it open.. “Here we are. We have a couple of guest bedrooms on this side of the house, so everypony make yourselves at home.”

“Whoo-hoo!” A pink blur shot past the pegasus into the first bedroom. Before anypony could stop her, Pinkie Pie was improvising an acrobatic routine on the bed closest to the door. As the bed was little more than a block of cloud given some framework, it bowed in the middle like an overacting thespian with every bounce.

“Pegasus beds are the best!” cheered the pink party pony in the middle of a double backflip. “I’m totally getting one of these when we get back to Ponyville.”

“What’s in this room?” Twilight Sparkle had continued past the bedrooms, stopping in front of a pair of double doors. A pair of pegasus sculptures about to take flight rested on pedestals on either side.

“Oh.” Fluttershy left the other girls to settle in while she joined the unicorn. “This is Father’s library.”

Twilight’s eyes swelled until they were rounds as moons. “Can-- can we go in?”

No sooner did Fluttershy push the doors in did a lavender blur shoot past her. What was getting into everypony? It was only a house...

“For a private collection, your father’s doing really well!” Lighting her way with her horn, Twilight trotted back and forth in a lowered section of floor in the center of the room. A pair of high-backed chairs rested on either side of the reading table in the center of the floor, facing out toward a large, curtained window on the far side of the room. A glass and iron lantern sat on the table unlit.

Twilight skimmed row after row of low shelves, talking to herself in hushed excitement. Suddenly, she stopped, backtracked a little, and squealed. “Oh my gosh--*Principia Arcana: A Brief History of Magic?*” She levitated a well-worn tome from its shelf for Fluttershy to see--the book was easily half the unicorn’s height.

“My dad would always read this to me when I was a filly. Well, I made him read it to me.” A guilty smile seeped across her face as she flipped through the pages. “Even though Neighton focused on unicorn magic, he also looked into pegasus and earth pony magic, too. You can see his observations in the appendices here.” She turned the book around for Fluttershy to read. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Um...” The pegasus’ eyes scanned the text in front of her. The way the unicorn philosopher described terms like “drag coefficient” and “meteorological potential” made it all sound like it was written in Canternese. “Well, it was very nice of him to think about the other ponies.”

“Very true.” Twilight closed the book. “Do you think your dad would mind if I borrowed it for the night? I always sleep better after some light reading.”

Light reading? The book had to be as heavy as a two-year-old filly. What did Twilight do when she got down and studied?

“I think he would be okay with that,” said the pegasus. “Father tries to keep his collection open to everypony. I bet he’d even be okay with letting you take a couple books on the road, as well.”

“You really think so?” Twilight’s lip twitched at the corner.

“Yes.”

“Ah-hahahaha!”

Fluttershy’s wings sprang free from her sides, but they had no chance to carry her away before Twilight’s hooves swept her up in a huge embrace.

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you!” Twilight repeated. “Oh, this is so exciting! Where should I even begin? Ponyville’s a little lacking in pegasus material, and there’s so much of it here!” She scurried off to pick more titles off the shelves. “*A Narrative Overview of Weather Control?* Guess I’ll take that one—ooh! *Flora of the Everfree Forest*, yes, yes!” Books thumped on the floor by Twilight’s hooves. “And oh my—eleven volumes of *The Complete Compendium of Pegasi Lore*—wow!” By the time Fluttershy left the library, Twilight’s reading list had piled up past her cutie mark.

The pegasus took a few moments to turn off the chandelier before checking up on the rest of her friends. She bid goodnight to Rarity, who had claimed a bedroom for herself, just as the unicorn inserted one last roller into her mane. Rainbow Dash was also alone in the next room, fast asleep. One of her hooves draped over the side of her bed. Applejack had decided to room with Pinkie, and when Fluttershy came by, the two earth ponies were sharing horror stories of catering gigs gone wrong.

“So the mayor wasn’t as happy as I thought she’d be when Gummy burst out of the cake.”

“Well, I reckon she expected somethin’ a lil’ more classy for her party than ‘Happy Birthday on the Bayou’. But that’s just ol’ Applejack speakin’. That was a good party in my eyes.”

“She didn’t even stick around to watch Gummy play the banjo for her! I mean, it’s okay to be a little mad, but to walk out on your own party like that?”

“I hear you, sugarcube. That was awkward for everypony.”

Fluttershy crossed over to the other side of the house. Her eyelids grew heavier with each step, it seemed--was this really the same day she had started by tending to the animals back in Ponyville? The library, the letter, the tower and the princesses--they all felt so long ago.

She laid a hoof on her bedroom door. Her eyes floated through her house, taking in familiar details one by one--the smooth hoofrail running along the edge of the mezzanine, the chandelier and its crystals turning slightly on their threads, filigree sprouting from the bases of the unlit sconces along the walls.

Nothing had changed.

“Fluttershy?”

Twilight emerged from the library trailing a cloud of books large enough to fill a good-sized wagon. Even at this distance, her voice telegraphed her concern quite clearly. “Is everything all right?”

The pegasus snapped out of her trance, shaking her head. “Everything’s fine,” she said, letting her hoof fall from the door. Yawning, she made her way over to her friend in the guest wing. “Pinkie’s right,” she continued upon arriving. “This *is* a sleepover, and it wouldn’t be very thoughtful of me if I didn’t join you all over here. Right?”

Twilight smiled. “Glad to have you on board, Fluttershy.”

Bidding the unicorn good night, Fluttershy tiptoed past Rainbow Dash to the other bed in the room. As she nestled beneath the covers in the darkness, she listened to the other pegasus' breath come and go in gentle waves.

"Aaaaah!"

Bits of leaf and dirt clung to her fetlocks as she galloped, and the gnarled trees surrounding her creaked in the stiff wind. Roiling clouds obscured what little sky peeked through the vine-choked canopy. Every time the path turned, a thorny tendril raked her legs, or a spider's thread fell across her eyes.

Her lungs burned. Every time she heard something scamper through the undergrowth around her, she lost what little wind she still had to screaming. The Everfree Forest was ominous enough living on its fringes. How did she ever get herself this far inside?

"Hello?" she cried. "Hello? Anypony there? Can you hear me? Helllp!"

Suddenly, the trees pulled back from Fluttershy, and she skittered to a halt at the edge of a large clearing.

"Hello?" The pegasus crept around the open space, her ears flitting this way and that. "Where am I?" she asked of no pony. She looked over her shoulder on a hunch, expecting one of her friends to trot into view. But then her hoof collided with a rock, and she tumbled over it like an apple cart.

No, it was not a rock. It was too soft to be one, and it shifted beneath her barrel.

Fluttershy scrambled back on her hooves--she'd stumbled over a mare. A red mane spilled over her neck like filamentary flame, and her cream-colored coat showed no signs of dirt or distress. Both of her wings rested along her flanks, rising and falling with her breath. Fluttershy wanted to say she was napping, but she could not understand why anypony would want to do so in the middle of the Everfree Forest.

She fidgeted in place as a gust of wind rustled the leaves around her. What did she want to do? The greater part of her, including the part governing common sense, told her she did not want to wake the sleeping mare before her. The issue went beyond something rude—something about this pegasus nagged at her. Had they met sometime in the past? Those colors reminded her of something from long ago, for sure, but she was almost sure they had never met in person. And waking up a stranger was a dangerous business, indeed.

On the other hoof, so was staying in the middle of the Everfree Forest alone, in the middle of the night.

“Um. Excuse me?” she mumbled, poking the mare’s wing. Much as she hated to disturb the resting pegasus, she wanted to have some company, at least until she could figure out how to return to Ponyville. “Miss? Hello?”

The other pegasus stirred, and uneasy regret crashed into Fluttershy’s gut the next instant. There *was* something familiar about the mare, suddenly--and when things happened suddenly, those things rarely turned out for the better.

She took a step back as the pegasus rose to her hooves. The other mare was not quite as tall as Princess Celestia, but she was certainly taller than Princess Luna, and with her wings unfurled, she looked to be twice as large again. Despite returning to wakefulness, the red-maned pegasus kept her eyes closed, and her mouth traced a flat line across her face.

“I, uh...” Her ears flattened against her head as she took another step back, and another. Her heart was beating like the wings of a hummingbird. Yes, she was now certain she knew this mare from somewhere, but she could not remember where they met. “I--I’m sorry to bother you,” she stuttered. “Y-you can go back to sleep. Don’t even worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

The mare took a step forward, her face impassive.

“No! No, no.” A twig snapped beneath Fluttershy’s hoof. “Eeyahh! I mean, you don’t have to go anywhere. Please, feel free to stay where you are.”

The mare took another step forward. Her head came down to Fluttershy’s level.

“Ah!” The butter-yellow pegasus screamed as she backed into a tree trunk. Still the other mare approached.

Fluttershy sank to the ground and covered her face. “Um, okay. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry for waking you. I’ll go back into the forest, and it’ll be like we’ve never even met.” A cream-colored hoof stepped into the space between her hooves. “How does that sound?”

The other pegasus halted just as the wind picked up. She looked toward the sky--no, how could she look with her eyes closed? She raised her head, prompting Fluttershy to do the same.

A hole spiraled into being among the clouds as they churned overhead, exposing the silhouette of a pegasus town against the starry sky. A dull orange glow tinted the town’s underbelly, while trails of light streaked behind some of its taller buildings. The tallest one caught Fluttershy’s eye in particular--even from several miles out, she thought she spotted something flapping at its apex. A flag, perhaps?

Her mind sprang back to when she first arrived outside the Princesses’ tower in Flamewithers. The flag flying from its spire had to be at least two or three stories tall.

A knot formed in the yellow pegasus’ throat as her pulse calmed a little. “That’s where I live.” She turned to the other mare. “So, you just wanted to show me how to get back? That’s what you wanted to do for me all along, right?”

The red-maned pegasus kept her head pointed toward Flamewithers. This was not the response Fluttershy expected--but what could she expect in the first place? She tapped her front hooves together and looked away.

"I was wrong about you. For a moment there, I was, well--I didn't know what was going to happen. I got scared. So, I'm sorry." She unfurled her wings and ascended above the canopy. "Thank you," she called down, "whoever you are. My friends are waiting for me there, and I don't want to keep them waiting."

The other pegasus took a step toward her.

"Oh. Did you want to come with me? I wouldn't mind flying with someone else for n—"

A blast of air swatted her upward before she knew what was happening. The earth and sky convolved, a dizzy mess of green and gray—she stopped and reversed direction. The sky retreated behind a canopy of leaves as several branches broke beneath her back. One refused her; she tumbled.

Her left wing became trapped beneath her flank, and it drilled into the ground.

"Aaaaah!"

Fluttershy rolled over, her lungs unable to catch the breath surging through them. Her wing lay bent at freakish angles along the ground, like a marionette with severed strings. She screamed not because she was in pain—on the contrary, she felt no pain at all—but because she expected it would come at any moment.

"Please," she pleaded, turning to the other pegasus. "Help."

The other pegasus towered over her in silence. Deliberately, she lifted one of her hooves into the air. It touched the ground on Fluttershy's other side, and the pegasus stepped over her as one would step over a small puddle.

"Wait," Fluttershy called. "Where are you going?"

Little by little, the pegasus glided into the shadows of the Everfree Forest. There were no other words to describe the smoothness of her gait.

"Are you going to get someone?" A crawling feeling seeped into Fluttershy's heart. "That's a good idea. More help's always a good idea."

The last inches of the pegasus' tail melded with the darkness.

"That's right, Fluttershy. She's just going to get help. She's getting help." She forced her gaze skyward as her wing let off a dull throb. "Everything will be okay. She'll be right back with help."

She craned her neck to get a better view of Flamewithers through the hole in the clouds and gasped. Had it grown closer? It was bigger than before. She could make out the little houses on the terraces. They traded shadows with one another as the streaking lights from before descended upon the town, where little plumes of cloud jumped into the air from where they landed. One collided into the pillars holding up the roof of a market pavillion, and the roof tumbled amid a burst of glowing sparks.

Fluttershy fell silent. The ground quivered beneath her back with every new light descending upon Flamewithers.

What about her parents' house? Her eyes darted over the town, and she found her parents' house standing alone and exposed on the third terrace—intact.

Before she could sigh in relief, however, she caught a glimpse of another light coming in from the corner of the hole in the clouds, and she was just in time to watch it drift closer and closer to the house...

The detonation hurled her from her bed against the wall in a tangle of legs and mane, but the twins of terror and adrenaline dragged her up on her hooves in the span of a cough. The two beds had scattered to the corners of the room in the blast, and sticking out from beneath one of the mattresses was a rainbow-streaked tail.

"Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy rushed over to her friend and hurled the mattress against the wall. Then she knelt and ran a hoof over the blue pegasus's coat for injuries. To her relief, Rainbow was unhurt and woke quickly, but not without a little disorientation.

"Ugh... Fluttershy?" Rainbow rubbed her head and winced. Her rose eyes swept through the room. "Did somepony just drive a train through your house?"

"I have no idea." Fluttershy looked over her shoulder. "I'll go check on Pinkie and Applejack. Can you go see Twilight and—"

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

Both pegasi jumped to their hooves. "Rarity!"

If ever anything existed to launch a pony from dreaming to flying in nothing flat, Rarity's brain-piercing scream would do just that. Rainbow Dash rushed through the doorway fast enough to suck the other bed straight from the room. "Hang in there, Rarity!" she cried.

While Rainbow Dash took care of the fashionista, Fluttershy scrambled over to the earth ponies' room. She caught flashes of little fires sprouting on the first floor--dancing on the paintings, creeping over the flower vase... "Pinkie! Applejack! You've got to wake up--"

Only an exceptionally athletic pegasus could hope to contest an earth pony in territorial disputes. Against two earth ponies, even the strongest pegasus would have more success rolling a boulder along a tightline. Because the scattered fires held her attention, Fluttershy had no chance of seeing her two friends in the doorway until she crashed into them, where they dismissed her into the far railing.

"Whoa, nelly!" Applejack ran over and helped the pegasus back upright. "You okay, hon?"

"I--I'll be fine," said Fluttershy.

"Where're the others?"

"Kyaaaaaagh!"

Applejack winced. "Hoo-ee. I guess that answers that for Rarity. Get along, now, girls!" The farmpony galloped off in the direction of the unicorn's screaming.

Fluttershy tried to suppress the chill rising up her spine, but she may well have tried . “You don’t think she’s hurt, do you?”

“I sure hope not.”

Pinkie Pie lurched ahead of the other two ponies with a tremendous bound. The door to Rarity’s room was closed, but not for long--Pinkie seized the edge of the door in her jaw and yanked. “Never fear, Rarity! Auntie Pinkie Pie’s here!”

On the other side of the door, the only description Fluttershy could come up with was that somepony had blown up a beauty supply store. Curlers and mane products littered the floor, while a set of scissors embedded in the wall described the curve of a fan. Bathrobes and towels were scattered everywhere. Rarity sat upright in bed with her mane in wavy distress, flailing her hooves and wailing—but the unicorn lacked any sort of mark or wound on her body whatsoever.

“Hey!” Pinkie bounced over by the unicorn’s side. “What’s with the saddy-waddy? We thought something serious had happened to you.”

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” the unicorn gasped, falling back into her pillow. “You should be worrying about Twilight instead!”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Twilight?”

“Yes!” Rarity sat back up and clamped her hooves on the earth pony’s cheeks. “She came in here with books just before I fell asleep, but she told me she would be going back to the library for more!”

Applejack shook her head sighed. “That’s Twilight for you,” she said. “Girl can’t stop studyin’ even when she’s about to go savin’ Equestria.”

“You don’t understand, Applejack,” said Rarity, rounding on the farmpony.

“Why do you reckon?”

If the unicorn flapped her forelegs any harder, she would have floated off of her bed. “Whatever caused that huge explosion just now passed through the library first!” she roared. “That’s why!”

“Hellllp! Somepony, come quick!”

Fluttershy’s legs reacted faster than her brain, and she found herself back out on the mezzanine just as Rainbow Dash finished yelling. The chromatic pegasus pressed her back up against the wall just to the side of what used to be the library. In its place was a jagged, roaring hole, behind which lay the glowing maw of some infernal beast.

“Rainbow Dash!” Fluttershy grabbed her friend by the shoulders and snatched her further away from the library. “Are you okay? Where’s Twilight? Is she all right?”

“She’s in there, and she’s knocked out,” her friend snarled, throwing her friend’s hooves off. “I can’t get to her alone, but now that you’re here, we might have a chance to get her outta there.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “What are you talking about? We can’t go in there!”

“Hello-o-o?” Dash flared her wings as wide as they would spread. Fluttershy could not ignore the soot tipping her friend’s primaries. “Pegasi? If we treat the fire like a really big updraft, we might be able to drive off the heat long enough to get to Twilight.” She scrambled back to the mouth of the beast. Come on!”

Fluttershy’s hooves dug into the floor. “B-but—”

“I said come on—aaagh!” A gout of scorching air showered Rainbow with embers. She shook them off and threw a hoof in front of her face. “I need you here *now*, Fluttershy!”

The yellow pegasus skittered back. “I-I can’t.”

“Come on, ‘Shy!” Applejack’s muzzle pushed into her back. “Rainbow’ll never let anypony get hurt while she’s around. You know that’s the truth, so help her!”

“Raaah!” Rainbow Dash slammed her hooves on the floor, rowing forward with one long, powerful stroke of her wings. Fluttershy’s jaw dropped—in a single motion, her friend had kicked the blaze half a wingspan back into the library.

A sharp impact from behind jolted the pegasus to her friend’s side, and only adrenaline-spiked reflexes kept her on her hooves. She pulled a hoof to her face as purple swaths burned across her vision--she could not look into the library for more than a moment at a time.

“Do it, filly!” Pinkie Pie screamed. “Don’t be scared, now! You can do this!”

“Flap those wings!” Rainbow pushed her wings forward again. “They were built for this kind of thing!”

The explosion, the yelling, Twilight in peril, more yelling, fire, fire, fire--it was all too much. She fled somewhere deep beneath her thoughts where she was not about to go walking into an inferno--she was not about to be anywhere, really. Nowhere was better than anywhere, and she retreated as far down as she could go.

An agitated prod in her side opened her wings. Another prod got them flapping, though the wind they put forth would not have upset a house of cards, much less push away a fire. Still she advanced at Rainbow Dash’s side, the latter contributing the most to their progress.

Something crunched into flakes beneath her hoof, and a strange tingle chased up her fetlock shortly after.

“Hey, space cadet! You’re stepping on a flaming book!”

She lifted her hoof. A few slaps from her friend’s wing smothered any embers that may have stuck to it.

“Don’t go numb on me just yet—Hey! *Hey!*” The cyan pegasus poked Fluttershy’s head. “Look, Twilight’s *right there*. Could you stay with me a little longer?”

Fluttershy followed her friend's pointed hoof. Either Twilight had extremely quick reflexes when the explosion happened, or else was very, very lucky. An armchair lay upended over her, forming an emergency shelter from burning debris. The only obstacles between the rescue party and the victim were the remnants of the other chair and table—the reading lantern lay shattered in the bottom shelf of a distant bookcase.

Rainbow Dash punched her friend in the leg. "Come on, Fluttershy! We're here! Let's grab Twilight and get the hay outta he—"

A sound like the popping of a cracked glass bottle from within sent a violet aura tearing through the room. The shock dragged trails of sparks over both the pegasi, and Fluttershy suddenly found herself back in the front of her head once more—her wings in pain, the air burning her nostrils.

"W-w-what was that?" she stammered.

"It sounded like it came from over there!" Rainbow Dash pointed to the broken lantern--or, rather, where the broken lantern had been. In its place was a circlet of violet-studded char, having blown through two of the bookshelves above it. With its lower supports gutted, the bookcase and its flaming contents began to tip into the center of the room.

Rainbow Dash's wings shot up. "No!"

Fluttershy seized Rainbow's tail in her mouth without thinking--one requirement of being friends with the Wonderbolt-wannabe was that one had to not only anticipate disaster, but what role Rainbow Dash would play in it. Had she not held her friend back at the last instant, a shower of flaming shelves and literature would have descended on her with remarkable force. When the collection crashed to the floor, no pegasus lay pinned beneath it.

The same could not be said for Twilight Sparkle. The flaming books piled all around the openings the armchair provided, and the fragments of the bookcase made the seal perfect.

"Twilight!" Her fire discipline forgotten, Rainbow Dash pulled herself free from Fluttershy's jaws and thrust her hooves into the burning pile--only

to draw them out just as quickly. "Hot! Hot! Hot!" She whirled on the pink-maned pegasus. "Don't just stand there, Fluttershy! Do something!"

But all Fluttershy could do was stand there, her mind hazy—a million voices cried out at once with no consensus; another million demanded retreat. Meanwhile, Rainbow tried to fling more of the debris aside, ignoring the smoke rising from the tips of her wings.

"Hang on, Twilight Sparkle! We're coming for you!" The cyan pegasus blew on her hooves and rubbed them over her coat, but her pace did not improve. "Fluttershy! Come on!"

She looks better. Did she put up any fights this time?

Twilight's words from earlier that evening leaped into Fluttershy's mind. She remembered, not hours before, how she had been relatively safe in her own home--free of fire and pain, surrounded by all of her best friends.

Pegasi can manipulate fire? But... fire's nothing but a product of an oxidation reaction.

She had not thought much of it back then, the way Twilight listened to her words. She thought the unicorn was scratching an intellectual itch from the way she listened so politely. However, they had talked with each other plenty of times before that—she had even confided in her during her short time as a fashion model. No—when they talked, they talked about much more than just the academic.

To Flamewithers, then! Let's go!

When Fluttershy thought about it, Twilight was usually the one encouraging her to go places. From defeating Nightmare Moon at the ruins of Castle Everfree to enjoying brunch with Princess Celestia at Sugarcube Corner--had the Princess' star pupil not been there to let her in past the guards, she would have never met Philomena.

"Twiilight!" Rainbow Dash kicked a piece of flaming shelf from the pile. "Wake up! You've got to get out of there! Do the teleparty thing, or

whatever it was, just—gah!" With a snort, the pegasus leaped back from the blaze. "Just come out already!"

Something twisted the bottom of Fluttershy's heart seeing her friend this way—the scalds on her hooves as she rubbed them down, the soot smeared all over her coat, the glare of unbreakable loyalty dismissed by impossibility.

Rainbow Dash did not believe in impossibility. If anything, to use her words, she made the impossible happen.

The haze in Fluttershy's mind disintegrated, leaving one voice as inevitable as the changing of the tides. It told her, simply, that Rainbow Dash would try again, with her or without.

She concentrated on the fire before her and spread her wings wide, cupping the heat beneath her feathers. She tried to fix Rainbow's technique in her mind--*long rowing motions, Fluttershy*, she told herself.

Her friends were depending on her. Knowing that gave her eyes a hard, iron-like sheen, and her brows slanted downwards. She leaned in with her body as she thrust her wings forward in the longest arcs she could manage, as hard as she could manage, ignoring how they wobbled and flexed in transit.

The flames covering Twilight's shelter wavered, but did not shift.

"Again, Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash let loose a push of her own, and still the flames remained where they burned.

They did not take long to fall into the same rhythm. Backwinging, Fluttershy imagined her wings scraping the fire away, imagined how she would crawl beneath the arm chair and rescue the unicorn who had done so much for her. She pushed forward together with Rainbow, and the fire conceded a couple of inches.

Still, doubt crawled down the back of her mind like drops of water from a basement drainpipe. Updraft manipulation was one matter, but bending an inferno to her will? No flight school in Equestria taught ponies how to do that. What if, instead of blowing the flames away, she was only

fanning them higher? The inches she and Rainbow Dash had pried away shrank before the roaring fire behind them.

“Don’t give up!” Rainbow had risen to her back legs. “Get closer!”

Even where she was, the heat felt like it was trying to scrape off her coat from under her skin. Still, Fluttershy put a hoof forward. The air around her began to shimmer, and a trail of light flickered around her leg.

We’re going to beat this fire, she told herself.

She reared up, spreading her wings until the air slipped between their feathers, and rammed them forward.

We’re going to pull Twilight out and get her to safety, no matter what it takes.

The fire retreated only a couple more inches, still well short of its apex. Fluttershy advanced upon its borders even as its heat turned into a wall—more trails of light spiraled around her barrel. The beating of her wings caught up with the beating of her heart, and their rhythm poured iron into her voice, even as the air seared through her nostrils. “Get— away— from my *friend!*”

Rainbow cheered at her side. “That’s it, Fluttershy! Don’t let up! You’re on f—”

A loud pop cut through the pegasus’ words. Fluttershy felt the concussion just behind her sternum, as if somepony had burst a balloon inside of her. The chill that followed it snap-froze her heart in a vortex of ice, and drove frigid tendrils down her limbs.

“Rainbow Dash!” she gasped. When she turned on her friend, the other pegasus reared precariously on one hoof, with her pupils collapsed to pinpoints.

“Fluttershy, get offa there! You’re on fire! You’re on fire!”

A wall of adrenaline slammed into her frozen midsection, and instants dilated and became large. Fluttershy became aware of a glow coming off of

her hooves as they floated into her vision. When they shifted into focus, bright wisps swirled around them and up her legs like streamers, diaphanous and fluid. More of them danced around her barrel, weaving, flowing, and separating to the slow melody of an unheard air.

The flames magnified about her; she grew colder and colder. The sound of Rainbow yelling her name faded from her ears, the burning contours of her father's library stretched into the distance, and the world lowered her onto her back.

She saw the sky. It held so many stars.