

VAGABOND PART 1

A lone figure made its way through the Everfree Forrest, stumbling. As its hoof hit another tree-root, it overbalanced and fell, muzzle-first onto the dirt. For a few moments it didn't move, then agonizingly slowly, it struggled to rise to its feet. The figure shakily struggled up to a standing position, and began plodding along the path again. A brown, blood-stained bandage was wrapped around its middle, and the smell of infection had set in earlier that day. The figure's saddlebags creaked with each tormented step and it shuddered from the cool breeze. It was emaciated, dehydrated, injured, running a fever, and bleeding- out slowly. In short, the figure was dying. It raised its head and saw through blurry vision, a small hut with a light on inside it. The figure let out a shuddering sigh as tears began flowing down its face. It had smelled a pony-like scent.

It turned away from Zecora's hut and headed, unknowingly, toward Ponyville.

Its mind slugged thoughts through its lips,
"Can't . . . hurt . . . any . . . pony . . . again." It slowly rasped.

The tears were thick and had a muddy consistency, due to the level of extreme dehydration, the figure was suffering from. It stumbled from side to side, swaying almost drunkenly down the path. It kept walking for several more minutes, coming close to cresting the hill that would bring Ponyville into view. A loud rush of wind caused the figure to look around. It saw nothing and so its addled mind began creaking to a semblance of life, 'Wonder what day it is? Is my sentence finally finished?' It was the last conscious thought the figure had. It collapsed onto the dirt. Its eyes closed and it lost consciousness.

The sky's color gradually changed from the bright, excited blue of day, to the calmer, more restful, and peaceful deep blue, almost black of evening. The birds lazily flapped back to their nests to roost for the night, the animals all headed back to their dens, warrens, caves, dreys, or holts to sleep peacefully through the cool night. Princess Luna gradually brought up the Moon and the land of Equestria began to fall into slumber, once again. Twilight and Spike bedded down in their respective mattresses, covered themselves with their respective sheets/blankets, and rather disrespectfully, began a record-breaking snoring competition in the deep, dark, quiet of the Library.

Pinkie Pie had ceased wolfing down sweets about an hour before and was already heading for the inevitable 'sugar crash' she enjoyed every night. She turned off the lights downstairs and staggered up toward her room, eyes blurring, speech slurring, legs wobbling. She reached her bedroom and flipped the light-switch in passing, took two steps and collapsed into her bed, already asleep before any part of her even touched the pillow.

Rarity lay her head back, onto her pillow just so, so as not to mess up her hair, which was thick with curlers. Every curler had to be perfectly in place. She wondered how Applejack or Rainbow Dash could possibly live with themselves. They took absolutely no steps to prepare their looks for the following day, but then again their lives didn't depend on their sales and that those sales didn't depend on good advertising, which was constantly displayed on their own bodies. Rarity had a responsibility, not only to

herself, but to Sweetie Belle, her parents, the business, and more than anything else those who constantly doubted her ideas of fashion, style and personal pride.

Rainbow Dash was having a bit of trouble sleeping. No matter how she flattened, smashed, fluffed, rearranged, or mauled the cloud, she just couldn't get comfortable. She sighed heavily and leapt off the cloud. Perhaps a quick run from the outskirts of Ponyville to the end of the Everfree Forrest and back would tire her out enough to sleep. She sped off against the wind, feeling the resistance against her face, and chest as her wings sliced through the air with scalpel-like precision. She tucked her legs against her undercarriage and lowered her head, level, and in-line with the rest of her body, streamlining her like a missile. Just for fun, she spun, wings making a corkscrew pattern in the clouds, simply enjoying the feel of the SPEED.

Applejack was visiting Fluttershy. Wynona had taken sick, and Applejack didn't want to take her to the Vet. Well, more to the point, she trusted Fluttershy, first of all and second, she didn't have enough money to pay the Vet for his professional, if very expensive skills. The two girls were sleeping in shifts, watching to make sure Wynona didn't take a turn for the worse. They were both tired and the fact that Angel kept pinning attention didn't help matters much. To placate the bunny, Fluttershy had suggested they sleep with him between their hooves, hopefully it would comfort him. Fluttershy loved him but sometimes he could be a bit of a pain, when he wanted something. It was Fluttershy's turn to sleep. She curled up on her couch and Angel hopped up between her hooves and snuggled down for four more hours of fitful sleep.

Back at Sweet Apple Acres, Big Macintosh was dozing silently. Applejack was always amazed that he didn't snore, he was so big, but it just goes to show, you can never tell. Applebloom was sleep-crusading for her cutie mark, tossing and turning constantly, occasionally growling at some fearsome foe that kept her from it.

Rainbow Dash spotted someone on the path to Zecora's, as she sped past, "Huh," she wondered out loud, "Who the heck would be heading to Zecora's at this time of night? The only ones who even visit her, are my friends and I. Better take a look." she banked and came around. She saw the figure collapsed on the path and immediately landed, "Hey," she said nudging the other pony with her hoof.

Rainbow Dash received no reply, "Man! Don't tell me I have to carry you to..." she stopped. *'Where is the nearest place?'* she wondered silently.

The answer came to her almost instantly, *'Duh, Fluttershy's. I hope she can do something.'* Dash nosed the unknown pony over her head and, after a few failures, managed a firepony's carry, right between the wings and neck, a rather tight fit. Under the weight, she had a great deal of trouble taking to the air, but Rainbow Dash being Rainbow Dash, she kept up until she did. She flew toward Fluttershy's cottage as quickly as she could. The wind had picked up, like it was trying to keep Dash from arriving at Fluttershy's. The wind wasn't cool like the evening was, but swelteringly hot and humid. It blew with a whispered chant, "Monstermonstermonstermonstermonster . . . " on and on it whispered, never letting up until the moment her hooves touched the dirt outside Fluttershy's cottage. Rainbow was panting hard from her exertion; sweat dripped off her every follicle of hair, mane, and tail. As she raised a hoof to knock on Fluttershy's cottage door, a bell tolled out the hour, midnight.

Rainbow Dash flinched, involuntarily, as a peel of lightning and thunder shook the very ground. She was facing Fluttershy's cottage when the lightning flashed behind her back. For the briefest instant, Dash thought she could see the silhouette of a dead pony's face in the panes of glass set into Fluttershy's front door. The face was that of a light red pony girl, roughly the same age as Pinkie Pie, it was horribly deformed, as if some terrible force had bludgeoned it into a mushy pulp. The eyes had burst, leaving only bloody sockets behind, and the mouth looked like it was moving, even though the lower jaw had nearly been ripped off. Rainbow Dash reared back screaming silently at the terrifying sight. Sound seemed, to Dash, to be cut off for an instant, as she stared at the dead pony's face. She saw the mouth move and distinctly heard a voice.

The voice was sweet, warm, and caring; it calmed Dash almost immediately, "His punishment is at an end. A new day has dawned. When he is ready, tell him I forgive him." The dead pony said.

Rainbow Dash called out to her, soundlessly, "Wait, who are you?"

"Arabesque." The face said.

As it spoke the name, the face knit itself back together, revealing a startlingly beautiful Pegasus filly with silver-green mane and tail. Rainbow Dash looked as closely as she could as the Pegasus turned sideways; there, on her flank, were a pair of ballet slippers.

The vision of Arabesque shifted into the face of Applejack, "Rainbow? What in tar . . . Oh my word!" Applejack yelled as she spotted the unconscious pony on Rainbow Dash's shoulders, "Fluttershy! Come quick! Rainbow's here with somebody, and he's hurt bad!" Applejack yelled. Turning back to Dash, Applejack said, "Bring him in here, real easy like. I'll help ya lay im down here on the couch."

Fluttershy awoke with a start and gently moved Angel off the couch and onto the floor, where he shot her a dirty look then scampered off. Fluttershy cleared off every pillow from her odd, flat couch, to make room for Applejack and Rainbow Dash, who were carrying the limp form of a pony between them. Fluttershy looked the strange pony up and down, while her friends tried to settle him onto the couch without jostling him too much.

The first thing Fluttershy noticed was that he had been brutally attacked. His middle was wrapped in a rough type of bandage that honestly looked more like a blood-soaked blanket, and he was covered, from ear to flank, with great, deep gashes, all of which were smeared with dried blood, not to mention swollen and puffy with the early stages of infection. He was a royal-blue color in his coat and his mane and tail were light brown. He was caked with mud and dried dirt which had mingled with the blood, making a tough mortar-like substance all over him. His only visible possessions were a pair of saddle-bags which had been damaged, but looked sturdy and still serviceable, if only just. His whole body was malnourished and thin, his hooves were swollen, his mane and tail were in a terrible state, but despite all that, Fluttershy could tell, by the look of his face, he was probably no more than 24 years old. Fluttershy had never seen anything in such a poor condition, well, nothing living anyway.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash set him down on the couch, then stepped back to let Fluttershy take a look at him. The yellow Pegasus slid her mane out of the way with a hoof and flattened her ear against the injured pony's chest, listening. His heart still beat, faintly.

Fluttershy looked up,
"Oh dear, his breathing is oh so very shallow..." she began.

Applejack interrupted her,
"Good enough! Let's get to work. What do we do first Fluttershy?" the orange earth-pony asked.

Fluttershy didn't really have experience dealing with medical matters pertaining to ponies, just animals, but she decided that best way to begin was probably the same for both,
"Applejack, will you please get some water from the tap and see if he'll drink. Get a straw too."

Fluttershy turned to Dash,
"I need you to please fill a bucket with warm water and put a sponge and cloth in it. As soon as you're done, you need to go get Dr. Mend."

She turned to the injured mess lying on her couch, "I don't think we can safely move him."
"Right." Rainbow said and sped off.

Applejack came back from the kitchen carrying a pitcher and a small glass with a straw in it. She set it down next to the couch,
"Now what?" she asked.

Fluttershy filled the glass with water and held it up to the pony's lips,
"Would you hold his head for me Applejack? I don't want him to choke." She said.

Applejack placed her hooves on his head and put firm pressure on him to keep him still. Fluttershy put the straw to his lips to see if he would drink on his own. He didn't respond. Fluttershy turned to Applejack,
"Would you please put your chest next to his ear so he can hear your heart beat." She said.

Applejack arched an eyebrow, but complied. Fluttershy waited for a moment before she peeled back his lips and slipped the straw up against his tongue. He twitched, but began drinking.

Applejack made as if to get up, but Fluttershy caught her,
"Oh please don't move. I have to keep the cup full." She said refilling the cup with a continuous, slow stream of water.

"Why in the world am ah here, with mah chest against some strange pony's ear?" she asked.

Fluttershy gently shushed her,
"Oh Applejack, please keep your voice down for now. The reason you're doing that is so he can hear a heartbeat. The first memory any baby has is of nursing while hearing its mother's heartbeat. It's deeply ingrained."
"So basically we're tricking him into thinking Ah'm his mother and he's nursing from me!?" Applejack asked aghast.

Fluttershy nodded,
“Yes, that’s the idea.” She said innocently.

Rainbow Dash flew back into the room and paused, staring at Applejack. She slowly put down the bucket, sponge, and cloth, then bolted out the front door, closing it behind her. Applejack raised her head,
“Did she REALLY just leave us here to take care of...”

“I’m sorry to interrupt you Applejack, but I asked her to get Dr. Mend.” Fluttershy said.

“Well that’s a mighty fine notion Fluttershy, but whose going to pay for that?” she asked.

“I will if I have to. Look at him Applejack. Don’t you feel bad for him?” Fluttershy said.

“Course ah do, but I ain’t got hardly no money and Dr. Mend ain’t free.” Applejack said.

“I don’t care!” Fluttershy said with conviction. She lowered her head,
“I’m sorry Applejack, I didn’t mean to yell.”

“That was barely more than a whisper, Fluttershy. Don’t you worry bout it none.” Applejack looked at the blue pony’s face, “Looks like he’s done. What now?”

“We should try to clean him off, but don’t touch the bandage, he’s still bleeding. If we take it off, he might bleed to death.” Fluttershy said dipping the sponge into the warm water, with her mouth.

Applejack picked up the cloth and joined Fluttershy in cleaning him off,
“We can’t clean up all o’ him by the time Rainbow get’s back with Dr. Mend.”

“Then we need to focus on the parts that sustained the worst injuries; his chest mostly, I think.”

He was positively filthy. Applejack refilled the bucket twice before Rainbow Dash brought Dr. Mend. The two arrived and entered without knocking. Dr. Mend was an older stallion. He was pitch-black in coat, with an ice-white mane, and steel-gray eyes, and he carried a large and heavy black bag.

He came in at a trot and set the bag on the floor next to the couch,
“Good grief!” he exclaimed, unzipping the bag, “Take this iodine, go to the sink, and scrub hard. Scrub every nook and cranny, get every particle of dirt, and hurry it up. Go!” he said.

The girls took the bottle and headed for the kitchen. They scrubbed furiously while Dr. Mend used a straight razor and shaved a patch of hair from his patient’s left foreleg. He assembled an I.V. bag of saline and hung it above his patient, then inserted the needle. Dr. Mend removed several different tools and set them out for easy reach.

When the girls returned, he had them all take places around him to help,
“Rainbow Dash, you’ll help me cut away and clean the bandage and wounds. Take these scissors, alcohol, and cotton swabs.”

He then turned to Applejack,
“Stand right here and pass me tool as I need them; I’ll use simple terms so I won’t confuse you with medical jargon.”

Finally he focused on Fluttershy,
“I need you to stand just to my left and use these gauze pads to apply pressure and stop bleeding where you see it.”

He then addressed all three of them
“If any pony sees him bleeding too much from one place that I may have overlooked, let me know. Let’s begin.”

Dr. Mend decided to tackle the big wrap-bandage first,
“Dash, cut the . . . blanket above and below where the blood is seeping through.” Dr. Mend indicated.

Dash cut away the blanket bandage and Dr. Mend carefully pulled it off the patient,
“Fluttershy, apply pressure here.” he indicated the bleeding lump.

Dr. Mend paused and stared puzzled at the injury now in front of him,
“Looks like a bone is protruding.” he said then checked the ribs,
“Badly bruised but nothing broken, and the spine is intact . . .” he mumbled, thinking.

Suddenly his eyes bulged,
“Luna and Celestia!” he breathed, “Applejack pass me the bone-saw.” he said.

Applejack handed over the frightening implement. She shot Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash a concerned look, and then had to perform a double-take. There were tears glistening in Dash’s eyes. Dr. Mend carefully sawed off the jagged bone tip, down to a smooth bump, and then stitched the surrounding flesh back together.

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It took five bags of saline, 283 stitches, and many hours of work on each side of the wounded pony, but finally Dr. Mend finished,
“You can relax now.” he said lowering his fore-hooves down to the ground finally, “Well done every pony. Sit down and try to relax.” he said to Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash.

He turned to Applejack,
“Make sure they sit down and don’t let them do anything, except sit. I’ll be right back.” he said hurriedly.

Applejack was puzzled. She turned to her two friends,
“Come on yall, take a load off.” she said sitting down on the floor.

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy didn’t move; they simply stood and stared at the now stitched and cared-for pony, oblivious to everything around them. Applejack stood up and carefully eased her two friends away from their ‘guest’ and sat them down. Even sitting, they continued to stare at him.

Applejack became frustrated,

“What is wrong with yall?” she asked loudly.

“They are in shock. Fluttershy held out better than I would have hoped.” Dr. Mend said sitting down and checking Fluttershy over.

Applejack was still confused,
“Why are they in shock doc?” she asked.

Dr. Mend lowered his head sadly,
“That poor pony is a Pegasus.” He said.

Applejack didn’t get it,
“What? No he ain’t! He ain’t got no . . .” she trailed off as it hit her.

She suddenly realized why Fluttershy and Dash were in shock,
“Those bones,” she whispered, “They’re wing stubs.”

Dr. Mend nodded silently.