

Transcendence

By Corejo



Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	22
Chapter 3	32
Chapter 4	46
Chapter 5	60
Chapter 6	67
Chapter 7	81
Chapter 8	93
Chapter 9	100
Chapter 10	107
Chapter 11	114
Chapter 12	128

Chapter 1

An orange stallion made his way through the outskirts of town, merrily taking in the sights, sounds, and smells around him. Ponies of all kinds filled the open streets and skies of Ponyville. The sound of youthful laughter could be heard from every direction as the young foals scampered every which way enjoying their annual freedom from warm apparel. The older ponies took a more passive approach to appreciating the new season. Some took the opportunity to spruce up their homes and ready themselves for the wonderful days ahead, while others deferred to lazily watch the young ones play and revel in the past years when they had once been that energetic.

The sun, from its home in the soft blue ocean above, cast its warm glow upon the landscape. The trees budding forth with life and the flowering plants germinating at the first sign of warm weather colored the earth with nature's trademark hue, a much missed sight by ponykind after its long rest beneath a blanket of snow. Animals that had remained dormant in seasonal slumber had been awoken by the residents of Ponyville to continue the ritualistic lives set before them by generations past. The colorful flock of innumerable avian species lead home by the dedicated pegasi of the small town added to the clamor of the resident animals. The fervent chirping that could be heard from the trees, the chattering of squirrels as they chased one another, and the chorus of other animals audibly collaborated with the silent growth of the landscape to announce a single message. Spring had arrived.

The stallion absorbed the glorious assault to his senses as he meandered towards his destination. His head oscillated from one direction to the other taking in the new atmosphere he had not borne witness to in months. His mane, a mess of short wild purple, bounced softly at each stride and every turn of his head. Light orange eyes glanced every which way entranced by the splendor of nature, subconsciously giving the stallion a light energetic bounce to every step he took. He cracked a smile as his heart followed the rhythm of his legs, feeling a light giddiness he had only been subjected to three times in his life. A pair of silver wings were emblazoned on either side of his flanks, matching the pair that lay folded at

his sides, in likeness if not in color. Ecstasy and instinct overpowered conviction; the stallion gave his real wings a few beats of excitement before recalling the precious cargo he now carried, choosing to contain his euphoria rather than disturb that which was most precious to him.

The object of this undying love rested upon the stallion's back. The small figure lay quite still, its carrier being very careful to provide smooth transportation. The midsection of the soft convoluted bundle of hair and feathers rose and fell in quiet serenity, peacefully asleep. The cargo possessed a striking resemblance to its bearer from head to tail. The little bundle let out a soft yawn, eliciting a backward glance and an affectionate smile from the stallion. The latter continued along the road and turned his gaze ahead once more. "We're almost there, Scoot." the stallion said quietly to his passenger.

The sun showered its peaceful radiance upon the slumbering filly, wrapping her in a warm embrace no coat or blanket could ever challenge. She felt the mellifluous sway of her transportation and heard the tranquil rhythm of his hoofsteps upon the dirt road as she gently awoke from her slumber. The little filly slowly opened her eyes to the wonders about her, taking in the change of scenery from her last bout with consciousness. The clamor of nature around her and the stallion began to fill her ears. She let out another yawn, and stretched out the last bits of weariness before fully perceiving her surroundings. The stallion took notice of the events unfolding on his back and gave his cargo a playful grin. "I see you're finally awake." he called out softly to the little one, receiving a joyful smile in return.

The two quietly strolled through the main square toward the other end of the town as its residents went about their business, or lack thereof; young fillies and colts weaved around the orange stallion as their games and playtime took them all through Ponyville. Scootaloo watched them play, scampering about in a disorganized mass of bright colors. The colorful swarm danced before her like a kaleidoscope, the dizzying swirl of fluorescent hues taunted her. She yearned to hop down and join in on the fun, never truly graced with an opportunity to make friends. Her father sheltered her from the rest of Fillydelphian society, his only answer to her inquisition being, 'It's for your your own good.' She had often wondered what that answer explicitly meant, and began to briefly ponder it again

before the benefactor of her existence interrupted her train of thought. "We're here," he stated.

A small house sat before the orange duo. A squat, one-story abode with two small windows peered out at them on either side of a large oak door. The building matched the multitude of houses surrounding it in every fashion save its ranch-style layout, the "SOLD" sign outside the front door, and a rather important-looking mare in a collar standing adjacent to the sign. "Good afternoon, sir." the mare said to Scootaloo's father as he approached her. Scootaloo's mind wandered as her father politely returned the mare's greeting. Her thoughts drifted to the brightly colored foals she had seen on their arrival to this strange new town. She had never left Fillydelphia before; would her father allow her to play with these new ponies?

The flow of thoughts, ideas, and questions flooded her mind, slowly pulling her out of the real world. She fantasized of how she could meet these other foals and join their games. She saw herself run up to the group of fillies and colts, and introduce herself. They would be thrilled to have another friend and accept her as their newest member. They would play all day under the warmth of the sun for hours on end before she would run home to her father and tell him of all the great friends she had made on her first day in this new town. He would listen to her patiently, a smile evident on his face at her retelling of the day's events and how the other foals had accepted her as one of their own.

*In her stupor, she glanced a streak of color in her upper peripheral. Reality came back to her in an instant as her violet eyes shot upward. She searched the skies with rapt attention, scanning for the dash of color that had momentarily disturbed the endless blue of the crisp spring morning. Seconds passed in intense anxiety before the streak bolted over the house and herself in turn. The orange filly's eyes were riveted with awe as she watched the blur swerve, bank, loop, and dive through the open air. Her mouth hung agape at the spectacle before her. Seconds, minutes, maybe even hours passed as Scootaloo sat on her father's back, utterly enthralled by the mystical display of aerobatics. She soon realized the colorful blur that twisted and danced in the sky was not something, but rather, some**pony**. For a split second, the streak stopped mid-flight, giving the orange filly a full glimpse of the pony that captivated her so.*

A lean pegasus the color of the sky itself hung in the air, legs tensed for another series of aerial stunts. A disheveled rainbow mane and tail clung to the sky-bound mare, adding a striking contrast to their owner who was otherwise well camouflaged against the serene backdrop. Wings flapped rhythmically and efficiently as the cyan equine gauged her surroundings. Rose colored eyes sat under furrowed brows completing the look of determination that spread across her face. In one sweeping instant she grit her teeth and accelerated with a burst of speed, over the nearby rooftops and beyond Scootaloo's line of sight. The image burned into Scootaloo's mind like a cattle prod; all thoughts of making friends in this new town evaporated under its white-hot intensity. She continued to gaze at the space previously occupied by the strange mare, still hypnotized by what had just happened. What she had witnessed within a fraction of a second was engraved upon her mind for eternity.

The sun rose in quiet splendor, silently rising from its resting place beyond the horizon and the far-reaching borders of Equestria. The morning it brought slowly woke the animals of Ponyville, the daily signal to begin their diurnal habits. The residents of this fair town awoke in similar fashion, the dreams of their nighttime repose put on hold for another glorious day by the kingdom's lone benevolent ruler. The golden orb, having complete indifference towards whom it bathed in its warming light, peeked through a certain window of a small ranch-style home, slowly refracting off floor and wall alike until the entire room was subjected to Celestia's resplendent glory. A glory that, Scootaloo thought, could shove it.

She pulled the covers over her head, defending herself from the light. The sun's inability to penetrate the blanket allotted the necessary darkness to return her to the wonderful dream from which she had been abruptly torn. The dream itself was not merely a dream, but a memory; a truly fantastic memory Scootaloo had kept to herself for almost a week. The memory still burned as fiercely in her mind as the day she witnessed it. The scene played repeatedly in her thoughts, the darkness beneath the covers providing a blank slate for her imagination to recreate what had happened six days prior. A rainbow maned pegasus looped and dove through the sky, taunting her. She had never seen anything like it.

The vivid memory continued to replay from the beginning as her mind eased back into a peaceful slumber, but fate had other plans for the unsuspecting filly. A blinding light assaulted the little orange pegasus' closed eyes, causing her to squint them tighter in pain. She flailed dumbly for her blanket only to feel the abrasive chill of an early spring morning upon her flank. Scootaloo's eyes shot open instinctively to discern the sudden change in her surroundings, her pupils becoming the size of pinpricks. The instant her eyes came into focus, she turned her head and saw a large face with light orange eyes not two inches from her own.

“Boo!”

The orange filly shot three hooves into the air and off the opposite side of the bed with a loud thump on the floor. Scootaloo momentarily sat up and shook her head to clear the dizziness from her fall. She then rose to her hooves and turned to face her assailant. Her head bent low as she set her face with a deadly glare; her wings flared, ready for action. Adrenaline instinctively pumped through her veins preparing her for a fight to the death, but the sudden recognition of her aggressor put it all to waste.

Standing across the bed from Scootaloo sat a very similar looking pegasus. His face contorted in an attempt to contain his amusement at the chain of events that had unfolded. The light orange eyes that had surprised Scootaloo welled with tears of laughter as the stallion could no longer restrain himself. He belted out a powerful laugh at his daughter's expense and fell on her bed, unable to keep his balance.

Scootaloo sat down on the floor, giving her father an indignant stare. The stallion, having calmed down from his laughing fit, impeded the younger one's attempt to reensconce herself within the comfort of her bedding. After all, he had woken her with a purpose.

“No you don't,” said the larger pegasus as he wrestled the squirming filly out of the blanket, “you're getting up now.”

“But it's saturday!” the little one whined while dangling from her father's grasp, trying to escape to no avail.

“I don't care if you want to sleep in or not, we have work to do.” replied the stallion.

But why? Scootaloo wanted to ask, but knew better than to talk back to her father. *It's freaking Saturday!* she thought to herself, *why do I have to get up so early?*

Her father apparently read her mind and answered her as he made his way out of the room. "We still have lots of things to do around the house, the movers finally brought the last of our belongings a few minutes ago," the stallion remarked. "We may be moved in, but we're far from finished making this our 'home.'" Scootaloo let out a loud huff, but complied and followed her father out of her room.

As the two walked towards the front room Scootaloo glanced up at her father walking alongside her. He moved with a commanding gait. Assertive, yet not imposing. His figure gave him a presence of authority, a charisma that graced very few. It came to him naturally, something that helped him achieve a status of greatness others could only dream to emulate. Some of the feats he accomplished made their way into her bedtime stories, fueling the filly's imagination with thoughts of grandeur. One such memory crept to the forefront of her mind as the two continued down the hallway.

The little filly lay quietly in bed. The room was lit by a small candle on her bedside table, a tapestry of stars surrounding a dark silhouette framed by the night's heavenly guardian peered through the bedroom window. Listening intently to her father, the little pegasus sat wide-eyed with rapt attention to his retelling of one particular performance.

"Five pegasi flew in line above a sea of green," the stallion held his hooves out, as if displaying a picture. "The wind rushed through their manes and across their azure regalia as they maneuvered to form an arrow. Expectant fans gazed upward in anticipation."

Her father was an excellent storyteller, one of many skills he could confidently claim mastery over. He spoke with such fluidity one would think he were reading his words straight from a book, which added an exorbitant amount of time to his bedtime stories due to the little filly's constant inquiries of the complex words he often found himself using despite knowing his audience. He never missed an opportunity to expand the little filly's vocabulary and teach her new things.

“The lead pony, indistinguishable from the others save his purple mane and tail flailing in the wind, lead the group upward for their final feat of the evening.” At this, Scootaloo’s father gesticulated wildly, barely able to contain his excitement while the tiny pegasus listened attentively.

He always told his flying stories in third person which seemed odd to the filly. He never gave her a straight answer as to why he did so, but that didn’t matter now, she was vividly imagining the scene he was painting before her.

“The five pegasi continued their ascent towards the ominous gray billowing above them. They became pinpricks against the drab, colorless sky...”

Her memory receded to the back of her mind as another quickly replaced it. Gray quickly transitioned to clear sky as a solitary blur raced through the endless ocean. It wove an intricate pattern through the blue dome, filling the sky with rainbows in its wake. The blur paused in the air, eclipsing the sun, and slowly faded to nothing.

*Who **is** she?* Scootaloo asked herself.

“Hey, quit daydreaming and help me with this.” The stallion said, snapping Scootaloo out of her reverie. Regaining her bearings, she noticed they had arrived in the main living room at the front of the house. Thoughts of the strange pegasus left her as she joined her father in removing the contents of a large cardboard box.

The two may have lived in Ponyville for nearly a week, but since her father was so busy with his new job down at the mayor’s office, the many boxes scattered about the house were left untouched. The arrival of the weekend didn’t signal two days of relaxation from school for the young filly, but rather a long weekend of organization and cleaning. Though she loathed the thought of being up early on her day off to work, she was excited to get her hooves on all her little knickknacks and toys.

Scotaloo began her work by opening boxes at random. She scoured each newly opened box in search of the few that contained her personal belongings. The filly, too young to foresee her current predicament, hadn't labeled any of her own boxes as her father insisted. She knew there were a total of three that contained all of her things, so she set each of them aside as she acquired them.

A total of six boxes had been opened in the filly's eager display of energy. Much to her father's annoyance, Scotaloo left the three undesired boxes where they were on the floor, clearly in the way, as she dragged her own to her bedroom one at a time. Once all three boxes were in the room, the pegasus began rifling through her possessions. All of the large objects in her room were already placed in their desired locations by the movers, leaving only the few things within the boxes. She knew exactly where she wanted everything to go, allowing the pegasus to finish her work quickly and return to the living room to assist her father.

Around two o'clock, the two stopped for a late lunch break consisting of apples and apple-based baked goods the stallion had bought from a kindly farmer pony at the marketplace. The stallion chuckled to himself recalling the mare's prolific knowledge of the delicious fruit while Scotaloo ate ravenously, having worked all morning without breakfast.

"Slow down, no one's gonna take it away from you." He said to the filly, whose only response was a brief pause and an innocent smile before devouring another apple in record speed. "So how has school been? I've been so busy down at the mayor's office I forgot to ask you all week."

At this, the orange filly took a serious pause from her meal. Her first week of school had been better than her previous education in Fillydelphia, though still fairly uneventful. Her father had been waking her early every morning on his way out the door to review the previous semester's curriculum. It was all pretty simple stuff; basic math, science, and geography came to her easily enough since it covered everything she had learned at her last school. She would finish her work quickly, leaving plenty of time to mill about the house bored.

"Don't leave the house. I'll be back to take you to school at lunch," her father would say to her. Not like she actually *could* leave the house, the handle of the front door being too high for the little filly to reach.

Regardless of this fact, the stallion would return at noon, true to his word, to escort the filly to her afternoon class session during his lunch break.

The two always took the quickest path to school, which was straight through the marketplace. Scootaloo was moderately interested in what was for sale at the various stalls, but what always captured the little filly's attention was a particular pawn shop. The store itself was well known for its assortment of random trinkets, baubles, and contraptions, but none of those things mattered to the filly. The little pegasus would gaze into the window display of the shop at one particular item, a scooter. She had always wanted one back in Fillydelphia after watching other ponies her age ride them. Her father took note of this daily and laughed at his daughter's wide-eyed captivation.

Everyday when the pair arrived at school, like clockwork, two stuck-up fillies made it a habit of loudly voicing their negative opinions of the orange duo as they left from their morning class, which served to rile up the young pegasus while her father reigned her in before she could teach them some manners. Once Scootaloo was in class, the only problem she had was a particular colt that sat behind her. He was a large brown colt with a dirty blond mane. Despite being the same age as his peers, the colt was much larger than the rest of the class. He knew this and made a habit of using it to bully everyone in the schoolyard during recess, particularly Scootaloo. Being the new filly in school seemed to be all the reason he needed to make her day much less enjoyable.

Dispite these two setbacks she was accepted readily enough by the rest of her peers and the ever cheerful Cheerilee, but she still hadn't made any friends. None of her classmates seemed interested in getting to know her, choosing to keep to themselves and each other. Still, being relatively ignored was favorable to the previous alternative...

"Owwrite." She replied through a particularly large bite of her apple, deciding against the inevitable flood of questions she was sure to drown in if she gave any sort of negative answer.

"Alright? That's it?" Inquired her father, surprised to hear a week's worth of school summed up in one word. "And don't talk with your mouth full," he added.

Scotaloo finished her apple and glowered at the elder pegasus, unappreciative of the latter statement. She received a stern glare in response to her unspoken rebuttle. The smaller pegasus faltered under his indomitable gaze and broke eye contact, choosing to look out the window.

The elder pegasus, confident that she had learned what he intended from the silent momentary quarrel, looked about the room. They had made great progress. Many of the boxes that had previously been scaling the walls of the living room found themselves flattened and stacked in a corner allowing much more of the room to meet his eyes. His mood was significantly brightened at this realization.

He turned his head to smile at his little assistant and comment on the hard work she had done when he noticed her attention was fixed upon something outside. The stallion's eyes followed hers and fell upon a handful of foals running down the street. He glanced back at his daughter to see that excitement had replaced her previous look of discontent. He then looked about the room eyeing the many boxes that surrounded the two, then back to the filly who was still gazing out the window longingly.

He smiled at her and softly asked, "You wanna go play with your friends?"

Scotaloo snapped out of her rumination and stared at him, wide-eyed in disbelief. *He's letting me go play outside?*

The question raced through her mind. Her face slowly transitioned from surprised to pure excitement; the look on her father's reinforced the words he had just said to be genuine. Her father let out a light-hearted chuckle and added, "Go have fun, I can finish the rest by myself."

The little filly didn't need a second invitation. She rushed to the door in a burst of energy the elder pegasus had never witnessed. After a short fit of laughter, incited by the filly's fruitless attempts to reach the doorknob, the stallion followed his daughter to the door and opened it for her. The filly raced off into the distance in the direction the group of foals had gone as her father crossed over the threshold of the great oak door and stood on the front step, a sorrowful smile was etched on his face.

"Just be safe," he whispered quietly to himself.

=====

Scotaloo raced down the streets of Ponyville, eagerly chasing the band of foals she had seen moments ago. Once again she took in the sights and sounds of the town around her as she had done nearly a week ago. Though this time, it was different. She was by herself. Her father wasn't towering over her as he always did, escorting her from point A to point B. There was no parental figure to tell her 'no.' She could go wherever she pleased in this new town and see all the point C's and D's and every other letter of the alphabet there was to be found.

The liberation she was feeling quickly gave way to a cramp in her side, she had eaten quite a few apples after all. The filly slowed to a walk and looked about her. She was in an open intersection, a few residents roamed the street in varying degrees of leisure. The ponies gave Scotaloo friendly glances and greetings as she passed them.

Are all the ponies in Ponyville this nice? Scotaloo thought to herself. *This place is way better than Fillydelphia.*

Laughter could be heard above the buildings, giving away the general direction her initial quarry had gone. The orange filly followed the sounds past a rather interesting establishment emulating an amalgamation of the pegasus' favorite deserts. She knew this place. It was the town bakery and home of its own pink party pony, the one who threw Scotaloo and her father a surprise 'Welcome to Ponyville' party.

Scotaloo continued past the bakery and down the road, listening intently for the sound of laughter that had faded away. She was apparently moving at a slower pace than the group of foals she was after. The pegasus quickened her stride. She turned her head left and right in hopes of hearing their faint laughter off in the distance, though it was all in vain.

After searching for about an hour and a half without success, Scotaloo began dejectedly making her way in the general direction of home. A mild depression slowly sank in as she walked aimlessly, her head down in defeat. She walked around a rather ornate fountain on her path home unaware of the world around her, when she caught a glimpse of something in the corner of her eye. The little filly looked in the direction of

interest and was surprised to see the group of foals she had been pursuing standing out in the field.

Scootaloo's mind did a back flip, "*I found them!*" the filly thought ecstatically. She raced to meet her peers, a mix of anxiety and excitement welled up inside her. She crossed a majority of the field in a blaze of speed, only slowing her pace once she neared the group. It was then she realized the fillies and colts weren't playing a game, nor did they seem at all happy. The orange pegasus halted her approach to discern the situation before her.

Six foals of various colors, some of which Scootaloo knew from class, stood facing the same direction with contempt in their eyes. In front of them stood a brown colt, much larger than the group behind him, facing the same way. She recognized him as the one who continuously harassed her for being new during class time. Much like the others, he wore a similar dark glare that complemented the angry shouts he was spewing forth. Opposite the seven sat a lonely unicorn filly, the recipient of the colt's anger. Scootaloo knew her from school, too, if only slightly. Sadness contorted the unicorn's complexion as tears streamed from her emerald eyes and down her face onto a small deflated ball, her apologies lost amongst the colt's rant.

Scootaloo watched in anxious ambivalence. The colt was much larger than her, standing a whole head higher than the orange pegasus. The thought crossed her mind to run home and act as if it never happened since no one had yet noticed her. The memories of his bullying rose to the forefront of her mind. If she did anything, he would only pick on her more.

While thoughts of fleeing continued to stream through the pegasus' mind, the colt's voice became more audible, his indignation still building to a climax. The unicorn's pleas only served to magnify the colt's anger. He raised himself to his hind legs and stomped on the deflated ball that lay at the feet of the white filly. The unicorn stumbled backwards and dropped to her stomach, holding her hooves above her head in pure fear. What Scootaloo had just witnessed solidified her choice, all the doubts in her mind left her.

Six youthful faces changed from scorn to utter shock. The focus of interest shifted from the weeping unicorn to their equally surprised leader

as shoulder met ribcage in a sickening thud. The colt was uprooted from the ground and launched sideways under the force of his assailant before he was lost amidst the blur of mandarin fury.

The unicorn heard the disturbance and found the courage to open her eyes. From behind her hooves, she saw not the imposing brown colt whose ball she had accidentally popped, but six gaping mouths staring to her right in disbelief. She too looked to her right to see something she almost couldn't comprehend.

Scootaloo, having the element of surprise, was able to knock her opponent off his feet and gain the momentary advantage. She assaulted the colt with everything in her power; biting, kicking, and bucking at her dumbfounded prey. The young pegasus' actions were instinctual. All thought processes stalled in her flurry of attacks, but the colt wasn't without his own instinctive reactions. Having recovered from the initial surprise of the pegasus' cheap shot, the brown colt was able to wrestle the filly off and gain a fighting stance. Size alone allowed him to reciprocate the damage twofold and overpower the young filly, but Scootaloo was in no mood to back down despite fighting a losing battle.

The two brawled for another minute while the onlookers continued to gawk, unsure of what to do. Before any of them could decide the best course of action, another surprise caught them off guard. A crack of thunder struck the earth at the hooves of the combatants in a blinding flash, the concussive force knocking both of them to the ground. The two rose to their hooves, both trying to focus their eyes on the source of the interruption. A feminine voice called out to them in a stern tone.

"This fight is **over**."

Scootaloo's eyes readjusted as she heard these words and beheld a figure she had seen once before. A rigid glare affixed a set of rose colored eyes that bore into the two pugilists, evaporating any remaining will to fight. The cyan interloper turned to the six spectators with the same gaze.

"Go home."

There was no need for a second directive. Each of the foals scattered in different directions, followed by the colt who was not about to

stay and find out what was going to happen. Once they were out of earshot, the rainbow-maned pegasus' face softened considerably.

"You roughed him up pretty good," She said to the orange filly as she turned to give her a playful smile. "If you would'a fought any harder, I would have had to stop *you* from beating *him* up. It was kinda cool."

Scotaloo sat there in awe, only half hearing what was being said by the pegasus standing in front of her. *It's her! She's the one I saw!* was all that ran through the filly's mind, the mild pain of her injuries momentarily subsiding.

"You alright, too, Sweetie Belle?" the pegasus asked the unicorn filly.

"Mhmm," the pink and purple maned filly responded with an appreciative nod while wiping tears from her face.

"Right. Let's get you home, I know Rarity'll go nuts when she realizes what's happened," the cyan pegasus said. "I'm Rainbow Dash, by the way," the pegasus said turning to the orange filly, "Best flier in all of Equestria!" she added with a flair of confidence.

The three made their way in the direction of Ponyville's boutique while the mare continued to boast to her new crowd.

"Sorry I didn't make it to your 'Welcome to Ponyville' party," Rainbow Dash said as she broke off from one of her stories, "I wanted to stop by, even if it was only for like ten seconds, but we had some crazy weather scheduled for that day and Pinkie Pie just couldn't wait til the day after. She's like that some-er...all the time." the pegasus corrected herself.

They arrived at an extravagantly decorated building that almost made Scotaloo gag. Rainbow Dash knocked on the front door.

"Hey Rarity, open up!" the pegasus yelled.

"Juust a *secoooooond!*" called a sing-song voice from within.

Within moments, the door swung open to reveal a white unicorn with a stylish purple mane. She greeted the sky-colored mare with a bright

smile that quickly turned to shock as she saw her sister's tear-stained face and the orange filly beside her.

"Oh my goodness! Are you two alright?" the fashionista implored, "What in Equestria happened!?" She particularly eyed Scootaloo and said, "We must simply get you cleaned up straight away!"

The white mare swept the two young fillies into her boutique, followed by Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow, what *are* you doing?" The unicorn asked.

The pegasus answered her with incredulity in her voice, "What? I'm coming in to help."

"No you're not," The fashion designer said sternly. "You're going to go get her father and bring him here. Oh, he must be worried sick!"

The cyan pegasus momentarily thought about this idea and agreed. "I'm on it," she said as she turned around and left before taking flight in the direction of Scootaloo's home. The two fillies watched her go before their attention was called elsewhere by a feminine cough.

"Now tell me, darling, what is your name and how ever did you get in such a mess?" Rarity asked the little orange pegasus.

The two fillies spent the next half hour recounting their tale, each telling their own perspectives in a very excited manner as Rarity carefully treated Scootaloo.

"And then she was like *BAM!* And he was like *OOF!* And then I looked up and saw them fighting and Scootaloo was winning!" Sweetie Belle rambled as her big sister finished the pegasus' first aid. "But he's bigger than-uf so e wz bbl't bt'r-up, too but she was so tough, she didn't give up!" The unicorn filly continued her sentence unabated by the damp glowing washcloth cleaning her face that Rarity held with her magic.

The elder unicorn laughed at her sister's antics as she disposed of the washcloth and said, "My, it must have been quite the surprise to have

one of your friends from school save you.” She gave the orange pegasus a thankful look as the two fillies exchanged smiles.

Their attention turned to the front of the boutique as the sound of an opening door reached their ears. In walked two pegasi, one the color of the sky while the other resembled the recipient of Rarity’s treatment.

“Welcome to Carousel Boutique,” the white mare happily greeted the orange stallion.

“Thank you, Mrs. Rarity,” replied the pegasus with a kind voice, “My name is Tyco, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Your friend Rainbow Dash filled me in on everything that happened. I trust my daughter has been agreeable during her visit?” The stallion added without changing his tone, but nonetheless caused a shiver to run up the little one’s spine.

The little pegasus felt a lump in her throat when he mentioned her. She fidgeted and averted her eyes, afraid of what her father might do. She had instigated a fight, one that clearly showed through the bruises and bandages that adorned her.

“Oh, of course not!” rarity exclaimed. “She’s been an absolute angel, and you should be proud to have such a brave young girl as your daughter.” Hearing the white mare vouch for her boosted the filly’s confidence and elicited a smile from her otherwise worried face.

“Glad to hear it,” The stallion said to the unicorn before turning to his miniature. “Let’s go, Scoot.”

The little pegasus apprehensively complied and followed her elder to the door. She glanced nervously over her shoulder to see Sweetie Belle beaming back at her. Scootaloo returned her smile as she and her father walked out the door and down the street. *She had made a friend.*

The walk home was filled with the sounds of a normal Ponyville evening, though the two pegasi contributed nothing to it. They walked home in silence, Scootaloo refraining from any kind of interaction with her father. She was deathly nervous of what he might do to her for getting in a fight. When they neared their home, she risked a glance up at her patriarch who was staring down at her quizzically.

“What’s the matter with you?” He asked, the curiosity in his voice matching the look on his face.

“I...I was worried you’d be mad at me,” the little filly said with a quavering voice.

“Mad?” Tyco let out a mirthful laugh, “why would I be mad?” The filly stopped in her tracks and gawked at him, utterly perplexed. “Rainbow Dash told me everything that happened...It takes a lot of courage to stand up to someone twice your size for a stranger. And like Rarity said, I *am* proud to have you as my daughter.”

Scotaloo’s face changed from confusion to excitement. Not only had she made a new friend by fighting the bully, but her father was genuinely impressed. The filly’s enthusiasm spread to her legs and changed her slow walk to a skip, only to remind her of the scrapes and bruises she had received earlier. Her father laughed at this display before recalling something he’d meant to tell the little filly.

“I almost forgot, I finished unpacking everything in the living room and decided to take a break,” he said while unlocking the front door to their home. “I got you a present,” he added with a smile.

The large portal swung open to reveal the duo’s living room. The boxes that had previously occupied the room had been flattened and placed in the corner with those from earlier that morning, allowing one to view the area in its entirety. Scotaloo looked around and saw many of the things that decorated their previous home, giving it that same significant feeling.

“Stay here and close your eyes.” Tyco said to his daughter. The little one followed instructions and shut her eyes tight in anticipation. She could hear shuffling of hooves as her father walked to the other room, followed by the sound of something scraping against cardboard. Moments later, an audible thud emanated from a few hooves in front of her.

“Okay, open your eyes,” the stallion said. Scotaloo did as she was told and found a rectangular box standing before her covered with colorful wrapping paper, in stark contrast to the earthy décor.

“Is that for me?” the little pegasus asked with wonder.

The elder pegasus nodded, “I was going to keep it as your birthday present, but after what you did today, I think you earned it.” Scootaloo raced to the decorated box in a flash and began tearing haphazardly at the wrapping, sending it flying in all directions. The box itself, as Scootaloo noticed, was one of the many moving boxes that had previously held what now surrounded her. That wasn’t important, but the present the little filly removed from it definitely was.

“A scooter! Cool!!!” the little pegasus exclaimed at the top of her lungs, unable to contain herself.

Her father laughed at her joy, “I saw you eyeing that thing everyday since we moved here, I thought you’d like it.” Scootaloo gave her father an ear to ear smile which was returned with his own, though more conservative.

“Can I take it over to Sweetie Belle’s place and show her?” she asked, clearly excited to show her new friend her present.

“No, it’s going to be dark soon,” the stallion said looking out the window, the sun’s decent halfway complete. “You can show her tomorrow.”

Scootaloo’s radiant smile deflated, replaced by a melancholy frown. Tyco watched the filly as she cast her gaze downward in sadness, her spirit crushed by his statement. Feeling guilty, the elder pegasus sighed and gave in.

“Just be back by sundown,” he said, giving Scootaloo a loving smile.

The little filly’s expression returned to elation as she nearly tackled her father in a hug, causing fits of laughter from both. She grabbed the scooter and raced out the open door, her father barely able to secure a purple helmet to the filly’s head. The sound of a motor bike filled the immediate area as Scootaloo beat her wings for propulsion and headed towards her friend’s house. Tyco stood on the doorstep as he had done earlier today and watched his daughter speed into the distance.

Chapter 2

Scotaloo woke to the sound of birds outside her window. The incessant chirping making its way through the portal she'd left open the night before to allow the cool night breeze to flow in. It was earlier than she was used to waking, but knowledge of the significance of this day returned to her. She leapt out of bed with enthusiasm, ran into the hallway, and towards the living room. The pegasus found herself before the great oak door that separated her from the rest of the world within seconds, and briefly glanced up at the wooden frame.

It was the first time she had gauged the size of it since her first failed attempts to overcome the imposing obstacle. She smiled, nostalgia apparent on her face; the door seemed so much larger back then.

She reached up and turned the handle without much difficulty before turning back to grab the contraption that leaned against the far left wall. Her prized possession sat patiently awaiting its next task. The pegasus took the scooter and walked it outside, its well-worn frame letting out a soft metallic squeak at every revolution of its wheels. Every part of the dilapidated machine creaked its fragility to Scotaloo, telling its master of its imminent fate.

The orange pegasus looked down at her faithful companion. She eyed all of the blemishes and degradations caused by time and good use. Snippets of the day she received this wonderful gift floated to the surface of her mind.

"Just one last ride," she said to her friend. The orange pegasus started her wings and took off in the direction of the distant Sweet Apple Acres.

The scooter complained as master and machine made their speedy journey to the apple farm. It had been two years to the day the rusty contraption first served the pegasus, and it served her well. Scotaloo thought of all the events that had happened since her arrival to Ponyville. She saw the very pegasus she came to idolize on her very first day in the

new town. She had witnessed the return of Nightmare Moon and heard of her subsequent redemption and glorification as Princess Luna. She helped wrap up winter in Ponyville's traditional method. And most importantly, she had met her two very best friends.

It was to her friend's house she was currently riding. Not so much to see Applebloom, though her friend always knew how to make her day considerably brighter, but rather to see another pony the farm filly said would be there on this particular day.

"Mah sis wuz talkin' to Rainbow Dash the oth'r day 'bout some weather 'round here," She recalled her friend saying one evening. *"Said she'd be here in the mornin' to move clouds over all o' Sweet Apple Acres."*

Scotaloo was on a mission. She had known her idol for nearly two years, but never found the courage to ask what she will today. The pegasus' thoughts wandered down dark stretches of her imagination.

What if she says no? What if she doesn't want to or says I'm not good enough? She might laugh at me if I ask. The filly's mind stalled its churning. *Ugh, why does this have to be so hard? It's not like I'm asking her out on a date or anything stupid like that,* she chided herself.

Scotaloo momentarily rode over a bump in the road, causing her transportation to squeak louder in frustration. Her mind returned to her faithful companion beneath her, she knew there was no turning back; it was now or never. Her determination came back in full force as she continued down the dirt road to the apple orchard

The orange filly arrived at the bright red barn a few minutes later where she deposited her scooter and helmet before looking to the sky. Nothing but endless blue expanded in every direction, save Celestia's benevolent radiance lofted in the serene ocean.

Of course...too early, the pegasus thought in a mildly self-mocking tone. Rainbow Dash always slept in on Saturdays, something she should have remembered before waking so hurriedly herself.

"Scotaloo, is that you?" came a familiar voice from behind her. The orange pegasus turned to see her long-time friend emerge from around the

corner of the barn. A pink bow adorned her red mane while orange irises accented her yellow body. Emblazoned upon her flank was a toolkit, the same color of her older brother. "What in tarnation are you doin' here?" Applebloom asked.

"It's nice to see you too," Scootaloo answered with playful admonition, "I remember you said Rainbow Dash would be here today, so I was gonna see if she could help me finally get my cutie mark."

Both fillies looked down at Scootaloo's flank, which still lay bare after hundreds of attempts at finding their special talents. The orange filly's face grew despondent at this fact before her friend tried to cheer her up.

"But Scoot, you're amazin' on yer scooter," she said emphatically, "you sure your talent ain't sumthin' to do with that?"

"I've been riding around on that thing for two years, Applebloom, and I still don't have my cutie mark. There's no way it's my special talent. Besides, I'm not *that* good at it," she added with depressed modesty.

Applebloom gave her friend a level stare, which was quickly interrupted by another voice from around the barn.

"Applebloom, y'out here?" came yet another southern accent. Applejack rounded the corner to see her younger sister and friend looking up at her expectantly. "Well I'll be, if it 'aint Scootaloo. How ya been?" she asked with genuine interest.

"When's Rainbow Dash getting here?" the pegasus asked with blatant disregard for formalities.

"Well I'd reckon that's her raht there," the elder earth pony replied, pointing a hoof to a quickly growing blur on the distant horizon.

The sky-colored streak raced towards the group, followed by a dissipating rainbow trail. The rainbow-maned pegasus alighted beside the three with a slight flourish, causing the elder farm pony to roll her eyes.

"I heard *somepony* needs a little help with her gardening," the winged mare said with her usual cocky attitude.

“An’ ah heard somepony else needs help waking up on time,” Applejack replied with a quick rebuttal.

Scotaloo didn’t hear any of the conversation occurring in front of her. Her mind was a torrent of things she wanted to say, but didn’t know how to form into proper speech. She sat there staring at her idol. Anxiety took control while sweat started to form on her brow. Her mouth finally opened to speak, but she was cut short by a gust of wind. The orange pegasus was knocked over backwards and caught a glimpse of her superior in mid-ascent. Her spirits sank as the courage she gathered to voice her appeal dissipated.

Scotaloo watched the cyan pegasus dart across the sky in a brilliant display of finesse and skill. A second pegasus flew in beside her in synchronous movement. One trail cast a prism of colors, the other a solid violet. She watched them grace the sky with their presence. The two danced among the gathering clouds, weaving the graying sky together into a blanket of cumulus in perfect harmony.

A hoof gently rest itself upon her shoulder. Scotaloo turned to see Applebloom, her face held a soft empathetic smile. The yellow filly gave her friend a gentle reassuring shake before she spoke.

“She’ll be done real quick. You can ask ‘er then.” Scotaloo gave Applebloom a friendly smile. She really did have the best friends she could ever ask for.

The two watched as Rainbow Dash continued to mesh the clouds above them into a dull monochrome blanket. When she finished, the cyan pegasus landed beside Applejack. Light-hearted raillery could be heard from the two as Applebloom nudged her winged friend towards the elder pair. Scotaloo, having forgotten how she originally intended to ask her idol, resisted her friend’s urgings.

“C’mon Scoot, jus go ask ‘er already!” reproached the yellow filly, “you wanted t’ shoot us outta a cannon, but ya can’t ask her t’ teach ya t’ flah?”

“B-but that was different!” the orange filly responded.

The yellow earth pony huffed at her friend's absurd hesitation and decided to take a more direct course of action. Applebloom approached the two conversing mares and politely interjected.

"Rainbow Dash," the filly said, gaining the pegasus' attention. "Ah jus wanted t' let ya know Scootaloo has sumthin important t' ask ya."

Rainbow Dash and Applejack looked in the direction of Scootaloo who had shot upright in consternation, her eyes wide in shock. The cyan mare casually trotted up to the perplexed filly.

"What's up?" she asked inquisitively.

"Uh..." was all that came from the little pegasus. Her mind floundered as she cast her gaze to the side, unable to form the words she wanted to say. The two elder mares stared at her with curiosity while Applebloom slid to Scootaloo's side and gave her an enthusiastic nudge and a nod of her head. "Well, uh...I kinda wanted to ask you if you'd, um...teach me how to fly," she finally got out coherently.

Rainbow Dash was taken aback, not expecting what she had just heard from the orange filly.

"Wait. You want *me* to teach *you*...how to *fly*?" she asked, the surprise apparent in her voice.

Scootaloo winced, mistaking disconcertion for indignation. This is what she'd been dreading all morning: denial of her requisition. Her mind stalled as her shoulders slouched, dragging her head down with them in defeat.

"I get to teach somepony how to fly?" came a gleeful voice. "This is gonna be *so awesome!*"

The orange filly perked up at the sound of the mare's unexpected excitement.

"Y-You really mean it?" Scootaloo asked with hope shining in her eyes.

“You betchya, pipsqueak,” Rainbow Dash said, giving the little pegasus a smile. “In fact, why don’t we start later today? I know just where to begin. Go home and psyche yourself up, I’ll meet you by the fountain where we first met in an hour.”

The little filly was ecstatic. She dashed to her scooter, mounted it, and was off in a blur; the raucous sound of grating metal and motor bid the party farewell. She turned her head to see Applebloom and her big sister waving. She returned the gesture before facing forward once more. A wide grin swept across her face as her mind was clouded with a swirl thoughts revolving around one thing...learning to fly.

=====

Scotaloo sat by the fountain anxiously awaiting Rainbow Dash’s arrival. The sun arced overhead in its routine astronomical trajectory, casting prisms through the flecking water of the marble feature. It was warm for a spring morning, something the filly was grateful for as she sat patiently by the babbling decoration. Momentarily, she heard the sound of wings and the alighting of hooves, followed by the memorable tomboyish voice that belonged to her soon-to-be mentor.

“You must be excited if you’re here this early,” the mare remarked. The orange filly nodded her head with vigor, forcing a smile to form on her superior’s face. “Alright, lets get going!” Rainbow Dash said. “Think you can keep up with me on that rusty old thing?” she added while pointing her hoof at the dilapidated scooter lying beside the filly, her smile changing to one of more mischievous design. Scotaloo read her expression and called her bet. She hopped on the decaying machine, beating her wings in preparation of the mare’s challenge.

Rainbow Dash lead the way as the two raced through the streets of Ponyville at breakneck speeds. Rainbow Dash gave the scooter pegasus competitive glances now and again while weaving around pony-made obstacles at her low altitude, impressed the little one kept pace so easily while maneuvering between the many pedestrians that populated the town’s streets. They reached the outskirts of town within minutes and slowed to a manageable speed on Rainbow Dash’s insistence; she wanted Scotaloo to be ready for her first lesson.

After a half hour of traversing Equestrian countryside, the two pegasi arrived at the foot of their destination. The orange pegasus hopped off her scooter and looked up at the massive cliff face that stood before her. Its monolithic edifice towered over her, the sheer distance giving it the illusion of tapering to a point at its summit. While Scootaloo was preoccupied with the intimidating stature of the mountain, Rainbow Dash swept around the near side to discern the difficulty of its ascent. She prematurely returned to their initial stopping point and landed beside her orange companion.

“Oooon second thought, I’ll just fly you up,” she said matter of factly.

Before the little filly could discern what was happening, she felt herself lifted off the ground by a volition other than her own. She landed on a soft warm surface that seemed distantly familiar, yet foreign. Her wits collected as she removed the helmet that had slidden down in front of her eyes at her sudden displacement. She was on the cyan mare’s back who was now exerting herself for altitude.

Scootaloo had never experienced anything quite like this, her father never having flown with her on his back. She saw the ground falling into the distance as the massive rock wall followed it, its summit becoming clearer with every upward thrust of the tireless mare carrying her. The roadway and foliage lost their minute features as the two climbed higher. The only audible noise she could hear was that of Rainbow Dash’s breathing and the beating of her wings. Scootaloo looked down at the pegasus beneath her and gave her a small hug.

In time, the two made it to the top of the mountain. The orange pegasus dismounted her larger counterpart and surveyed her surroundings. They were on a roughly circular, rocky plateau approximately thirty meters in diameter. She could see the peaks of adjacent mountains jutting above the plateau’s horizon in the north in sharp, jagged points. In complete contrast to the warm climate of ground level, a strong frigid wind swept across the barren mountain top and through the filly’s skin, adding to her sudden fear of heights as she looked out from the edge of the cliff. The road they had followed formed a hairline sliver amidst the vast landscape pockmarked with fields, woods, and meadows leading back to the molecular speck that was Ponyville.

“Rule number one,” the rainbow pegasus stated while pacing back and forth, oblivious to the foal’s unease, “always keep your cool.”

Easy for you to say, Scootaloo thought numbly, her eyes shrinking to match the size of her hometown in the distance.

“Rule number two, flap your wings rhythmically and efficiently. Only exert yourself on the downward motion, don’t waste your energy buzzing your wings like you do when you’re on your scooter.”

The little filly’s attention was split between her mentor’s advice and the slow advance of apprehension that built in her stomach. A small puff of cumulus drifted lazily across her line of sight, momentarily blocking her view of the ground.

We’re REALLY high up...

“Today we’ll just work on your ability to glide, so learn to spread your wings and get familiar with using them for flight instead of simple propulsion.”

“Um, Rainbow Dash?” Scootaloo said sheepishly, “I’m not so su-”

“Rule number three,” the cyan mare cut her off, a gleeful smile consuming her face.

“Have fun!!!”

The orange pegasus was caught off guard by the sudden jab at her flank and the sound of her hooves scraping rock. She was met with the most awkward sensation she had ever felt as her internal organs resisted the change in motion she had not yet come to comprehend. A weightlessness enveloped her. Her bowels, heart, and lungs shifted upward. Mind caught up with reality while body went rigid with its realization; *she was falling*.

Blood and adrenaline surged through the frightened pegasus as she thrashed about in free fall. Gasping for breath, her heart raced in fear of the distant earth rising to meet her. The wind deafened the filly to the world

around her as she screamed in terror. She shut her eyes, too afraid of her imminent doom.

*“What the **hell** are you doing?”* a harsh feminine voice rang out clearly, easily heard over the rushing wind.

Scotaloo opened her eyes and glanced around. To her left, she saw Rainbow Dash falling beside her, plummeting supine with her forehooves crossed in indifference and wings and tail flailing about madly above her.

“Stop freaking out, calm down.” she said nonchalantly, as if almost bored.

The orange pegasus nodded after a moment's repose. She relaxed her body and concentrated on her purpose. Her legs went limp as she tucked forward into a passable nosedive. The mare beside her took note of her actions and followed suit.

“Good. Now what?” the rainbow-maned pegasus asked.

Scotaloo's mind probed the question. She was falling faster than ever, yet she was determined to remain calm. Her thoughts landed on the answer to the problem as she opened her wings, but it felt different. She spread them wide, away from her body, slicing the air around her, rather than holding them open behind herself like she did on her scooter. As awkward as it felt, it seemed right. Slowly, she craned her neck back, her body naturally following. The orange pegasus slowly came out of the dive, feeling the force of inertia gradually build underneath her wings. Her descent slowed as her direction changed from vertical to horizontal.

After the intensity of the moment passed, Scotaloo gazed about in awe. Clouds drifted overhead in peaceful leisure. The ground crawled silently below, still quite a distance beneath her. The earth took shape as she glided loftily downward, details in the landscape becoming more distinct. She could see individual trees budding forth from the canvas she gradually drifted towards. The breeze felt calm and cooling on her face after her initial panic attack. The road they traveled earlier grew in size and definition with every passing moment. The filly gently landed on the soft earth of the path in a fluttering canter, the weightless feeling of her first experience with aeronautics still lingering. She turned to face the mountain

and gaze up at its peak before letting out a squeal of triumph while a cyan mare sat atop the precipice in the distance, a look of genuine hopeful pride gleamed in her eyes.

Chapter 3

The next few weeks of Scootaloo's life were exceptionally busy. School consumed the first half of the pegasus' day, while the latter was filled with an extensive routine of flight training. Like her father always said, *If you're gonna do something, you better do it right*, and Scootaloo wasn't one to disappoint. It had taken her father a rather long time to forgive the cyan mare's unorthodox, and rather quite reckless, method of flight-or-fall instruction when he initially heard of it first hand from his daughter, but his protective instincts eventually relented in the face of such inexorable enthusiasm.

The sun set upon the land of Equestria as its celestial counterpart began its nocturnal duties, shedding its luminous rays on two pegasi who were still hard at work, deep into the early hours of the morning. The tapestry of stars that hung overhead wished sweet dreams to Scootaloo as she heaved herself onto her bed and complete nothingness enveloped her. Every morning, the orange filly woke up bleary-eyed from fatigue and prepared for school a half hour before it began. Today, though, her daily regiment started at the crack of dawn, her superior forgoing her own natural inclinations for relaxation to whip the filly into top notch condition. Rainbow Dash didn't pull any punches when it came to training.

Presently, the weary pegasus dragged herself out of bed as the first slivers of light eeked through her bedroom window. She trudged sluggishly to the front door of the ranch and opened the great oak barrier. Once outside, the pegasus was greeted by the soft hum of cicadas and the sweet aroma of dew upon the grass. A light fog hung in the air, adding to the peaceful solitude of the atmosphere. She breathed deeply, inhaling the spring fragrance that filled the quiet morning, and shook herself from head to tail, removing any lingering traces of sleep before lifting herself into the air and on to her early training session.

Scootaloo arrived at the predetermined meeting point on the northern outskirts of Ponyville where she saw her mentor leaning against a large maple tree with an inattentive expression on her face, her mind clearly

wandering as she awaited the filly. Scootaloo landed nearby and crossed the mare's gaze, gaining her attention.

"You ready?" the cyan pegasus asked the purple-maned filly, skipping any sort of formalities.

"Of course," she replied, her tone matching the fatigue she felt in her wings.

"Heh. Sore, huh?" Rainbow Dash chuckled, "you'll get used to it. That's why we're adding morning practices. Nothing like good old endurance training!" she added with her usual spunk.

Scootaloo gave the mare a superficial smile. *Training even more so the normal training stops hurting? Does that even make sense?* she thought quickly, but suppressed her doubt with the energetic aura that emanated from the cyan equine standing before her. *If she can do it, I can, too.*

The two pegasi took off to the north at a decent pace. Scootaloo's fatigue left her mind blank. She flew autonomously, bereft of thought. Dumb to the world around her as her body churned on tirelessly. She breathed subconsciously, her heart beating a steady rhythm in counterpoint to her wings. Her face sagged without expression, as if attempting to return to the peaceful slumber from which she had earlier torn herself. The cyan mare cast sidelong glances at her flying mate every now and again, observing the trance-like daze the orange flier was in. After ten minutes had passed, Rainbow Dash decided to break the silence.

"So, uh, how's school been going since we started?" she asked at a loss for a good starting point.

Scootaloo snapped from her dream-state, returning to the realm of the living once more as her mind followed suit. She turned to face her inquisitor, ensuring she had indeed heard the question before considering it.

"It's been okay so far," the orange pegasus replied, unsure what to make of her mentor's sudden interest in small talk.

“That’s good,” Rainbow Dash said, leaving an awkward silence to linger between them. She snuck a quick glance at the filly who kept pace beside her. Her expression had indeed lightened at the mare’s question, but one sentence wasn’t sufficient to fill the void of an hour long flight. This was the first real opportunity to get to know the little pegasus, and Rainbow Dash wasn’t going to let the chance to learn more about the filly pass her up. She attempted to resume her initial inquiry.

“You been keeping up with your work and everything?”

“Yea,” Scootaloo responded, “it’s all easy enough, I guess.” The rainbow-maned mare nodded silently at this answer and paused for a second before another idea came to her.

“That bully still giving you trouble in class?” she asked with the faintest of grins. A weak laugh escaped the filly before the necessity to breathe cut it short.

“Nope, he started leaving me alone after that fight,” she recollected, thinking back on that day more than two years ago. “He even started being nice to the others when I was around,” she added, giggling once more despite the cramp it caused in her side. Rainbow Dash joined in on this before solitude built between them once more. The sun rose over the horizon to the mare’s right, glaring in her rightmost peripheral. She turned her head slightly to the left, removing the blinding effulgence from her vision and catching a glimpse of the little pegasus in the process. She seemed much happier than she did in her sleep deprived stupor a minute ago. Her purple mane caught the wind and whipped to and fro above and behind her. A thought occurred to Rainbow Dash when she noticed this, and she took a shot in the dark.

“You ever wanted to be in a race?” she asked with genuine interest in her voice. Scootaloo turned to her coach with vivid luster.

“Yea! I’ve gone to see every single race you’ve been in ever since we came to Ponyville! I’ve always dreamed of being in a race ever since!” she exclaimed.

Bingo.

The cyan mare laughed, finally relieved she found a mutual subject of interest. She began to talk about racing, answering any questions the little pegasus fired her way. The topic slowly shifted to the races Rainbow Dash had participated in prior to Scootaloo's arrival in Ponyville. She recounted her many stories while her acolyte listened attentively for the duration of their workout.

=====

Scootaloo arrived late to school, earning the ire of her teacher for the morning.

"School starts at eight o' clock sharp, young lady," came a condescending voice from an equally condescending-looking mare, a ruler gracing either of the gray instructor's flanks. The orange filly rolled her eyes as she passed the pompous teacher, extremely worn out from her morning flight and not at all in the mood for her nagging. She missed Cheerilee's class, wishing the magenta mare taught the upper grades as well. Nevertheless, time moved forward, as did Scootaloo towards her seat on the far side of the classroom beside her two best friends.

Applebloom was the first to notice Scootaloo's exhausted demeanor.

"Whoa, you don't look so good, Scoot." she whispered to the weary pegasus as their teacher resumed class.

"Yea, you look like you got hit by a train," Sweetie Belle agreed.

"Nah, I'm fine you guys," Scootaloo said dismissing their observations. "I just had to wake up early is all." The three's conversation was interrupted by an abrupt cough at the head of the classroom where a pair of deep green eyes glowered at them beneath a well-combed mane, graying with age. The keen gaze remained locked upon the fillies for a moment before returning to the notes that sat on the desk beside its owner.

"What were ya doin' up so early?" Applebloom inquired quietly so as to continue their discussion unheard.

"Rainbow Dash wanted to start adding some distance flyi-"

“Since you seem so interested in learning, Scootaloo,” the authoritarian interrupted in an patronizing tone, “would you mind telling us the answer to the question?” She openly despised all but two of her students, the orange one most of all, but somepony has to teach these little ruffians how to behave. *Kids these days...*

Scootaloo looked at the board and saw a simple math problem etched in large white numbers.

$$\begin{array}{r} 12 \\ + 4 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Addition...really? We learned this last year. “Sixteen,” the orange filly stated without any particular interest. An outburst of laughter beleaguered the pegasus. Everypony in the room excluding her two friends participated, including their teacher.

“If you were paying the slightest bit of attention, young lady,” the mare said contemptuously, “you would know we did our arithmetic this morning while you were out. This is the tenth time you’ve been late to class this month. Such consistent tardiness and lack of motivation is something you should be ashamed of,” she finished with a tone of superiority, her nose raised slightly so as to look down upon the one she berated.

This public chastisement sat sourly with the young pegasus who glared daggers at her instructor. Out of pure spite, a pink hoof rose into the air followed by a series of excited interjections.

“Oooh, oooh, Mrs. Auctoria,” the pink filly exclaimed, her façade working its magic, “the answer is Princess Luna.”

“That’s correct, Diamond Tiara,” Mrs Auctoria said sweetly to the little earth pony who, in her mind, was a shining example of how little fillies and colts ought to behave. The aforementioned ‘shining example’ shot a malevolent grin at Scootaloo when their teacher turned to face the board. The three crusaders each rolled their eyes at her fraudulent display of interest before Sweetie Belle started giggling.

“You were pretty far off, huh?” she whispered, managing to crack a smile on the orange pegasus’ face.

Class continued much as it normally had every other day...**very** boring. Mrs Auctoria droned on incessantly about something to do with unicorn magic while Scootaloo daydreamed about the coming evening. Her body ached with the fatigue of her morning flight and she dreaded the workout Rainbow Dash had planned today, but, for some reason, she couldn't help but look forward to it.

The initial glamor of flying had worn out its welcome as the filly came to experience flight training of this caliber. She loathed the daily exhaustion that took its toll on her. Her despise for it outweighed her desire for any tangible substance in the world, but something continued to lure her to it. The strain of her workouts was almost unbearable, yet it called out to her melodiously, like a siren to a lost ship. In a paradox of feelings, she enjoyed the stress and pain, though she knew not why. Scootaloo remembered the fundamental reason she first wanted to learn to fly was purely due to her perpetual worship of the pegasus that now taught her, but that feeling had faded with the grueling reality of her training. Simple masochism wasn't it...she wasn't *that* crazy.

*Why **did** she do it?*

A thunderous crash echoed through the classroom. Scootaloo bolted upright in alarm, her eyes widened to take in her surroundings as her body tensed instinctively. She beheld the figure of her teacher towering over her with a ruler in her mouth, the source of the sudden noise.

Mrs. Auctoria glared death at the filly who dared to doze off in her classroom.

Nothing but trouble, this one...the little cretin.

Though she had plenty of venomous things to say, she had a class to teach. Discipline was her special talent, after all; failing to follow her own scruples would be hypocrisy, leaving her no better than the degenerate who sat bleary-eyed before her. She couldn't live that down. Mentally composing herself, she strode back to the head of the classroom with an air of dignity.

Scotaloo, still gathering her wits, looked about at the smirking faces around her. She turned to her friends to ask if she had been asleep, causing Applebloom to giggle.

“You were snorin’ louder than mah big sis durin’ apple buck season,” she replied pointing to the translucent ooze that sat placidly upon Scotaloo’s desk. The orange filly sighed inwardly, *this is going to be a long day...*

=====

Freedom!

The school bell rang out 3 o’ clock, signaling the end of the school day. High pitched cheers could be heard across Ponyville as colts and fillies scattered every which way, eager to make use of the weekend for fun and excitement. Scotaloo followed the herd of stampeding foals out into the schoolyard before saying a quick goodbye to her two friends and taking flight.

Friday...*finally!*

Scotaloo rose above the rooftops of Ponyville in simplistic movements, conserving her energy for its later expenditure. She looked down at the town below her, watching the small colorful figures move about. Remnants of her schoolmates were visible in the streets, each group toward their own destination while she flew solitary above them. Her mind wandered once more as she glided to the meeting point. She thought of her previous workouts and the toll they had taken on her. Her wings felt like rubber, but Scotaloo knew they would support her regardless of how little energy she felt she had, something she knew was impossible weeks prior.

Her goal of learning to fly had been accomplished, but something else continued to tease her. Rainbow Dash came to the forefront of her mind. The rainbow-maned pegasus who had seemed to be only a dream, a fantasy, was now a very real part of her life. There were no more lofty desires to simply watch her grace the skies with her presence, nor any strong urge to idolize her the way she had done for years. Yet something still haunted her.

That something lingered on the pegasus' thoughts until she reached the great maple and was pulled back to the physical realm by the voice of the very mare that convoluted her mind.

"You ready?" she asked the orange filly in her usual manner. Scootaloo closed her eyes and tried to empty her mind. She suppressed the swirl of questions and confusion that raged like a howling blizzard, focusing her thoughts on the task at hoof. They diminished like newly fallen snow under the blazing intensity of a summer sun, melting away as she mentally prepared herself for the coming exercises. With her mind at peace, she opened her eyes and looked up at her mentor.

"I'm ready," she said.

=====

The weekend passed in a blur for Scootaloo, her daily training taking up a majority of her time while the remainder was spent in languid recovery. Much to the filly's surprise, the morning endurance flights indeed improved her ability to keep up with her regiment, just as Rainbow Dash had said. Whether it was due to actual improvement or a psychological loophole remained a mystery to the little pegasus. Regardless of this fact, Scootaloo awoke that Monday morning in a rush. She went through the motions of her morning workout in a daze, the anticipation of what she had learned Friday evening boiling over.

She had to tell them.

For once, and much to Mrs. Auctoria's surprise, Scootaloo arrived on time for class, inordinately rushing past the schoolteacher in a flurry of energy and landing in her seat beside two quizzical-looking fillies. Scootaloo beamed at them, bursting at the seams with excitement. She opened her mouth to unload what had been eating away at her for two whole days before being interrupted by the school bell's clamor. Much to Scootaloo's dismay, Mrs. Auctoria began her daily greeting and subsequent lesson the moment the bell relented.

"Good morning, class," she said in the monotone voice she always used when not actively denigrating somepony.

“Good morning, Mrs. Auctoria,” the class sang back in a similar tone before the recipient of this returned greeting resumed their lessons in arithmetic from the previous school day.

Math dragged on into writing, which, in turn, led to reading time. Scootaloo’s prior anxiety-induced energy melted away, leaving her exhausted and still without a chance to tell the other Crusaders her great surprise. Her shoulders slouched and her eyes drooped under the weight of sleep deprivation. The world around her smeared into darkness while the voice of the filly currently reading aloud became muffled, as if beneath a layer of thick blankets.

Scootaloo stood on an open dirt road in the middle of a pasture, greenscape sprawled in every direction. A white line was drawn perpendicular to the path at her hooves. The sun bore down on her and the others lined up beside her. Not a single cloud marred the open sky. She heard cheers and chants echoing from either side, taking no definite form, yet easily recognized as such. A gray stallion calmed the cheers before taking an official position ahead of the competitors.

Scootaloo looked around nervously surveying the competition. Fillies and colts of various ages stared ahead in fierce concentration, sapping her will to race; she panicked. The orange pegasus fervently tried to settle herself to no avail as the official blew his whistle, signaling the start of the race. In her frantic breakdown, Scootaloo spotted a familiar form in the crowd. She stood stock-still in blatant contrast the tumultuous sea of zealous spectators around her. Her prismatic mane outlined the soft features of her face, which gave the orange filly a simple, friendly smile. The earnest gaze was enough to comfort the pegasus who smiled back contently. She took a confident racing stance and refocused herself on the imminent race, bending low for quick acceleration at the sound of the bell.

Everything went deathly quiet. The sky darkened, snuffing out the sunlight and casting a shadow across the landscape, which became black and formless. The darkness bolstered its power, consuming everything around the orange filly. Her subconscious instincts were at play, ripping her from sleep. Wake up!

Scootaloo opened her eyes to see an ominous silhouette enshrouding her. She quickly directed her gaze upward to see the frame of the shadow's owner looming above, repugnance simmering lividly within her deep green eyes.

"Is there something wrong?" the mare asked the drowsy pegasus with obvious restraint. "Is this book too boring for you, Scootaloo?" she added, lashing out at the filly with passive aggression.

No, just you.

A chorus of gasps preceded an awkward silence. Wide-eyed stares of disbelief converged on the pegasus from every direction. Scootaloo looked around, noticing the sudden change in atmosphere. Her curiosity doubled when she saw the shocked look on the mare's face slowly turn to anger. She turned to her friends who shared the same look of horror as her other classmates. Understanding sunk in as she timidly shrank into her seat and quietly mumbled,

"That was out loud, wasn't it?"

=====

Scootaloo sat in her chair with nothing but her thoughts and the paper that lay on her desk to keep her company.

I will not talk back in class, she wrote for the umpteenth time before sighing and looking out the window on the far side of the room with longing. She could hear the soft murmur of laughter and playtime through the glass panes and see the multitude of foals enjoying their recess, completely indifferent to her predicament. The filly turned away from the scene that taunted her and wallowed in her current situation. She glanced up at the large desk in the front of the room where the green-eyed tyrant sat grading papers, diligently marking incorrect answers while muttering undesirable comments under her breath about whomever's paper she was scrutinizing.

The toll of the school bell called the fillies and colts in for lunch. A loud shuffling of hooves was heard outside Scootaloo's classroom. Excitement coursed through the pegasus as she leapt from her seat to grab

her pack lunch and follow the others to the cafeteria before she was halted prematurely by the condescending mare.

“You’ll be eating in here,” the heartless warden said without looking up from her work.

“But I-”

“You’ll be eating in here,” the mare repeated with pronounced authority, glancing unabashedly at the filly who returned it with an irascible glare. Scootaloo huffed and stomped back to her seat before opening the brown paper bag containing her midday meal. She opened it and ate its contents in silence.

The latter half of the school day went its course without much incident. The clock on the front wall of the classroom monotonously clicked away the time while Mrs. Auctoria lectured about space and the many stars and constellations in the night sky. Scootaloo merely lent an ear to the drone of her teacher while vigilantly eying the weathered chronometer. She watched the second hand creep toward its peak, coming ever closer to making the L-shape analogous to her emancipation.

Almost there! she thought to herself, ensuring she was actually thinking it this time. In a matter of seconds, she’d finally be able to tell her friends the big surprise she’d been waiting for all day.

Without disappointment, the bell rang true to its design; its clamor effectively interrupted Mrs. Auctoria mid-sentence and hailed an onslaught of excited cheers and conversations amongst Scootaloo’s classmates. The ensuing cacophony, much to the mare’s displeasure, was enough to drown out her futile attempts to halt their release and finish her statement.

“Finally!” the orange filly yelled, adding to the noise of the classroom before turning to her friends.

“What’s up?” Applebloom asked, interested in her friend’s sudden cheerfulness.

“I’ve been waiting *all day* to tell you guys,” Scootaloo answered eagerly as the trio packed their saddlebags. The two earth-bound fillies

looked at her expectantly while making their way across the classroom. "Rainbow Dash entered me into this week's Junior Speedsters Track and Flight meet!" she expelled gleefully, happy to have finally told her friends after two and a half days of waiting. The two responded with equal amazement as they walked past the large desk of Mrs. Auctoria who happened to eavesdrop on the conversation. She gave the orange filly a sidelong glance as the three passed by. Her brow rose in piqued curiosity before her intrigued expression gave way to a malicious grin.

=====

"So what exactly *is* Junior Speedsters Track and Flight, anyways?" Sweetie Belle asked her winged friend as the trio walked away from the schoolyard.

"It's an athletic event hosted by the pegasi who run Junior Speedsters," Scootaloo said. "They hold them every Friday outside Fillydelphia. I used to go to them with my dad every once in a while when I was little. They have all sorts of races for both pegasi and earth ponies."

"Cooooool," replied the other two in unison.

"Maybe we could join, too," Applebloom said. "We could be th' Cutie Mark Crusader track stars!" she added with excitement.

"Except you forgot both of you already have your cutie marks," Scootaloo remarked, "but you two could come cheer me on!" she said, quickly supplementing her sentence to dispel any hint of aggression the two might have felt from her previous statement.

"Oh, I don't know, Scootaloo," said the unicorn, "I don't think Rarity will let me go that far away from home. Sorry." The white filly cast her gaze downward in regret at her inability to support her friend while their yellow companion shied away from the invitation in a similar manner.

"Yea, I dunno either, Scoot, Applejack wanted me t' help 'round the farm. We got alotta stuff that needs fixin' up." Scootaloo, though saddened that her friends wouldn't be there for her, nonetheless looked forward to the coming Friday and put on a brave face for the sake of her friends.

“That’s alright, guys,” she said with a confidence matching her bold expression, “I know you’ll be cheering for me from here.” The two gave the pegasus friendly smiles, relieved by her understanding. The trio exchanged goodbyes as the orange filly took flight, heading north to begin the second phase of her daily ritual.

Scotaloo’s evening practice went by in a flash, partially due to her body becoming increasingly tolerant of the daily grind, but primarily because Rainbow Dash wanted to taper the filly’s practices. The two ended their session under the abundant strands of wispy cirrus, which turned a vibrant orange as the western sun slid unto its nightly resting place. The filly flew home under the slowly reddening sky, her mind in an empty neutral state once more.

Images of the coming race crept into the recesses of her brain which mingled with another seed that began to germinate, calling forth the familiar swirl of mixed emotions and confusion that often haunted her when she was alone with her thoughts. The question still lingered...*why did she do this?* She thought of the cyan mare that had, in both a literal and figurative sense, taken her under her wing. The rough and grueling labor of flight training was a facet of her daily life, only compensated for by fatigue and self complacency. She thought of the mare’s rose-eyed smile, her sole reward at the end of each day. It made the whole endeavor worth it.

Scotaloo found herself at the foot of the great oak door, painted sanguine by the reflection of the clouds that floated above in chromatic saturation. She entered the ranch and crossed the warm, earthy interior towards her room before a soft fatherly voice startled her from her introspection.

“You’re back early,” he said with mild surprise, “what gives?” Scotaloo gave her patriarch an embarrassed smile.

“Rainbow Dash is lightening up on my workouts because she wants me to-”

“Be ready for a race?” he finished for her. The filly gave him a perplexed stare, unsure of how he knew. “I used to race, too, Scoot. I know how it works,” he continued knowledgably, successfully answering the filly’s blank stare. “Junior Speedsters?” he asked with an air

premonition after a moment's silence to which Scootaloo nodded numbly, fascinated by her father's keen intuition. The stallion laughed, reading his daughter's expression. "I flew in those races every week as a colt. Why do you think I took you to them?" he added with a sly wink. "You'll have a lot of fun there. Now, off to bed, you want to be fresh this week for your first race, right?"

Scootaloo gave her father a wide smile before running to her room and diving onto her bed. The soft plush of the mattress enveloped the pegasus, sweetly accepting her capitulation to slumber and the ease of unconsciousness. Engulfed in peaceful oblivion, the little filly joyously dreamt of rushing wind and bellowing crowds.

Chapter 4

The rest of Scootaloo's week crawled on at a slow but bearable pace. She endured the unpleasant attitude the green-eyed mare wrought upon her, despite her improved participation and consistent attendance. The easier practices were showing on the filly, her posture and voice both vouching for the relative abundance of energy she now retained daily.

Friday morning finally decided to stop teasing Scootaloo and grace Equestria with its presence, much to the joy of the little pegasus who awoke bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, the saying taking on a literal semblance in conjunction to its metaphorical meaning. The orange filly raced to the hallway, following the scent of fried vegetables wafting in from the kitchen.

She arrived at the source of the sweet aroma and hopped up on a stool sitting before a long wooden bar table that separated the living room from the kitchen area, eagerly eying the stir-fry that sizzled on the stove top. The stallion tending to the savory mix of sautéed vegetables turned upon hearing the stool shift and gave his progeny a quick smile.

"You're up early. Excited?" he asked with a hint of mirth.

"Uh huh," Scootaloo replied, tantalized by the iron skillet that sat atop the gas flame.

"Heh, I thought so," the stallion said, "I took an hour off this morning to cook you up a good breakfast for your big day." Tyco took the skillet off the heat and plated its contents before setting it at Scootaloo's forehooves, which sat on the table patiently awaiting the meal. The filly immediately began to chow down on her breakfast before a series of exasperated breaths echoed throughout the room as she attempted to cool the scalding food in her mouth prior to swallowing.

"What'd you expect, I just took it off the stove!" her father exclaimed, nonplussed by her blatant lack of foresight. Scootaloo, undeterred by her blunder, blew on the steaming pile of vegetables to cool them before

consumption, eliciting a laugh from her father. “Well, at least you learn from your mistakes...” he said with a grin, recalling a fond memory from his colthood.

Scootaloo finished her meal with a thankful word of farewell. She sped to the oak door and on to school before returning a minute later to grab her saddlebags and head out once more, much to the entertainment of the stallion. She arrived a few minutes early to school and entered the classroom with a flair of excitement, eager to get through the day and move on to the evening events that awaited her. As she passed by the large desk of Mrs. Auctoria, she heard something unexpected.

“Hello, Scootaloo,” a voice said from behind the lacquered desk. The pegasus stopped and looked up in surprise, never imagining the mare could address her in such an amiable tone. Mrs. Auctoria sat with her nose raised slightly, so as to look downward at the filly standing before her. A faintly wry smile graced her aging features.

“Uh, good morning?” Scootaloo replied at a loss for words, the connotation of her elder’s grin lost upon her. She ran to her seat in a fashion synonymous to her arrival and gave her friends a joyful smile, which they returned before besetting her with a multitude of questions relating to the upcoming track and flight meet. She brushed them off nonchalantly, displaying an air of confidence.

The school bell tolled out the eighth hour of the day, officially giving Mrs. Auctoria purview over the children sitting before her. She began the day with her ritualistic itinerary, starting class with her morning greeting before delving into arithmetic with a buoyant attitude. Her demeanor was surprising. The mare gave off an energetic aura the trio had never witnessed. She addressed each and every foal with politeness and courtesy, in complete contradiction to her normal mannerisms. The mare’s vibe lasted through lunch time where the three fillies sat down at their usual table and began discussing their teacher’s sudden change of heart.

“Ah don’t get it, wah’s she so neighborly allova sudden?” Applebloom asked her friends exasperatedly.

“Ahdnno,” Sweetie Belle said through her daffodil sandwich to the yellow filly sitting across the table before looking to Scootaloo who seemed lost in thought.

“Well, besides Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, she knows everypony in class hates her,” Scootaloo surmised. “Maybe she’s trying, like, reverse psychology or something.”

“Mrs. Auctoria actually tryin’ t’ be nice? Ah don’ believe it,” Applebloom reproached, looking out the window behind her to ensure the sky was still where it should be. “She’s up t’ sumthin,’ ah jus know it,” she finished.

“But what?” the white unicorn asked, concerned with the idea of an ulterior motive behind their teacher’s actions. Nothing came to mind between the three as a relative silence lingered around them, only broken by the din of the cafeteria. The trio sighed synchronously and gave up on their efforts to ferret out the reason for their teacher’s new attitude, resigning to simply enjoy it while it lasts.

The latter half of school flowed in much the same manner as the prior. Mrs. Auctoria retained her amicable qualities while the Crusaders were content with her lack of condescension. The old weathered clock resting above the chalk board performed its civil duties, silently displaying the time as it ticked away. The mechanism neared three o’ clock, covertly stealing the attention of many a foal who waited in anticipation; Scootaloo was no exception.

Much to the filly’s joy, and to that of those around her, the clock struck its famous pose to the sound of the bell and much celebration. The orange pegasus leapt into the air with a shout of euphoria before quickly gathering her things and heading for the door behind the stampede of her peers. Before she crossed the threshold of the doorway, she heard a soft voice call out to her.

“Scootaloo,” the voice said. The filly turned around to see the green-eyed mare looking at her. “Would you wait here, please?”

“But I have to-”

“Scootaloo, this is a matter of importance,” the mare said, cutting off the younger’s appeal. “One that I’ve put off for far too long.”

Scootaloo looked at her teacher with a worried face, *What have I done wrong?* she thought. *If I don’t get out of here soon, I won’t make it to Fillydelphia on time.*

The mare saw the concerned look the filly wore and let out a soft chuckle, “Is something wrong?” The pegasus made eye contact with her superior and gave a disheartened frown.

“It’s just, why do you want me to wait? If I stay too long, I’ll miss out on Junior Speedsters.”

“Then maybe you should have thought about that before you started making a mockery of your education,” the mare said. “I’ve taught for many years, Scootaloo,” her tone increased in seriousness,” and I’ve taught many a filly and colt. Some are like your two friends, polite and respectful. Others are like Twist, eager to learn and be the bright future of Equestria. And then, there’s your kind,” she said darkly. “I know your type when I see it. No interest in academics, no potential for contributing to society. Your kind begets nothing. That is why I teach, to nip the problem in the bud and maintain order for future generations. Discipline is my forté, and sometimes it must be harsh to teach somepony how to behave. I will do everything in my power to ensure you grow up to become a mare of proper standards, and if that means taking away something precious to you, then so be it.”

“I sent for your father not long ago,” she said after finishing her speech, “he’ll be here to discuss the matter of your academic motivation shortly. He is a stallion of dignity, and I feel certain he will dispense just punishment for your gross misbehavior.”

Her words shot through Scootaloo like an arrow. Her spirit withered like a flower, the crushing weight of the mare’s judgment striking out ferociously where it hurt most. She was this close to having the time of her life, to putting her training towards something practical, something meaningful, only to have it torn away, inches from her grasp. A sorrowful anger rose up in the filly, the kind that occurs due to complete and utter helplessness. The injustice of the mare’s game taunted her like a

schoolyard bully. She understood why her teacher did so, but that hardly excused how she went about it.

The two sat deadlocked in a staring contest before the thunderous sound of hoofsteps echoed from the hallway, causing Mrs. Auctoria to turn her head and smile while dread coursed through Scootaloo. An orange stallion burst through the doorway, panting heavily. He perceived the two figures that stood in the classroom eying him before taking a deep breath and sighing, seeing his daughter was in no immediate danger. The elder pegasus composed himself before addressing the instructor.

"I came as soon as I got word," he said, restraining his breathing pattern as his heart rate regressed to a manageable level. "Is Scoot okay? Your message made it sound like it was an emergency," the stallion added, trotting closer to his daughter for further inspection of this theory.

"No, Tyco, Scootaloo is fine, but there is the matter of her delinquency." He turned to the mare with curiosity while his miniature shivered anxiously. "Your daughter has been tardy over ten times this quarter," she said with a level tone, "and I've caught her sleeping on multiple occasions during class."

"W-what?" he asked, only half hearing the words she said. She repeated herself with calm tautology.

"Wait," Tyco interrupted midway through her sentence, "you mean to say you sent me a message *today*, to tell me to leave work three hours early *without notice*, and *sprint* here to be on time...for a parent-teacher conference?" He stared at her in disbelief. "Why didn't you just tell Scootaloo a few days ago to let me know so I could give the mayor some warning before I dropped everything and made a complete ass of myself?" he finished with rising irritation.

"I assure you," Mrs. Auctoria said, trying to regain some of the momentum she had lost, "the manner in which I called for you is prudent to the disciplinary measures that must be taken in order to teach her how to beha-" she stopped mid-sentence, noticing the far off reminiscence in the stallion's eyes. He was piecing two and two together. Tyco momentarily returned from his glazed stupor and affixed his peer with a deadly stare.

The stallion boldly strode up to the disconcerted mare and shoved her hard into the desk before coming nose to nose.

"Now you listen to me," he said in a harsh undertone so Scootaloo couldn't hear, "my daughter's been working a lot harder outside of class than your simple mind could ever comprehend. She hasn't had any major problems with her schoolwork since we moved here, yet you insist on depriving her of what she's been working for for months? We came to Ponyville to get away from elitist shit like you, and I will not have you persecuting my daughter on some crusade for your own twisted view of 'proper.' Your level of arrogance would make even my father turn in his grave. If you even fucking think about harassing my daughter again, I'll take this to the board of education and have your ass mounted on a wall."

The stallion finished his tirade, breaking eye contact with the trembling mare and abruptly turning to leave. "Come on, Scoot," he said levelly, "we're leaving." The little filly complied without hesitation. She had never seen such an unprecedented outburst of rage from her father.

"H-h...how dare you s-speak to me like that," the green-eyed mare said in a shaky voice, slowly reconstituting herself. "You'll be hearing from the committee about this," she added feebly. Tyco stopped at the threshold and shot a cross glance back at the quavering disciplinarian. He outstretched his right hoof towards her at eye level, with a slight bend at the elbow.

"Sit on this," he said before departing, leaving the horror-stricken teacher with a new-found sense of humility.

The orange duo emerged from the front doors and made their way off the premises. Scootaloo was relieved to have escaped from potential disaster, walking beside her savior who still seemed to be calming down from his recent confrontation. She worked up the courage to ask him what he had last said to the mare.

"Hey dad, what does 'sit on this' mean?" she asked, looking up at him innocently. The stallion, who was lost in contemplation, immediately came to with a look of concern, now realizing his faux pas.

"Don't you have a race to win?" he quickly replied, to which the filly jumped in startled remembrance and took flight with a hasty farewell. He

watched his daughter fly into the distance, chuckling at her youthful exuberance. His gaze lingered on the shrinking speck as he somberly returned to work, memories long dead resurfacing anew.

=====

The sound of excitement and laughter was abundant upon the open plain. Rainbow Dash flew anxious laps around the area, searching for her missing contestant. Her eyes darted back and forth scanning the landscape, straining for any sign of orange and purple. She banked left and landed at the check-in table in a rush.

“Has a ‘Scootaloo’ checked in, yet?” she asked the mare behind the table, interrupting her conversation with a group of foals. Though slightly miffed, the mare rifled through her papers before giving the cyan pegasus a negative response. Rainbow Dash grit her teeth in frustration before turning to leave.

Her first race starts in a few minutes, where the heck is she? The prismatic mare scanned the horizon with a fool’s hope. Foolish or not, she spotted a dot far out to the east, steadily growing larger. She inspected the enlarging shape, scrutinizing it. The mare gave an outward grunt and launched into the air, kicking up chunks of grass with her forceful ascent. Rainbow Dash sped towards the figure, irritation compounding her velocity. She nearly collided with the little pegasus in her haste. “Where have you been!?” she asked Scootaloo, who attempted to answer the mare’s question before the elder cut her off with an exasperated interjection and a quick shove. “Track! Race! Go!!”

The filly charged towards the large group of her peers who aggregated at the check-in desk. Scootaloo obtained her racing number and quickly arrived at the starting line of the cinder ash track. She was fourth in line for her lane, allotting ample time to catch her breath after her long flight. She heard the bell’s deafening clang, signaling the start of the first heat. The runners were off in a blaze, kicking up dust in their wake. Scootaloo watched them round the first turn before centering herself and concentrating on her own performance. Her first race of the day: the 800.

We want you to be warmed up for your biggest challenge, she recalled her mentor saying. *I put you in a middle distance ground race,*

followed by a longer flight race. Then comes the big one, your moment of glory!" she said, injecting as much pep into her speech as equinely as possible, *"The 5k!"*

Scotaloo smiled to herself as she thought of the rainbow-maned pegasus, the energy of the memory flowing through her, giving her confidence.

The fourth heat of the race was called forward by the official. The orange pegasus walked up to the white chalk line and stood ready to run. The official called for silence, receiving apt compliance from spectator and athlete alike.

"On your mark." Scotaloo leaned forward into a similar posture as the other competitors, ready to take off at the sound of the bell. "Set."

The bell rang out raucously, followed by the mutual cheers of the crowd and a thunder of hooves. The exhilaration of racing engulfed the little pegasus. She ran off adrenaline and excitement. The race almost didn't register in her mind, only a bronze medal and a gleaming smile from Rainbow Dash to corroborate her participation.

The 1500m flight race followed soon after, giving the filly her first taste of competitive flight. The cyan mare met her at the finish line with a congratulatory smile.

"Nice race you had there," the mare said, pointing to the silver medallion dangling from the filly's neck.

"Thanks!" Scotaloo replied with a flutter, looking up at her mentor with a heartfelt smile.

"You feeling good for the next one?" Rainbow Dash asked the orange filly with an edge of expectation, which was returned with an excited affirmative. "Good. Then you'll want to keep an eye on her," the cyan mare said, pointing to a dark orange filly. She stood with a confident posture, chatting with a few colts who were ogling her gold medal. "She was in the heat before yours. She got first overall and beat your time by sixteen seconds. Her name's Pyra. And you," Rainbow Dash turned back to the little pegasus, *"you're gonna beat her."*

Scotaloo turned to inspect her new rival. Her yellow and red streaked mane and tail complimented the natural hue of her coat, and gave obvious reason for her name. She looked experienced, calm, and collected as she conversed with her peers. Being in the early stages of adolescence, she had the clear advantage; an advantage Scotaloo couldn't wait to put in its place.

Rainbow Dash saw the grin forming on her disciple and matched it, *This is gonna be good*, she thought.

Though not wanting to break the static building between Scotaloo and her unsuspecting prey, the cyan mare had to bring the little filly back to reality and ensure she was physiologically ready for the encounter.

"I can tell you really want to race, but it doesn't start for another half hour." she said, gaining the attention of the orange pegasus. "Go fly around some. Look at stuff. Just make sure you stay limber, and for Celestia's sake, don't be late."

Scotaloo gave Rainbow Dash the medal she wore for safe keeping before taking off to scout out the racing grounds. She soared high above the surface of the earth, taking a lofty position among the clouds. She watched the miniature equines run circles around the cinder ash track, letting her mind wander.

She thought of the upcoming race. The form of the dark orange filly appeared in her mind, occupying her vision completely. Her mentor said she was her biggest threat to winning the next race, but why was winning so important? Why did she want to claim victory over some random pegasus? There was no true animosity between the two, only a desire to triumph; to be the best. But where did this longing for success come from? Just as she held no true passion for flight after the first few weeks, the same feeling reared its head when she thought about beating Pyra.

A vision of Rainbow Dash appeared in place of the fiery pegasus. She thought of her smile. *That smile...those gleaming eyes, filled with pride.* The very ones that graced her complexion every time Scotaloo achieved something of merit. It made her happy...*but why?*

The orange filly shook her head to clear the unending swirl of rhetorical questions and refocused on the scene splayed out below. A small gathering had formed at the far end of the premises, the striking flare of her opponent attracting her gaze.

If she's there, I should be, too, Scootaloo thought as she dropped from the cloud, accelerating into an easy glide. She alighted at the edge of the congregation to hear a clear voice ring out above her.

"Since we have so many competitors today, we'll start this race with a traditional ground run," the voice said. "At two hundred meters, by the orange cones, you will take off and begin the flight portion of the race. That'll lessen the confusion at the start." Scootaloo came around the far side of the group and saw the official giving the instructions she now heard. His gaze swept through the crowd, inspecting the many faces looking up at him. "After that, just stay within the cloud markers. Any questions?"

The official took the general silence as an answer and turned to fly in the direction of the bell. The competitors trotted back to the white line painted in the grass and went through their pre-race rituals.

Scootaloo took her place alongside the rest of the pack and glanced down the line. She gathered they were all a few years older than her. A feeling of doubt crept up from the bottom of her stomach at the realization, could she really win this? The orange filly saw a bright mane of fire far down the line, its owner stood coolly awaiting the sound of the bell.

You're gonna beat her. The apprehension dissipated as quickly as it formed, replaced with a sense of certainty.

"Get out quick, you don't want to be in the middle of the crowd when you take off." Scootaloo turned to see Rainbow Dash standing behind her, the source of the advice. "Fly your own race, but always keep in range of Pyra. She's your target. And remember, when you think you've got nothing left, you do. Dig deep. Fight hard." The cyan mare finished her monologue with a playful ruffle of the filly's mane before departing for the sidelines.

“On your maaaark,” rang out the stern voice of the official, drawing Scootaloo’s attention to the stretch of grass before her. She kicked her hooves out subconsciously, shaking out the lactic acid from her previous race. “Seeeet,” the official said, followed by a long pause. Silence reigned as anxiety filled the open air, suffocating and intolerable. The high pitch of the bell finally released the immeasurable tension. The competitors burst forth in a stampede of adrenaline, like a tidal wave upon the unsuspecting landscape. Scootaloo charged to the head of the pack, keeping pace with the current leader. She turned her head quickly to search for her rival, determined to keep her in check. The orange filly was surprised to see her towards the middle of the herd.

Scootaloo put that thought aside as she took off at the orange cones, making a b-line for the first set of cloud markers. She heard the chaos of those behind her, entangling themselves in their efforts to take flight. The official’s idea failed miserably to the slight humor of the orange filly.

Marker after marker passed by as those behind her slowly caught up in an attempt to recover lost ground. *Fly your own race*, she recalled Rainbow Dash saying. She resisted the urge to match the speed of the handful of colts that overtook her, in complete disregard of her natural desire to stay ahead. The course climbed high into the clouds, the arduous task of elevation taking its toll. She slowed her pace to match her previous output of energy, only to be disheartened further by a steady stream of pegasi inching past her.

“Aren’t you a little small to be in this race?” a kind but incredulous voice huffed over its own rhythmic breathing. Scootaloo turned her head to see the dark orange figure of Pyra slowly gaining headway over her. The two reached the peak of their ascent before banking leftward into a dive. The two kept a solid pace, slowly gaining territory over the rest of the competition.

Pyra, sensing something different about her flying mate, shot Scootaloo curious glances every few minutes, which slowly turned to anger in light of the little filly’s persistence.

She just won’t give up, will she? the fiery racer thought, kicking up her speed to try and lose the little one.

The wind swept through Scootaloo's mane as she flew just above the treetops, tailing her prey with an insatiable zeal. Her muscles ached with fatigue and the growing buildup of lactic acid as her metabolism switched to anaerobic respiration. The red and yellow of her rival's tail flailed about in the wind, true to her namesake. It taunted Scootaloo, harassing her with its wild dance as they passed the 3k cloud marker.

The two pegasi overtook the remainder of their competition, leaving only Scootaloo and Pyra to vie for gold by the time they reached the 4k marker. The little filly felt as if she were on death's door. Her breathing became rasping and pained, weariness evident in her overexertion. She watched as her rival made the gradual ascent to the finish line in the clouds, slowly outdistancing her.

A sudden movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention. The displaced vapors of the final cloud marker evaporated to reveal a cyan mare uprighting herself from a vigorous landing.

"Eight hundred meters, Scoot! She's right there! Go!!!"

Scootaloo heard her mentor bellow with primal ferocity. Her heart fluttered, pumping with increased fervor. Her pupils widened in response to the surge of adrenaline the mare's shout induced. Her breathing became full-bodied as the strain of fatigue melted away, masked by the high of endorphins. The cry of her tutor resounded within her ears, the magnitude of its desperation pervading her mind like a flood of cold water.

Rainbow Dash.

She thought of her smile once more. The happiness embodied by such a simplistic expression; the very idea of being something she can be proud of. It filled every crevice of her thoughts. *This is why she flew. This is why she's racing.*

This, is why she will win.

Scootaloo accelerated in an explosion of energy. Her second wind bolstered her confidence, forcing a wry smile to streak her face. When she thought she had nothing left, she did. The orange pegasus flew all out, quickly closing the distance on her sole competitor. Pyra heard the sudden

crescendo of exertion behind her and dared a glance. The little filly caught her prey's mistake, solidifying her certainty of victory.

The fiery pegasus eyed Scootaloo in disbelief as the two flew abreast for an instant, before the purple-maned filly overtook her. Scootaloo crossed the finish line triumphantly. Cheers echoed all around as she fell to the cloud below in absolute exhaustion. The pain of racing returned with a vengeance upon her body, but to no avail. She was victorious.

A rough hug enveloped Scootaloo, keeping her from falling into the void that called her longingly. She turned to see a prism of colors hanging from the figure that held her tight. A pair of rosy eyes gleamed at her through a film of joyful tears.

"You won! I knew you could do it!!" Rainbow Dash said, nearly choking on happiness.

This was her prize. Not the endless clamor and praise of the spectators. Not the gold medal that would soon adorn her neck. Not even the realization that she'd bested nearly seventy fillies and colts upwards of four years older than her. It was the sweet sensation of her mentor's euphoria. She felt like butter in the warm caress of her superior, melting in the radiant pride of the cyan mare. She treasured the moment, cherishing its brevity in all its glory. Scootaloo returned the familial gesture with a loving embrace.

=====

Master and apprentice flew home at a leisurely pace, hastened by an eastern wind. The familiar numbness set in as Scootaloo shifted mental gears, preferring to make the journey in semi-unconsciousness. She thought of the race, focusing on the fiery pegasus. A vision of her memorable tail coalesced, dancing before her once more. Scootaloo recalled the uncertainty she felt at that moment during the race. A feeling of hopelessness welled up inside her. *She almost lost.* She nearly forfeited the opportunity to achieve what she desired most. Scootaloo looked to her flying mate.

She won it for me, the filly thought. *She's the only reason I won.* She looked down at the three medals that clanged hollowly around her neck. A

sudden thought struck the pegasus, *She's the only reason I even did this in the first place...*

Scootaloo had finally answered the question that plagued her, only to have another replace it... *Why did she want to please Rainbow Dash?* Where did this desire for prodigious affection come from? Her thoughts continued to collide and mix in an attempt to form an answer to this new imposition. Her heart sank at the prospect of more inner turmoil. She felt lost.

A hole filled her heart, giving rise to a profound feeling of emptiness. The cyan mare held significance in this quandary. She sensed a presence within the void of her heart occupied by her mentor, but it was insufficient. There was a greater force at play that held her captive, something instinctive. She wallowed in her rumination for the rest of their flight.

A farewell reached the filly's ears. She barely registered it, too deep in thought to consider returning the formality. She landed on her doorstep and promptly opened the darkened portal. The living room sat in dreary silence, the orange sunset giving the earthy décor a sober appearance. Tyco walked in from the hallway upon hearing the front door open, giving his daughter a bright smile at the sight of the medals about her neck. He approached the filly to give her a resounding congratulation, which quickly evaporated when he saw the look of despondence upon her face. Scootaloo looked up at the concerned patriarch. Their eyes met in somber harmony.

"Dad...where's mom?"

Chapter 5

Father and daughter shared a moment of silence. Tyco stared into his progeny's eyes, lost in the confusion and turmoil that filled her violet orbs. He broke eye contact and sighed before looking back to Scootaloo who continued to gaze at him with sorrowful innocence. Seeing such sadness in his daughter's eyes pained him immensely.

"Follow me," he said with a sigh, turning back towards the hallway. He lead her to her room and motioned towards the bed. The filly leapt up onto the mattress and looked to her father expectantly. "Wait here," he said, before walking to his room. He returned with a small black binder and set it before the little pegasus. The stallion sat at her bedside and looked out the window at the evening twilight that cast its melancholy glow through the panes.

"A long time ago, way before you were born, I used to live in Manehattan. My parents were wealthy businessponies, paragons of Manehattan's aristocracy." He opened the binder to the first page where three ponies gazed up at Scootaloo. The elder male in the photo wore a long flowing robe of red silk. The orange stallion had his mane slicked back, complementing the sleek atmosphere he created. His mate stood regally beside him, her purple hair done up in an archaic yet appealing fashion. Both had an almost indignant look about them. At their hooves was the figure of her father. He sat on his haunches beaming up at her in youthful innocence. She felt as if she were looking in a mirror; save the obvious differences in gender, he looked exactly like her.

"I had it all. A wonderful education, a warm bed, and anything else I desired. Well, almost anything," he added, dropping his gaze to the floor. "My parents enrolled me in a high-class school built specifically for the elite and gifted. I was talented in mathematics, and I learned quickly. They had great plans for me," he said with a small chuckle. "They wanted me to succeed them and carry on their great legacy, be the shining champion of Equestrian society."

We went to numerous balls, parties, and esteemed gatherings. All of it was a part of their plan. They taught me how to behave in public, like a 'proper' colt. They drilled their beliefs and prejudices into me, but I didn't understand. They forced their desires upon me, expecting I would follow in their hoofsteps without question. And for the most part, I did. Honestly," he said looking at Scootaloo with a faint smile, "I hated it.

As much as I wanted to make them happy, one thing foiled their attempts to shape my destiny. One of the parties we attended was an after-show dinner for the Wonderbolts. I remember the very first time I ever saw them," Tyco said reminiscently, looking out the window once again as his voice softened. "I stood beside my parents who were talking to a large stallion in blue. He looked down at me and smiled as I gazed up in awe. I had never seen such an impressive stallion. His name was Blaze, Captain of the Wonderbolts."

Tyco flipped the page, revealing numerous news clippings, all of which related to the magnificent fliers. In the center of the page, surrounded by the many articles, was another photo. A lone yellow stallion clad in deep azure posed athletically with a sidelong grin. It was signed with a black marker in messy cursive, *To my little Rebel. -Blaze*.

Scootaloo looked up from the yellowing photo. She saw her father lost in thought, staring pensively at the photograph. His eyes briefly misted over before he recomposed himself and resumed the story.

"He saw something in me that day, and I in him. I was enthralled, completely absorbed in the wonder and mysteriousness of his squad. Nothing compared to my desire to see them in action. I collected anything and everything Wonderbolt...my appetite was insatiable. I began to play outside more. I flew around all day, emulating my idols, fueled by my youthful imagination. The sudden change worried my parents. They became frustrated that I wasn't living up to their standards of civility and etiquette.

I rejected their efforts to mold me into a soulless entrepreneur. I-" he stopped mid-sentence. The stallion looked down at the little filly who returned his gaze with a mutually sympathetic one. "Never mind, that part isn't important," he finished, turning away and drooping his ears. He sighed deeply before continuing, "Anyways, after a few years, I moved to

Fillydelphia in search of my dreams. I trained day and night to become the pegasus I needed to be in order to achieve them.

It was the most grueling thing I've ever done in my entire life. I poured all my time, effort, and talent into flying. It took four years, four years of failure and persistence, but it paid off." The stallion smiled as the ancient memory bubbled forth from the depths of his mind. The emotion washed over him, fresh as the day it happened, like a warm tide. "I became a Wonderbolt," he said with pride. "I had never been so excited. I'll never forget how happy I was the first time I wore that suit. It filled me with a sense of pride I had never felt before. I took on a new name, a name befitting a true Wonderbolt," his voice shallowed, far off in reverie, "I became Flyinn."

He began flipping through the photo album again. A plethora of photographs and news clippings adorned page after page, crammed together and overlapping like a collage. Every one of the pictures and articles highlighted the feats of the purple-maned pegasus. The cool blue of his skintight uniform clashed with the warm tone of his orange coat, but at the same time accentuated his masculine figure. He looked like a true stallion; a hero among lesser equines.

"The stunt I perfected that year became the talk of the land and garnered much attention. Flyinn the Magnificent, they used to call me. Flyinn the Great." He let out a soft chuckle, "Flyinn the Lightning Caller was my personal favorite. We traveled Equestria, performing show after show, leaving every audience stunned. Three years past in a blur of sweat, fame, and glory. I loved every single moment of it.

But then, something happened, something I didn't expect," his voice changed, as if still confounded by what he was about to reveal. "After our final show of the season, the mayor of Cloudsdale threw us a party in congratulations for a job well done. It was an extravagant party, attended by the whole of the sky-bound metropolis. I remember sitting at a table in the corner of the ballroom. I was never really inclined to social interaction, so I decided to pass the time pony-watching. I admired the festivities and frivolity, taking in the soothing atmosphere around me. My eyes wandered from mare to stallion, lingering briefly before moving to the next in no particular order. At that moment," he said, looking his daughter in the eyes, "I saw her.

She was the most beautiful mare I've ever laid eyes on. Her name was Starshine, and never before has anypony's name rung truer. Her navy blue mane shimmered like the nighttime sky, and fell gracefully about her in long flowing curls. Her coat was of electric indigo, hauntingly alluring in the dim light of the ballroom. I was transfixed. I couldn't tear my gaze from her, so I sat there, hypnotized by her beauty. Soon after, her eyes met mine and we stared at each other in silence, frozen in time." The stallion gazed out the window once more, entranced by the tapestry that resembled his heart's captor. "Eventually, I worked up the courage to talk to her. Her voice was as soft as her features which only doubled my fascination."

Tyco turned the page again, and was greeted by the familiar face. He let a smile grow upon his own, "You have her eyes," he said to his daughter. Scootaloo inspected the mare. She indeed embodied her namesake to the minutest degree. The pegasus smiled up at her warmly with large violet eyes. The smile penetrated Scootaloo, feeling as though it reached out and hugged her in a maternal gesture. The little filly was mesmerized by her mother's beauty...she made Rarity look like Granny Smith by comparison.

"We started dating, taking long walks through Cloudsdale, talking about life. We enjoyed the little things. I put her first before everything else; she was the one. But the others," he said looking somberly at the floor, "didn't agree with my priorities."

They felt Starshine was inhibiting my training, clouding my vision. We had an argument, and they gave me an ultimatum: I had to choose between the love of my life, or the job of my dreams...I didn't even hesitate, nor did I ever look back. I renounced my name, and became Tyco once more. We moved to Fillydelphia, and I vowed never to fly again in my resentment."

The two of us lived comfortably in the new city. We settled down in Delamare Valley, and became a part of the growing community. And when I thought life couldn't get any better," he looked at Scootaloo with love in his eyes, "you arrived."

That was the third, but most joyful moment of my life. I remember Star caressing you, holding you close as she laid on the hospital bed. You

opened your eyes for the first time, and I saw your mother in them," He stroked his daughter's mane gently, "I still do.

The three of us returned home. We laid you in your crib and watched you sleep. It was like watching an angel. I slept soundly that night, comforted by the serendipity of your entrance into my life, and the love that lay beside me. But that feeling of elation was short-lived." Tyco's face became gloomy. "I awoke the next morning to find your mother was gone. She disappeared, like a shadow in the night. She left without warning, without reason or farewell. She left," he said, looking back to his daughter with a steadily growing smile, "but she didn't leave me alone; she left behind the most valuable and precious keepsake I had," he ran his hoof down Scootaloo's cheek, wiping away a tear, "and I've cherished it ever since.

You grew just as I did: persistent and headstrong, fearless and daring. I watched you grow up in the face of adversity; Fillydelphia saw us in a different light ever since that fateful day. We were the center of gossip, the hushed whispers of society." His face grew hard and stern, "I could easily withstand such trivial nonsense, but I wasn't gonna to let you grow up as an outcast. I saw how you were treated differently in school. The other fillies and colts reflected the hostile mannerisms of their parents. It enraged me that our neighbors could suddenly turn on us and harbor such unjust animosity.

That's why we moved here, to get away from it all," he said, patting the filly's head with a smile. "You've grown quite a lot these last two years. I'm proud of you, and I always will be."

Scootaloo looked up at her father with a new-found respect. He had never told her any of this before, and she could sense it hurt to retell such a depressing tale. The little filly did what any truly loving daughter would do. She put her hooves around the stallion's neck, and shared in his sorrow.

"I wish mom was here," the little pegasus whispered quietly into her father's shoulder, "so you can be happy again." The patriarch removed the filly from his hug in a mixture of joyful sadness.

"But I am happy," he said softly, giving her a heartfelt smile, "I've got *you*. My gem of gems. My light in the darkness. Your joy is the bulwark of

my strength, the spring of my vitality, and the paint of my canvas. You are the source of my life, the center of my universe, forever and unconditionally. You are the candle in my heart that warms my soul. You are the cornerstone of my will, the foundation of my world. I would endure a thousand years of hell for your sake. All the radiance of the sun cannot compare to how much I love you. Nothing,” the stallion lifted his daughter’s chin with his hoof, and peered deep into her eyes, “**nothing** can take that away from me.”

Scotaloo’s vision blurred as she felt a warmth roll down her face and buried herself within the refuge of her father’s chest. The stallion affixed his miniature with a paternal smile before wrapping her in a loving embrace. Scotaloo felt warm tears fall upon her shoulder and held her father tighter in response. Once the little filly calmed down, the stallion kissed his daughter on the forehead and quietly turned to leave.

“Dad?” came the soft voice of Scotaloo. Tyco looked back at the pegasus who sat somberly on the edge of her bed. “Can I sleep with you tonight?” The stallion gave her an affectionate smile.

“Of course you can,” he said gingerly.

=====

The night reigned in its natural order: crickets sang their sweet melodies, soft and repetitive, while the light of the stars shone into the master bedroom and alighted upon father and daughter in gentle tranquility. Scotaloo snuggled underneath her patriarch’s wing, warmed by the fire of his love. She breathed softly, filling her lungs with the cool night air. She nestled her head into the niche between her father’s shoulder and the feather pillow.

“Goodnight, dad,” she murmured from the depths of her dream-state.

“Goodnight, Scoot,” he replied with a saccharine whisper. The stallion gently stroked the filly’s mane, running his hoof through the wild purple. He listened to the slow respiration of his progeny and felt her little heartbeat, soft and innocent, pump a steady rhythm in amity with his own, as if sharing the same lifeblood. Two hearts beat as one.

The stallion looked out the window and gazed at the diamondesque tapestry that glowed with a soothing fluorescence. The night sky held him captive for a minute before a tear solemnly traced his cheekbone.

“Goodnight, Star...wherever you might be...”

Chapter 6

“Ouch,” Scootaloo said as she stood up from her rough landing. She brushed herself off and looked up to the sky where a disheveled rainbow mane looked down on her with disappointment.

“Ugh, come on, Scoot, we’ve been working on this for two days now!” Rainbow Dash said irritably. “We should have been done with this move yesterday, I’m running behind on my own practice for the Wonderbolts tryouts!”

Scootaloo frowned inwardly when she heard her mentor’s reprimanding statement. Joining the Wonderbolts was Dash’s dream, and being the reason she might not make it this year was the last thing on her to-do list. She lifted herself into the air to retry her new stunt.

High in the atmosphere, Scootaloo shot towards the ground with extraordinary speed. She felt the wind rushing through her mane and around her body. It screamed in her ears, deafening, like the first time she learned to fly. There was a familiar sense of resistance building up around her, like an ethereal barrier. A mach cone started to form, fighting back against the filly who dared to attain such speeds. Though curious if she could truly achieve such a remarkable feat, it wasn’t what she was after. Scootaloo felt the pressure that now surrounded her and knew she was ready.

The little filly performed a sudden barrel roll and angled her wings like a helicopter propeller, allowing the speed of her fall to compound her longitudinal rotation. The ground spun like a record player. Bold colors overpowered her vision as they formed blurred rings, steadily growing larger. The mach cone twisted and contorted, bending to her will and spiraling just as she did, before dissipating due to her deceleration from the rotational drag. She could feel the wind matching her spin; step one complete.

Now it was a test of daring and precision. Scootaloo squinted as she neared the ground, estimating her altitude and calculating her timing. If she

halted her dive too early, she would be swept up in the vortex that she now channeled behind her and land in a rough, disoriented heap, like her last attempt. Too late, and, well...she didn't want to think about that. It was a game of chicken; this was her domain.

The ground continued its spiraling ascension, intense and terrifying. *Fifty meters.* Scootaloo felt a small lump of doubt form in her stomach. *Forty meters.* The smearing earth seemed to lunge up at her. Illusion and fear combined to create the deceit she saw. *Thirty meters.* Rainbow Dash flashed in her mind and dispelled her worries. Her vision pierced the veil of lies below. *Twenty meters.*

Now.

Scootaloo flared her wings and strained against the force of gravity. The spiral of her descent remained intact as she lost momentum and landed heavily upon her hooves. The inertia of her landing dug a deep circle into the grass, rooting the filly in place. The fury of her creation lashed at her backside and pulled her head and flank counter-clockwise. The wind rent and tore at the pegasus' hide, and whipped her wings awkwardly about. Her eyes watered at the sudden and excruciating pain.

After clearing the tears from her eyes, Scootaloo looked up to inspect her handiwork. Just as foretold by her mentor, the writhing swirl of dirt and debris became self-sustained and carried itself off with the gentle breeze towards the Everfree Forest, much to the surprise and ensuing chaos of the local wildlife. She beamed at the wonderful specimen she had created, relishing the tornado's ferocity as it howled with rage. The little filly turned to search for her master, eager to look upon the face of admiration, but was instead met with an escalating cry.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

Scootaloo turned in the direction of the sound to see the cyan pegasus tumbling through the air before crashing hard into the ground before her, covered in dust and dirt. Her eyes spun about in their sockets as she looked up to the orange filly with a groggy but pleased expression.

"I think it worked," she said with a slur, as if inebriated by her dizziness. She shakily rose to her feet and widened her stance for

balance. "But next time, your two buddies there can't help you out," she finished, before collapsing forward in a heap.

=====

Whew, another rough day, Scootaloo thought as she descended into a canter a few meters from her house. She opened the door languidly and slowly made her way to her bedroom. She managed one last exertion of energy and leapt up onto her bed with an airy plop. She rolled on her side and stroked her back with her hoof, feeling the spots where the wind made its illusionary lacerations not long ago. *It felt so real.*

The little filly rolled to her other side and stretched out her free wing, only to earn a charlie horse in her adductor muscle. She convulsed in response to the awkward pain until it finally relaxed and left her in a relatively blithe state of comfort. The pegasus opened her eyes and beheld the sight of her dresser, which contained all of her warm weather apparel. From the knobs of the dresser hung three medals of varying color, with an additional two recently added to the collection. It'd been almost two months since that day. It felt so long ago. The familiar sadness came back to haunt her. She still had that longing feeling, though not nearly as much as then. Rainbow Dash had come into her life and taken root in the emptiness before she was even aware of its presence, and her father's story filled in the cracks. She wanted to meet her mother, to see her face and feel the love the stallion had described, but, in her absence, Scootaloo had found the best substitute she could ask for.

The little filly rolled over once more, clearing the somber thoughts from her mind, and looked at the nightstand that stood adjacent to her bed. She looked at the object that rested atop the wooden frame. The tiny, three-legged calendar stared at her blankly.

Eight days, Scootaloo thought. *Eight days till her tryouts.* The date was circled with a red crayon. The upcoming Wonderbolts auditions loomed along the horizon, signaling a pivotal moment in her life. If Rainbow Dash was accepted, it would be the happiest day of the cyan mare's life. Naturally, she would share in her jubilation, though it would also mean Scootaloo would lose her as a mentor and instructor, which would be devastating. If she failed to make the cut, Scootaloo would have her for at least another year, but would that year really be worth the

heartbreak of rejection? Rainbow Dash was finally of age to tryout for the prestigious flying squad. She had never tasted the bitter pill of denial before, could she handle it? Would she still be the same mare Scootaloo looked up to?

The little filly pushed these thoughts aside, certain of her mentor's infallibility. If anything bad were to happen, she preferred it happened to her.

After her mental debate subsided, Scootaloo turned the page of the calendar to reveal another date of interest. The date, multiplicatively circled, outlined, and underlined with the same red crayon, gazed at the filly with intensity.

The Best Young Flier's Competition. The idea whisked through her mind, and a smile formed on her lips as she closed her eyes. She let the page fall back into place and drifted off into a peaceful slumber filled with open skies and streaks of violet.

=====

Scootaloo tore through the sky in a blaze. The wind rushed about her, howling wildly, voicing its rampancy. She pulled up into a tall Immelmann's loop, followed by her telltale streak of violet, and raced through a cloud ring with perfect execution. The filly then ascended to the dark cloud above. It billowed ominously, rumbling with impatience. The thunder quaked with suppressed rancor as the cloud flashed dangerously. The deep bass of the cumulonimbus vibrated within her heart and drowned out the raucous cheers far below, but it only served to excite her.

Scoot.

She neared the base of the drab, roiling blanket and pulled back into a half loop, retaining her supine position. She felt the presence of a blue garment about her as she grazed the cloud with her wings and absorbed the static charge within.

Scoot, Rainbow Dash is here.

Using the natural pull of gravity, the azure-clad pegasus broke contact with the billowing mass and fell, trailed by the remaining tendrils of electricity that desired to follow. She was now in free fall. The ground steadily rose up to meet her head on, but she remained calm. Closer and closer it came with startling speed. Almost there. She could feel the tingle in her spine and the pins and needles in her muscles; the sensation of lightning coursed through her. It was primal and wild, waiting to be released upon the world. The green of the earth below grew ever closer, calling for her, singing her name...

Dang it, Scoot! Get up already, or we're gonna to be late!!!

Two cyan hooves found themselves jabbing into the side of the sleeping filly, receiving a loud oof from their recipient and a wide-eyed stare from the disconcerted stallion who stood beside their owner. Scootaloo looked up to see a pair of rosy eyes glaring down at her with impatience before the sudden realization washed over her. She hopped out of bed and shook off the remainders of sleep before giving her two visitors a wide smile.

Tyco laughed at his daughter's cheerful demeanor, "You look pretty happy. Good dream?" Scootaloo nodded enthusiastically and turned to her mentor who was groaning into a facehoof.

"Ugh, we don't have time for this! *Lets Go!*" she yelled as she hastily exited the room. Scootaloo ran to the doorway but stopped to give her father one last smile before following the cyan mare. She had almost accomplished his stunt in her dream. *She had almost called lightning.*

Scootaloo and Rainbow Dash arrived at the outskirts of Fillydelphia, just north of the Junior Speedsters track grounds. They landed among the general hubbub of the spectators and cantered along at a leisurely pace since they arrived with ample time to spare. A multitude of ponies greeted Scootaloo's eyes. The sundry assortment of colors mixed and swirled all around her.

The annual Wonderbolts tryouts used to be a private affair, until none other than Flyinn himself inspired the idea of holding them as a public spectacle; after all, if they can't perform in front of a crowd now, why even let them in? The auditions quickly exploded into a major commercial event

as ponies of all kinds made the journey in droves, eager to see the premiere of any upcoming Wonderbolts. Vendors and grocers of all facets of life set up camp on the sprawling countryside, ready to capitalize on such a massive congregation of potential customers. One particular businessmare recognized the duo as they walked through the bustling, makeshift marketplace.

“Well, golly, if it ain’t Rainbow Dash n’ Scootaloo,” Applejack hollered from behind her apple stand. The two pegasi turned in response to the greeting and gave their own to the orange earth pony. “Glad t’ see ya here,” she said in a merry tone while coming out to greet them face to face, “It’s great t’ see a friendly face aft’r all this here hard work.” She looked over her shoulder at the line that continued to grow in her absence. “Well, guess ah better be wish’n y’all good luck,” she said, giving Rainbow Dash a wink.

“Hah, thanks, but I don’t think I’ll be needing any of that,” Rainbow Dash replied, brushing off the gesture nonchalantly and receiving an eye roll from her friend. The resonating sound of a stallion’s voice through a megaphone reached the trio. “Oh, horseapples, I gotta go! Later!” The cyan mare took off in a blur towards the congregation of participants in the distance while Applejack and Scootaloo watched her go.

“All that confidence ain’t gonna do ‘er a lick o’ good if she’s late,” the farm pony chuckled. “Now, can ah get you anythin’ there, Scoot? she asked the little filly, putting her before the ever-growing line that stood impatiently awaiting service.

“Oh, um, no thanks. I’m not hungry,” she politely fibbed as a means of circumventing the issue of having no money on her. Her stomach belied the statement and attempted to obtain one of the succulent fruits by growling loudly, earning Scootaloo a level stare from the earth pony. “Uh, heh, really, I’m good,” she said quickly, giving Applejack a faltering smile while slowly backing away. “I’m gonna go watch Rainbow Dash. Bye!” She was glad to be away from the orange earth pony, even if it meant staying hungry. That mare’s southern hospitality was too much to handle at times.

Scootaloo momentarily found herself atop the soft fluff of a passing cloud. She sprawled out on the pillowy mass and snuggled into its soft

plush. The orange pegasus looked down from her floating bed and saw the contestants standing in a neat row. They stood twenty abreast in various states of concentration and anxiety, nervously awaiting the first part of their auditions. A whistle pierced the ears of everypony nearby, effectively earning the attention of contestant and crowd alike. The light blue stallion who had blown the whistle stood erect before the line of participants. Scootaloo could see he was talking to them. After a minute, he flew to his perch among the other Wonderbolts who sat on a cloud not far from her.

“On your mark,” came the clear voice of the stallion. Rainbow Dash looked up and saw the orange filly resting on the cloud above. “Set.” She gave her a grin and a slow salute before returning her attention to the space ahead. “Go!”

The competitors took off in a blaze, beginning the first of two phases in their auditions. The twenty participants raced through cloud rings and markers, following the path that twisted and turned obliquely to test their speed, precision, and agility. Scootaloo had never witnessed a race of this caliber. The course looped and dove; it pivoted and contorted, like a maze in the sky, a labyrinth of cloud and atmosphere. To the credit of the racers, every single one of them followed it without confusion or hesitation, flying with immeasurable tenacity.

They passed her in a rush of speed, dangerously close, blurred by their sheer velocity. Scootaloo felt the powerful draft of atmospheric displacement and subsequent pull of the vacuum left in their wake. She watched as they put a great distance between her and them within seconds. The group pulled upward and ascended toward the last leg of the course. She spotted her mentor’s prismatic mane at the head of the pack, and her heart pounded with a mixture of joy and anxiety.

Rainbow Dash kept her lead to the peak of their ascent, if only barely. After passing through the final cloud ring, she looped backward into a dive towards the finish line, neck and neck with three other pegasi. Scootaloo watched while her heart raced. The four leaders barrelled towards the finish line, straining for first. The little filly trembled with the fear that Rainbow Dash might not win, until she saw something that quelled these thoughts instantly. For a split second, the cyan mare glanced her way and grinned.

As if fired from the barrel of a gun, Rainbow Dash surged forward, almost effortlessly, and claimed a significant lead. The familiar ethereal barrier formed around her and narrowed as she continued to leave her competitors in the dust. She wanted to, she really did, just shove it in their faces and prove she was on a completely different level, but she refrained; it would have a bigger impact in the next part, anyways.

Rainbow Dash crossed the finish line without any nearby competition. She alighted on the grass and cantered whimsically toward the water cooler, as if simply out on a mid-morning stroll. After a quick sip of water, she looked up with a cool smile at the orange filly who beamed down at her.

The second part of the Wonderbolts tryouts began shortly thereafter, subjecting each participant to their own daring and imagination. A simple order was given to the pegasi: 'Wow us.'

One by one, the contestants had their chance to strut their stuff and sum up their talent in a single, mind-blowing stunt. Some were brash and forceful, powering through thunderstorms made from the clouds at their disposal, while others took a more graceful approach, showing off more agility and endurance in their displays.

Naturally, Rainbow Dash deferred to go last, given the choice since she won the first phase of the auditions; the last spectacle is always the first on one's mind after a show.

The cyan mare flew high into the sapphire dome, swelled with the confidence from her initial victory. She reached the altitude required and looked below. The mare grinned when she saw the little filly staring up in anticipation. Scootaloo had never seen her perform the Sonic Rainboom before, and it gave her a jittery feeling to know she was about to make this the best day of her life. Filled with assurance and a familial conviction, the cyan mare dove.

Scootaloo watched as her mentor accelerated towards the ground. She fell faster and faster, earning gasps of shock from the crowd below. The little filly held her breath, yearning for the inevitable. The cone formed around Rainbow Dash as she strained against it. It narrowed, enveloping her slender figure.

The air exploded violently, and a prism of colors emanated in every direction. The prismatic ring filled the sky with its splendor. Scootaloo's jaw dropped, as did many others. She felt a gust of wind as a rainbow trailed downward, mere inches from her face, bold even in its residual power.

She followed the rainbow with her eyes and saw the parabolic shape created by none other than the mare she looked up to with such fervor. The little pegasus could hardly believe her eyes; she had witnessed a Sonic Rainboom.

Raucous cheers rode on the coattails of shock and awe, giving Rainbow Dash the praise and applause such an impressive feat rightfully deserved. She landed on the soft grass and circled around, taking in the admiration that gushed forth from the crowd like a flood. The mare looked up to the little orange pegasus and returned her gaping smile with a sly wink.

=====

Two days later, Scootaloo awoke to begin a brand new day. The little filly, now used to waking at the crack of dawn, hopped out of bed with an unusual burst of energy. Her mentor's spunk was really rubbing off on her. She walked out of her room with a light skip, eager to get her morning flight out of the way and meet up with her friends for some summertime crusading. She headed to the oak door and opened the wooden portal to an unexpected sight.

Standing on the doorstep of the house was a lean figure clad in blue. It stood gallantly, glancing down at the little filly with a wide grin. Scootaloo saw the cyan hooves, the rosy eyes, and the prismatic mane beneath the grand azure, but the significance of the mare's regalia took a moment to register. When it clicked, the filly's already astounded gaze doubled in size.

Words were unnecessary.

She joyfully tackled the Wonderbolt, who fell over backwards in the little one's display of exuberance. The mare returned the gesture, hugging

Scotaloo with both forehooves and wings while laughing all the same. Tyco appeared in the door frame to investigate the sudden noise, but smiled and quietly backed away so as to not interrupt the moment.

The two's merriment subsided as they got to their hooves. They exchanged smiles, Rainbow Dash's filled with elation, while Scotaloo's was melancholy, reminiscent of her earlier worries. The cyan mare noticed the sadness that pervaded the filly's face and understood the reason for her despondency. Rainbow Dash lifted the little pegasus' chin with her hoof and gave her an affectionate smile.

"Hey, this doesn't mean I'll be gone forever," she said compassionately. Scotaloo looked at the ground. She knew Rainbow Dash's words were true, but it didn't help the fact that she wouldn't be around as much, if barely at all.

"B-but I just want to be with you, I don't want you to go!" Scotaloo pleaded.

"Scoot, I know it's hard, but we all have to grow up," Rainbow Dash said, ruffling the filly's mane. "Can you do that for me?"

Scotaloo gave the mare a smile through the tears that formed in her eyes, "Of course, I'll grow up to be just like you!"

Rainbow Dash laughed softly at the little one's enthusiasm, "No you won't. You're not gonna grow up to be some dumb old Rainbow Dash, you're gonna grow up to be Scotaloo, *The Scotaloo*, the best flier in all of Equestria." At this, the little filly cried freely and hugged the pegasus with all her might.

"I love you, mom."

Rainbow Dash, though taken aback by the sudden release of emotions, took the magnitude of Scotaloo's devotion in stride. She had no idea the little filly looked up to her that way. Suddenly, it all fit. The idolization turned respect, the filly's insatiable desire to gain her approval, and all the time Scotaloo spent with her, wanting nothing more than to be at her side. In the absence of a true motherly figure, she had come to embody the relationship the filly never possessed. It all made sense, and

the thought of being regarded with such esteem brought tears to her eyes. All she could do was gently return the hug and will herself not to cry.

Spitfire landed a few meters back, awaiting the cyan mare. Rainbow Dash took note of the yellow pegasus and, after a final, passionate squeeze, released the orange filly to give her one last word of advice. "Just remember one thing...when you think you've got nothing left," she nodded while looking behind Scootaloo, directing the filly's gaze towards the orange figure in the doorway, "you do."

Scootaloo turned back to see Rainbow Dash ascending into the sky. The cyan mare looked over her shoulder and grinned. "One month!" she yelled, giving the orange filly a salute before taking off into the distance. Despite the sadness that dwelt in her stomach, Scootaloo couldn't help but smile as she watched the duo shrink away.

One month, she thought, I'll be there. Her smile slowly turned into a grin, *And you better be ready.*

=====

The month passed as if it were mere days. Scootaloo, though disheartened her mentor was no longer around, kept to her training regiment. She worked hard every day, toiling under both sun and moon to meet Rainbow Dash's expectations. Before she knew it, the day had arrived.

With many well wishes from her father, Scootaloo set out towards the floating metropolis. She arrived in good time and was met with the wondrous sight of the Cloudiseum. She flew to the gates and followed the stream of pegasi who also made the monolithic structure their destination. Scootaloo made it through the gates and on to the competitor's waiting area, where she was given a number and received multiple stares from the others. She felt the attention bear down upon her, all of which she knew was attributed to her youth. Scootaloo felt out of place amidst the older pegasi, an outcast among her kind.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," came a familiar voice, "and don't mind them, they're all just nervous." Scootaloo turned and saw a dark orange pegasus smiling her way. Her yellow and red mane fell about her

shoulders in a sheath of flame. Scootaloo returned the smile, glad to see sompony she recognized. "I heard your trainer made it into the Wonderbolts, that's pretty sweet." she said with genuine interest.

"Yea, and today, I'm gonna spend all day with her!" Scootaloo replied with the brash tone of her mentor.

"Heh, not if I've got something to say about it," Pyra said with a hint of pride. "Ever since you beat me that day, I've been waiting to even the score." Scootaloo grinned at her statement, glad to see she was both magnanimous and as eager to win as she was. She felt a connection between them, a link. It tethered the two, binding them together, a true sense of mutual rivalry.

"Oh-kay, contestant numba wan, you're up!" came the nasally voice of the orange-maned director. A white colt perked up at the mention of his number and hastily ran to the curtain. Scootaloo looked at her flank, *thirteen*.

"Hey, would you look at that," Pyra said, following the filly's gaze. "You're right before me." Scootaloo looked at the fiery pegasus' number. Sure enough, there was a bold, black fourteen partially covering her cutie mark. "Better give me something good to beat," she said with a sly grin.

Contestant after contestant left through the curtain, and the sound of cheers could be heard intermittently. Scootaloo felt the familiar knot form in her stomach as the numbers rose into the double digits. She shivered with anxiety at the thought of performing in front of a crowd.

Get a hold of yourself, she thought, you sang your heart out to Ponyville without even flinching! Scootaloo heard the nasally voice call her number, but she felt rooted in place. A hoof rested itself upon her shoulder.

"Hey, kick some flank, you got this," Pyra said, forcing a smile on the filly's face. Scootaloo closed her eyes and felt the creeping doubt release its grip. She focused her mind on Rainbow Dash and the wonderful day ahead. A whole day with her mentor after all this time apart...

She opened her eyes and boldly walked towards the curtain. Scootaloo pushed it aside and stepped out into the dazzling sunlight and

the cacophony of the stadium, ready to show her master a month's worth of dedication.

=====

The normal buzz of city life was audible among the clouds that nestled in the sky. The populace of Cloudsdale went about their business in bliss, carefree of worry. The sun shone with all its regal beauty upon the fair city and the many youthful competitors that now departed the Cloudiseum. Such a splendid day unraveled around the little orange pegasus who sat on her haunches, leaning against the soft fluff of the arena's exterior. Her face was gloomy, filled with contemplation of recent events. She looked up at the sun where it sat at its zenith, shining its peaceful rays down on her, mocking her with its wanton benevolence.

Scotaloo sighed and lowered her gaze to the cloud at her hooves. The afterimage of the golden orb lingered in her sight for a few minutes, dancing about in the center of her vision.

I lost, she thought to herself, *I lost to her*. The image of Pyra came to mind. The performance she gave was absolutely spectacular compared to her own. Even if she wouldn't have messed up her tornado stunt, there was no way she could have outdone *that*. The thought of her rival's performance flashed before her. *She set a cloud ablaze...how the hay did she even do that?*

A shadow passed over Scotaloo and interrupted her thoughts. She looked up to see the silhouette of her long lost mentor who landed a few meters away, clad in the blue of her Wonderbolts uniform. The cyan mare wore her yellow goggles around her neck, and her face was free of the flight suit's balaclava, which rested on her nape like an unworn hood. She was a truly marvelous sight to behold.

Scotaloo saw the figures of Spitfire, Soarin, and Pyra alight in the distance to give the two some privacy. Though she had lost the competition, Scotaloo's heart soared at the prospect of speaking to the cyan mare. It had been a month since her fateful farewell, and the little filly wanted nothing more than to tackle Rainbow Dash in a loving embrace, just like she did on that day so long ago. She ran to her mentor, to the maternal figure that stood stoically before her. She laughed as fond

memories welled to the surface of her thoughts, drowning out the sadness that had recently occupied her mind. Nothing but the thought of Rainbow Dash's love dwelt in the recesses of her brain.

"Go home, Scoot."

Scootaloo stopped dead, and her heart skipped a beat. She gazed up at the figure of the cyan equine and saw her gleaming, rosy eyes, but her face was hard, as if cut from stone. "Go home," she repeated in her level tone. "You aren't good enough," Rainbow Dash said, turning to leave.

Scootaloo stood there, trembling in consternation. The voice of her mentor resounded within her skull. She heard every word that came forth from the mare's lips, but she could hardly believe them. She watched the pegasus slowly walk away. Rainbow Dash stopped short of the trio and turned her head, looking at the ground. "You never were."

Without a compassionate goodbye, a sliver of remorse, or any sort of recompense, Rainbow Dash took to the skies, followed closely by her three companions. Scootaloo watched the prismatic mane shrink into the distance. The last utterance pierced her heart like a spear, and left her shattered. Quietly, Scootaloo slumped down to her haunches and wept.

Chapter 7

Scotaloo flew home in the direction of Ponyville. She flew silently among the clouds, admiring their insouciant existence. She wished she could become one and just float away, carefree and indifferent to the world around her. There would be no hard work, no grueling training regiment. She wouldn't have to worry about being a blank flank. And most importantly, there would be no concern for Rainbow Dash and her heartlessness.

Rainbow Dash.

Fresh tears welled up in Scootaloo's eyes at the thought of the cyan mare, of the figure she had come to regard maternally. The one she had come so close to in the last few months; the very one who had torn her heart to shreds. She could feel the chill of the wind against her face where the tears stole the warmth from her cheeks. It felt cold...so very cold.

Scotaloo cried as she flew, and her tears fell into nothingness below, into the gaping void that consumed her heart. They disappeared amidst the clouds, infinitesimally small in size, a drop in the bucket, a molecule within the sea of a cruel and unforgiving life. She watched them fall. They fell like diamonds and sparkled in the afternoon sun. They held all her joy and washed away her happiness. They stole her treasured memories and descended far below. Downward they fell, down into the depths of depression, and vanished in the distance.

She wished she could do the same, just fall and succumb to the simplicity of gravity, be free of the voice that echoed within her skull and feel at peace.

Go home, Scoot. Go home. You aren't good enough. You never were...

The image of Rainbow Dash came to mind. The resplendent figure stood before her, wrapped in the blue garb of her uniform. The mare's face was burned into her memory. Those gleaming eyes, set within her stony

complexion, tormented the filly. *Her eyes gleamed as she shattered her and took away every ounce of happiness.* The same eyes that used to look down upon her with love. It was as if she took pride in breaking her.

Just remember one thing...when you think you've got nothing left, you do.

Scotaloo thought of her father, of the stallion who had comforted her in her confusion and sadness that night long ago. His smile danced before her, a happy memory of another profound relationship in her life; one that could never be destroyed. She smiled for the first time since Rainbow Dash's rejection and set her heart on returning home to her father's warm embrace.

Scotaloo reached the outskirts of Ponyville within the hour. Her mind had wandered down dark corridors of her thoughts once more as she flew in silence above the world. She lingered on the events of the Best Young Fliers Competition, and how it had to be the source of her fall from grace. Presently, the soft, sweet sound of music rose up from the hillock on the southern side of town. It was a melancholy tune, carried aloft by the mellifluous voice that produced it. It enchanted the little filly. The song soothed the tumultuous sea within her heart and wrapped her in its arms. She felt calmed by the peaceful melody, and felt as if it were calling to her. The orange pegasus searched for the source of the voice and descended upon finding it.

Scotaloo landed among many residents of the town who were engaged in listening to the beautiful voice. The orange filly walked between the multitudes who made camp on the green lawn and sat down in front of the stage beside another filly wearing a large pink bow. Applebloom acknowledged the presence of her friend, but was too enthralled in the scene before her to give the pegasus a proper greeting. Scotaloo didn't need one, however, for she was now even more entranced by the voice of the little white unicorn that called her from the skies.

*You may leave,
Leave it all behind.
You may leave,
And watch me crash down from the sky.
But there is one thing you should know,*

*That when the grass begins to grow,
I'll be waiting,
Waiting to come home...*

*When the night and darkness come around,
And my fears appear and swell abound,
Tears will fall,
As you build this wall,
But I'll be waiting,
Waiting for your return.*

*And while the shadows of tomorrow,
May seem dark and gloomy now,
I know that if I keep you close at heart,
To us all the world will bow,*

*And when I see you standing there so tall,
So gallant in the wind...*

*Though storm and sea may howl,
And the terrors creep and prowl.*

I'll be waiting...

*I will trust in you,
And you will be my Way.*

Scotaloo felt a familiar warmth moisten her cheeks as she listened to the sad melody. Though it echoed the somber thoughts and feelings that plagued her, the tune cradled her heart and comforted her immensely.

The crowd stomped their hooves in applause as Sweetie Belle shyly exited the stage and met up with her friends. Applebloom and Scotaloo each gave their friend a warm round of congratulations.

“Wow, Sweetie Belle, that was amazing!” Scotaloo said, having momentarily forgotten her own worries. “Did you come up with that song on your own?”

“Yea, kinda.” the unicorn replied, blushing.

“You really are an amazin’ singer,” the little yellow earth pony said, “no wonder you got that there what-cha-ma-call-it as yer cutie mark.” she finished, pointing to the black treble clef on Sweetie Belle’s flank.

Sweetie Belle blushed even more at their unwanted attention and quickly tried to change the subject.

“Hey, Scoot, how did your competition go? Did you win?” At that question, the cheery mood set by the unicorn’s peaceful melody immediately burst. Scootaloo slumped down to her haunches despondently.

“Whoa, what’s wrong, Scoot?” Applebloom asked.

“N-nothing...don’t worry about it,” she replied, turning her head. The last thing she wanted was to burden her friends with her troubles, or worse, garner their pity. Applebloom affixed the orange pegasus with a stare, if there was one thing she learned from her big sister, it was when somepony was keeping a secret.

“‘Nothin’? Horseapples, sumthin’s wrong. What happened? You can tell us, Cutie Mark Crusaders forever!” she added, giving the orange filly a friendly nudge. Scootaloo looked between the two. She could see the genuine worry in their faces. She hesitated, and then sighed.

“I saw Rainbow Dash today,” she began, earning excited smiles from her friends, “but...she wasn’t happy to see me.” At this, the smiles quickly faded and were replaced with confusion.

“Well wah in the hay wouldn’t she be happy t’ see you?” Applebloom asked.

“B-because...because I’m not good enough,” Scootaloo answered after a short pause, “I never was.”

“Wha-how could she even think that? What about all them shiny medals you showed us? Shoot, she was practically yer big sister!” Scootaloo winced at the remark. She didn’t know the half of it. The little earth filly couldn’t comprehend the level of familial adoration she had for

the cyan mare. Applebloom's words of incredulity only deepened her depression. She turned to leave the duo, intent on not dumping her worries and troubles on their shoulders.

"Scootaloo," came the soft, tremulous voice of Sweetie Belle. The orange filly looked back at the white unicorn. Her face was filled with sympathy and compassion, and her eyes were glazed with a film of tears. Scootaloo couldn't muster the strength to look either of them in the eyes any longer. She took flight without another word and left for home.

The filly arrived at her doorstep and burst through the oak door. She rushed to her bedroom and catapulted herself upon the mattress. Scootaloo cried her heart out into the pillow and let the grief wash over her anew.

She didn't know how long she cried, but it made her feel better. It felt good to cry, to release her emotions into her pillow. It absorbed her tears, taking in her sadness; it understood, and was willing to do its part. Such a simple object, yet so comforting when she needed it most.

Scootaloo felt a hoof softly brush her mane, and she turned to search for its owner. Her father stood at her bedside with a concerned look upon his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked with a voice to match his complexion. Scootaloo looked him in the eyes. His fatherly gaze pierced the veil of solitude and opened the floodgates. The little filly dove into his chest and recounted everything, down to the smallest detail.

Tyco listened patiently. He didn't interrupt the filly, save to get her a handkerchief. At the end of her story, the stallion wiped the tears from her face with the white linen.

He sat in contemplation for a few moments before motioning for Scootaloo to follow him. She dragged her pillow with them across the hall where he then nodded towards his bed, upon which the little filly climbed with the tear-stained object and turned to see what her father was doing. Tyco walked to the bookcase on the far end of the room and removed a thick, old leather-bound book from the middle shelf. The book itself was ragged and well-worn. Its binding had seen better days, and it was easily

visible that, even though the book was closed, the pages had stood against harsh and unforgiving conditions. Tyco gently laid the book on his bed and gazed at it with reverence. Scootaloo looked at her father with revulsion, even she knew where leather came from.

“The gryphons may be a little savage,” he said, answering her look of disgust, “and much less culturally sensitive than us ponyfolk, but that never stopped them from appreciating great literature.” Scootaloo, though now understanding of the book’s origins, was still unsettled by the fact that the binding of this ‘great literature’ used to be a sentient being.

Tyco opened the decrepit book to the title page where glyphs of an unknown language peered up at the filly, chaotic and ferocious. “The Embodiment of Perfection, by Duskbreaker,” he translated. “This is the first book I ever willfully read cover to cover. I found it as a colt, and I’ve kept it ever since.” Scootaloo looked up to her father. She saw tears form in his light orange eyes before he blinked them away.

“I learned to read the language of the gryphons because of this book. It helped me through the hardest times of my life. It has always been there for me, and I’ve never forgotten that. Now,” he turned to his daughter, “it will help you in your time of need.

The book itself is too long for one afternoon, but there is one part in it that pertains to how you feel.” Tyco flipped religiously through the pages, careful not to damage the yellowed and aging parchment. He stopped just past the middle and began to read the jagged talon-scrrawl in a soft voice.

*“The greatest of stallions is not brash and hasty,
Nor is he the mighty warrior, the victor of the bloodiest of battles.
He is the humble, the contemplative.
Calculating in design and steadfast of mind.
He follows in the hoofsteps of the greatest before him:*

*He builds his castle upon solid ground;
It does not falter to the storm.
He raises his banner to the wind;
It transmits his chivalry afar.
He fills his walls with the strongest of stallions;
His castle is impenetrable.*

*His gate is wide and sturdy;
Strong to enemies, but open to friends.
He lights many torches within,
So he may find his way in the dead of night.*

So, too, I have built my life:

*When my castle sank into the bog,
I rebuilt another on the mountainside.
When my banner was pitiful and filled with shame,
I cast it aside and fashioned a new one.
When my walls were filled with the weak and lazy,
I disciplined them.
When my gate was small and frail,
I reforged and expanded it.
When my castle was dark and dank,
I lit a candle to defeat the abyss.*

So, too, should you build your life:

*Build your castle upon the foundation of trust.
Weave a banner of pride, so that it can flutter in the breeze of
prosperity.
Fill your life with knowledge, defend against rumor and doubt.
Keep your mind open: cultivate friendship, abhor enmity.
Pursue your dreams;
For without them, you are doomed to wander aimlessly,
Damned from the paradise around you.”*

Tyco closed the book and allowed silence to reign. Scootaloo looked up at her father with a hint of confusion.

The hay is that supposed to mean? Scootaloo thought to herself.

“Build your castle upon the foundation of trust,” Tyco said, expecting the look the little filly gave him. “You built yours upon your affection for Rainbow Dash. ‘Pursue your dreams,’” he looked Scootaloo in the eyes. “Yours were to become as great as her, correct?” Scootaloo nodded, still unsure of where his train of thought was going. “And and if what you said earlier is true, then she dashed them to pieces.”

Scotaloo hung her head in sorrow as the dark thoughts came back. Tyco noticed this and took it as an affirmative to his statement. "What she did to you was inexcusable, but while it may hurt inside," he said with a faint smile and a soft hoof upon her shoulder, "I'm sure there was a good reason for it. Sometimes," he thought quietly for a moment, "sometimes, you have to break a foundation, in order to strengthen it."

Though the meaning of her father's last sentence was lost upon her, Scotaloo felt better with his reassurance and decided to hide the remainder of her confusion and sadness. She suppressed the melancholy thoughts and gave her father a quiet and appreciative smile.

The stallion was going to say more but was interrupted by the filly who launched herself into his chest with a tight embrace. They sat there for untold minutes, father and daughter entwined in tranquil emotion. She felt better, rejuvenated by her father's bountiful wisdom. Tyco released the filly from his grasp and looked her in the eyes with empathy.

"You've been through a lot today," he said, stroking her mane once more. "How about we go down to Sugarcube Corner and get something nice?"

The orange duo made their way toward the confectionery in a bubbly manner. Scotaloo had all but forgotten her earlier troubles and worries, and was now skipping beside her father, who shared her enthusiasm. They passed through the town square where many residents of the town gathered and relished the warm summer afternoon. They weaved through the bustling streets, dodging the many pedestrians and foals enjoying their playtime. It was a merry day in Ponyville, but that didn't matter. The only thing that was of any concern to the little filly trotted alongside her.

She looked up to the stallion who returned her gaze. Scotaloo laughed, thinking of all the wonderful moments she had shared with her father. She lengthened her stride in her excitement and skipped along without a care in the world, just her and the one pony in all of Equestria that would never abandon her.

"Scoot, watch out!"

In her reverie, Scootaloo didn't pay attention to where she was going. She heard her father's warning, and came to in time to see the shiny lapel her face would soon become very intimate with. Scootaloo ran into the chest of a passing stallion and fell over backwards. After collecting her bearings, she gazed up at the large figure with whom she had collided.

In all, there were three stallions, each dressed in stately attire, making their way towards the town hall in a dignified manner. Two of which flanked and, as far as the filly could tell, appeared to be assistants to the stallion between them, the one she had run into.

"Watch where you're going, don't they teach you foals manners in this backwater town?" the stallion said irritably, causing a small crowd to form around the commotion.

"I apologize for that, sir, she'll be more careful next time," Tyco replied, cantering up to the three visitors. The stallion glanced at the orange pegasus, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"I know you," he said, "You're that Wonderbolt who resigned almost twelve years ago. 'The Fallen Angel' they called you, after what you did." He looked down to the filly that lay on her back, still gazing curiously up at the aristocrat. "And it seems you've fallen further than they ever imagined."

Scootaloo shot up and stood beside her father, who was taken aback by the sudden insult. She gave the stallion a harsh glare, one he returned with a façade of magnanimity.

"Excuse me?" Tyco replied incredulously.

"This is your daughter, I assume? That means you wed the mare you ran away with, and that harlot had a daughter before she left you." Tyco's face turned hard as the stallion spoke. "That scandal was all over the news. She ran from her problems like she always did. That's all she could ever do. She ran away, leaving you with her burden and the shame of your brash decision. Did you hear what happened? They found her last year, face down in a puddle of mud. The whore got what she deser-"

He never had a chance to finish his sentence. Scootaloo launched herself at the stallion in a blind rage, eliciting gasps from the many

onlookers. She tackled the stallion to the ground, taking advantage of his inattention to make up for the vast size deficit. She heard the cries of the bystanders and her father as she bit and kicked at her victim, but she shut them out. No pony desecrates the immaculate image she had come to create of her mother. No pony.

Before Scootaloo could release the fury that raged within, Tyco ripped her from the stallion before his assistants could react and defensively slid her behind himself in one swift motion. The aristocrat got to his hooves and stormed toward the little filly with fire in his eyes.

“How dare you atta-”

An orange wing flapped open between him and Scootaloo, blocking his view of the little pegasus like a curtain.

“If you try and touch her,” Tyco said in a low but stern voice, “I *will* kill you.” The aristocrat met the orange stallion’s gaze and saw the bloodlust in his eyes, placid and calm, patiently awaiting his next move, ready to strike without hesitation if he dared harm his daughter, regardless of the odds stacked against him. It was no bluff; there was no doubt in his mind that the pegasus would fulfill his promise.

He faltered under the piercing glare of death itself, but quickly hefted his shoulders and raised his head as if to brush off the threat like a common insult, a futile attempt to retain his pride.

“Hmph. The mayor will be hearing about this as well,” he said in as calm a manner as possible after the visions of his life subsided.

“Then she will,” Tyco replied in a similar tone, refurling his open wing. Still eying him intently, he motioned the aristocrat and his subordinates in the direction of the town hall and escorted them there. Scootaloo began to follow before she was stopped by her father. “I’ll take care of this, don’t worry,” he said softly over his shoulder.

“But I want to come, too,” she said in an almost pleading tone.

“No, let me take care of this.” The filly tried to interject, but was interrupted with a stern directive. “No. Go home, Scoot.”

Go home, Scoot.

Those three simple words hit her like a train. The memories of that morning returned like a tidal wave. She watched her father walk away, oblivious to the nerve he had struck so violently. Scootaloo's vision blurred behind a wall of tears, fresh from the newly salted wound. She flew home dumbly, blind to her surroundings, drowning in her sorrow. She leapt upon her bed and cried her heart out into the pillow once more.

Scootaloo released her sadness into the pillow for an hour. She trembled as she cried, unable to contain the grief to mere sobs. It stung at her and rent her soul asunder. Sweetie Belle's song came to mind, but did nothing to comfort her. The melancholy tune played in her head, soft and sweet, but it only served to further isolate her from the joy of her friendships.

She thought of her father's story. *He builds his castle on solid ground; It does not falter to the storm.* She had built her castle upon the love of Rainbow Dash and the absolute, unwavering trust she had for her, the mare that embodied perfection, but it had faltered regardless. The cyan pegasus had shattered the foundation upon which she built her life, the very essence of her aspirations. Rainbow Dash had destroyed her, and in her manic depression, she could see nothing else to rebuild upon. A profound hopelessness engulfed her, and she could no longer withstand the torture.

Scootaloo looked about her room, at the ordered chaos that held the elements of her life. The rusted scooter leant stoically against the wall beside the window sill, effulgent in the afternoon sunlight that peered in from the panes above. Thoughts of her adventures with the little machine resurfaced, delightful and joyous. She eyed the wide assortment of medals and ribbons that adorned her dresser and bedposts, trophies of a happier time and souvenirs that begot the true prize of her endeavors; a prize that would never grace her life again.

The thought of leaving a note crossed her mind, a means of explanation, a release of her worries. She thought of her father's reaction, and tears welled up in her eyes at the prospect. There were no words to express her anguish.

As a final gesture of ironic piety, the filly neatly made her bed, just as her father always vainly asked of her. She somberly walked out the door and into the stale Sunday afternoon.

Scootaloo didn't return home that evening, nor the morning after.

Chapter 8

Scootaloo walked through the streets of Ponyville in a daze. She solemnly weaved through the crowds with her head hung low in defeat. The cheerful noises about her were muffled, muffled beneath the pressure of depression and mental solitude. Her heartbeat pounded in her head, the only means by which she knew life still coursed through her; a life she wished would have never come to pass.

Scootaloo looked up at the evening sun that now licked the western horizon. The light of the great orb reflected its rays off the many surfaces surrounding her, reminding her of the shimmer of Rainbow Dash's goggles. She sighed as she thought of the cyan mare and her final words.

You aren't good enough...

It repeated itself infinitely, and her misery only served to add to it. *You aren't good enough for her. You never were. Go home...you're worthless.* She lowered her gaze to the dirt at her hooves and closed her eyes to hold back the tears.

"Mommy, mommy! Look what I can do!"

Scootaloo turned in the direction of the foal's endearing voice. She saw the filly, no older than five, balancing on her hind legs. She wobbled about for a few seconds before falling on her back and giggling up at the smiling face of her mother. Scootaloo stood there and watched the two, longing for the true maternal love the little filly presently basked in. She got up and began to hop and skip circles around her mother, laughing all the while. The scene was too much for her. Scootaloo took flight, away from the joyous couple, and flew high above Ponyville.

She flew across town, watching its residents take shelter in their homes as the sun disappeared to make way for Luna's splendor. The night quickly set in, shrouding the earth in peaceful obscurity, but Scootaloo continued to fly, unfazed by the darkness. It took her mind off the depression; one last attempt to console herself.

Small lights peered up at her from the many houses below. The little squares of light that came from the tiny windows looked warm and inviting. She imagined the many families that lived within, bountiful in familial endearment. She thought of the many foals in their beds tucked in by their mothers, by the mares that reared them; the ones that would never abandon their young.

Before realizing the distance she had traveled in her rumination, Scootaloo found herself over the grassy meadow along the edge of the Everfree Forest where she had first practiced her tornado stunt. She alighted on a stationary cloud that sat lonesomely above and mulled over the dreadful idea that had formulated in her head earlier that day.

=====

Scootaloo sat atop the small white cloud and gazed up at the tapestry spread above her in all directions. She was utterly captivated. Each and every star glinted independently like little diamonds, casting their soft light down upon the earth. It was beautiful.

Thoughts of that night long ago resurfaced. She thought of her father's heartwarming story and of the mysterious mare that was her mother. The photo appeared before her. She saw the breathtaking face, silent and unmoving behind the worn glaze of laminate. The image in her mind's eye was awe-inspiring, but it was overpowered by the splendid display above. Her mother was not locked within some aged and withering photograph; she was here, immortal and sacrosanct, in the vast ocean of mysteries: the star-lit sky.

Scootaloo had never before felt such an intimate connection. Physically, Starshine was a stranger to her, present for no more than a day of her life, yet she sensed such an astounding familial bond regardless of that fact. It was as if she were right there, gazing down on her. She felt the mare's presence around her, here in the quiet solitude of night, and she knew where this feeling came from. Her mother was among the stars. No, her mother was the stars, **is** the stars.

Her shimmering mane was all about, midnight blue, bejeweled by the endless majesty of the heavens. Her eye shone down regally, haloed by

the illuminated haze of the atmosphere. She watched the eye arc through the sky as it inspected its progeny with love. She felt at peace.

They found her, face down in a puddle of mud.

The mental depiction flashed in her mind. The flawless mane, muddied and caked with dirt. Her face, marred by the cruelties of life, stared at her lifelessly, dead and soulless.

The seed of corruption grew exponentially and swallowed her whole. The Trojan horse had done its job, and the swarm of horrific memories overran her thoughts like locusts.

Blank flank. Go home. You're not good enough. Your kind begets nothing. Go home, Scoot. You're worthless. Watch me crash down from the sky. I lost. Where's mom? You never were. She was practically yer big sister! Tears will fall. The whore got what she deserved...

Suddenly, her mind went blank, unable to withstand the onslaught. She let out a small shudder and looked up at the white sphere. A tear shimmered in its soft glow, and Scootaloo whispered softly to the moonlight, barely audible over the still night air.

"Mom...I'm coming home."

And with that, she fell.

There was no trumpet call, no glorious sound of triumph over her tribulations, nor any cry for mercy, all she could hear was the rush of the wind and the beating of her heart. She fell supine, wishing for one final glimpse of the nighttime sky. It had never looked so magnificent: the stars shone brighter than ever before, pulsing incandescently like distant lanterns in the dark; the moon emitted a deeper fluorescence, aglow with all the radiant passion it could muster; and the navy blue backdrop sang with the perfection of untold millennia, unparalleled in its aesthetic excellence...one last hurrah in honor of the life that would soon leave this world.

She watched in peaceful silence as her mother danced before her. She could see the twinkle in her eye, the sweep of her curling mane as she cantered among the stars, and hear the soft sway of her voice; it was as

beautiful as her father had described, and she smiled as her body hurtled violently toward its fate. She was going to meet her soon, meet the mare she so longed to love and hold. She saw her tears fly up from her face, too light to match her speed, and rest among the stars above.

Are we ready to get our cutie marks, ponies? READY!

She laughed at the thought of her and her friends' antics, and their avid search for their special talents. How obvious they were in hindsight...such simple talents, hidden right under their noses. She thought of the zeal with which they pursued them, and how they were always together, ready to support each other through thick and thin.

Cutie Mark Crusaders forever!

Her mind went further into the past, to the day she made her first friend. Sweetie Belle. Seven foals beleaguered a lone white filly. She could see the tears on the little unicorn's face and hear her cries. The angered shouts of the colt echoed aloud and reverberated in her mind. She remembered that fight vividly: the ambivalence, the fear, the determination. It felt like it was only yesterday she stood up to that bully.

You got a problem with blank flanks?

Applebloom. She remembered the look on her face as she was mocked by those two snobs at the canteena. It was the same one she herself wore back in Fillydelphia when her peers made fun of her, and seeing it on another was something she couldn't live with. Standing up to those two was a proud moment of her life. She never had an opportunity to get back at them until that day. Lo and behold, she made another great friend in the process. Looking back on it all, her life was paved with good fortune...

Her father cared for her since birth, alone against the world and all those that would judge them. She grew in his hoofsteps, always eager to please and reciprocate his affection. She thought of the house they moved into two years ago, of the multitude of boxes that occupied the living room; the cardboard that gave way to the warm interior that had greeted her every evening since. Its earthy furnishings swam around her. She could smell the kitchen and its many alluring aromas. She could taste the

vegetable stir-fry she ate the morning of her first race. Its scalding temperature was keen on her mind.

The first time she saw the humble abode arose in her thoughts. Sitting there on her father's back, she could see the great oak door, massive in stature once again. She heard the sound of the mayor's voice, followed by her father's...

A streak of rainbow colored the expanse above. She looked up in wonder at the figure: the cyan equine, the prismatic mane, those rosy eyes affixed with infinite concentration. She felt the ground quake beneath her, and stood up to see the same slender frame rising from the dust, glaring at the colt beside her. She felt the mare's hoof jab sharply against her flank and the nothingness beneath her own; she was flying again. Rainbow Dash's voice rang clear in all its vigor, crying out, urging her toward victory. The rush of adrenaline, that single, minute instant when she passed the fiery pegasus. She felt the warmth of the cyan mare's embrace about her, and she melted within it once more. She watched her leave, fly away into the distance to live her dreams and fulfill her destiny.

Just remember one thing...when you think you've got nothing left, you do.

Her father appeared, smiling down on her benevolently. She remembered his laugh, the joy he obtained from her exuberance and youthful energy. That full-bodied laugh. It contained no ill will, no underlying derision, no hint of paternal weariness. It was pure, unadulterated love; the love he held for Starshine, her mother. She was the last trace of her existence, the mare's only legacy to the world. She was the sole piece of the missing puzzle, the last remnant he had of his wife, and he poured his life into hers.

I've got you.

His voice called out to her softly and quietly, easily heard over the roaring wind.

My gem of gems. My light in the darkness. She could see her father's face clearly, patient and wise, as he said these words.

Your joy is the bulwark of my strength, the spring of my vitality, and the paint of my canvas. She could feel his gentle hooves upon her shoulders.

You are the source of my life, the center of my universe, forever and unconditionally. She could see his eyes, those light orange orbs that gleamed with pride like no other.

You are the candle in my heart that warms my soul. She felt the rhythm of his heartbeat, strong and steady from years of athletic endurance and passionate fidelity.

You are the cornerstone of my will, the foundation of my world. She saw his wing open protectively, defending her from the stallion that had defamed her mother's image.

I would endure a thousand years of hell for your sake. All the radiance of the sun cannot compare to how much I love you...

An orange stallion sat alone in the darkness. His head was bowed in mourning, and he trembled as tears quietly streamed down his face. His eyes were filled with horror, locked in place, unmoving from the dark and bloodied figure that lay broken at his hooves; *he* was broken.

Nothing can take that away from me.

All at once, the memories, the joy, the sadness, and the triumph rushed back upon her. They hit her like a wall, like lightning to a tree. Her friends, her father, *Rainbow Dash*. She would be gone from this world soon, leaving them behind in her selfishness. She thought of their reactions to her brash and irreversible decision. All their tear-stained faces looked down on her lifeless corpse with sorrow and pity. To tear herself from their love and leave them with nothing but a sad memory, a hollow shell of her true self, was too much to bear. It wasn't worth it.

Scotaloo righted herself and flared her wings to slow her descent. The ground was dangerously close, and she fell with immense speed. The filly began to hyperventilate as she strained against the fall. She could feel her muscles scream in agony at the sudden and extreme exertion. Without warning, her wings gave out to the upward pressure of the atmosphere and

fluttered uselessly above her. Fear gripped her heart and pulled her muscles taught. Every fiber of her being tensed in response to the panic that flowed through her and consumed her utterly. She saw the ground rise up to meet her like a nightmare, a terror from the bowels of hell itself, and the horror of the situation overwhelmed her. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and she saw no more.

Chapter 9

*Ringin*g. Soft, white ringin

g filled the air. It hummed patiently, singing its monotonous tune: unchanging, unrelenting, unloving. It cared not who heard its deathly hallowed call, only that it continued unabated, endlessly flowing, sonorous like the babble of a steady brook. It called forth into the depths of space, pervading everything. The noteless song became known to Scootaloo and spurred her mind into action.

Is this heaven? Is this the end? Where am I? Are you here, mom?

Pounding. A pulsing sensation beat within her skull, rhythmic and steadfast. She could feel the throbbing force hammer away at the insides of her head. She heard it keeping time with the eternal ringin

g, harmonizing with it eerily. It assaulted her her senses as if it were war drums: loud, thunderous, and painful.

Pain. If there was pain, then there was life...

Scootaloo opened her eyes and took in her surroundings. She lay upon the soft grass of the meadow. The wind blew gently across her face continued on to rustle the trees of the Everfree Forest not far from where she was. The ringin

g in her ears and the blur of her eyesight from the pounding in her head subsided to allow the quiet sights and sounds of the earth to take their rightful place. Crickets creaked their multitudinous melodies, and fireflies danced about, silently blinking in the expansive darkness. Scootaloo sighed deeply, relieved that she had survived her frightful endeavor. She stood on all fours and was met with a searing pain in her right hind leg. She lifted it off the ground and inspected it.

Sprained, she thought, relatively happy it wasn't serious. She carefully unfurled her wings to check on their condition. Fearing the worst, she flapped them cautiously. Other than being very ruffled and a little sore, they were perfectly functional.

Scootaloo looked toward Ponyville and saw the many glistening lights of the small town. She thought of returning home, but the image of her

father flashed in her mind: the orange stallion sitting there, broken beyond words by what she had almost done. The little filly shivered and tried to remove the thought from her head. She couldn't go back tonight, her conscience wouldn't allow it.

Scootaloo turned away from the luminous glow and hobbled gingerly toward the nearest tree. It was a large elm, and it stood resolute, ancient and old, alone in the meadow. She laid down beside the tree and felt a blunt pain spread across her underside. She rolled onto her back to escape the sudden, sharp discomfort and began examining her chest and stomach. In the dim glow of the full moon, she could make out large bruises covering the entirety of her underside; after all, she had fallen quite a distance. The little filly pushed these thoughts aside and gazed up at the stars to quell her returning sorrows and let time pass in silence.

=====

The star-studded sky was as present as ever. It still gazed down upon her as it did in her anguish, though it now softly carried her away from her troubles, like a raft on a calm and peaceful river. She stared at the shining quilt, fully content with the intimate but distant bond she shared with her mother. So close, yet so far away. Her mane twinkled and calmed the filly's breathing, pulling her from consciousness.

Scootaloo sat atop a soft white cloud. The earth stretched out endlessly below. She rested on her haunches, unable to move. The golden orb shone omnipotently into the sky and upon the rolling landscape, gilding everything with a heavenly sheen.

The sky transitioned to its true color, overpowering the sun's rays and filling the dome above with the majestic cyan hue it was known for. As the filly watched the scene, the sun began to set, sending streaks of orange through the sky to mingle and dance with the brilliant blue. It was a sight to behold.

Clouds formed and shrouded the sky from sight, low and suffocating, bathing the world in an ominous opacity. The world itself was now entirely covered in shadow, save a small pinprick of light far in the distance. An ocean appeared beneath her as the clouds released a torrential downpour. The darkness swirled and churned below, turbulent and chaotic.

Fear gripped the heart of the little filly as the waters rose. A humid warmth began to compress about her. She could feel the pressure of the atmosphere dampen and intensify, unbearably intolerable. The wetness moistened her complexion and formed beads that ran down her face. She couldn't stand it anymore.

Scotaloo opened her eyes to meet a small beady pair gazing into her own. She felt the warm breath of the creature upon her face like hot steam. As putrid as the stench was, the filly's mental faculties were more in tune with the massive stature of the figure that loomed over her. She had woken up...out of the frying pan and into the oven.

The large frame occupied the entirety of her sight. The tan of its fur and the red of its mane were muted by the darkened shadow it threw about her; all she could see were those two tiny eyes and the large maw abundant with razor-like fangs. Scotaloo whimpered as the significance of her situation dawned on her. Her pupils shrank to pinpricks and her lip quavered, desperately trying to release the voice that hid within.

Though not a creature found to habitually leave the gloom of the Everfree Forest, the monstrosity that stood over top the filly was lured out by the scent that wafted in from the meadow. The beast growled to match that of its stomach, and its deep bass rumbled through her, vibrating her heart and unlocking her voice box. She screamed as loud as her tiny body would allow.

The lion-like monster, startled by the sudden and extremely high-pitched cry, responded with its own, though low and thunderous. The filly rose to her hooves and attempted to run, but was halted by an intense pain in her hind leg. She fell to the ground in a heap, compounding the injuries and bruises of her underside, and began to hyperventilate.

This can't be happening. She turned to see the beast slowly walking toward her, dead set on its prize. Horror consumed the little pegasus, locking her wings at her sides, making her a prisoner of the earth and an easy meal for the winged lion that strode ever nearer. *It can't end like this, not now.*

Scootaloo limped backward away from death, prolonging the inevitable. Her wide-eyed gaze was fixed on the massive jaws of the beast, and a low, baritone growl emanated from the depths of the monster's throat. She felt the jaws of death close about her, and she let out one final scream of terror.

=====

An orange stallion galloped through the streets of Ponyville shouting the name of his progeny and inquiring of her whereabouts with the occasional pedestrian that happened to be out this late at night. His voice was harsh and raspy, dry from hours of searching in vain. There were others on the lookout as well, but nopony had heard or seen anything of the little filly since that afternoon.

Tyco stopped to catch his breath and looked around. He found himself on the western side of town. His face was ragged in the light of the streetlamp above him, and his hooves felt numb after the long hours of constant searching.

Damnit, Scoot, where the hell are you?

He looked in the window of a nearby house to discern if its residents were awake. With a muffled expletive, he turned away from the structure and began walking eastward toward the town hall thinking of possible areas he hadn't yet combed. He was abruptly shaken from his rumination when a faint but ear-shattering scream hit him from behind, followed by a thunderous roar. His blood ran cold and a shiver shot down his spine. Without a moment's hesitation, he rounded on his hooves and broke his vow of flightlessness.

Fear propelled him forward. Fear for his daughter, for Scootaloo; fear of the unknown. He strained the muscles that had remained dormant for more than a decade, and they screamed in protest to the work he forced upon them, but he gave them no heed. He surged on toward the source of the outcry and the succeeding roar. The outline of the forest grew rapidly, illuminated by the full moon.

Tyco discerned two figures standing near a large tree, one small and meager in comparison to its frightening counterpart. He could see what it

was, the monster that slowly crept toward the miniature frame, and his heart leapt into his throat. His mind raced a mile a minute as to why she would be way out here, but that didn't matter now, the only thing that mattered was that a three-ton manticore stood before his daughter, salivating.

The stallion surged with all his might, determined to intervene. He had no idea how he intended to face down the maned demon, but the second scream of terror clouded his thoughts. Instinct took the reigns.

An orange blur tackled the beast out of seemingly nowhere. Scootaloo stifled her cry in shock as the massive predator flew sideways, clean off its paws. She turned her head to see it roll and come to rest a few dozen meters to her left, accompanied by an unexpected sight. Her father quickly arose from the heap and righted himself between her and the manticore, wings flared in preparation for the monster's counter.

The beast stood on all fours and roared with a primal fury as it charged the stallion, aggravated that something would dare to come between it and its helpless prey. Scootaloo felt a lump form in her throat and her heart beat rampantly, fearing the worst of the events unfolding before her.

Much to the surprise of the filly, Tyco rushed headlong at the stampeding manticore. Just before the beast could strike, the stallion dodged leftward and, tenaciously using his wings for quick redirection, caught the underside of the monster's jaw in a staggering buck. He regained assured clear distance, narrowly avoiding a retaliatory swipe of its barbed tail.

With the three now forming a right triangle, the winged terror had a clear line of sight to its original prey, an opportunity it chose to take advantage of. The beast charged at the fear-rooted filly, and Scootaloo merely watched in a daze as the monster perspectively grew in size. Tyco dove at the manticore in an attempt to dissuade its course, but, without substantial momentum, it merely threw him off its back and gave him a solid paw swipe for good measure, sending him tumbling through the air and crashing hard into the trunk of the elm.

The manticore returned its attention back to Scootaloo who still trembled in place, unable to will herself to move. The beast moved to pounce on the filly when a bright yellow-orange light shot from Scootaloo's rightmost peripheral and collided with the ribcage of the massive predator. She felt an intense wave of heat wash over her as the manticore was once again torn from the dirt beneath its paws by the impact. The beast let out a howl of pain in response to the fire that engulfed its left side. As much as it desired to make a decent meal of the filly, it wasn't worth the effort. The manticore regained its footing and turned tail to flee back to the safety of the forest.

Without missing a beat, Tyco stood up from the scorched earth where the beast had last lain and turned on the little pegasus.

"Where the hell have you been!?"

The filly cringed at the stern question, physically feeling the anger in his words. "Do you have any idea how worried I was?" he asked as he strode closer to his child. Scootaloo was appalled by the blood that thatched his side, cauterized by the flames of his final assault. She looked him in the eyes and saw the dark rings that sagged beneath them; he had obviously been up all night looking for her. She felt ashamed to have put him through so much because of her actions.

The stallion was upon her and she sank into the dirt, afraid of her punishment, but it never came. Tyco grabbed the filly and held her close, "Don't ever scare me like that again." Unable to do anything else, Scootaloo quietly returned the embrace. After the brief moment of silence, the stallion released the filly and looked her in the eyes with heated concern. "Why are you all the way out here, anyways?"

"I-I was out here with mom," she replied sheepishly before looking up at the sky. Tyco's grave mien was instantly replaced with one of perplexity and he followed her gaze into the twinkling ocean above. Understanding and empathy seeped into his mind and all the anger and frustration pent up inside him dissipated.

Tyco sighed and gave his daughter a weak smile before gently nudging her shoulder, motioning her toward the elm. Scootaloo complied to her father's unspoken order. The stallion took note of her awkward gait,

and his mind connected the dots; that kind of injury couldn't have come from the manticore. For her sake, he refrained from addressing the state of her condition, content with fact she was in one piece.

As she neared the ancient tree, Scootaloo noticed the deep, smoldering scores still glowing brightly on the side of its trunk, the launchpad of her father's fiery blow. The stallion saw the look of awe upon her face and grinned with a hint of pride.

"Blaze taught me that one." The two sat below the tree, father reclining against the base of the tree, daughter comfortably against his uninjured side. He wrapped his wing around her and looked up to the stars, thinking where best to begin.

"When you lose somepony special in your life, it can feel like there's nothing left. It can leave you with an emptiness, a hole you don't know how to fill. It leaves you searching for a way to cope with or hide from the pain, or simply why it happened. There's a lotta ways to mask or remove the pain of loss, most of which are destructive and irreversible." Scootaloo shivered as if ice water were poured down her backside, his words were uncannily true.

"But to truly defeat it," Scootaloo looked up at her father, "you have to face it head on and keep pushing forward," the stallion returned her gaze, "or else it'll destroy you. Where there's a will there's a way, and there's many ponies in this world ready to help you," he gently shook her with his wing and smiled, "you just have to know where to look."

The filly smiled up at her father, once again warmed by his wisdom. She peered into his eyes and saw the strength beneath the soft exterior. The orange equine that held her within the fold of his wing risked life and limb for her without hesitation or regret. He was the reason she aborted her fall, the reason she was alive, why she lived; his heart beat for her, and hers for him.

Scootaloo cuddled further into the warmth of his reclining figure. She closed her eyes and was lulled into a wonderful, soothing dream by the ambiance of the night around her.

Chapter 10

Scotaloo slowly returned to consciousness, awoken by the soft light of the early morning. The little filly blinked the sleep from her eyes and gave a quiet yawn before stretching out her tired limbs. She felt something shift about her and looked up to see the sleeping face of her father. Scotaloo could feel the tranquil inhalation and exhalation of breath and the corresponding rise and fall of his chest.

Scotaloo looked around, cautious not to disturb the slumbering patriarch. The southern portion of the sloping meadow lay in shadow as far as the eye could see. The tops of the forest to her right were tipped with the light of the dawn that steadily crept downward in the sun's implacable march toward the heavens.

The filly turned her head left and peeked over the wing of her guardian. The sprawling village, though tiny in perspective, formed a long silhouette beneath the golden parabola that grew in the horizon. It was a magnificent sight.

She yawned one last time before carefully sliding out from beneath her father's embrace and giving the environment an unhindered inspection. A loud interjection from below caught the pegasus' attention. She looked down and felt the rumbling in her stomach, accompanied by the sudden pangs of hunger; she hadn't eaten since last morning.

Scotaloo looked dejectedly at the ground, unsure of how to subdue the beast that roared for appeasement. She looked at the forest's treeline and considered traversing its depths to forage for food, but turned that idea down. The filly turned about, scanning the horizon for possible alternatives to such a hazardous endeavor when something caught her eye.

Far in the distance, she could discern the expansive orchard that surrounded Sweet Apple Acres. Scotaloo smiled and her stomach seemed to agree with her choice. She took flight toward the apple farm.

The wind blew through her mane and filled her ears with its usual, soft howl, reminding her of days long past. She felt a sense of renewal at the simple action of flight. A feeling welled up inside her as she graced the skies, and it bubbled over. She was enthused with the concept of life, of having the ability to soar over the sea of green, a delight she hadn't come to appreciate before her fall from favor.

The elated pegasus arrived at her destination, picking a tree at random and hovering beside the succulent fruit that hung tantalizingly from its branches. She ogled the shining red orbs and began to salivate. Scootaloo picked as many as her little hooves could carry and returned to the solitary elm.

The filly tried to land but was met with the difficulty of carrying a half dozen apples between her legs, accidentally dropping most of them and subsequently losing her balance, falling in a heap amidst the breakfast that now rolled helter-skelter in every direction. The commotion aroused the elder pegasus from his sleep and earned an amused chuckle at her antics.

"Good morning," he said with a yawn and a smile, "I see you got breakfast." The filly returned the smile with one of embarrassment as she righted herself. "Where'd you get it?"

Scootaloo screwed her face in surprise at the realization: as innocent as her intentions were, she did steal it.

"Uh, Applejack gave them to me," she responded quickly, desiring to avoid chastisement for her unintended mistake.

"Huh, that was nice of her," he said, slowly coming to. Scootaloo's stomach growled impatiently. "Heh, she probably heard that from a mile away." The filly giggled alongside the hearty chuckles of her father before the two made camp beneath the shade of the ancient tree.

Tyco grabbed an apple from the ground and rubbed it clean against his chest before taking a bite. Scootaloo completely ignored any formalities of hygiene, voraciously devouring the ripened delicacy in order to sate the roaring beast. The stallion watched her with an evident smirk, reverie keen in his eyes.

“Have I ever told you about the first time you ate an apple?” he inquired. The filly looked up from her meal curiously. “I’ll take that as a ‘no.’ Well,” he began, smiling through the little pegasus, pulling the old memory from the dusty, top shelf of his mind, “it was a long time ago, way back when we lived in Fillydelphia. You were only two when it happened. We were walking through the park one day and I said something about how nice it was outside. You looked up at me with the biggest smile I’d ever seen.” Tyco laughed and looked down at the fruit between his hooves.

“And that’s when it happened. An apple, just like this one, fell from a tree and landed right here,” he stated, putting a hoof to the crown of his head. “You should have seen the look on your face,” he said with a ringing laugh, hardly able to contain himself from the humor of the memory. “Your eyes were as wide as dinner plates, filled with horror at what just happened. I watched you stare down the apple when it landed on the ground. You had this resolute look about you, and then you pounced on it, like a little kitten, determined to save me from my assailant.” He snickered again at the innocence of her youth while Scootaloo felt an embarrassed warmth rise in her cheeks.

“You rolled around, gnawing on it, until you suddenly bit into it. The surprise on your face was priceless. I broke down laughing on the spot as you started to chew with delight, I didn’t care who saw me rolling on the ground, it was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen you do. I knew right then and there,” he gave his daughter a mildly sarcastic grin, “that you’d always be there to protect me.” Scootaloo, though further reddened by the cheesy remark, smiled appreciatively at her father.

=====

The sun rose higher into the sky as Tyco retold countless tales of the filly’s youth. From her very first word to her first day at school, the stallion relived his fond memories of fatherhood, and Scootaloo desired nothing more than to quietly listen to his voice.

When the radiant orb attained its summit, the two happily made their way back to the small village in the distance. Scootaloo flew lofty circles around her father who chose to meander atop the soft grass in light of the stiffness of his wings from last night’s physical altercation. The orange duo

arrived at the outskirts of town within the hour where the leisureable chatter and disorganised merriment crescendoed to its usual volume.

Father and daughter found themselves passing the town confectionery when a friendly voice called out to them.

“Hey, Scoot, hey Tyke” Applebloom hollared, exiting Sugarcube Corner with bulging saddlebags. Scootaloo returned the filly’s greeting while her father was quietly taken aback by how informally she had addressed him; he hadn’t been called that in a while. “where ya been? Sweetie Belle an’ ah haven’t seen ya since yesterday afternoon.” The little pegasus alighted beside her friend before responding.

“Oh, I was just, uh, with my dad.” She intended to keep the events of the previous night between her and her father. The yellow earth filly seemed content with this answer and gave the pegasus a smile.

“Cool. Well, maybe you can come over later, ah’m helpin’ mah sister make some muffins,” she cast a pride-filled glance at the saddlebags. “Ah better get back t’ th’ farm, Applejack’ll be wantin’ this here flour.” Applebloom started in the direction of home but remembered something and turned around. “Oh yea, mah sister saw ya takin’ some apples earlier t’day. She didn’t seem too happy ‘bout it. See ya!”

Scootaloo’s face twisted in consternation and she warily looked up at her father who met her with a raised eyebrow, “Taken?”

Busted.

The filly stammered, at a loss for explanation. She looked about and took advantage of her only reasonable exit.

“Hey, Applebloom, wait up!” she yelled, taking flight, choosing to defer punishment to a later time. Tyco watched his daughter catch up with her friend and could only sigh before turning in the direction of the local hospital.

Scootaloo flew circles around her friend who curiously observed her unusual activity.

“Hey, Scoot, whah’re ya’ flahin’ ‘round so much? Ah’ve never seen ya so excited to flap yer wings before.”

Though it was mostly to stay off her injured leg, the pegasus couldn’t help but achieve a level of satisfaction from remaining airborne. She smiled as Applebloom’s voice pervaded her ears, the familiar southern accent brought many memories to the forefront of her mind. She again felt the weightlessness of free fall and the flashbacks that opened her eyes to the significance of her life returned, all those happy memories that saved her.

“Because I haven’t been,” she replied with her gaze fixed upon the light blue sky.

=====

The fillies arrived at the doorstep of the farmhouse after their slow navigation through the orchard. Applebloom hollered out for her elder sister who, after reciprocating the greeting from out back, appeared in the kitchen with Sweetie Belle and Rarity.

“Howdy, Applebloom.” she said cheerfully before turning to the other filly and affixing her with an admonishing stare.

“Sorry,” Scootaloo apologized with earnest sorrow.

“Oh, it’s all good, Scoot, just ask next time b’fore drummin’ up a tab, will ya?” she added with a wink. Scootaloo smiled, appreciative of the mare’s easygoing disposition.

“Now are you sure they won’t be too much for you to handle?” Rarity politely interjected, “I’d be more than happy to look after them tonight if you aren’t feeling up t-.” Applejack put a hoof up to the fashionista’s mouth in a gesture of silence before abruptly retracting it with a blush, remembering she had fertilized the southern field earlier that morning and hadn’t had a chance to adequately wash her hooves. What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, right? Quickly recuperating from her mistake, Applejack kindly responded.

“Ah’ll be alraht, Rarity. You just get on home and let me take care of it. How much trouble could they be?” The unicorn gave her a level stare before being shooed out the door.

“Applebloom, did ya get the flour ah asked for?” she asked the yellow filly.

“Of course!” she replied, gleaming at the saddlebags. Applejack opened one and gave her sister a blunt stare.

“You didn’t tell Pinkie Pie to put the flour in some bags before you brought it home...?” she asked, still staring in disbelief at the loose lumps of white powder.

“Um...”

“Nevermahnd that,” she said after a sigh of resignation. “Y’all ready t’ get bakin?” The three fillies knew baking wasn’t any of their special talents, but who had the right to say they couldn’t help?

“I’ll get the milk!” Sweetie Belle yelled.

“I’ll get the eggs!” Scootaloo shouted.

“Ah got the flour!” Applebloom exclaimed.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADER MUFFIN MAKERS ARE GO!”

The trio high-hoofed before setting about their self-appointed tasks, much to the dismay and frantic breakdown of their elder who gave up on any semblance of maintaining order amidst the energetic chaos that ensued.

Nearly two hours and one utterly destroyed kitchen later, the fruits of their labor exited the oven accompanied by a billow of dark, black smoke. No pony dared test the charred remains of what otherwise could have been a very satisfying treat.

“Well, ah guess you can cross that one off yer list, Scoot,” Applebloom remarked with a friendly elbow and a grin. Despite being a

little downtrodden that dumb luck wouldn't find baking to be her special talent, Scootaloo couldn't help but smile. The two hours she had spent causing a near cataclysm in the kitchen was fruitless and all but disastrous, but it was with friends.

Applejack, thoroughly exhausted from trying to keep up with the three, sighed at the horrific state her kitchen was in. The crusaders attempted to help clean up but were shooed out the door in a similar manner to Sweetie Belle's elder sister. With nothing else to do, the unicorn and pegasus fillies said their goodbyes to the yellow earth pony and set out for their respective homes.

Scootaloo arrived at the threshold of the great oak door and let herself in. She came face to face with the stern gaze of her father who tapped his hoof impatiently upon the floor. After a quick lesson in ethics and honesty, the little pegasus found herself acquiescing to the calls of her mattress, though it was still relatively early, it'd been a long day. Scootaloo closed her eyes to the world, eager to awake the next day and seize it for what it is. Following the events of the prior night and the emotional tornado she finally wrestled under control, she was determined to never take the fragility of life for granted ever again.

Chapter 11

The morning after the muffin fiasco slowly took over the vigilant duties of the nighttime sky. The humid, nocturne air became visible under the ever-lightening dome, setting a light haze about the distant horizon and its contents. Morning doves cooed for their mates in the trees, competing with the perpetual noise of the insects. Nature was in full swing without a care in the world to whomever witnessed, or was otherwise disturbed by, its progression.

Scootaloo awoke to the unsaturated cyan glow that seeped through her window. She groggily looked out the panes of glass to estimate the time and grumbled that she had been called from the peaceful bliss of sleep by her body's internal clock before sunrise. The filly rolled over, pulling the thin sheet over top of her head to keep the light out; she needed to get her father to buy some curtains already, it was getting ridiculous. Scootaloo tossed and turned fitfully in a vain attempt to find a cool spot on her mattress to lull her back into nothingness, but the constant fidgeting and mental annoyance served otherwise.

After a couple of minutes of fruitless efforts to fight the inevitable, the pegasus grumpily sat up in surrender. She wordlessly cursed the sun, loathing the hours it chose embark across the sky and perform its civil duties. Unable to return to sleep and intent on relieving her mild irritation, Scootaloo got out of bed and headed for the hallway.

As she exited her room, the filly poked her head into her father's to see if he had already left for work. The door swung silently on its hinges and revealed the darkened interior of Tyco's room from which she could hear the quiet, stertorous respiration of her elder. She smiled to herself and closed the door, careful not to make a sound.

Though it felt much better than the day before, Scootaloo slightly favored her hind leg as she walked to the living room and looked around at the décor. The deep, earthy vibe it emitted was homely, like a lit fireplace on a cold winter's night. Her surroundings were comforting, but far from satisfying.

The filly, as calmed and secure as she felt within the building that housed so many cheerful memories, felt like she was missing something. It wasn't a despondency or gaping hole in her heart, but something seemed out of place. There was an absence about her, but she couldn't put her hoof on it. It wasn't the kitchen or the bar table that separated her from it, or the multitude of furnishings that filled the living room. The light that filtered through the two front windows held no answer to her quandary. What was she missing? What was she doing?

What wasn't she doing?

She wasn't flying, that's what.

The realization hit her suddenly, like a slap to the face. Evolution did its job, and her biological clock had woken her in the manner prescribed by millions of years of evolutionary success. All those days of rising at the crack of dawn continued their schedule regardless of Saturday's dramatic events. But why? She had no reason to be up at this ungodly hour of the morning. Scootaloo looked about her one last time. The stillness of the living room was palpable, and it held no solace for the deficiency she felt. The house wasn't going anywhere, what did she have to lose?

The filly left the ranch and entered the warm and sticky outdoors. She gave a quick sigh before taking wing into the atmosphere. Scootaloo soared above the rooftops, letting her mind go numb as the sun bathed her backside in its warm light. She flew in neutral, shifting out of gear and ignoring the world around her, simply coasting along in a contented stupor like she always did on her morning flights.

She beat her wings subconsciously in steady rhythm, just as she was taught. Her breathing matched the pumping of her wings, supplying them with the necessary oxygen for their unending metabolism. She flew with the speed and efficiency of the mare that instructed her, the pegasus that gave her the gift of flight.

A bright flash below caught the filly's attention. She looked down and saw the sparkling reflection of light play off the flowing waters of the ornate fountain where she had first met Rainbow Dash. She eyed the marble object curiously, and a strange feeling struck her. The fountain seemed to

call out to her, draw her in like a fish on a lure. The odd, unattributable phenomenon was captivating, and it pulled her down to the babbling structure. She landed beside the water feature and gazed up at it. The water flowed out the top and fell down to the lower tiers of marble, making its serene splashing sound and sending a fine mist of water into the air. Scootaloo saw the miniature prisms and her mind flashed back to that day long ago.

The filly came back to reality and looked back over her shoulder into town and far off into the distance. A reminiscent smile grew on her face and the little pegasus took off, backtracking the way she came, but with an alternate destination in mind.

Scootaloo flew low through the streets of Ponyville, keeping no more than four meters between her and the road below. There were very few pedestrians about at this hour, but the nostalgic flier compensated for it with her imagination. She weaved and swerved through the air, dodging the figments that coalesced and populated the streets. A sense of competition rose in her stomach and compelled her forward with haste.

The filly broke free of the confining rows of buildings and found herself flying through the open countryside. The distance between her and her destination forced her back into semi-unconsciousness as she slowly elevated herself to meet it. The monolithic cliff face grew steadily, and the wind blew with greater fridity. Scootaloo landed on the summit of the enormous mountain and inspected her surroundings. It was just as she remembered.

The edges of the round plateau stretched outward in either direction and connected at the far end. The sharp peaks of the mountains to her north poked above the plateau's horizon like stalagmites from the mighty earth. She turned around and saw the minuscule pinpoint, Ponyville, far out at the end of the tiny road that snaked its way to the base of the mountain. She looked down at the rocky ground beneath her hooves and was met with an unexpected sight.

Etched into the surface upon which she stood, the filly could make out the scrapings of her hooves from the first and only time she'd been up here. Her hooves were much smaller back then.

Always keep your cool.

She looked out off the cliff at the sprawling landscape and its many shades of green that softly transitioned to turquoise at the outer limits of her sight. The mountain cast a long shadow far out to her front right which absorbed and spat out those of passing clouds.

Rhythm and efficiency.

The elevation of her current position caused the wind to nip at her sides and face with the harshness of winter despite the warmth of the current season. She looked straight down at the bottom of the cliff and felt the ancient sensation well up in her stomach like a lead weight.

Have fun!!!

Scotaloo felt herself shift forward under her own subconscious volition. She stared at the ground far below and the lump in her stomach shot up to her throat. Her muscles tightened in response to the sudden pull of gravity and she felt herself fall. Her heart beat rapidly and her body felt weightless as her innards caught up with her. The filly accelerated to terminal velocity and the wind roared in her ears, but she couldn't find the strength to spread her wings while gripped with this unjustified terror.

What the hell are you doing?

The little pegasus looked around. She was alone. Scotaloo turned her attention back to the ground that rose to meet her and felt herself relax instinctively. Her muscles released their tension while her heart rate slowed to a reasonable pace. The filly leaned forward into a dive, narrowing her vectorial size and decreasing her air resistance. She closed her eyes and centered herself, blocking out the sound of the wind, searching for an inner peace amidst the fright of her situation. She felt her wings slowly open and spread wide. The wind swept around them as they cut through the air. Scotaloo slowly pulled her head back and felt the wind cut upward against her chin. She leveled off from her fall and the wind died down to a pleasant breeze. Scotaloo then opened her eyes and beheld the majesty of the earth.

The woods and meadows rolled below, peacefully gazing up from their rightful place beneath her. The dirt road grew in size as she glided down from the peaceful blue ocean. The sounds of summer met her ears when she neared the path and gently landed upon it. Scootaloo turned and looked up at the monolith, at the peak of the massive rock colored a faded blue by the distance between them.

There was no Rainbow Dash peering down from the precipice. There was no gleaming pride cascading like an avalanche from on high. There was no cyan mare filled with pride at what she had accomplished. The mountain was bare, devoid of any signs of life atop its peak. Scootaloo was the sole witness of her triumph, and she smiled inwardly; she had conquered it alone.

Chapter 12

Scotaloo opened her eyes to the twittering of birds outside her window. Rolling over and hiding her head beneath her pillow, she tried to block out the noise, but was unable to. She groaned as she sat up and rubbed her eyes before yawning loudly. Stupid birds, haven't they ever heard of sleeping in?

Hoping for some sort of motivation to get out of bed, Scootaloo looked blearily about her room. Nothing seemed particularly enticing, but she knew the birds weren't going to relent anytime soon. With a stretch of her wings and another yawn, Scootaloo leapt to the floor with a muffled clomp on the rug. She turned to make her bed, but paused.

Why was she doing this again? The mattress looked more inviting than ever, and her body cried out for more sleep. She considered the offer, but shunned the invitation and made her bed without another thought.

Though there was no practical reason for it, rising with the sun to continue her morning flights seemed right. She gained a certain satisfaction from them. It was a calming feeling, a completeness of body and soul. The thought of ending it was incomprehensible.

Scotaloo walked to her bedroom door and opened it, but a soft clang caught her attention. Poking her head around the inside of the door, she saw a gold medal hanging from the doorknob. Her first gold medal.

She gazed at it wistfully for a moment, but shook her head.

She didn't do this for Rainbow Dash. Not anymore.

Scotaloo chose not to dwell on the heartbreak of her loss. After the events of that weekend, she pushed her mentor aside along with all of her memories of their relationship. Though saddened that Rainbow Dash had left, there was still flight. She had been given the keys to the sky, the most precious gift in the world, and she would unlock her own heaven with them.

The house was quiet as Scootaloo walked down the hall and into the living room. Before reaching the front door, she stopped and looked over her shoulder. She listened for the faint sounds of slumber and thought of her father's smile. She couldn't do this without him.

Scootaloo left her house and took flight into the morning stillness. She flew south for once, deciding it was time for a change in scenery. Her hopes of seeing something new and interesting slowly faded when she realized the landscape was pretty much the same here as everywhere else: rolling green fields and pastures as far as the eye could see. She resigned to keep a level gaze and slowly drift into mental oblivion, but was unable to empty her mind. Thoughts of the past week kept resurfacing and forced her to mull them over.

Scootaloo had told her friends of her flight two days ago and how she did it without Rainbow Dash. She knew it sounded silly, but it gave her a sense of pride that she could overcome the mountain alone. Though she was happy, something still clung to her.

The wind carried away a sigh along with the array of colors that haunted her.

=====

The latter half of the day found itself hosting a little flight exhibition. The green of the rolling meadow by the Everfree Forest was spotless, save the figures of Applebloom and Sweetie Belle. Circling far above, Scootaloo gazed down at their smiling faces, which eagerly looked up, anticipating an exciting display of aeronautics. She took a deep breath and launched herself toward the earth.

Sweetie Belle and Applebloom cheered, enraptured by their friend's expertise. Scootaloo looped and dove through the air, adding little

flourishes to her routine. She flew low to the ground and banked a wide left, encircling her two earthbound companions.

She wracked her brain for something spectacular, something to appease her crowd and sharpen her abilities. One particularly roguish idea popped into her head, and she put it to action.

Still circling her friends, Scootaloo tilted her angle inward. Like a tether ball around a pole, she slowly inched nearer.

“Um, Scoot, I don’t think this is such a good idea,” Sweetie Belle said sheepishly, but to no response. Scootaloo was lost in concentration, centered entirely around her current stunt. Maintaining her inward spiral quickly put a grueling strain on her wings. She beat them faster as she closed the distance, but not enough.

Scootaloo couldn’t keep up with the necessary tempo and lost her rhythm. Her momentum launched her out of her circle and into a tumbling roll across the meadow. She bounced across the soft grass, leaving pockets of torn earth in her wake. Friction did its job and brought her to a sliding halt. The two onlookers ran to their friend to see if she was alright.

Sounds of spitting and gagging filled the air as Scootaloo expelled chunks of grass and dirt from her mouth, much to the amusement of the others.

“Wow, Scoot, that sure was sumthin’,” Applebloom giggled, “but what in the hay were ya tryin’ to do?”

“Eh, nothing, really,” Scootaloo fibbed, passing off an air of nonchalance to smooth over her failed prank.

“So why do ya still do it, anyways?” Applebloom asked.

Scootaloo looked at her friend quizzically. “Do what?”

“Why do ya still fly after everythin’ that’s happened? You still haven’t told us.”

Scootaloo didn't answer. She hadn't really thought about it before. "It's, um...It's like knowing there's always something there for you no matter what. I guess it's kinda like your cutie marks," she added with a shrug.

"Like our cutie marks?" Sweetie Belle echoed in confusion.

"Speakin' of cutie marks, do ya still think flyin' is yer special talent?" Applebloom asked.

Scootaloo looked at the ground in thought. It was more than just a talent to her, and whether it lead to her cutie mark or not didn't matter. They didn't know how strongly she was drawn to the skies, the higher power that claimed sovereignty over her. They couldn't.

She flew because it felt right, because making use of this gift seemed mandatory in the most instinctual and natural way possible. In the most basic sense, it was freedom. Freedom from her worries, from the troubles of the world, a release of any and all pent up anxiety.

Scootaloo smiled at her friends, "Yeah, I think it is." She was glad they couldn't understand, and she hoped they never would.

=====

Friday morning finally arrived, filling the sky with a beautiful red glow. Scootaloo went about her business, waking up early to continue her instinctual habit and prepare for another fun-filled day with the other Crusaders. Upon exiting her house and taking wing over Ponyville proper, she noticed a change in scenery.

Balloons, streamers, and decorations of all sorts occupied the area surrounding Sugarcube Corner. There was no doubt about it: Pinkie Pie

was hard at work. Celestia knew what for, but if she was up this early preparing for a party, something big was happening.

Scootaloo saw a handful of ponies entering the bakery, but she restrained her curiosity. She had to get her morning flight in before doing anything else. Her work ethic wouldn't allow otherwise. She headed north with nowhere particular in mind.

She returned from Equestrian countryside an hour later and was brought back to reality by Ponyville's transformation. A kaleidoscope of fluorescent colors had seemingly grown out of the woodwork and taken the town hostage. Pinkie must have been really excited if she went this far with her decorations, but Scootaloo wasn't up for discovering why. She was worn out from her flight and not in the mood to put up with Pinkie's shenanigans. Scootaloo arrived home and promptly headed for the bathtub to wash away the sweat and grime of her morning endeavor.

Refreshed and rejuvenated, Scootaloo went outdoors into the heat of the summer sun and saw a few more ponies heading toward Sugarcube Corner. Curiosity got the better of her.

She took to the air, heading toward Sweet Apple Acres, flying faster than usual, spurred on by the gnawing curiosity. As she neared the farm, Scootaloo spotted Applebloom and Applejack walking along the dirt road and landed beside them.

"Hey Applebloom! Hey Applejack!" she said.

"Well, shoot, Scoot, ya scared the livin' daylights outta me!" Applejack said. "What brings y'all the way out here?"

"Oh, I was coming to ask Applebloom if she wanted to go to Sugarcube Corner," Scootaloo replied. "I saw lots of ponies going there, and I thought it'd be fun to get Sweetie Belle to go, too."

"Well you're in luck," Applejack said. "We were just on our way there. Pinkie Pie asked Granny Smith to make some of her famous apple pies," she added, glancing at her saddlebags.

"Ah got to help!" Applebloom said with a gleeful hop.

Applejack smiled at her sister. "That ya did, Applebloom, and Ah'm sure Rainbow'll be plum grateful."

Scotaloo looked up at her in alarm. "What?"

Applejack looked back to Scotaloo with mild surprise. "Why, didn't ya hear? Rainbow Dash is back!"

Scotaloo flinched, and her hair stood on end. Rainbow Dash was here in Ponyville?

"The Wonderbolts are havin' a show in...hey, Scoot, where ya goin'?"

Applejack's words fell on deaf ears. Scotaloo was already airborne, surging back to town with all the speed she could muster. She had to see it for herself, see *her* for herself.

Scotaloo entered town, and the vibrant decorations blurred at the edges of her vision as she blew past them. Sugarcube Corner grew in her sights, but she was blind, unable to see past the rainbow in her mind's eye.

She burst into Sugarcube Corner and stood in the doorway. A hushed silence reigned, and all eyes fell upon her. Rainbow Dash's smile disappeared as their eyes met, and a battle of wills raged in the stillness. The air was stifling. No pony moved, hardly daring to breathe.

Rainbow Dash closed her eyes and quietly sighed. She solemnly walked toward Scotaloo with her head bowed.

Scotaloo felt a faint spark of anger ignite inside her. How could she show her face here after what she did? Scotaloo wanted to tackle her and show her the pain she had inflicted, but, at the same time, from the bottom of her heart, she secretly wished Rainbow Dash would scoop her up in her hooves and apologize. That she could just tell her everything would be okay, and it would be.

Now in the presence of her mentor once again, the old, happy memories of their relationship resurfaced. Counter to the resentment she

currently felt, Scootaloo wanted nothing more than to be held close, to melt within her embrace once more.

As Rainbow Dash neared, Scootaloo's heart gave a flutter of hope. Will she? Is this the moment she dreamed of? Would Rainbow Dash find the compassion to stay?

Scootaloo felt the brush of feathers against her side, and a shiver found its way through her body. She turned to see Rainbow Dash's tail gently sway back and forth as it exited the building, and the urge to yell hurtful nothings at her tormentor welled within, but all that came forth was a soft-spoken utterance.

"Why?"

Rainbow Dash was unmoved by the question. She continued out the door and onto the porch. Her hooves echoed loudly off the concrete. Stepping down onto the road, her wings opened to lift her into the sky.

"Answer me!!!"

Her cry resounded throughout the open street, and Rainbow Dash stalled her ascent. She briefly looked to the sky before bowing her head again, as if contemplating her next words.

"Because," Rainbow Dash replied, not even turning to look Scootaloo in the eyes, "I don't train noponies."

Scootaloo recoiled, and her heart bottomed out.

Rainbow Dash took flight without remorse. Scootaloo shut her eyes in an attempt to hold back the tears. She shivered as she tried to retain her composure, but the intensity of the emotional blow was too much. The spark flared up and engulfed her.

No. Not again.

Scotaloo shot into the sky in hot pursuit. Violet streak followed rainbowed over the rooftops of Ponyville. She was determined to catch her.

Carried on the winds of rage, Scootaloo chased Rainbow Dash west over the river, leaving Ponyville far behind. The Everfree Forest rose in the distance as Scootaloo closed the distance on her target.

Rainbow Dash glanced back, and Scootaloo saw the malice in her eyes.

“If you want me, come and get me.”

With that, Rainbow Dash faced ahead and pulled her hind legs forward. With a powerful buck and simultaneous surge of her wings, she launched herself forward at the speed of sound and lit up the sky in a blaze of color. The multi-colored explosion sent Scootaloo in the opposite direction, tumbling head over hooves and landing in the river with a resounding splash.

Water enveloped her as she thrashed about against the aquatic nightmare. She reoriented herself and broke through the surface, gasping for air. She heaved herself out of the river and looked up at the bold streak that curved over the edge of the Everfree Forest and headed north. She followed it with her eyes to where it tapered into the distance, and her heart sank at the lost opportunity.

Because, I don't train noponies.

Scotaloo hung her head. “You’re right...”

She thought of Rainbow Dash’s embrace, her gleaming eyes, and her choked up attempt to voice her pride. They dangled themselves in front of her before vanishing like leaves in the wind. The cold rejection of Rainbow Dash’s words crushed her again, as if once was not enough. She thought of how she had run away from home and what happened because of it: her flight, her fall, and her survival.

Her survival...

Scotaloo started at the realization. Through all of the hardships she endured after the Best Young Flier's Competition, her father was there for her. Applebloom and Sweetie Belle were there for her, too. From the first time she met them, to the day before last, she had friends who were ready and willing to support her. She coped with her loss through their love and sympathy, as well as her father's, but they weren't the only reason she was able to endure her trial. There was another foundation upon which she firmly planted her hooves, the very thing her transgressor had bestowed upon her: flight.

The past few days, from the morning after the ordeal to today's session, it was there for her. It gave her a means by which to overcome her problems, her own shoulder to lean on. It was something Rainbow Dash had given her that could never be revoked, never pried from her being until life ceased to flow through her. The skies were hers for the taking; she had received the gift of flight, and she now knew exactly what she would do with it.

Scotaloo looked far out into the distant skies at the azure speck, and a faint grin swept across her face. She shook herself from head to tail, shedding the water that encumbered her.

"You're right," she said confidently. Rainbow Dash was no longer a figment of her past; she was the blip in the distance, the faraway target. Rainbow Dash had built a wall, but Scotaloo was ready to destroy it. She would overtake Rainbow Dash and dig an untraversable chasm behind herself. She had defeated the mountain, and now she would defeat her. She would best Rainbow Dash on her own terms, and she knew where to do it.

Eleven months. She knew what was ahead of her: pain beyond her wildest imagination, constant exhaustion unrivaled by what she had previously endured, and a mental struggle far greater than anypony had ever been subjected to before. She trembled at the thought of the task she laid before herself. She trembled with excitement.

Eleven months. She knew that it would hurt, but it would be worth it. It would be worth the coming hell required for such perfection, and Scotaloo knew she would need all the help she could get. Applebloom. Sweetie Belle. Her father.

Eleven months. She would be reborn into a new life, one with the sole purpose of arising to the challenge, to *her* challenge, to *her destiny*. One she knew loomed far ahead, distant and imposing, ready to be conquered by the will that raged within her soul. She was ready to fight for her life, for the light at the end of the dark and foreboding tunnel, and claim victory over the ineffable adversity that paved the way to it. She would forge her own heaven in the manner she saw fit, and it stood before her with the intensity of the sun, awaiting her grasp.

She would be ready, intent on showing the world who she is and what she is capable of. She is neither a nopony, nor the mold of Rainbow Dash.

She is Scootaloo.