

All Paths Lead Home

by Mystic

Chapter 2: How the Wind Howls

Dawn arrived with a sense of incompleteness. The cold, weak light did little to ease the fears of the night. The mare rose first like she always did, allowing the filly to get a little more sleep before they continued on their journey. Even then, she did so reluctantly. They had a lot of ground to cover now that they were going over the mountains, and time was certainly not their friend.

The mare walked over to their bags and withdrew the cookie jar. She removed one and set it aside for the filly. She did not take one for herself. She did, however, indulge herself with a small mouthful of water, the liquid somewhat soothing her cracked and dry lips.

She sat on the ground, watching the world slowly reveal itself. The walls of the gully rose steeply on either side, covered in boulders or trees.

The filly woke with gentle yawn, her eyes blinking in the cold light. She gazed around at her surroundings before curling ever so slightly into a tighter ball, wrapping her tail around herself.

“Would you like some food?” the mare asked.

“Yes please...” the filly murmured.

The mare took the cookie over to her daughter and watched as she nibbled on it slowly, savouring each bite.

“Thank you, Mama,” she said when she had finished the meagre meal.

“You’re welcome.”

They left the campsite soon after, leaving the gully far behind as they set out along the road again. The mare kept her hood down now, and she listened intently for any remaining bandits.

Around them the trees swayed under the influence of a wind that was growing slightly stronger as the day wore on. Their branches scratched against each other, their naked limbs creaking, seeming almost as old as the earth itself. The filly pulled the collar around her neck a little tighter to keep the wind from getting in.

While they walked through the wooded terrain, the mountains drew ever closer. The fire was barely noticeable now on this side, but smoke still poured out from across the ridge, pushed ever northwards by the wind. The mare hoped that the blaze would be long gone before they reached their destination.

As the morning passed by quietly, the land refused to stay consistent, flat for a few miles, undulating for a few more. At times the trees would grow close together, and others, far apart. They encountered nothing of interest, however. They were alone on the road.

Settling into the familiar monotony of travel, the filly began to lose herself in a world of fantasy. She would run around the mare, murmuring of adventure and wonder. Her mother watched her affectionately.

It was nice to know that at least somepony's imagination still existed within Equestria. Celestia knows hers had died a long time ago. Like the world she loved, the fires had burnt it all away, leaving nothing but the harsh reality of the ash in its place - ash and her memories.

"Come on, Spades!" the mare cries out to her colt companion who is breathing heavily. "There are dragons around!"

"I..." he gasps. "Stop running around so fast. I have to catch my breath."

"Bah!" the mare exclaims in joy, totally lost in her imaginary world. "The fate of Equestria is more important than catching your breath! Come on, there is a dragon to slay and treasure to have!"

The small colt called Spades shrugs his shoulders before resuming the game, still slightly out of breath.

"Look! The dragon is coming out of his cave!" he yells, pointing over to a large cardboard box with the word fragile stamped across the side.

The mare jumps around her room. In her mind's eye she can literally see the foul beast stepping out of the darkness, his fangs glistening, his small eyes glowing evilly. Above the dragon the mountain looms up into the sky, shrouded in cloud. Behind her is a cliff face with a drop of over several hundred feet on the other side. But even his terrible claws or impenetrable scales could not hold her back.

"Stay back, dragon! We shall defeat you! Your days of terrorising the poor ponies of Equestria are over!"

Spades lets out a fake roar, now pretending to be the over-sized lizard. "You can never defeat me, small pony! I am a big and terrible dragon!"

"Never!" the mare shouts, grabbing a nearby broom with her mouth, lifting it like a lance. "Prpre t' b dfeatd!"

With a yell, the mare charges the small colt.

He looks around wildly in fear. "Uh... what are you doing?" he whispers as the mare continues to charge.

"Yah!" the mare exclaims as the broom finds its mark, poking Spades in the chest.

"Ow!"

"Sorry... but you're a dragon, remember? How else am I meant to beat you?"

"You could have poked softer..."

The mare giggles before proudly strutting around the room. She stands, bathed in the sunlight streaming through her bedroom window, one hoof off the floor in victory.

"I have slain the dragon! I have brought peace back to Equestria!"

"But what about me?"

"...with my trusty side-kick, Spades of course!"

"Hmph."

"Don't worry, I'm sure there's lots of treasure inside the cave."

Spades' mood picks up considerably at that, and a smile grows on his face.

"Yeah!" he says as he dives into the cardboard box. "Look, I found some diamonds!"

Not wanting to miss out, the mare follows close behind him. The imaginary gloom of the cave did little to scare her; she was a dragon slayer, after all.

"Look, Spades, gold!" She lifts up her empty hooves, showing off her invisible loot.

"We're going to be rich!" the small colt exclaims.

"You know, being a dragon hunter in real life would be pretty cool..." the mare says, thinking out loud.

"Maybe a little scary..."

"True..." the mare replies, forgetting all about the bravado she had been showing barely a minute ago. "Still... it would be cool."

"Do you think one day we will ever see a dragon?"

“I dunno. The last nice one died years ago, remember?”

“Yeah...” Spades says sadly.

“Still... I think our dragons are better, don't you?” the mare offers.

“Yeah!”

She smiles. “I think it's time we went out and found another dragon to slay! Only this time it's stronger!”

Spades giggles as the mare raises herself up onto two hooves and growls angrily. “I'm a big and scary dragon and nopony can beat me!”

“We'll see about that!” Spades exclaims as he picks up the broom from where the mare had left it.

Giggling, the two small ponies had played late into the afternoon, lost in a world of dragons and adventure.

The mare was sure that she had seen a dragon since the end. It had been a shadow, barely recognizable amongst the clouds, but the mare had sworn she had seen a creature with large bat-like wings, its tail streaking out behind it. It had been moving east, away from Equestria. Nopony believed her, though. Nothing ever flew anymore. Nothing could survive in those clouds, so she had to have been wrong. Perhaps that was the final nail for her imagination. It was hard to tell exactly when it went away.

The burnt carriages of the once bright and multi-coloured train lay twisted and warped along side the buckled train lines. It had been blasted off the tracks by a force of considerable strength, the carriages resting several feet away from its normal pathway. The right-hoof side of the passenger cars was black, the metal frames having been melted by those cursed flames. The actual steam engine was lying a little closer to the tracks, its metal bulk proving harder to move.

The mare and the filly approached the wreckage carefully, eyeing it with suspicion. The train tracks marked the beginning of the west road. Both the road and the train lines headed along the base of the mountains to the sea from where they would go south to Manehatten. They had to keep going south, up the mountains instead of around them. And now in their way, was the train.

“I'm going to have a look inside. Keep your eyes closed, ok?” the mare said to her daughter.

“Why?”

“Because there might be something useful,” she said, avoiding the obvious.

“No, I mean why do I have to close my eyes?”

“There are probably bad things inside.”

Silence, and then. “Then why are we going to look at it?” the filly asked, fear rising in her voice.

“Not that kind of bad thing.”

“I... don't get it.” The small pony sounded confused.

“Just... just keep your eyes closed. Please.”

“O-ok.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Thank you.”

They walked in between two of the destroyed carriages, placing themselves on the other side. A buildup of ash allowed the mare to get up onto the side of the car without too much hassle. The filly followed, looking pointedly at the trees.

Looking down through the window and into the dark, the mare couldn't make out anything but vague shapes of what appeared to be seats. There was the faint hint of a foul smell inside. Driven by curiosity and the ever present idea that there could be something worthwhile to scavenge, the mare opened one of her packs and pulled out the matches and an old piece of newspaper. After scrunching the paper up into a small ball, she lit the match carefully using her mouth. She then set flame to the yellowed page and let it fall into the train carriage.

The little light floated gently into the darkness, faintly illuminating the shapes of the seats, and the upholstery was burnt and melted. The mare watched in sadness as the flickering golden glow suddenly cast into horrific relief the bodies of several ponies, piled together on one side of the train where they were thrown by the initial impact. Their corpses were twisted and burnt, the charred flesh fusing into their neighbours'.

The mare's gaze lingered on the body of a small foal, propped awkwardly against the side of a chair, away from the rest of the destruction. Its body appeared bubbled, the heat having literally crackled and charcoaled its flesh. The mare felt sick at the sight.

She turned around and was greeted by the wide eyes of the filly, staring past her and into the train. The mare grabbed her daughter and pulled her away from the

broken window, as below them, the little piece of paper slowly disintegrated into a yet another pile of ash, its glowing edges like the petals of a rose.

“You promised!” she accused her daughter, suddenly angry. Why did she have to look?!

The filly didn't reply and instead looked down at the side of the train on which they were standing.

The mare shook her gently by the shoulders, pressing for an answer. “Why did you look? Don't you trust me?”

Again, the filly looked away from her mother. Her brow was trembling, her eyes sad.

The mare felt her anger ebb as she stared at her daughter, the anxiety clear on the small pony's face. “Do... do you want to talk about it?” she finally asked as gently as she could.

The filly shook her head.

Sighing, but with nothing more to say, the mare led the filly down back to the ground and resumed their journey. There was nothing for them here, only darkness and death.

They started to move through the forest, the ground now definitely beginning to rise uphill. There weren't any set paths to follow, so the mare relied on the being able to see the peaks in front of her for guidance, hoping that they wouldn't become too lost or be forced out of their way. Distractions and lost time could be the difference between life and death. Even still, south was still south.

The rest of the day passed with the monotony of long travel. They stopped briefly for a drink at what the mare guessed to be midday. They walked in silence, each lost to their own thoughts.

The two ponies camped that night at the base of one of the mountains. Its roots forced the earth into steep valleys that provided cover from the wind. Here the trees grew close together, their branches lifeless and black.

It started to grow colder, so the mare covered her daughter in a blanket. The small pony wrapped it around herself tightly, trapping in as much warmth as possible. The mare knew, however, that it was only going to get colder from here. Above, a gentle breeze droned into the ether.

Dinner comprised of another tin of beans, shared between the two of them in silence. A fire would be too visible, and the mare didn't dare light one.

The two ponies sat in the darkness. The lantern provided a faint light - the most

that the mare was willing to risk. The filly sat on her rump, staring into the depths of the lantern, her face twisted into an expression of thought. The mare watched her carefully, not wanting to interrupt, but desperately wanting to make sure she was ok.

“Mama?” the filly finally asked, her voice unsure.

“Yes?”

“Where... where do ponies go when they die?”

The mare looked at her daughter sadly, fighting an internal struggle.

“I don’t really know. No pony does.”

“Oh.” She was silent for a moment. “I wonder if it hurts to die. Or maybe it’s just like falling asleep.”

“I don’t know,” the mare replied again, her heart breaking.

“If it’s like falling asleep, then maybe you dream. That wouldn’t be so bad.”

“I...”

“Maybe you dream of someplace nice, someplace with flowers or grass,” the filly said, visibly trying to imagine a place with two things she had never seen. “Maybe there are animals there too, like rabbits or birds.”

“And the sun shines down warmly, and there isn’t a cloud in the sky,” the mare said involuntarily, trying so hard not to picture the scene. It was too good to be true. It was too tempting.

“Yeah...” the filly murmured. “That sounds nice.”

The mare was silent, her heart gripped in anguish. Fight the fear, fight the cold, fight the dark. She told herself these things over and over, and every day they became harder and harder to fight.

“Do... do you think that there are any ponies left my age?” the small pony asked suddenly, breaking the silence that had fallen.

The mare paused – she was not expecting that. “I... I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Oh.” She sounded upset, but not surprised. “Are they all dead?” Her question was blunt, and the mare winced.

“Yes.” The mare’s voice echoed into the darkness and the filly closed her eyes for a moment.

“Mama, do you think that somewhere there are two ponies like us? One your age and one my age and that they want to go home too?”

“I don’t know,” the mare replied.

“Maybe we’ll meet them one day. And we can have fun together, like you did when you were a filly.”

“Maybe one day,” the mare said, smiling.

“That would be nice. I’d like that,” the filly said dreamily.

The mare opened her mouth to speak, yet no words came out. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t break her daughter’s spirit, not like that.

“Me too,” was all she said in reply.

The filly yawned and curled into a ball, making sure her bundle of rags was comfortable beneath her head. She wrapped the blanket tightly around her small body, trying to keep warm.

The mare paused for a second, her conscience heavy with sorrow. This was life. She could do little to change it. She could do little at all but survive, whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice.

Wrapped tightly under a blanket of her own, the mare blew out the lantern, letting the night fill the campsite like death itself. The mare fought briefly, but then surrendered to the dreams of sleep, lost in a world to which she could never return.

Fear was an ever-present condition to the mare. It was something that every pony who still lived battled against. Some ponies were stronger than others. Some ponies folded under the pressure. Some forgot who they were, removing all of their ideals, their morals, everything that made them ponies in the first place. Others submitted to the fear, chasing the impossibility of a better place, leaving the ashen world far behind.

It was always there, though. Like a snake curled around her insides. It was fear, and it was everywhere. The mare, like everypony else, fought against its cold embrace. Fight the fear, fight the dark. She couldn’t resort to the alternatives. She wouldn’t.

The next morning, they woke to an icy cold dawn, the air temperature sucking the strength out of their limbs. The mare helped the filly up and fastened a blanket around her neck like a cape to add another layer. She hoped it would be enough.

After a breakfast of cookies, the two ponies began to climb. Above them the peaks disappeared into low-lying clouds that hadn’t been there the day before. The

mare could only hope that it wasn't snowing.

The ground rose steeply, and the mare felt their pace slow because of it. She didn't want to push the filly further than she had to. There was still a long way to go before the summit.

Around them remained the familiar trees. Their blackened skeletons had been the two pony's silent companions over the last few days. They were always watching.

By mid-morning they had come across a stream within a small gully, the swirling water murky and thick. The mare paused here. They needed water. After telling the filly to wait on a near by stump, the mare began to dig a small hole in the ground by the stream. She watched as the water began to fill by osmosis as the murky liquid seeped into the pit. Next she placed her container of water into the hole, watching the ripples dance of its contact.

After this she placed a small sheet of plastic tarpaulin over the whole and weighted it down with rocks along the edges. Its once bright-blue surface was faded almost beyond recognition now. The mare then placed a rock right over the middle of the sheet, directly over where the canteen sat. The plastic sagged into the hole, forming a point right over the container.

Now all the mare could do was wait while the still, through evaporation and condensation, removed the impurities from the water. It was a long process, but the mare was willing to spend the time in order to prevent getting sick. In this cold and in this weather, getting sick would probably mean death.

"Don't get wet," the mare warned when the filly jumped across the small stream.

"I know," the filly replied.

"If you get wet you'll get sick."

"I know," the filly repeated, ending the conversation.

With refilled water bottles, the two ponies followed the stream up through the gully. It was more temperate here outside of the wind. They walked side-by-side next to the small waterway, casting their gazes up toward the steep walls of earth rising above them. Boulders jutted out of the dirt and ash every now and then, their surfaces covered in dead weeds. The corpses of the plants provided a blotched, grey mosaic.

The gully ended in a steep cliff, the water pouring off the top as a small waterfall. Careful as to not be hit by any spray, the two ponies climbed the side of the gully, making their way to the top of the cliff. The constant *splash* of the water slapping the rocks below soon filled the air, drowning out the wind.

At the top of the cliff, the mare and the filly found themselves looking out into a

small, flat gully, the centre of which was built by a lake, the water grey and ominously still. Around the lake, particularly on the left-hand side, the mountains continued to rise up steeply, forming natural walls. The mare could see several small waterfalls falling from the cliffs around them, all feeding the body of water in the middle. One waterfall was larger than the others, the roar of its fall audible even from where the two ponies were standing. The stream they had been following was the single off-shoot of the lake, disappearing into the forest behind them.

The mare saw a way up the right hand side of the lake, where the mountain rose up less steeply and a river provided a natural pathway. With a direction now firmly in mind, she started to walk towards the large body of water. Around the two ponies the trees continued to stare down at them. The filly watched the lake with interest while its contents rippled slightly as it was filled with water from the waterfalls.

“Mama, do you think that there are any fish in the lake?” she had asked when they were about halfway around.

They walked along the bank, the small, dark pebbles crunching under-hoof.

The mare looked at her daughter carefully before replying. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Oh,” she said. “How come?”

“The water is toxic to fish now. It’s too poisonous for them.”

“Oh.”

The whole world was toxic now, not just the water. The air, the ground, and especially the water, they were all poisoned. It was as one then, in a twisted presentation of harmony, that the world was dying, choked by the ash of the end.

The mare is young, still just a small filly. She is practically bouncing with excitement. Around her, the sun is warming the earth with its brilliant embrace, and the wind is gently playing with her mane.

Her parents stand next to her. They smile at their daughter.

“Go ahead,” says her father. “We have the whole day here. Go have some fun.”

The mare gives a squeal of joy before bounding off to enjoy herself. In front of her lies a gigantic lake, its water a brilliant ultramarine blue, sparkling like a multi-faceted gem in the sunlight. Her family is holidaying outside of Trottingham and in the face of a magnificent summer day, decided to go the lake.

Laughing out loud as her hooves hit the soft sand of the natural beach, the mare bounces toward the water. Around her are dozens of ponies, all smiling and laughing,

all of them enjoying the gorgeous weather. To her left, two earth ponies are head-butting a beach ball back and forward. On her right a bright-blue unicorn is building a monumental sandcastle, simultaneously levitating several buckets and spades. His structure of sand and love is almost as tall as he is.

At first the mare is a little overwhelmed by choices. What does she want to do? Build a sandcastle? Play some beach hoof-ball? She gasps. She's got it!

Her smile so wide it is threatening to jump off her head, the small pony gallops as fast as she can toward the water, its twinkling blue surface lapping gently against the sand.

With joyful abandon, the mare splashes into the water, its deliciously cold temperature sending chills up her legs. As she pushes in deeper, she dives beneath the surface, pushing forward with her legs, awkwardly swimming further. Her coat and mane offer a fair bit of resistance, but she doesn't care.

She breaks her head above the surface and takes in a satisfying breath of air. Her mane hangs down around her, dripping into the cool water. Flailing her legs around wildly, the mare stays afloat, smiling broadly the whole time.

Rolling onto her back, the mare tries to find her balance to stay afloat. She tucks her legs in tightly to her body to prevent them sticking into the air.

Around her, several ponies are splashing each other in the shallows, giggling as they do. Out deeper into the lake the mare can see a unicorn on a sailing boat using the wind to breeze across the water's surface. His casual passing sent out small ripples that hit gently against the banks.

Closing her eyes contently, the mare smiles happily into the sky, listening to the sounds of ponies having fun. She wishes she could come here every day...

She gasps again as she realises that there is so much that she still wants to do! Hurriedly rolling over, the mare begins to swim back towards the shore. Next on her list of things to do: build the biggest sandcastle anypony had ever built!

The mare runs back on shore while behind her the water continues to lap the beach gently in the soft breeze, warmed by constant light of the sun.

“No,” the mare said suddenly, her voice breaking harshly into the silence. They were leaving the lake behind them now and were beginning to follow one of the tributaries through a valley that appeared to corkscrew its way down from the summit. “There aren't any fish left.”

The filly didn't respond.

All afternoon they followed the river, definitely far too large to be called a

stream. The mare wondered how the lake could hold such a large volume of water considering just how much was coming down this one waterway. It ran its way through a 'v'-like valley that twisted upon itself as it fell down the steep slope of the mountain. In some places it would run faster than others, the water forming a grey foam that rested along the banks.

The rapidly moving water had eroded the side of the valley, creating a small drop on either side into the river. Several trees had already fallen victim to this removal of earth, their corpses now creating rotting bridges that stretched over the waterway.

The mare stared up into the sky, the peaks of the mountains visible for brief moments while the cloud rearranged itself, building and growing, threatening to fall over into the valleys below. The older pony's brow furrowed when she saw sheets of white intermingling with the black of the rock faces. It had been snowing.

When the two ponies paused to take a drink, the mare turned and looked back out over the plains from which they had come. They stretched out as far as the eye could see, the forests running for about half of the way. The ground bulged into ridges that formed the roots of the mountains they were now on, creating the same gullies that they had taken shelter in the last couple of nights. Beyond the trees lay the empty, desolate and windswept plains of the south. The oppressive grey of the ash-fields dominated the landscape. Beyond that, the world fell away beyond the horizon, too far away to make out any detail.

While the mare stared out over the world, unrecognizable and yet so normal now, the filly had moved off a little, looking toward the river with curiosity.

She made her way over to the side of the river, placing her hooves carefully around the multitude of small stones that had been deposited during the river's spring flows. The rocks were smooth, shiny and jet black, their sleek surfaces just inviting a pony to slip. Between the stones lay a thick blanket of ash, having recently fallen due to the fires higher up the mountain.

Drawing close to the edge, the filly paused and looked down the small embankment and into the raging water. It bubbled ferociously as it moved past, writhing and twisting on its unstoppable descent.

The filly eyed the water suspiciously. Her face was scrunched up in intense concentration as she pondered the flowing river.

"Get back from the edge!" The mare's voice burst out into the cold afternoon, causing the filly to jump.

"Mama! I'm not even close!" she complained.

"It's not safe! Please get back now!"

The small pony huffed slightly in annoyance, full of self-confidence. Reluctantly, she turned and made to move back toward her mother.

As she moved, her back hoof stepped onto the edge of the embankment, and with a soft *'thwump'*, the earth below her back hooves slid into the seething water, the fault line in the dirt hidden by the ash.

The filly screamed out in fear as her body slipped along with the ground, pulled uncontrollably into the icy water. The mare watched in horror as her daughter disappeared below the edge of the embankment.

“NO!”

The mare sprinted as fast as her legs would carry her, watching helplessly as her daughter was swept along by the currents.

“Ma- Pl- lp- me!” Was all the mare heard, the small pony being dunked again and again as she was dragged down the river, further and further away from her mother.

“Just hold on!” the mare yelled as she ran, careful to stay away from the edge herself.

Despite her efforts, the mare was running a lost race, the rapidly moving mountain flows pushing her daughter faster than she could run. Just as she was starting to panic, her muscles burning and her breathing coming in ragged gasps, did she see the small pony grab wildly at a dead tree that spanned most of the width of the river. Her heart soared when she saw the filly successfully grasp hold, hugging the branch with her legs.

And then the branch began to crack.

The mare redoubled her intensity as she made her way towards the tree. Her weakened, malnourished body screamed in protest. She sent a small, rushed prayer of thanks to the Princesses for making the tree's base on her side of the river.

“I'm coming!” she yelled to her daughter, who was clinging to a branch, her eyes wide and frozen.

The mare reached the tree and without hesitation, placed her hoof slowly on the wood, testing it. It held firm at her end, but the mare watched with a sense of rising panic as the rotting wood started to crack further down at the filly's.

Cautiously, the mare inched her way down the blackened tree. Below her, the water charged past, the rapids hungrily sending spray up at the pony.

“Just hold on! I'm almost there!”

The mare heard the filly whimper softly in reply, barely audible above the water.

Using her back legs to grasp the log tightly, the mare crawled out towards the filly. The tree dipped dangerously toward the river. The filly's tail touched the water and was being flicked up by its pace.

The mare soon reached her daughter. She reached out with a hoof.

"Grab on!" she yelled.

The filly didn't move and the branch creaked ominously, sagging even further.

Inching herself even closer, using the crook between her front leg and hoof to grab onto a branch that was sticking up into the air, the mare tried again.

"Just grab on! I won't let you fall!"

The small filly looked at her mother in terror, clinging to the branch with all four of her legs.

"Please! Grab on!" the mare begged, tears in her eyes. "Please!"

Slowly, tentatively, the small pony loosened her grip with her front two legs.

"That's it! Reach out and grab my hoof. I'll pull you up!"

Driven by pure fear, the filly suddenly let go with her front two legs and reached out to grab the mare's leg. The mare tried to take the most of her weight, but the branch broke under the filly's momentum. With a splintering crack, the branch fell into the water, disappearing below the foam and not once reappearing.

The filly, however, was not on it.

Grunting under the weight of the small pony, her shoulder screaming in pain, the mare started to lift her daughter up to safety. The filly had wrapped her front legs around the joint between the mare's foreleg and hoof and was holding on tightly, her eyes closed.

Mustering all of her strength, the mare pulled the filly up onto the tree, where she grabbed on with all of her legs, holding on for dear life. Relieved from the filly's weight, the mare let her head hit the slimy tree, her breath coming in shaking gasps. Her shoulder felt like it was on fire.

It was the shuddering that told her something was wrong. The mare looked up and saw that her daughter was shivering violently, her saturated clothes sticking to her body, her small mane hanging around her face like a curtain. She could hear her teeth chattering from here.

Oh Celestia no.

The mare reached out and grabbed hold of the filly and helped her crawl back along the tree. She told herself not to panic, to think rationally.

Once they were both safely on the shore, the mare stripped the small pony of all her clothes. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out their two blankets, and hurriedly wrapped them around the filly like a cape – just like how she had done it earlier that morning. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

The filly stood there wordlessly in the ash. Her whole body shook from the intensity of her body's reaction to the shock of the icy water.

The mare took out another blanket, this one with a waterproof exterior and wrapped the filly's wet clothes in it before stowing them back in her pack. She couldn't allow the rest of their stuff to get wet.

She didn't ask the filly whether she could walk and instead knelt down onto the ash.

“Get on,” she said. “Hold onto my neck.”

Barely able to control her shaking muscles, the filly did as she was told, climbing awkwardly onto her mother's back. Her legs hung pathetically around the older pony's neck, their grip weak and unconvincing. Getting the filly to hold onto her served two purposes. It would increase their speed, something that the mare desperately needed. It would also allow the mare to share her body heat with the small pony. The blankets rested on the filly, trapping her body against the mare's. The older pony knew that blankets alone would not be able to warm up the filly's frozen form.

Not wanting to waste any time and to keep her own rising fear down, the mare started off at a steady trot. To their right the valley rose up into a small ridge. The mare hoped that they could find a suitable shelter on the other side.

With her daughter still shivering uncontrollably on her back, the mare pushed herself to go even faster. Her legs shook from the effort she had exerted in saving the small pony. She flicked her head in annoyance at her own weakness.

Upon cresting the ridge, the mare allowed a small sigh of relief to escape her lips. Below the two ponies lay a small wooded valley that ended in a steep wall on their right. It would provide the perfect place to camp outside of the wind.

Re-invigorated, the mare started to gallop down the hill, hoping that the filly would stay on. She pushed her way around the trees, making mental notes wherever fallen branches lay. Just before the valley ended, she saw a cluster of boulders that formed a lee between their large, grey bodies. It would be a perfect shelter. Entering their looming shadow, she urged the filly off her back and onto the largely undisturbed ash and dust. She then took off the packs and leaned them up against the

rocks.

“Stay here, ok?” she said, trying not to sound panicked. “I have to go collect firewood.”

The filly nodded her head numbly, shaking as she tried to pull the blankets around her body more tightly.

The mare rushed off between the trees, trying to remember where she had spotted a fallen branch. Whenever she found one of the blackened prizes, she picked it up and raced back to their camp site. Before long she had collected a small pile. She needed more, though. It would have to last all night.

The filly appeared to be struggling to stay conscious and would often murmur gently to herself, her words altogether incomprehensible due to her shivering. Whenever she heard her daughter’s feeble voice, the mare only doubled her efforts.

As the glow behind the clouds started to dip toward the horizon, the mare concluded that if she didn’t have enough, then she would deal with that later. She had run out of time.

She arranged several of the logs into a small pile, stacked up against each other like a tent. The mare stuffed a sheet of newspaper into the middle of her pyre and took out the matches. Carefully, she lit one and placed it inside the bundle of yellowed paper, the flame taking greedily to the dry parchment.

The mare watched in hope as the fire began to lick the edges of the logs, its orange glow growing brighter as more and more of the paper began to burn. She breathed a sigh of relief when the wood itself caught fire, despite its already blackened surface.

Satisfied that the fire would survive for now, the mare pushed the filly as close to the fire as possible before she feared she would burn. She made sure that the blankets were still tucked around her small frame tightly, only now she left a small gap directly in front of the flames to let the heat in.

Next, the mare grabbed a few small stones from the ash around them. She picked the smooth ones, anything jagged wouldn’t do. After picking four large, flat rocks, she placed them near the fire. They were close enough to warm up, but not close enough to be covered in charcoal.

When the mare was satisfied the rocks had warmed up enough, she gently grabbed them between her two front hooves. She then placed them within the filly’s cocoon of blankets and got her daughter to hold them against her body. She held two pressed against her chest with her legs, and the other two rested against her body - like the water bottles of old.

Not sure what more she could do, the mare sat down next to her daughter. She

reached out with a leg to wrap the blankets around herself and then pulled the filly against her body, adding her own body heat to the mix. The small pony's shaking had started to slow now, the added warmth already paying dividends.

"How are you feeling?" the mare asked softly.

"Cold," the filly replied. "But getting warmer."

"Good."

"Mama," the filly began tentatively, "you said if we get wet, we'll get sick."

"Yes?"

"And that if we get sick, we'll die."

"Not always," the mare replied.

"But it *might* happen," she stressed. "I could die."

"We all could die," the mare said. She didn't mean for it to sound so blunt.

"But I might die tonight, Mama." The filly spoke dispassionately, yet her voice wavered on the end of the sentence.

"You're not going to die," the mare said firmly.

"But why not? You said..."

"I know what I said, but you're not going to die."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't let you," she said with conviction. "I am not going to let you die. Not tonight."

"How...?"

"I'm going to save you. Look, you're already warming up," she said, motioning to the fire which was now burning merrily, the flames dancing along the length of the wood. "And if we get you all warm and toasty, you won't get sick."

"And that... that will save me?" the filly said hopefully.

"Yes. I am going to save you. I wouldn't let anything bad happen to you."

The filly smiled. "Thank you, Mama. Thank you for saving me. It was really brave of you for crawling out over that tree."

“I wouldn’t let anything bad happen to you.” She pulled her daughter closer, and the small filly rested her head against her mother.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

The pair fell into silence, staring at the fire as it continued to devour the wood the mare had placed into its centre.

The mare shudders in pain. She is exhausted, utterly spent. She is vaguely aware of her own ragged breathing, a soft crying and outside, a horrendous roar. She’s not completely sure of anything. The pain still racks her body in waves.

She is lying on a blood-stained blanket, the once white fabric now indiscernible from its original colour. The room is small and unfurnished, a single wooden table with a chair sitting in one corner. A window to her left is boarded up, but an ominous orange glow seeps through the cracks of the hastily constructed blinds. The light reflects off of the blood and other substances on the floor and on the table. The mare tries not to look at these things.

Another pony stands with her in the room, a stallion. He is bent over the table, fresh blankets in his mouth. From the table comes the sound of crying, as well as the occasional ‘drip’ as blood and other bodily fluids fall to floor.

The mare, though exhausted, is happy. No, she’s ecstatic - triumphant, almost.

She’s done it. Despite everything, she succeeded. She’s done it.

“She’s alive,” comes the voice of her husband, who is now smiling at her.

“I can hear,” the mare says, laughing shakily.

“You did it.”

“I know.” The mare smiles.

“Would you like to see her?”

“More than anything,” she replies.

The stallion nods and lifts a small bundle of blankets in the crook of his leg. He walks awkwardly over to the mare, careful not to drop the blankets. He gently places the small bundle in front of the exhausted pony.

Almost reverently, the mare tenderly lifts open a fold of fabric to reveal the face

of her newborn daughter, her mane still filthy and soiled.

“She’s beautiful,” the mare breathes, awed.

The stallion doesn’t reply and instead smiles sadly at her wife. The mare doesn’t see that, though, too focused on the small pony lying in front of her.

The baby has stopped crying and is now staring up at her mother with large, white eyes, the colour of her pupils impossible to make out in the orange glow. She yawns gently, scrunching up her face to do so.

“Hello there,” the mare coos softly, her heart filling with warmth. “Welcome to our family.”

The stallion walks over to the window and attempts to look through one of the cracks. The mare doesn’t pay him any attention.

“It’s still burning,” he mutters to himself. “How can it still be burning?”

Oblivious, the mare reaches down and kisses her daughter softly on the head. Her own pain is now a distant memory. She only sees her daughter.

“I’m going to be here for you, you know,” she whispers softly. “Forever and always.”

Her baby’s eyes begin to close, her mouth opened in a small ‘o’. The mare smiles lovingly as her newborn falls swiftly to sleep, exhausted by the mere act of being alive.

Kissing her again softly, the mare closes her eyes as well. She has done it. Amidst all the pain, fire and fear, she has brought new life into the world.

Smiling contently, the mare lets her head lie next to her baby’s, one leg stretched out around her protectively.

Peacefully, the mare drifts off to sleep. Outside, the world is lost to a sea of flames. They consume everything and leave nothing but ash.

Except for a small filly, born but an hour ago into this cursed world - a light in the darkness.

The mare woke into a bruised dawn. She could hear the wind slice through the trees above her and was incredibly thankful for the shelter the rocks provided. Overhead, the clouds had plummeted off the peaks of the mountains. Their blackened and angry bodies were bringing with them the wrath of the sky. She was vaguely aware of how cold it was. Her nose had grown numb.

Groaning as she sat upright, the mare looked over to her daughter. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the small filly's body move consistently with each inhalation. Next to her the fire was now nothing but a small pile of faintly glowing embers. It had served its purpose.

The mare got up and checked the filly's clothes that she had left drying the night before. They were cold and stiff, but no longer wet. Satisfied, she swiftly pulled out two cookies for their breakfast, trying to ignore the fact that there were only two left. She wanted to get moving quickly. The clouds overhead spoke of bad weather approaching. She shuddered to think of what it may be like as they went higher.

The filly woke soon after, cocooned within her blankets. She smiled softly when she saw her mother. "You did it, Mama. You saved me."

"I told you I would," she replied, touching her daughter's face gently with a hoof. "Now get up. We have to be moving quickly."

After breakfast, the two ponies wrapped themselves up as best they could, using most of their blankets for added warmth. Bulky and cumbersome, but as warm as they were ever going to get, they left their campsite and proceeded to climb higher into the mountains.

They followed a ridge as it rose steadily uphill. Around them the wind whipped ferociously at their clothing, snatching their voices out of the air if they tried to speak. The mare could no longer see their destination above them, the swirl of grey and angry clouds limiting visibility. They watched in apprehension as small grey flecks got blown out of the blanket overhead. It was starting to snow.

As they climbed higher, the weather got worse and worse. It was definitely snowing now, the wind causing the snowflakes to tear past them and into oblivion off the edge of the ridge. In places the snow had started to form banks, grey pockets of slush up against rocks or trees. Occasionally the clouds would open for a second and the mare could see the peaks above them. She watched fearfully as each time the sides of the mountains became darker and darker from the heavy and dirty snowfalls.

Slowly, the two ponies forced their way up the mountain, alone in the swirling darkness. The storm was gaining in strength, and the mare knew that they had to keep going. Staying still for too long would mean death in this wind.

After an unknowable amount of time, they stopped to get a drink under the protective shadow of a boulder. The constant scream of the wind blasted their eardrums. There were no longer any trees on these slopes. They had passed the altitude where trees could grow.

While they rested, the snow continued to build up around them, forming murky sheets that covered the ashen ridges. The filly sat silently in the icy air, shaking slightly as she did. It was so very cold.

Her joints creaking in protest, the mare stood up. They had to keep moving. She had no idea how much further it was to the summit. She couldn't see it due to the clouds.

They pushed on into the torrent of grey that tore around them with a vengeance.

A deep roar echoed through the valleys, causing the two ponies' hooves to shake. They peered into the gloom from where the sound seemed to have originated, but could see nothing but a swirl of grey moving rapidly down the mountain slopes on their left. The fast moving mass of cloud and snow veered down the valley and began to race down toward the plains below.

The mare and the filly moved on, focusing on each step, keeping their heads down against the wind.

The day dragged on and the mare knew that the filly was struggling. The wind made every step a challenge of strength, and since her own endurance was wearing thin, she could only imagine what her daughter must be going through.

Just a little further, she hoped. She prayed.

Another echoing rumble tore through the air. This time it was closer, in front of them. They watched as the great grey mass swept through the valley, falling away on their left. There was no mistaking it this time. It was an avalanche.

The mare's heart dropped. Where was the pass? It had to be nearby. Please Celestia let it be nearby. Please...

The ridge was moving toward the left now, and a great hulking blue shadow loomed up in front of the two ponies. The mare assumed this was one of the peaks. She pushed herself onwards. The pony had no idea whether or not it was their destination, but as long as the altitude dropped on the other side, she wouldn't care.

The snow lay thickly on the ground now. Each hoof-step sunk deeper and deeper into the grey ice. On their right a great wall of stone rose up the side of the mountain. They followed it, grateful somewhat for the meagre shelter it provided.

As they walked, the two ponies suddenly became aware of a dark hole that seemed to fall away into the rock-face. They approached it carefully, the wind lashing out against them.

On closer inspection, the dark mouth of the mountain revealed itself to be a cave. The filly looked at her mother in fear, not bothering to speak against the wind. The mare stood still, silhouetted by the dark opening in front of her. She had no clue whether or not danger lurked inside its gloomy depths.

She shivered. The darkness taunted her, willing her to come inside. She was sure it was just her imagination, but even the snow itself appeared to avoid the black

opening.

The ground began to shake. Startled, the mare looked up the sheer rock-face as it disappeared into the swirling storm. A great roar began to assault the two ponies as they stood in front of the mouth of the mountain. She had a second to react and she knew it.

“Move!” she screamed, pushing her daughter into the cave.

They charged into the blackness, their hooves hitting the cold rock. Utterly blind, they pushed on deeper and deeper. The roar grew louder until suddenly, it ended in a loud *whump*. The ground, however, shook for seconds afterwards, sending small tremors through the earth as aftershocks.

The mare paused in horror. She couldn't see a thing.

“Mama!” the filly yelled into the darkness.

“I'm right here,” she replied.

“I can't see, Mama! What happened to the light?”

“I think the avalanche sealed us in.” The mare's voice shook, her breathing loud in the absolute shadow.

The mare heard her daughter's breathing come in faster and faster when she heard that.

“Don't worry. I'll get us out,” she said, trying to calm her down.

The small pony whimpered. Forcing herself to breathe normally, the mare blindly reached around and opened one of their saddlebags. She stuck her head inside, feeling carefully for her goal. When her lips encountered the dirty plastic, she smiled softly.

She gently removed the glow-stick from the pack before cracking it with one of her hooves. The mare shook it vigorously with her mouth and then proceeded to wait as the soft orange glow grew brighter and brighter.

Before long the mare could make out shapes in the orange light. The filly was sitting near her, staring back at her mother in fear. Around them were the stone walls, floors and roof of a gigantic cave, taller and longer than the mare could make out with their limited visibility.

She had often pictured caves like these when she was a filly. This was just like the dragon caves she had constructed in her mind. The reality lay before her, its stone walls grey and pitted.

Loose boulders lay strewn about the cave floor, and by the wall she could make out a stalagmite pillar. The mare could hear the soft sound of water trickling somewhere in the earth.

The light had started to go out. Even though she knew that the glow stick was old, she couldn't help but feel dismayed that it was going out so soon. Not wanting to waste the rapidly fading glow stick, the mare made use of its light. She took out the lantern and inserted a candle into its holder. There weren't many candles like this left in the world. It was a magic candle, created by unicorns to last longer than normal wax would have permitted. She had been saving it for a time just like this.

After the lantern was lit, the mare tied a piece of thick string twice through the loop on top. She slipped her head through the string, wearing the lantern like a piece of jewellery. After a few tugs to ensure that the lamp wouldn't move around too much when she walked or if she had to run, the mare paused, satisfied with her work.

“Now what, Mama?” the filly asked.

“We see if we can find a way out,” she replied.

The mare started to walk deeper into the cave, the filly close behind her. Their hoof-steps echoed into the blackness as they walked. They could hear each breath as it was nervously inhaled or exhaled. The sound of running water was louder now and coming from several different places.

They had walked for several minutes when they reached the back of the cave. The mare paused, looking helplessly around for an exit. The filly had moved away, her attention grabbed by something shiny.

“Look, Mama! Look what I found!”

The mare turned and saw that the filly was holding a dirty, yet unmistakably golden, coin. It shimmered slightly as the light reflected off its surface.

“It's a coin,” she replied, still looking around the cave wall.

“Can I keep it?”

“Of course you can.”

The filly smiled, temporarily forgetting about the larger problem at hand. She carefully tucked the coin inside a small pocket on her clothing.

“Yes!”

“What is it, Mama?”

The mare had finally found what she was praying for. A small, dark crevice ran

along one corner of the cave, just large enough for a pony to squeeze through. She had no idea where it headed, but as long as the cave continued, there was hope.

“Do... we really have to go in there?” the filly said, clearly crashing back down to reality at the sight of the narrow opening.

“We have to try.”

“O... Ok.”

The mare took a deep breath before squeezing her way through the crack. Behind her, her daughter waited, and in front of her, the darkness hung like a curtain, punctured weakly by their only light source.

Steeling her nerves, the mare, followed closely by the filly, made her way deeper into the mountain.

A/N: A *massive* thank you to my editor, Sessalisk, for helping me to such an incredible extent with this story. It means so much!

Questions? Comments? I appreciate feedback of any kind, so feel free to let me know how you are finding it! Thank you again to everyone for reading, and I shall see you for chapter 3!