

## **The Hound of Ponyville p6: A Duel In Darkness**

By Thanqol

My first impulse, as my readers no doubt guessed, was to try and kick my way out of the cage. Unfortunately this was far more difficult than I expected - the footing was awkward, and the cage swung from its chain whenever I shifted my weight. When I kicked at the bars, I just made myself swing backwards and forwards, filling the air with the creaking sound of chains and making absolutely no progress towards freeing myself. I soon realised the motion was hopeless unless I found a way to brace myself and stop the cage from moving, though frustration lead me to continue kicking regardless.

Anger gradually gave way to a deep sense of defeat and despair. Not only had I flown off on my own without pausing to tell anypony or wait for help, I'd put Rarity into grave danger. It had been an impulsive and rash decision, born of a mixture of panic about Fluttershy, fear at my association with Spike being discovered and a desire to prove myself superior to Blueblood and worthy in my role of detective. I began to slump in my cage, and even the squeaking of the chain began to die away as the cage settled back to equilibrium.

It was at this point that I heard a sound like a mouse sighing, and turned towards my companion in darkness.

"What was that, Fluttershy?" I asked.

"I was asking if you were okay." Fluttershy said. I was struck by the sentiment - Fluttershy had been in here for over a week and her first action was to ask if I was all right. If there was anypony who didn't deserve this treatment, it was her.

"Does it look like I'm okay?" I said, meeting kindness with despair and anger, "I have placed everypony in grave danger and been captured and locked in a cage! I had one, simple task and I failed."

"It's not your fault," Fluttershy's voice, soft and concerned, as if the worst thing to happen to her was finding out that I was upset. "It's my fault."

"Fluttershy, don't be ridiculous. You were kidnapped. That's not your fault." I said.

"I got caught. I couldn't escape. I distracted Pinkie Pie. I didn't stay in Ponyville where it was safe. Of course it's my fault."

She sounded like her heart was breaking, like the only place she could find to put all the blame and sorrow that had built up during the days she'd spent in captivity was on her own back. She

was the one least able to deal with guilt like that, and she was also the one least able to give it to anypony else. She would prefer to accept Mr. Pie's insane beliefs as true if that meant she didn't have to hate him.

And I wasn't about to let that slide, not when I had a much more valid target for the blame. "No, Fluttershy, it's my fault for running all the way out here without thinking."

"I should have called out and warned you," Fluttershy went on stubbornly.

"I should have figured out Mr. Pie was behind it from the start." I countered with what may, in retrospect, have been a little stubbornness of my own.

"I should have gotten word out somehow," Fluttershy said.

"I should have finished that letter I was writing to you."

A silence fell between us. In the absolute darkness, when the words stopped it was like I was alone. Like there was a gulf between Fluttershy and myself of more than just distance and darkness. It was like speaking was putting part of yourself at risk, putting your words out into the void and having to hope they'd be answered. Having to hope they'd be the right words.

I shifted in my cage. The bars were laid unevenly and I had to stand in an awkwardly splayed stance to remain vertical. If I moved then one of my hooves would drop through the space between the bars. If I tried to sit down then I had to place all my weight on one narrow, cold metal surface. It was supremely uncomfortable and the distraction of trying to find a position I was content with drew my thoughts away from Fluttershy. Sometime throughout the process of trying to find a comfortable position I muttered aloud, "I should have brought a pillow,"

There was a sound like a cough from Fluttershy. It went on for a little bit; the beginnings of laughter. "I should have packed a lockpick,"

Despite myself, despite my predicament, I started to smile too. "I should have learned to chew through metal bars."

"I should have taken that contortionist class." Fluttershy said

"I should have heat ray vision,"

"I should have been born an alicorn."

By this point, we were starting to giggle. It was quite ridiculous under the circumstances, but the laughter was addictive. For the first time in days I was genuinely laughing. For the first time since I'd arrived at Ponyville Hall, I was weirdly glad that I'd come.

"So, what brings you to Ponyville Hall?" Fluttershy asked, voice warm and jokingly formal.

"Trixie came south, told us about your disappearance and hired us to investigate. She also acquired the new Lord of the Hall, one Prince Blueblood, to manage the estate in your absence." I summarised.

"I don't think I've met him,"

"Then consider yourself fortunate. I have never had as much cause to hate a stallion so," I said, impulsively and with feeling.

"Hate?"

"He's flirtatious and grabby, with the soul of a churl. A well dressed idiot. And, worst of all, he has caught the eye and perhaps, now, the heart of Rarity - despite my best efforts to prevent it."

"Did you talk to her? What did she say?"

"Actually..." I trailed off, then awkwardly confessed, "I didn't so much *talk* to her as I teamed up with the most wanted criminal in Equestria to pull off a series of pranks to drive them apart." I said that last bit very fast.

Fluttershy laughed, and took a moment to realise that it wasn't a joke.

"You did *what*?"

"I may have teamed up with Spike."

"Spike? You teamed up with *Spike*?" Fluttershy said, "Poison Joke Spike?"

"I may not have been thinking particularly straight at the time." I said weakly.

"What about this Prince is so bad you'd go to such lengths to stop him?"

"Because Rarity can beat Spike," I said with conviction, "She can beat the Hound. She can beat Mr. Pie. She can solve this case, rescue us and lock Mr. Pie up in ten seconds flat. But I don't know if she can defeat a broken heart and broken dreams,"

"You must care about her deeply."

"And what does he have anyway?" I snapped, suddenly putting voice to a sentiment that had long lurked in the back of my head, "Money? Power? Fame? Looks?" I paused, "Well, yes. I

suppose he has all those things. But he wouldn't *treat* her right."

There was silence. A long, awkward silence as I realised that I had said far more than I intended to, and that Fluttershy didn't know what to say. The warmth drained from the air gradually and the void between us seemed insurmountable.

"How's Pinkie Pie?" Fluttershy's voice, soft and low.

"Bad."

"Tell me."

"Descended into creepy town, talking to rocks and lint, and the lint talks back. What's going on with her, Fluttershy?"

"When we arrived together, Mr. Pie takes Pinkie Pie to her room and introduces us to her "friends" - a collection of inanimate objects. And I've never seen Pinkie Pie upset before, but when her father asked why she didn't want to play with Sir Lintalot anymore her legs were trembling. Nothing scared her half as much as the idea of those things. I tried to look after her. We became... close. And that seemed to make Mr. Pie angry, and while I was Lady of the Hall I couldn't tell him what to do in his own house. When it became clear that Pinkie wasn't going to last long in this place, I sent her a letter to meet me by the gate to the moors where I'd talk to her and suggest going back to Ponyville..."

"And Mr. Pie found the letter and sent the bear to capture you. Of course. And Pinkie thinks you stood her up."

"Or that I was only calling her to say goodbye."

"No wonder she changed," I murmured.

I heard a soft sniffing sound. A faint, ungraceful sniff. The sound of tears.

And I knew that I had to do something. No matter what, no matter how futile the effort might be, I had to get out of this cage and set things to right. I set my feet and threw my weight forwards, and then backwards. The chain squeaked as I gradually built up momentum, arcing backwards and forwards, flapping my wings for additional speed. But no matter how much momentum I built up, I couldn't smash myself against a wall and potentially break the cage open. Swinging myself horizontally, all the way up to the rooftop, killed all my momentum just before contact.

And then, on the swing back down, my cage clipped something and I went spinning off in another direction. There was a squeak from Fluttershy - I'd accidentally hit her cage while swinging my own around like a fool.

But I noticed, running my hoof along in the gloom in front of me, that one of the bars had bent very slightly.

"Fluttershy." I called. There was no response.

I got very worried very quickly. "Fluttershy! Are you all right?"

There was a huge smashing sound as a cage smashed right into mine. I spun away, dizzily quickly, though the impact didn't do more than rattle my teeth.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Fluttershy's voice called back. "I thought that maybe if we could bend the bars a little more..."

"Sorry," I said with a new smile, flaring my wings to arrest my momentum and bring myself back into a controlled swing, "Isn't good enough."

And we duelled.

In utter darkness, we duelled. Using weapons we had no real control over, we duelled, trying our best to gather momentum and swing at each other with maximum force. We had limited control over our cages, the only thing we had to aim by was the squeaking of chains, the beating of wings, the occasional crash of metal and our gradually rising laughter. Many times there were great rushes of air as we missed each other by inches. Stopping, talking and co-ordinating didn't occur to us. This was a battle, like a combination of swings, shopping trolleys and bumper cars. And I, for one, intended to win it.

I came to the peak of one swing and hurtled down to where I thought Fluttershy would be. There was a huge crash as our cages finally hit each other, dead on, at maximum velocity. We were both thrown against the front bars as the twisted metal finally gave away and the cage doors burst open. As our cages spun away in opposite directions we were thrown out and landed heavily on the ground. A little bruised, but otherwise exhilarated. And above all, we were free.

I flew over to the door without hesitation and kicked it open. Light flooded the cage. Blinking, Fluttershy and I stepped out into the light. In the distance, we heard the baying of Trixie's hounds. We did not need to talk, we didn't even need to look at each other. Fluttershy and I immediately began flying at top speed towards Ponyville Manor.

And the sound of a great hellhound howling hung in the air before us, rising over the splintering of wood and the roaring of a great bear.