

Sunshine and Raindrops
By
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“Do you realize who that was you dropped all that furniture on?” a custard pegasus mare growled, mimicking a gruff, masculine tone. “That was Princess Celestia’s star pupil! If this got into the newspapers then the whole company could go under. I’ve already had to deal with complaints about that walleyed temp I hired to help out goods to the wrong buildings. I’m sorry, Raindrops, I really am sorry. I don’t want to do this but the business can’t handle anymore accidents or missteps. I have to let you go.”

Sitting alone on a small fluff of a cloud, the mare sighed heavily as her ears drooped. “And that was it,” Raindrops concluded in her own voice. “The day my life was ruined.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a pretty rough day.” The response came from above her. “Almost as rough as nearly blowing a major flying competition in front of the Wonderbolts and the Princess.” A waterfall of rainbow-colors seemed to fall right out of the sky and stop a short distance away from Raindrops’ tiny cloud. The rainbow strands sprouted a confident smirk and a large pair of confident eyes. “Your life totally isn’t ruined. Cheer up, Rainy. These things have a way of working out in the end.”

Raindrops shook her head and looked away. “Yeah, but you actually ended up winning the competition, getting your wish and spending the day with the Wonderbolts.”

“And the winning crown too,” Rainbow Dash boasted with a little chuckle. “Can’t forget about the crown.”

“Yes, and the crown too,” Raindrops replied with a roll of her eyes. “All I got was a pink slip, and it’s not even a pretty color of pink either.” A faded strip of paper slipped out from under a wing and fell. It slipped through the cloud vapors, tumbling end over end, and slowly began to make its way towards the ground below. Raindrops lay down and hung her head over the side of the cloud, watching the piece of paper lazily fall. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t have any leads on a new job and getting fired isn’t exactly a great entry in my resume.”

Dash fluttered her wings and alighted nearby on what little space remained on the cloud. “Look at it this way. Moving furniture is *way* too boring to be a permanent job.” She hopped up and looped around the cloud puff before settling back down with a lopsided grin. “Everypony knows that hauling around heavy stuff isn’t your talent. I could get you back on the weather team. How’s that sound?”

Raindrops sighed again without looking up. “No thanks, Dash. I appreciate the offer but it’s just not my thing.”

“Not your thing? You’ve got drops of rain as a cutie mark and you’re the best rainy weather pony this town has ever seen! Even I can’t get rain clouds to move and behave the way you can, and that’s saying a lot. Remember when we missed that shower and had to schedule a downpour on short notice?” Dash gave Raindrops a thump on the shoulder. “That was all you, champ.” Raindrops did not reply, only shaking her head

Rainbow’s grin was replaced with a concerned frown. “Listen, I know you’re feeling bummed out, but you’ve got friends that are here to help. If you ever change your mind you know where to find me. I can have you back working with the team in a jiffy.” She gave Raindrops a quick winghug and patted her shoulder. “I gotta jet but if you need anything just drop by.” Rainbow dropped off the cloud out of sight but quickly reappeared. “Just try and drop by whenever I’m not in the middle of a nap. And remember, the weather team can always use your help.” Then she was gone.

Raindrops watched quickly as her friend and former colleague arched up and over another set of lazy clouds and fly away. “Easy for you to say, you actually enjoy your special talent.” She flipped over on her back and idly pulled a small cottony ball of cloud from her perch. The ball slid through the air effortlessly as the pegasus pushed it back and forth. Then she rolled it in-between her front hooves like cookie dough until it was a smaller, tightly packed bundle of gray. A light tap and a miniature rain shower began to trickle out.

“You’re not just going to lie up there forever and mope, are you?” Rolling over to the opposite side of her cloud, Raindrops looked down to find a pinkish unicorn smiling up at her, a stray bit of striped mane hanging out of place.

“And what if that is my plan? What then, Seafoam?”

Seafoam gave her friend a mock snort. “Oh, don’t be like that, Rainy. Now come on down; it’s lunch time.”

“I’m not hungry,” Raindrops moaned before shifting back away from the edge.

“I was just heading over to Rosemary’s for a bite; you should come too.” The pouting pegasus, no more than a tuft of aquamarine mane sticking out over the side of the cloud, shook her head. Seafoam grinned broadly. “I was also planning on going by Sugarcube Corner for dessert afterwards. I hear they have marshmallow cream cakes today.”

Raindrop’s ears perked up and she swallowed the saliva response that immediately came at the mention of the sugary treat. “Well…” She thought for a moment before finally rolling off her cloud puff and fluttering down to her friend. “I guess I could spare a few bits for a little something to eat. I haven’t started to dig into my savings just yet.”

“Perfect!” Seafoam clapped her hooves together. “A nice treat is just the thing to cheer you right up.” The two set an easy pace through the heart of Ponyville, Seafoam

commenting on everything from the sunny weather to a sale going on at Carousal Boutique. Raindrops offered little more than an occasional word or two in response, her tail dragging morosely in the dust. The trip was a short one and soon they were seated at a small table outside of a restaurant, its colorful sign proclaiming it to be Rosemary's Snack Shop.

"The usual, ladies?" a stallion with a green chef's hat and an apron called to them from the open serving window.

"Yes please, Mr. Cobb," Seafoam answered for both of them. They waited in silence for their order to arrive. Seafoam continued to smile warmly while Raindrops continued to pout. "So," Seafoam began. "You and Rainbow talk about anything interesting?"

"Just me getting fired for dropping a bunch of furniture on Twilight Sparkle."

Seafoam flinched. "Yeah. I heard about it from Lyra. Glad Twilight wasn't hurt too bad. How are you holding up?"

"I've been sighing a lot. Don't know if that's a skill I can put into a job application." Raindrops buried her face in her hooves. "I have no idea what I'm going to do now, Seafoam. This was so sudden and unexpected and moving stuff wasn't a great job but it paid for the bills and--"

"Hold up there for a moment, Rainy." Seafoam laid a hoof gently on her friend. "Take a deep breath and let's just work on getting through lunch. Then we'll start working on getting you squared away with a new direction."

As Raindrops was pulling herself together the stallion that had called for their order returned with two plates: a daisy and tulip sandwich, and a fescue salad. Raindrops reached for a small purse tucked beneath one of her wings but the stallion shook his head.

"It's on the house," Mr. Cobb said. "I heard about what happened, so don't you worry about it today."

"I-I couldn't," Raindrops sputtered. "It's not necessary, really. Thank you but I'm not a charity case yet." She pulled out her bit purse and started to retrieve a few coins when Seafoam levitated several over to Mr. Cobb.

"Don't worry about it; lunch is on me today."

Raindrops glanced at each pony, small tears beginning to form in the corners of her eyes. "Thank you. Thanks you, but I just can't accept your generosity. Not yet. If I start now then...then I might as well have given up already. Please, you have to let me pay my own way."

Mr. Cobb knickered. "I can respect that but your bill has already been paid." He dropped the bits offered by Seafoam into an apron pouch. "But if you're set on paying your own way, how about a bit of all the local happenings you've heard then? I think the mailmare delivered our newspaper to the wrong address again and I know you're good for all the best stories about what's happening around town."

Raindrops eyes brightened a little. "Oh! Um, let me think." She pondered for a second or two. "There's some heavy weather moving in from the Everfree Forest; more than the weather team can handle. That means the rain shower scheduled for the day after tomorrow is cancelled." A wing moved up and flicked up a single feather on the tip of the wing (name?). "Cheerilee is looking for help running the stage for the school's upcoming pageant on account of her latest substitute teacher quitting after a trio of fillies used the schoolhouse as a terrarium trying to get their cutie marks in bug collecting." She thought for a moment longer, a small smile coming to her face. "And Fluttershy's chickens got loose again. Two are still missing and she's asking everypony to keep an eye out for them. I doon't think most of that is something the newspaper would report on though."

Mr. Cobb nodded. "That's why I ask you whenever you stop by for lunch. Thanks. I can always count on you to know what's going on around Ponyville. I've got a bit of news myself." The stallion straightened his chef hat. "Rosemary is thinking about starting up a delivery service for the shop. If you ever need something to tide you over, we could use a speedy pony."

Raindrops's small smile seemed to wilt under the praise and offer. "Thanks, but I don't think that's the job for me."

"Still, good luck," Seafoam added to the conversation. "It sounds like a great idea." Mr. Cobb nodded his thanks and returned to the shop. "Please try to lighten up a little bit," she said to Raindrops before digging into her salad. "I mean, you *do* need a job and he was nice to offer it to you before they've even advertised the opening."

"I'm more than aware that I need a job." Raindrops munched on her sandwich with little enthusiasm. "But I've been in one lousy position after another and I'm tired of it all. I'm not getting into something else that I know I'm not going to enjoy."

"Sounds like maybe you're in a rut. A change of scenery might do you some good."

"What do you mean?" Raindrops asked, nibbling on a piece of crust.

"Get out of Ponyville for a little while. What would you say to a short vacation?" Seafoam asked with a bit of twinkle in her eye.

"A vacation?" Raindrops paused for a moment as she thought. "I haven't had a vacation in a while." She shook her head. "But I don't have the time or the money to take a vacation. Not now." She watched Seafoam as her friend said nothing but instead just

continued to smile. Raindrops sighed and folded her hooves across the tabletop. “If I did go somewhere for a few days, and I’m not saying that I will, what did you have mind?”

“Well,” Seafoam said, drawing out the word. “I like to go to the coast to relax, so how about a trip out on a ship?”

“A ship?” Raindrops perked up a little. “Like a sailing ship? On the water? I’ve never been on one before. That could be fun.” Her ears fell again. “But that kind of thing is usually pretty expensive.”

“Don’t worry,” Seafoam giggled. “I have a friend that runs a sightseeing tour out of a small harbor near Hoofington. He owes me one so I can probably get you a seat on his boat for free.” Raindrops started to protest again but found Seafoam’s hoof at her lips. “You really need a break so you can come back with a clear head.”

“Maybe.” She started back on her sandwich. “So if I agreed, when were you thinking about going?”

“Today.”

“Today?!” Raindrops dropped her sandwich and a few errant flowers spilled out onto the table. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Why not?” Seafoam took another bite of her salad and cast a glance over her shoulder to the east. “By train it’s only a day or two from here, and there’s usually a train leaving for Canterlot in the late afternoon. We could catch a red eye from there.” She winked at Raindrops. “It’s called being spontaneous.”

“I can be spontaneous,” Raindrops mumbled back, slurping up the flowers that were trying to escape. After ensuring that none of the petals were planning on making a break for it again, she gave her friend a sincere look in the eye. “Do you really think it’ll help?”

“Of course! You’ll love it, trust me.”

Raindrops looked the vessel up and down, from bow to stern, and shot Seafoam a dubious glance. They stood together on a short pier of heavy wooden planks next to a moored ship. All around them, ponies bustled and went about their various jobs. Many other vessels, some much larger and others mere dinghies, bobbed in the water nearby.

“Are you sure about this? I mean, it doesn’t look like much. The, uh, thing there is all wrapped around that other thing.”

A reassuring hoof fall across Raindrops’ shoulders. “Yes, I’m sure,” Seafoam giggled. “It’s supposed to look like that.” The pegasus mare did not look fully persuaded. “You

said you never been on a ship before? Not even a small one on a lake?"

Raindrops shook her head. "I've never even set hoof on one. This is only my second time even seeing the ocean, and the first time was from the air." She shifted her weight from one side to the other and ran a hoof through her mane. "I don't know. I can see a lot more floating on a cloud than I can floating on the water."

"I don't know about floating on a cloud but you can't say you've experienced the ocean till you've sailed on it at least once." Seafoam gave her friend a playful nudge towards the vessel. "Go on, I already told him we'd be dropping by this morning. I also mentioned you were really excited, so relax and have fun."

Raindrops sucked her head and cast a wary glance at the ship as it bobbed gently in the swells. Seafoam flicked her tail in response and gestured for the pegasus to get going. Raindrops relented but paused at the foot of the brow and eyed it with some uncertainty. She set one hoof on it, then another, and finally all four. One step at a time, she started up the narrow plank of wood. A small grin began to grow on her face. Each step further made the little grin grow more noticeable. She was halfway across when a swell abruptly caused the brow to shift, rising and sinking with the crest and trough.

Raindrops yelped and immediately took to the air. She hovered just above the rocking plank. "Forget that," she said to the offending piece of wood. A few quick flaps and she touched down on the deck of the ship. Looking around, she did not spot the pony Seafoam had mentioned.

"Hello?" she called out. No one answered. There were only three doors she could see: a large double-door set into the deck towards the front and two smaller ones that seemed to lead into what Seafoam had called a cabin. Stepping lightly over to the first of the smaller pair she tapped on it with a hoof.

"Is anypony home?" There was still no answer. Raindrops walked over to the railing on the side and leaned over. "There's no one here," she called over to her friend.

"He's got to be here; he's almost always here," Seafoam replied. "Sometimes he gets too wrapped up working on something. He's got kind of a short attention span if something distracts him. Hang out here for a couple of minutes while I'll check with some of the other ships."

"But this thing smells funny!"

"If you think this is bad, go give one of the trawlers a sniff." The male voice came unexpectedly from behind and above Raindrops. She spun around. Standing up on the smaller deck that formed the roof of the cabin was an earth pony. His coat was a dark blue and his slightly unruly mane and tail were a slate gray. He smiled warmly, trotted down the narrow stairs to Raindrops, and stuck out a hoof.

“Welcome aboard the *Unsinkable II*. I hope you haven’t been waiting around for too long.”

“Um, the *Unsinkable II*?” Raindrops offered with a raised eyebrow. “What happened to the first one?”

“It sank.”

“It sank?”

“Yep, but there’s no need to worry. I took care of all those problems when this one was built.” Raindrops lifted a front leg and rocked back a bit on her rear legs before the stallion snickered. “I’m sorry. That was just a bad joke.” He extended a hoof. “Her real name is *Dusky*.”

Raindrops shook the offered hoof. “Um...good one?” She cleared her throat. “Sorry. Never been on one of these before.”

“That’s no problem. Not a lot of ponies get to experience open ocean sailing unless they’re born into the life. Seafoam told me it was going to be just you coming along today but I don’t see her.” He looked around the main deck. “I thought she’d at least see us off.”

“Down here, you blind sea rat!” Seafoam waved as the stallion approached the railing and waved back with gusto. His wave was interrupted by Raindrop’s hoof.

“What do you mean just me?” she asked him. The stallion looked confused so the pegasus turned to her friend on the pier. “What does he mean just me?”

Seafoam shrugged. “Have you seen the dolphins on my flank? I grew up around the ocean; I’ve been on a ship lots of times. Now it’s your turn.”

“Well yeah, but-but...” Raindrops sputtered. She pointed a hoof at the earth pony accusingly. “You’re leaving me all alone with some strange stallion?”

“Ma’am, I might be strange but I can assure you that I’m mostly harmless. You’re in safe hooves; I know what I’m doing.”

“Don’t believe a word he says,” Seafoam laughed.

“You’re not helping the poor thing.” He gave the pegasus an apologetic look. “I guess that part of the tour slipped her mind.” An exasperated sigh was the reward for his efforts.

Raindrops fanned her wings. “You know, it’s not like I’m stuck here if I don’t want to go

alone.”

“If you’d rather not that’s okay,” the stallion offered. “I understand.” He scuffed a hoof against the weathered wood of the deck. A seabird squawked high up on one of the masts and he raised his eyes to the sound. “The sea isn’t for everypony. I’m sure I can find another customer sometime tomorrow.”

Raindrops folded her wings and looked at him. She was silent for a moment and then looked at her friend. Seafoam put her hooves on her flanks and looked disapprovingly at Raindrops.

The pegasus hung her head at last. “Oh alright,” she said. Raindrops fanned her wings again. “But if anything happens, like the boat sinking or I see a shark fin, I’m gone.”

“Ship,” he corrected.

“What?”

“The *Dusk Horizon* is a ship, not a boat. Boats are carried by ships. That’s how you can tell them apart.”

Raindrops blinked. “Oh. Do you have a boat?”

“Nope. Not anymore, at least.”

The pegasus shot him a questioning glance. “What happened to it?”

“Giant squid ate it,” he replied as he moved towards the bow.

“Oh, well okay. I - WHAT!?! Did you say giant squid?” Raindrops leaned back over the railing. “He said giant squid!” she yelled down to Seafoam. “Why didn’t you tell me there were giant squid?!”

“You mentioned the giant squid?” the unicorn called up to the stallion. “I thought that was the tour’s grand finale.” Standing there with her mouth open Raindrops looked from one pony to the other. She tried to form words, but though her mouth mimicked their movements no sound came out. Then the pair burst into uproarious laughter. Seafoam rolled on the pier while he stomped his hooves.

Raindrops fumed and glared at her friend. “You!” Then she turned to the stallion. “And you!”

“I’m sorry ma’am,” he said between trying to catch his breath and laugh. “It’s an old joke between me and Seafoam.”

“Just be glad we didn’t pull the pirate gag,” Seafoam added. “I don’t think that group ever went near the ocean again.”

“That-that wasn’t funny,” was all Raindrops could say, scowling. “How would I know there aren’t any giant squid?”

By now the stallion was composing himself and rubbing his temples. “Oh, they’re real alright. Ow, my head. I haven’t had a laugh like that in a good while.” He was still smiling broadly after he had retrieved a small piece of hemp line from up forward and trotted back.

“Been a couple that’s washed up on shore in the past several years. One topped out at eighty hooves long. Dead as can be when they found it, but still a scary-looking beast. I wouldn’t worry though. They stick to deep waters and we won’t be going out past the Guardians. Here.” Taking the piece of line in his teeth he sat back and began weaving it around his hooves. It all looked like a confusing twist of crossed loops until a final tug brought the creation together.

The stallion held up a tightly wound, crisscrossed core of hemp with three loops and a twin tail. He held it out to Raindrops. “A little souvenir for having the courage to go out to sea for the first time.”

Raindrops took the offering and turned it over in her hoof. “Thank you.” The scowl on her face softened. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. It looks like a clover made of rope.”

“It’s called line, not rope, and it’s a masthead knot. Very common and fairly simple to make. If you remind me, by the end of the trip I’ll show you how to tie one yourself. Did you come ready to shove off? There’s an ebb tide this time of day and it’s easier to ride it outbound than have to tack through the currents.”

The pegasus blinked. “I have no idea what half of that means. And I didn’t know I was supposed to bring anything.”

“No worries,” the stallion replied, now moving to untie knots and check on several small hatches. “I just meant that if you’re ready to head out now then we should get going. It’s only an overnight trip so you should be fine.”

Raindrops cast another hesitant glance landward and ran a hoof through her mane. “Yeah, I suppose I’m ready,” she finally said. “It’s not like I’m going to be any more ready.”

“Great!” Moving back to the moored side of the ship the stallion waved to Seafoam. “Would you mind casting off the lines?”

“No problem,” Seafoam answered. “Gimmie just a minute.” The unicorn busied herself

with the lines draped over the bollards while the ship's captain continued with his own preparations. Lines were tightened or cast loose, knots tied or untied, and hatches battened down.

"Is there something I should be doing?" Raindrops asked as she watched the confusing motions.

"Um..." The stallion paused for a second and glanced around. He pointed to the upper deck. "Stand up there and pull whatever lever I say to, if you wouldn't mind." Raindrops nodded and hopped up the stairs to the deck above the cabin. She was greeted by a very unusual sight. The ship's wheel was right where she thought it would be, but there the similarities to the drawings she'd seen ended. Arrayed around the wheel were close to a dozen levers embedded into the deck. Four raised pedals flanked the wheel and a post with six horizontal bars sat by itself further back. Each lever and pedal had a color or striped marking.

"Pull the lever with the green stripe!" she heard the stallion shout. Raindrops gave the lever a good pull and felt it click though the wood beneath her hooves. A zipping sound and a surprised yelp drifted up from the pier. The pegasus jumped up and hovered over to see what was happening. She found Seafoam edging away from the thick mooring lines as they were sucked into the ship's hull through round holes.

"Wow, that's a new one," Seafoam remarked. "How long to get that working?"

"Five days, three splintered planks, more bruises than I cared to count, and a lot of angry fishing ponies," the stallion called back from somewhere near the mainmast.

Raindrops looked the ship over and glanced at the other vessels along the pier: all of them, except the *Dusk Horizon*, were swarming with ponies. Onboard this ship, there were just the two of them. "Excuse me? Where is everypony else?"

The stallion came up the stairs. He took up a position just behind the wheel. "What do you mean?"

"All those other boa-uh, ships, have a lot of ponies working on them. Aren't we going to wait for the rest?" The earth pony chuckled and Raindrops frowned. "What's so funny?" She stepped aside as he began pulling levers and pushing pedals. Overhead, lines began moving, spars unfolded, and dull white canvas unfurled. As the sheets caught the wind and the current grabbed the keel the *Dusk Horizon* moved away from the pier.

The stallion spun the wheel and grinned mischievously. "There aren't any others. That's what all these levers and such are for. I can run almost everything myself." He waved one more time to Seafoam as they gradually began to draw away.

"Wouldn't it be easier to have some others working for you?"

“Maybe. I might even break fewer things when testing new ideas. But since when is easy fun?”

“Bye Raindrops, see you tomorrow,” the unicorn called out in a diminishing voice. “Take good care of her, Salty. It’s her vacation.”

Raindrops looked away from her friend and ran a hoof through her mane. “Um, what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t say, but thanks for asking.” He placed both hooves on the wheel and leaned forward, his eyes drinking in the view of the open ocean out ahead. Breathing in deeply he closed his eyes for a moment and smiled, pure contentment spreading across his face. “It’s Salty Breeze,” he replied softly. “You can call me Salty, if you like.”

“Nice to meet you. So where are we heading?”

Salty’s grin broadened so much that his teeth showed. He pointed towards the open ocean. “Towards freedom.”

The pegasus found she could not help but smile back at the comment. “Sounds fun.”

“That sure didn’t sound like fun.” Salty Breeze glanced anxiously behind him and saw Raindrops with her head hanging over the side of the ship. Her hoofs were up on the railing and her whole body seemed to sag. A hoof appeared and weakly waved at him.

“I-I’m okay,” Raindrops mumbled. She lifted her head and offered Salty a plaintive smile. “Just need to-oh, oh no.” Back down her head went and the pegasus once again started making sounds that made Salty wince.

“We haven’t even been out for a full hour and the swells are only three hooves. I think this is some kind of record among all the passengers I’ve had. Did you chew on that piece of ginger root I gave you?”

“It just came back up.”

“You weren’t supposed to eat it, just chew on the thing.”

“Well how was I supposed to-oh boy.” Once again the mare’s body quivered.

Salty shook his head. “It’ll pass soon enough. Watch the horizon and put your face into the wind. I’ve got some bread too. That’ll help keep your stomach calm.” Pushing down on a pedal, the stallion locked the ship’s wheel in place. Opening a small hatch nearby, he

reached inside and brought out a perforated square of something brown. He tapped the square against the deck. It made a sound like one stick hitting another. Salty offered the square to Raindrops.

“I really don’t think that’s such a good idea,” she replied gloomily. The stallion insisted and Raindrops relented. She took the offered food and bit down. The square remained whole. Not even a bite mark marred its surface. “It’s gone stale.”

“Stale? Oh, I keep forgetting. That’s hardtack. It’s bread that’s baked long enough to make it last a long time. That makes it a little tough to chew.”

“A little?” Raindrops dropped the piece of hardtack onto the deck and stomped on it with a hoof. It barely cracked. “You could use this thing as the head of a hammer!”

“Just nibble on it then. It’ll help you feel better sooner.” He went back to the wheel. “Have a seat up forward for a spell. The view is better up there. Come on back when you’re feeling well again and I’ll point out the sights. This is a tour, after all.”

Raindrops stuffed the hardtack into her mouth and slowly shuffled along the railing to the bow, grumbling all the way. The motion of the ship was more pronounced farther forward, but the cool breeze was indeed refreshing. Despite the almost complete lack of taste in the hardtack, that too seemed to be helping. In a short time, the rhythmic rocking of the ship lulled the mare into a light doze. A brief nap later and Raindrops was feeling much better. She rejoined Salty Breeze at the helm while the stallion pointed out various sights.

“Even away from land there are always sights to be seen,” he said. “Look over the railing and up forward, close to where you were napping.”

Raindrops held on to the rails as she leaned over the side of the ship and looked at the bow. It was cutting a sharp wake through the water and pushing a swell out to either side. “I don’t see what you mean,” she muttered. A sleek, gray body suddenly breached the surface. It sailed a full ten feet through the air before sliding back into the ocean with hardly a splash. It was followed by another and another. Gray fins began to spout fine clouds of mist all around the bow of the ship. “Dolphins!”

“Yep. They like to ride the wave made by the bow of ships. Legend has it that seeing a dolphin swimming next to your ship is good luck. Means you have someone watching over you in case something bad happens. I’ve even heard stories of dolphins saving ponies that fell overboard by towing them back to land.”

“Really?” Raindrops eyes grew wide as she glanced back at Salty. Her attention was drawn back to the bow of the ship by a shrill cry. A white bird was floating on the air ahead of the *Dusk Horizon*. “A seagull!”

“An albatross, actually,” Salty corrected. “Would you like to hear the story about them?” Raindrops nodded emphatically. “Seabirds are said to be the souls of lost sailors in physical form. A seabird, especially an albatross, following your ship is supposed to be a very good omen. Fair winds and following seas are sure to come. Unless somepony happens to kill one.”

“That’s terrible! Why would anyone kill a little bird?”

“We’re not the only things out on the sea. Griffins and pegasi are able to sit on clouds but many a day out here is clear of clouds. Eventually one gets tired and needs a place to land and rest. A griffin killed an albatross while onboard a pony vessel because it was tired of eating hardtack and the like. The next morning, the sun rose and cast the sky in a dreadful red hue.”

“What’s so dreadful about that?” Raindrops looked away from the soaring bird. “It sounds like a beautiful sunrise.”

“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning,” Salty quoted with a flourish. “But, continuing on, later that day a squall the likes of which no pony on the ship had ever seen appeared. The ship was dashed to pieces and lost with all hands. A day later, a new flock of seagulls came in off the sea to roost.”

“If no one survived, then how does anyone know what happened?” Raindrops asked with a mocking tone.

“Don’t you know better than to ruin a good tale with logic? It’s all sailor superstition anyways. All the dots don’t have to be connected in order for it to make sense.”

“Are you superstitious?”

Salty eyed Raindrops. “Does tossing a bit into the sea behind the ship when I leave and not looking back at the pier count? Don’t answer that.”

“What about islands or something?” Raindrops inquired.

“As a matter of fact, there’s a shallow reef not too far from here. We’ll only be able to get in close later in the evening when the water’s high enough to keep the ship off the coral. Until then, I’m at your service.”

Raindrops smiled and glanced around at the myriad of lines, sails, levers, and other contraptions. “Well,” she began. “You can start by explaining all this to me.”

“Excuse me, ma’am. Ma’am? You might want to come and see this; it’s pretty amazing.”

Raindrops snorted herself awake and blinked sleepily. She looked around the dark cabin until her unfocused eyes settled on the blurry outline of Salty's head. It was poked around a door that had been cracked open just enough to allow in a sliver of dim candlelight. "Wh-what?" she mumbled.

"Sorry to disturb you, but I thought you'd want to see this," he repeated.

Raindrops rolled over and yawned. "What time is it?"

"About three-thirty."

"It's what?!" The pegasus sat straight up and tossed the wool blanket onto the deck. "It wasn't much past sunset when I turned in. I slept all day?"

"All day? Oh! I meant it's three-thirty in the morning." In the bare candlelight Salty saw Raindrop's shoulders droop and mouth drop. A deft duck behind the door and he avoided the thick feather pillow flung at his head.

"What is wrong with you?" She covered her head with the blanket. "I never wanted to know this hour even existed."

"My apologies, ma'am."

Raindrops lifted the blanket off her head just enough to glare at Salty. "And stop calling me that."

"Sure thing, miss."

The glare intensified. "Wrong answer," she growled.

"Hey you?" Salty disappeared around the door again as the blanket followed the pillow.

"Are you always this...this..."

"Belligerent?"

"If that means what I think it means then, yes."

"Only when I'm in a good mood," he retorted.

"I swear," the pegasus fumed as she rolled off the cot and got to her hooves. "I don't know how you manage to stay in business. Just call me Raindrops from now on or I'm outta here."

“Sure thing, Miss Raindrops,” Salty chuckled. He ducked out of the cabin and shut the door as his passenger tried to hurl the cot at him.

Several long minutes later the custard mare stumbled through the outer cabin door and onto the main deck. It was dark, very dark.

“Up here,” Salty’s voice called. “Just lean against the rails and feel for the steps till your eyes adjust.” Completely ignoring the advice of the stallion, Raindrops headed to where she was sure the steps would be and walked right into a wall of wood. “Told you,” he said as she peeled herself off the front of the cabin.

“I can handle myself,” Raindrops insisted testily. She turned and smartly marched forward right into the mainmast. Grinding her teeth she blinked and peered off into the darkness. “I’ll bet you think this is real funny,” she said to the night.

“Well, maybe a little.” Raindrops jumped when she felt a hoof placed gently on her shoulder. “You have to admit, you’d think it was funny if it were me walking into things.” Salty’s voice sounded like he was grinning.

“How can you see out here?”

“Give it time; your eyes will adjust eventually. Follow me and I’ll lead you.”

“And how am I supposed to follow what I can’t even see?” The strands of a tail brushed across her nose.

“Grab on and keep up; I’ll call out when there are steps.” They stood there on the pitch black deck until Raindrops finally took a tuft of Salty’s tail in her teeth.

“Uch! It tastes like dirty salt.”

“I only ask that you don’t JERK on the hairs.” He heard a snicker. “Alright, I guess I deserved that for laughing. Now take it one step at a time.” Together they moved back aft slowly and carefully, navigating up the steps one hoof at a time. By the time both ponies were at the ship’s wheel, Raindrops claimed she was starting to see better.

“Good. I don’t feel like losing any more of my tail tonight.” The stallion put his hooves on the wheel and gave it a quarter turn to the left. Though the night was warm an occasional bit of spray mixed in with the wind and kicked up a bit of a chill.

Raindrops shivered a little. “So what’s so amazing that you had to wake me at this imaginary hour? And how are you still awake yourself?”

“Short naps during trips that only last a few days. I take longer ones when I’m further out. You get used to the routine after a while. I also have my favorite tea to help.”

“Tea?”

“Yep,” Salty nodded. “I tried coffee before but it gave me a headache, so I drink tea. There’s this herb the zebras grow that makes a great red tea. If you want some I still have a cup or two warmed.”

Raindrops waved a hoof, which she could now make out. “I’ll pass, but maybe later. So what’s this thing you drug me out of bed to see?”

Salty grinned broadly and sat down. He tilted his head back. “Look up.” He heard her tired sigh turn into a sharp gasp. “So, what do you think?”

The mare sat with her mouth open and eyes wide as she drank in what she was seeing. Overhead was a clear night sky. There were stars, thousands and thousands of stars, from one horizon to the next. Some twinkled while others shown with a steady hum. Most were white but a few dots of red, yellow, and blue glittered like individual jewels. A swath of clusters swept across the apex of the heavens. It created a glowing band that bathed the ship and sea in a pale cream hue. Raindrops tried to speak again but a shooting star streaked across the richly painted sky and stunned her back into silence.

“Even in the smaller towns there’s always excess light,” Salty began, head still titled towards the stars. “That means you never get to see them all unless you go someplace far away. Like out here.” Turning back to his station, the earth pony pulled a couple of levers and rearranged the angle of a few sails. “I never get tired of this sight.”

“It’s...it’s unbelievable,” Raindrops finally managed to say. She was still staring straight up. “Think of all the ponies who might never see this.”

“They’re missing one really great view,” Salty agreed. “I have something else to show you. How’s your vision now?”

Raindrops torn herself away from the countless stars and found that, although colored in muted shades of gray, the world had come back into focus. “Much better.”

“Good. Watch your step and go over to the port railing.”

“Port is...left.” Raindrops could not help but strut just a little when Salty applauded approvingly. “This sailor stuff isn’t so hard,” she continued.

“Then maybe later on I’ll have you take a fid and splice an eye into a line.”

“Take a what and do what with a huh?” Even in the dark Raindrops’ utterly perplexed expression was plainly clear.

“Not quite, but close,” Salty chuckled. When Raindrops reached the port railing he locked the wheel in place and stepped over next to her. “So what do you think of all this out here?”

“It’s amazing,” she gushed and turned her head skyward again. “Even in the cloud cities I never saw so many. But I wonder why the moon isn’t out.”

“It must be new tonight.”

Raindrops blinked and looked at the stallion. “I’m pretty sure it’s really old.” Salty opened his mouth, closed it, and gave her an astonished look. She sputtered and burst into laughter. “Got you! That look was priceless. I know what you meant.”

“You know a little about astronomy?”

“Just a little.” Raindrops shrugged. “I had a teacher that had her own telescope and everything. It was *so* easy to get her off the day’s lesson topic by just mentioning something about stars. Some of it stuck.”

“Well, be glad we have a new moon tonight. Normally it shines so brightly out here that it’s difficult to make out many stars.”

“So what do you look at on those nights?” She gazed around at the featureless horizon. “There’s not much else in the way of scenery out here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Salty insisted, pointing to the waves kicked up by the ship.

Raindrops followed the stallion’s pointing hoof over the side and down to the frothing wake of the ship. Surfing on the waves kicked up by the vessel were bright flashes of green, blue, and white light. With each roll of the sea a new cluster sprang to life. It burned fiercely for a split second before disappearing into the night. They were not missed for long as another starburst of color took their place and created spiraling, chaotic patterns. Behind the ship and along its sides trailed a glowing carpet of tiny stars, winking in and out of existence.

“That’s incredible!” she laughed aloud. “What is that?”

“They’re tiny creatures that can make their own light within their bodies. Whenever they get disturbed by a passing ship they make those flashes. Cold water seems to be their preferred temperature. During the winter the *Horizon* looks like a comet when she sails.” Salty’s voice had a wistful quality to it.

“You really have quite a different world to yourself out here,” the mare commented.

“Sure do. You know what the best part is of all this?” he asked. Raindrops shook her

head. “The freedom. Out here, a captain is king of his ship. He goes where and when he pleases with no rules but his whim. Out here, no pony’s life on land matters. The sea is a blank slate every time you sail on her. Away from the past and history you left back on shore, a pony can be whatever they want.” Salty took in a deep, trembling lungful of salty air. “Out here, a pony is as free as he’ll ever be in life.”

Raindrops’ eyes were no longer latched on to either the stars in the sky or the stars in the sea. She was watching the stallion. Flicking a bit of mane from her eyes she leaned against the railing. “Sounds like the perfect life. Like a dream.”

“A lifelong dream,” he sighed.

Raindrops shook her head. “I meant it sounds too good to be true. Why aren’t there more ponies out here if it’s the life to have?”

“It’s not for all ponies, and we’re not all looking for the same kind of freedom. Most are perfectly happy with their life. Letting them control *every* aspect would be frightening to them.” He watched the pegasus run a hoof through her mane.

“That sounds silly. It’s like you’re saying that ponies would rather be told what to do or be bound to something rather than have a choice. How can that make them happy?” she asked.

“Because it’s comfortable, stable, and predictable. Every day for them is familiar. True freedom is often difficult and anything but predictable. Just like life out here. There are storms, nasty critters, hidden rocks and reefs. Not to mention all kinds of problems keeping good food and water in supply.”

“Then what’s the point?” Raindrops sat down. “Is all that really worth getting this illusion of freedom when you still have to come back to your past when it gets too dangerous?” She watched Salty think to himself for a while, the silence filled with the swish of the sea below and the whistle of wind in the lines above.

“What do you do for a living?” the stallion finally said.

“I’m a weathermare,” Raindrops replied matter-of-factly.

“So you’re on your town’s weather team.” He saw her glance away.

“Well, not exactly. I mean I was, but I quit several months ago.”

“You quit? To go do what?”

“I was hired on with a moving company.” The pegasus grimaced at the look that crossed Salty’s face.

“Weathermare is a strange way to say movingmare. So you liked the moving business more than the weather stuff?”

“Not really. I needed a job and they were hiring at the time.”

Salty sat down opposite of her and looked her in her eyes. “You left one job you didn’t like for another that you liked just as little. Why?” The stallion watched Raindrops run a hoof through her mane again.

“Well...” She turned so Salty could see her cutie mark. “See? I’m supposed to work with weather, and I am really good with rain clouds.” She turned back to meet his gaze. “I just wasn’t enjoying the work, so I left. The moving gig didn’t last long anyway.” Salty’s eyes asked the question. “I accidentally dropped something on someone’s head. An important someone.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Except it was a potted plant. Then an anvil. Then a loaded cart and a grand piano.” She saw the shocked look she was getting. “It wasn’t my entirely fault! And she was okay, the pony we dropped the stuff on; just needed some bandages and such.”

Salty winced at the mental image. “Fired?” he asked. The drooping ears and hung head was answer enough for him. “Sorry about that. What have you been doing since then?”

“Staying with Seafoam. She suggested this vacation to cheer me up and clear my head. I’m glad to get away for a while, but I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get back.”

“Do you think the weather team would hire you back?”

She nodded. “They’ve offered, and not many pegasi move out to the countryside around Ponyville. Especially with it being far from most major cities.”

“I suspect that’s not really an option you’re putting on the table,” Salty guessed with a sideways glance. He was looking up at the stars again.

“No, not really, but it’s not like I’ll have much of a choice.”

“Why not?” The stallion’s brow furrowed as he looked at different parts of the sky.

“Really?” Raindrops snorted. “Did you already forget what my cutie mark looks like, or are you just trying to get another look at my flank?” She laughed while Salty choked on a sharp intake of his own breath and coughed mightily. “So that’s a ‘yes’ to which one?”

“Neither,” he replied when he had caught his breath. “I was being serious. Why do you think you don’t have a choice?”

“Um, because it’s what I’m good at and it’s what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Says who?” The stallion watched Raindrops fumble for an answer.

“A cutie mark is what you’re special talent is, so that’s what you do with your life. Yours looks like the wheel for your ship.”

“Yep,” Salty agreed. “But I’m not out here just because I’m good at what I do. I also love the life. You’re good with rainy weather but it sounds like you don’t like that job or that life.” He moved a little closer to the mare. “What if you’re cutie mark means something more than just what you’ve assumed?”

“Huh?” Raindrops lifted a hoof. “Like what?”

Salty shrugged. “You tell me. What do you like to do for fun or for a hobby? Or anything really.”

“Well, I’m pretty good at flying.” She recoiled slightly when Salty shook his head.

“Nope. I asked what you liked to do, not what you’re good at doing.” Glancing back up at the sky the stallion frowned and stood. “I’m still listening, so keep talking. I need to check on something.” He trotted over to the small hatch near the wheel and nudged it open as Raindrops thought. Pulling out two wooden boxes he opened one and set a small lantern aside. Next out was a rolled length of parchment that became a chart once unrolled on the deck.

Raindrops sauntered over, curious, and peered over the stallion’s shoulder as he lit the oil lamp with a flintlock mechanism. “Whatcha doing?”

“Checking our position.” Salty pulled a charcoal stick and weighted ruler from the box. He got up to check his compass. “You were going to tell me what you enjoyed.” He made a few marks on the chart with the writing stick.

“I guess I never thought of doing something other than what I was good at,” Raindrops admitted. “You know, doing something for a living that you also do for fun. I take it you don’t just sail with customers?”

“Are you always this evasive?” Salty did not look up from his chart so he did not see Raindrops shrug.

“Only when my audience is distracted. Truth is I don’t really know. I’ve always been pushed towards normal pegasus stuff, but I usually had to pretend to be interested.

Actually, the most fun I had working with the weather team was going around and letting everypony know what was coming. Somepony tried dropping leaflets once, but that just made a big mess. And though I love our mailmare, she's not always the most reliable when it comes to schedules."

"So what did you do?" Salty asked, still hunched over his chart.

"I'd go around and tell as many ponies as I could and they'd pass the word along. I got to hear a lot of different bits of news that way, and by the end of my run everyone in town knew what was happening. I did like all the flying, but that was only half the fun." Raindrops glanced at the deck and scuffed a hoof. "I even had an idea to inform the whole town all at once, but the team said that pegasi towing big signs through the air was too silly. They said I was too good at what I already did and needed to stick to rainclouds."

"I don't see a problem with finding your own path."

"I don't want to do what I'm supposed to be doing with my life. That's not normal!" Raindrops flopped down onto the deck. "How many ponies do you know that live their lives differently from what their cutie marks destined them to be?"

The stallion put down his tools and looked up at the mare. "Just because you have a special talent for something doesn't mean that it has to rule your life. There are plenty of things I'm good at that I would never want to do every day of my life. Sometimes ponies even get lucky and can combine talent and passion into something fantastic. You have to decide for yourself what is going to make *you* happy. Once you figure that out..." He trailed off as his gaze shifted to the sky again.

"Once I figure that out... what? Um, Salty?" Raindrops waved a hoof across his face. "Anypony home?" She followed his gaze.

"Look up and tell me what do you see." Salty asked.

"Uh, stars?"

"Do you notice anything about them?" As he asked, he opened the second box and pulled out a strange tool. He locked it into a swiveling mount on top of the ship's wheel. It was a complex tangle of mirrors, dials, slides, and weights.

"I noticed that your acting strangely. What gives?"

"Something's wrong."

Raindrops' wings flared open. "As in giant squid wrong?"

“As in up there wrong.” Salty pointed at the sky and began turning knobs and adjusting slides on his device. He peered through a tiny slot into a set of mirrors and began jotting down numbers with his charcoal stick. “Try to find the constellations Orion and Canis Major.”

“Okay.” Raindrops looked at the stallion like he had lost a few marbles over the side of the ship, but began searching the heavens anyway. “There it-wait...no, that’s not the right one. How about...nope, not that one either. Where are they?” Spinning around, the pegasus looked but could not find the two familiar shapes in the night sky. She turned back to Salty. “I can’t find them.”

“They’re not there anymore,” he said solemnly. “None of the stars are where they’re supposed to be.”

“That’s just...no. The stars don’t do that; they don’t just move around.”

“Not by themselves. If I’m wrong then tell me how there are no constellations anymore. Everything’s changed.”

“How...why...huh?!” Raindrops began to breathe a little quicker and brushed back her mane.

“I don’t know how. As for why, I don’t know that either.” He pointed to the device. “This was the other thing I wanted to show you. It’s a sextant. I use this to navigate without any landmarks in the open ocean. The problem is that it uses the stars and horizon as reference points since they’re supposed to be constant. If the constellations aren’t there then the stars have changed.” He sighed and looked at Raindrops. “Without those reference points I won’t be able to accurately fix our position on the chart.”

“I’m still stuck on the stars moving around part, so work with me here.”

“I don’t know if I can get us back to the harbor.”

“What?!” The force of Raindrops shout lifted her off the deck. “You’re kidding. You’re kidding, right? You got us lost?” She immediately began pacing back and forth frantically.

“I didn’t get us lost,” Salty replied, putting away all the items except for his chart and writing stick. “I know where we *should* be based on my last fix. We ought to be able to find the nearest piece of land with the compass and a bit of dead reckoning.”

“Now’s not the time to be throwing the word ‘dead’ around.”

“You’re right, and neither is it the time to panic.” Both of their voices had begun to rise in volume. Salty busied himself with laying out a track on his chart while Raindrops tried to

pace with a hoof in her mane.

“This is bad, this is very bad,” she kept repeating. Something about giant squid food kept squeaking out too.

“You’re not helping by doing that,” the stallion added.

“What if I flew off for a ways and tried to find land?”

Salty shook his head. “If you got out of sight of the ship you’d never find her again. At least not without a proper bearing, and I don’t have another compass you could borrow. Besides, weather acts differently over water than it does land. You ever dealt with a squall line or oceanic thermal before? I know ponies that have lost friends because they wanted to ‘surf the sky waves’ and didn’t come back. Just keep calm.”

“I am calm!” Raindrops shouted, her fluttering wings taking her several feet off the deck. “I’m as calm as calm can calmly be when we’re lost at sea.” The ship heaved and rolled as it settled onto a new course. Sails and lines jerked taut and Raindrops struggled to maintain her balance.

She stomped her hooves on the deck and snorted. “This is a bad dream! It has to be.” Raindrops spun on her hooves and began marching back towards the steps. “Come get me when you’ve figured it all out. I’ll be in bed trying to dream that I wasn’t stuck at sea with – eep!”

Salty’s ears perked up. “I’ve been called a lot of things but ‘eep’ is a new one.” The reply drifted up from the bottom of the stairs.

“Ow.”

Trotting over to the stairs, Salty found an upside-down Raindrops sprawled across the deck. “It wasn’t the usual pinch, but did you feel that?”

“Just get me home!”

“No problem, ma’am. A straight transit over a couple of horizons and we’ll be seeing land by dawn.”

“What time is it?” Raindrops asked sweetly. She batted her eyelashes at Salty who was glowering with his hooves hooked around the ship’s wheel.

“Noon,” he replied glumly.

“It that before or after dawn? I’m not too sure.”

“After.”

“Oh.” She moved in closer. “Did Equestria sink? I thought we were going to see land by dawn, but noon is after dawn and I don’t see anything but ocean.” The mare gulped. “What if it’s all gone and we’re the last ponies left in the world?”

“Celestia help me if that’s true.”

“So where are we?”

“The ocean.” Salty glanced over at his chart, now covered in black marks and gray smudges. He pointed to a scattering of small islets near the Equestrian coast. “We should be near here, but I haven’t seen anything since dawn. Something else is wrong.”

“Something else besides the stars moving around and you not being able to get us back, you mean?” Raindrops flicked her tail. “What else could go wrong?” Distant thunder rolled across the waves and the two ponies slowly turned to look behind them.

“You had to say it,” moaned Salty. On the horizon, anvil-shaped thunderheads were gathering. Brief flashes of lightning jumped from one dark cloud to another. The air between the clouds and the ocean surface was blurred and hazy with rain.

“Not my fault,” Raindrops squeaked.

“Not mine that we’re lost either.” The stallion pushed on a pedal and let out more sail.

Raindrops began pacing. “But I thought you knew what to do in situations like this. I trusted you.”

“I *do* know what to do, but there’s more going on than I thought. We were here,” he began, pointing to the chart. “We’ve been traveling directly west, so we should eventually hit land. We ought to be there by now.”

“Did we go out too far?”

“No way. The Guardians mark the way out to the open ocean and we never sailed past them. This shouldn’t be-.” Salty’s face darkened and he swore. Like a sailor. His hooves slammed down into the deck and Raindrops jumped back a few steps. “How could I be so stupid?!” He saw her confused look. “I forgot about set and drift, and the approaching storm is making it worse.” He gestured with his hooves to illustrate. “A ship doesn’t travel in a straight line. We get pushed off-course over time by currents and wind. I forgot to correct our course.” He hit the wheel. Hard. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, his mouth a hard line. “I ruined your trip and I put you danger because I got distracted.” He sighed

heavily. “Any ideas?”

“Yes, I fly off back home and you can get yourself out of this mess you’ve made.” The pegasus fluttered her wings and scowled. The stallion looked away. She tried to make her face look more stern, but did not hold the expression for long. “It’s...it’s not alright, but I understand. It’s just that this was supposed to be my vacation.”

“I know.” Salty glanced back at Raindrops. “We can still fix this.”

“I have an idea about that,” Raindrops replied. “I’ll go up and have a look around. No, don’t shake your head at me. I know what you said but just listen for a minute. Higher up I can see a lot further. I’ll keep the ship in sight and rest on the clouds if I get tired. It’ll be like having the tallest bird house in the world.”

“The tallest what?”

“Um, the tall part where a pony looks for land.”

“The crow’s nest.” Raindrops nodded and Salty looked back at the gathering storm clouds. “I still think it’s a bad idea.” He worked his jaws and shook his head. “Pressure’s dropping; the storm’s getting closer. If you’re not going to listen to reason, try out ahead of the ship. Stay away from all that behind us.”

“Worried about me?” Raindrops asked with an arched brow.

“Worried about my safety deposit,” Salty snorted, his frown slowly turning into a hopeful smirk. “That’s a lot of bits to lose just because you flew off and did something reckless.”

“Your concern is touching, but I can handle myself.” Walking to the stern the pegasus put her hooves up on the railing. “How long do I have?”

“A couple of hours, maybe less. If you’re not back by then, stay up there. Find a cloud to rest on or something because it’ll be like hay in a windstorm down here.” Raindrops rolled her eyes and Salty gave her a hard look. “I’m serious. There’s no telling how the winds and swells will act. You don’t know trouble till you’ve been caught flat hoofed by a sea squall. Now get up or get below.”

“I’m going, I’m going. See you in a few.” Raindrops kicked off with her back legs and was off into the air. She climbed swiftly and banked to the left. Rapidly dwindling below her was the *Dusk Horizon*, the small ship cutting a V-shaped wake in the water. Glancing around, the mare saw nothing but sea, sky, clouds, and the one lonely ship. Higher and higher she flew, ascending in a tight spiral almost directly over the vessel. Once level with the clouds she set off in a direction parallel to the vessel’s current course.

“Let’s go see the ocean. You’ll love taking a cruise for a day,” Raindrops said, mimicking

Seafoam's voice. "Of course it's safe; I've done it lots of times. It'll be an experience you'll never forget." She shook her head. "When I get back, Seafoam, just you wait." Out ahead she could see mostly clear skies, but a few broken cloud formations were creeping in around her peripheral vision. A quick glance behind revealed the full extent of the oncoming storm. Great masses of slate gray and coal black clouds billowed and rolled high into the air. Further down they spread out over an enormous area. She could see the leading edge tearing over the sea very quickly and releasing torrential rains.

"That doesn't look good. I'd better hurry." Pushing onward, Raindrops climbed as high as she dared. She looked down and found the *Dusk Horizon* as a tiny brown speck against the azure backdrop of the sea. It was absolutely dwarfed by the size of the storm moving towards it from behind. Gritting her teeth, the pegasus beat her wings and cut an ever-widening zigzag pattern through the sky in front of her. With only the sound of her own wing beats and the rushing wind to keep her company, Raindrops soon found the silence annoying.

"Tell me I don't know what I'm doing with my life; I don't think so Mr. Salty Breeze. Salty. What a name. He probably tried to distract me with the stars to cover up the fact that he was already lost last night. I hope that storm really spins his head around." If she squinted, Raindrops was sure she could still just make out the ship. Still no land in sight, so she kept going.

"So what if I didn't like my jobs. Equestria is full of ponies who work because they have to, not because they love their work. Right? The weather team was a good position and we did good things for Ponyville. I guess I should have been happy that I could provide a service that grows food and makes bright, sunny days." Raindrops sighed. "So why was I never happy?" A passing seabird squawked at the pegasus and she idly shooed it away.

"I was helping ponies, and I like that good feeling. I also liked the flying I did with the team, but constantly being on rain duty was boring. Then there was spreading the word around so everypony knew what was happening. All the talk and news, too. That was fun. I wonder if there's anything I could do with that. Without having to tow around big signs, of course." She thought for a while as she flew. Before long another seabird swooped by her and Raindrops shooed it off too.

"Dumb birds. What are they doing way out here? Shouldn't they be sticking closer to-" She stopped when a sliver of brown poked itself just over the horizon to her right. Laughing aloud, the pegasus dove to pick up speed and angled towards her sighting. The sliver grew quickly into a bump and the bump continued growing into a large island.

"I found land. I did it. I. Am. Awesome!" Raindrops looped around in the air and even threw in a barrel roll at the end. She pulled up and rolled out to fly in a straight line back the way she came. "Ha! Now to tell Salty. I can't wait to see the look on his face." Climbing higher, she broke through a thin layer of clouds and saw only open ocean. The *Dusk Horizon* was nowhere to be seen.

“Uh oh.” Zipping off as fast as she could, Raindrops headed towards the only reference point she could think of: the leading edge of the storm. She did not have to travel far to find the line of angry clouds and wind-whipped rain. “It’s gotten bigger,” she said with a tinge of fear in her voice. Even several miles away she felt the force of the system as it drove winds and waves ahead of its path. Lightning leapt about inside and thunder rolled through the air, bringing with it the distant smell of ozone.

“This is bad, this is very bad. Salty told me not to try and go in after him if the storm got worse. But without me he’ll never find land. If he kept going straight after I left he’ll miss the island.” She fidgeted as she hovered, running two hooves through her mane. Several glances back and forth between the direction of land and the storm was interrupted by another booming thunderclap. Raindrops hung her head.

“I’m probably going to regret this, but here goes.” Taking a deep breath, the mare plunged into the oncoming clouds and burst out of the bottom into the rain and wind. She was brutally flung back by the first gust of wind that hit her. Raindrops’ cry of surprise was torn from her lips as she fought against the chaotic currents and eddies. Every foot gained seemed to find a gust that moved contradictory to the last one. Flying sideways, backwards, and momentarily upside-down, Raindrops was quickly tiring. Water lashed against her face and updrafts tugged at her wings and tail. Her mane whipped wildly about and the hairs on her coat stood up as lightning crackled. All around were whitecaps and thick swells, but no *Dusk Horizon*. Sight itself was a sense that was almost impossible to use, thanks to the wrathful spray that stung like needles. Squinting into the fury of the storm, Raindrops climbed back above the worst of the weather and into a dark cloud.

Gulping down shuddering breaths she panted to catch her breath. Lightning flashed again and she darted away from the boom that followed. Up ahead was a bank of clouds of a lighter shade and she alighted on the first patch. She was completely soaked through already and hugged her shoulders, teeth chattering in the cold. After a few minutes of rest and another deep breath, the mare swooped back down below the cloud layer. It was just as bad as her first foray and still the *Dusk Horizon* was nowhere to be found. Again, she climbed above the worst of the storm and flew for a distance before dropping back down for a quick look. No luck. She repeated the process for another half hour before climbing high enough to clear the storm completely. Her mane was a frazzled mess, her coat sagged, and her eyes were tinged with red. She sniffled and sat on a small gray puff over the menacing storm.

“Come on, girl,” she muttered to herself. “You can do this; you have to do this. There’s a pony down there that needs help.” Her shoulders and ears drooped. “But it’s so nasty down there, and there’s so much ocean to cover.” She sighed. “He’d be lucky to still be floating on a whole ship in all of that. Maybe...no, Seafoam said he was a good sailor and she knows about that kind of stuff. He *has* to be okay.” Her ears perked up. “And if he’s *that* good then maybe he can make it out by himself. Yeah, he can do it; I don’t need

to risk my life going down there again.” Slowly she began to move away from the storm system in the direction of the land she had spotted earlier.

“Besides, if I got stuck on the ship I’d lose my sense of direction and we’d both be in trouble. I’d have to stay up here to guide him out properly, but there’s no way he can see me now. If only there was a way to get a message to him.” Raindrops scratched her head and stopped. She glanced from the storm, to the far-off island, and back again. Then she growled and bucked at the air.

“Stupid guilty conscience. He’s going to refund Seafoam for this trip or something.” She narrowed her eyes and dove straight down. The wind whistled past her ears and tears slipped away as droplets stung her eyes. Down and down she went, bursting any clouds that got in her way. When Raindrops broke through the bottom layer she hit a wall of rushing air and was flipped into a spin. Recovering from the impact, she leveled out and scanned the roiling waves.

She saw nothing at first, but then her eyes widened. “Wait a minute. What’s that?” A smudge of brown floated on a wave crest above the horizon and then dipped below. Another moment later it reappeared and vanished again. It was on the fourth sighting that the smudge grew tall masts. “The ship!”

Raindrops attempted another congratulatory loop but spray from a pair of colliding waves interrupted the laugh that she had just started. The newly soaked pegasus frowned, shook herself, and dashed off towards the bobbing ship. As she neared, she could see the state of the *Dusk Horizon*. A few of the horizontal spars on both masts were already missing. Many lines were dangling uselessly from the intact portions of the two masts. Raindrops did not know if it was a good sign or not that only a couple of tiny sails were unfurled and stretched taut. Angling in for closer look she breathed a quick sigh of relief at the sight she saw on deck.

Salty was leaning into the fierce winds with forelegs hooked around the ship’s wheel, his mane whipping wildly. His hind legs rocked and swayed with the motion of the ship beneath his hooves, but a few rolls made him grip the wheel more tightly to avoid slipping and falling. Even from a distance it was plain to see how battered and tired the stallion had become.

“Salty!” Raindrops called as she neared the ship. The winds tore at her voice to the point that she could barely hear herself. She called again but the stallion still did not look over at her. The pegasus descended and pushed through the gale to get closer. Another pair of waves crashed beneath her and Raindrops twisted to keep from getting a face full of seawater as she accelerated. More spray jumped up but only covered her flanks and tail. She glanced behind to make sure no rogue waves were sneaking up on her and, for one amazingly slow second, wondered why her tail was suddenly smoking. A misty stream snaked out behind her and left a short, cloudy trail through the air. Raindrops was mystified as the trail slowly drifted apart and vanished. Then, the realization and another

wave of spray hit her at the same time.

“A vapor trail!” she shouted as another rolling line of mist streamed out behind her. The voice of her old instructor at flight camp came echoing back to her. Something about a pony in flight, air pressure around the wings and body, and condensing humid air. “That’s how I can tell him in which direction he needs to head.” Whipping back around, Raindrops sped up even more. She dipped into one of the lower clouds before streaking through the air in front of the ship, leaving a long line of mist. Looking back, she could see Salty either waving or shaking a hoof at her. She could not tell which.

“It worked!” Quickly darting about, she traced another line through the air and added a canted pair near one end of the line. “Follow the arrow,” she shouted at the ship. After having to redraw the arrow twice more she saw the vessel slowly adjust its meager sails and alter course. This time no wave interrupted Raindrop’s celebratory loop. Looking at the misty circle, she snickered at a thought. A curving line, two puffs bucked from a cloud, and a simple smiling face was gazing down on the ocean. “That was kinda fun. I wonder...”

The sun was already partially below the waves when the *Dusk Horizon* found calm water and Raindrops touched down on the cabin deck. She ran a hoof through a mane that was limp and shook a coat covered in salt. Salty was not in any better condition and his eyes and body sagged. The two ponies said nothing at first. Then Raindrops began to giggle. Salty’s eyes brightened a bit and he began to chuckle. Before long both of them were laughing. They continued to laugh as the stars came out; stars in patterns that both of them recognized.

“Hey! Seafoam! Would you mind tossing the springline onto that bollard?” Raindrops asked, waving a hoof at her friend on the pier. “Hello. Anypony home?”

Seafoam was sitting on the pier, her mouth open and eyes wide. Through the whole process of the ship pulling into port she had not moved. Her eyes followed the dangling lines broken free from their tiedowns, pieces of mast spar hanging in the rigging, and bits of flotsam caught high up on the anchor. A third shout brought her to her senses and she pulled the eye of the mooring line over the bollard, helping make the ship fast to the pier. Raindrops and Salty came trotting down the gangplank after all was secure and the unicorn immediately launched into questions.

“Ohmygoshwhathappened?!” Seafoam gushed. “It’s been over two days! I heard about a squall rolling across the bay and the town was hit by some really bad weather. The local weather team barely got the worst of it under control. Then you two didn’t show up on time. Are you okay?”

“We’re fine, we’re fine,” Raindrops repeated as she calmed her friend. “We got blown

around a little bit, but it wasn't anything Salty couldn't handle."

The stallion nickered. "I'd still be lost if it weren't for you. Those cloud arrows you wrote in the sky pointed me in the right direction. Without your help, I might even be manning the rails for Davy Pone's ship." He gave the mooring lines a quick tug. "Yep. Raindrops here managed to find the northernmost tip of the Guardians. We stuck near the coast after that. You know, just in case that star-switching thing happened again."

"Star-switching?" Seafoam looked confused. "Have you been drinking seawater or something?"

"Oh no, it's true," Raindrops continued. "Turns out Princess Luna had a little accident on the day we went sailing. She was picking a bouquet of rare star lilies for Princess Celestia and didn't notice a clump of poison joke before she brushed against them. Nothing happened until she tried to bring out the stars and moon. The stars got all mixed up and the moon was turned black for the whole night. But don't worry, she got the antidote by morning and everything worked out." The other two ponies looked at Raindrops. "What?"

"How do you know that?" Salty asked. "We just got back."

"Yeah, I haven't heard anything like that around here," Seafoam added.

Raindrops shrugged. "I heard the crew of that trader talking about it; the one we bought something more appetizing than hardtack from yesterday. I like keeping up to date on what's happening and pass on the news."

"Even out in the middle of the ocean...is there anything you don't hear?" Seafoam did not wait for an answer but instead wrapped her friend in a hug. "I'm just glad you're back safe." She hugged Salty next. "And you too." Seafoam turned back to Raindrops. "I wish this had been a better vacation. They're supposed to be relaxing. This was supposed to help you get your life back in order, not put it in danger."

"Actually," Raindrops began. "I do have a little idea that I want to run by you both." She turned to Salty. "Remember that idea I told you about? The big signs in the sky? I had a thought the night after the storm."

The front door of Ponyville First Bank opened and a custard pegasus, framed by the splendid afternoon sunlight, walked through. She looked around the main lobby before spotting a familiar face. Raindrops fairly floated over to a straw-colored earth pony with a roll of colored tape for a cutie mark.

The mare looked up from a stack of papers and stood. "Good morning, Ms. Raindrops.

How was your vacation? I heard you and Seafoam went to the beach.”

“Hello, Red Tape. It was very exciting, but Seafoam stayed at the beach while I took a sightseeing cruise. That trip was exactly what I needed.”

“Sounds wonderful. I’m glad to hear that.” She motioned to a chair and the two sat. “So, what can I do for you today?”

“I’d like to take out a startup loan,” Raindrops announced.

“Really? Are you going into business for yourself?”

“Yep. It took a couple of disasters, but I think I’ve finally got my life straightened out. I know what I want and I’m ready to take the next step.”

“So you won’t be returning to the weather team?”

Raindrops shook her head. “I might be good with clouds, but it’s not what I enjoy. What I want to do is bring the news of what’s going on to everypony that I can.” She slid an application form across the table. “I think this will let me combine what I want to do and what I’m good at doing into a living.

“That’s great news.” Red Tape shook hooves with Raindrops. “Let me be the first to say good luck.” Red Tape scanned over the paperwork. “There will be a few more forms to fill out once this is processed, but everything seems to be in order. Have you thought about a name?”

Raindrops did nothing to suppress the smile that spread across her face. “Yes. I’m going to call it Clear Blue Skywriting.”