

Half the Day is Night

by AugieDog

Chapter 13

"Anything for the princess," Lace Brocade was saying, the ruffles around the edges of her black frock coat just exactly the right shade of ecru to contrast with the bright red of her hair and hide. "And your designs!" She kissed her right front hoof and waved it at the ceiling. "An absolute pleasure to work from! If you have any further need of the House of Brocade, don't hesitate to call!"

It took every ounce of Rarity's self-control not to fall at the fashionista's hoofs and start kissing them. Lace Brocade! Praising her designs!

But instead Rarity took a breath and said, "This has been the single most fulfilling experience of my professional life so far, Ms. Brocade! I can't thank you enough for--"

"Oh, now, really, Rarity!" The slender unicorn gave her a smile. "Certainly you'll be calling me Lace from now on."

For the first time in her life, Rarity wished she could be Pinkie Pie for a moment, could somehow express the pure joy

bubbling up inside her without having to worry about how foolish she'd look jumping around like an idiot. She allowed herself one little giggle--not too much, or she knew she wouldn't be able to stop--and said, "Then here's hoping, Lace, that we'll have many more opportunities to work together in the future."

"I'll see to it that we do." Lace Brocade nodded, turned, and started back into the depths of the workshop behind the House of Brocade showroom on Canterlot's main square just down the road from the Palace.

And even though Rarity knew they had to get back, had to get the uniforms delivered, had a million other things to do before the festivities this evening, she didn't want to go, wanted to just soak in the pure creativity washing around her like a warm and lovely breeze from the lighted design tables to her left, the sewing machines to her right humming like a hive of contented bees, pegasi swooping among the looms at the back of the room, even a small smithery, unicorns and burly earth ponies working together to create metallic fashions unlike any seen anywhere in Equestria.

"Is she all right?" she heard Ory whisper behind her.

"Oh, yes," came Fluttershy's voice. "She gets like this sometimes at home, too. 'Zoning out,' Rainbow Dash calls it."

"Actually, darling,--" Rarity tore herself away and turned to her two friends. "It's called 'being in the zone.' But, yes, perhaps we'd best be on our way before I decide this is one zone I never wish to leave." She forced a step, another, two more, found herself breathing easier, Ory's scent as he smiled at her sparking an entirely different set of sensations within her.

And considering the hour or so of sleep she'd had since arriving in Canterlot--were they really starting only their second day??--the adrenaline from all these various sensations was pretty much the only thing keeping her upright at this point. So she returned Ory's smile and said, "Would you be so kind as to escort us back to the palace, Mr. Stargazer?"

He bowed. "I should be honored, Miss Rarity."

In the street outside the showroom under the crisp and cloudless blue of a late autumn morning, unicorns were raising the last of the uniform-filled crates onto huge carts, earth ponies in orange vests limbering up before slipping into the harnesses at the front of each wagon. The largest of these ponies wore a hat--the strawboss, Rarity assumed--and he waved a hoof at them, called out, "So we're taking these to the Citadel, right?"

"No, no, no." Rarity fluttered her eyelashes, not sure that she needed to but fairly certain it couldn't hurt. "The barracks of the Night Guard."

The strawboss blinked. "I thought there weren't no Night Guard no more."

"They've been reinstituted." Which, she was fairly sure, was not the correct term, but she pushed on regardless. "And these are to be their new uniforms."

"Huh." The strawboss nodded. "They taking recruits? 'Cause I got a colt at home could use a little infantry training, y'know?"

"I don't know, actually." And the idea that struck Rarity then nearly blinded her with its brilliance. "When you get to the Night Palace, however, ask for Minister Dash. She'll certainly know. In fact--" She turned to Fluttershy, nervously watching the hubbub. "Fluttershy, why don't you fly ahead and alert Rainbow that the uniforms are on their way? Then she'll be standing by when they arrive and can answer this gentlecolt's question."

Fluttershy looked from her to the Palace a few blocks away, then back again. "Are you sure you and Ory will be all right walking back on your own?"

Rarity had never been surer of anything in her life.

"We'll manage somehow, darling."

"All right." Fluttershy leaped gracefully into a hover and nodded to the strawboss. "I'll let them know you'll be along very soon, sir!" And she zipped off.

The strawboss grinned, his gaze following the pegasus. "Ooo la la, I love this job," he said, then he bowed to Rarity, spun toward the carts, and shouted, "Harness up, you slobs! Move! Move! Move!"

Ory gave a chuckle beside her. "How certain of your safety are you, Miss Rarity?"

She glanced over at him. "Have you had a premonition, Mr. Stargazer?"

"Nothing specific." He gestured up the street toward the Palace with a hoof, and when Rarity started in that direction, he fell into step beside her. "But, well, a lovely young lady? Alone in the big city with no one for company but a disreputable jazz musician?" He shook his head. "One hesitates to contemplate the possible dangers."

"On the contrary." She tossed her mane. "I find myself suddenly quite contemplative on the subject."

His laugh this time was full and rich. "Oh, Rarity!

You're so...so alive! And I'm not saying that just because we were almost killed last night. I've never--" He stopped, and she looked over, found him looking back wearing an expression she could only call rapturous. "I've never met anypony like you before."

"I should say not." She wanted so much to touch his nose, give him a little 'beep' with her hoof like Pinkie so often did, and whether it was her lack of sleep or her current state of euphoria, she found herself doing so, reaching up to tap him gently between the nostrils. "After all, there is no pony else like me."

Her touch seemed to freeze him in place, his gray eyes wide, and she turned, continued a few paces along the street before he laughed again and caught up with her. "So, hypothetically," he said. "If a sturdy young trombonist, an itinerant jazz musician, say, were to decide he'd had enough of Canterlot, that the dubious pleasures of the city had begun to pall and grate upon his sensitive nature..." His voice became suddenly quieter. "What sort of welcome might such a wandering minstrel find in, oh, I don't know, say a town like Ponyville?"

The serious undertone in his question made her look at him again, almost afraid to imagine what he was actually asking.

"Well," she said, stalling as whatever wit and charm she'd been feeling a moment ago deserted her completely, "as I'm sure you know from our travel brochures, there's any number of attractive features about Ponyville--"

"Oh, yes." Ory reached out a hoof and gave the end of her nose a quick touch. "If the present example is any indication," he went on in that same quiet voice, "I can only imagine that the town itself must be breathtaking."

She found herself wishing she hadn't sent Fluttershy on ahead, that she hadn't taken such efforts to be alone with him, her heart beating faster than it had since their kiss last night. "Would you?" she asked. "Come to visit, I mean?"

"To visit?" He shook his head. "To stay, however, to settle down, to become a part of the town and--" He swallowed so hard, Rarity could follow the motion along his throat. "And perhaps a part of your life?" The depths of his eyes made her catch her breath. "I can think of nothing I would rather do, Miss Rarity."

Aware that they'd stopped in the middle of the street, aware of the stares and the grins of the unicorns moving around them, Rarity found she didn't care about any of it. "And I," she said, smiling at him, "I can think of nothing I would rather

have you do, Mr. Stargazer."

Fluttershy reached the palace quickly, forcing herself not to stop, not to go back, not to hide on a rooftop along the way to see if Ory and Rarity might--she couldn't stop a little giggle--might kiss again.

It just made her so happy, she had to do a little loop above the balustrades of the Day Palace. For as long as she'd known Rarity, on their every excursion and spa day or just getting together for lunch, her friend had spoken about her dream, about meeting a prince of the former royal family in Canterlot, about being swept off her hooves, about the whirlwind courtship and eventual marriage into the dynasty that had ruled the unicorn city before largely abdicating their power and inviting Princess Celestia to move in when she'd left her original palace in the Everfree Forest.

But after the disaster at the Grand Galloping Gala, Fluttershy hadn't heard Rarity mention anything about her dream again until last night. And while she'd never understood Rarity's whole obsession with romance--the one thing Fluttershy had taken away from her horrible, horrible modeling career was the understanding that other ponies really did think she was

pretty, but whenever anypony looked her up and down like that teamster had a few minutes ago, she just wanted to crawl into a rabbit hole and pull it closed behind her--that dream meant so much to Rarity, and Ory was such a nice pony, a gentlecolt like Rarity had said, Fluttershy really, really hoped things would turn out OK this time.

She landed in the courtyard between the two palaces, flinched when the guards at the door saluted her, and rushed past them into the hallway to the throne room. She tried to keep her hooves from tapping, tried to move as quietly as she could while still hurrying, and was happy only a few of the Day Ministry staff looked over at her when she entered.

Princess Luna sat on the Day Throne looking so very regal, Fluttershy had to stop and catch her breath. Just since yesterday, the princess seemed to have grown taller, her wings even more graceful, her mane dark but flowing with silver like the full moon on a summer night. She still looked sad, though, nodding at something the Day Minister was saying, the unicorn scratching notes with a quill on a pad suspended in the gray light of his horn.

Several long moments went by, and Fluttershy thought about tip-toeing outside again, maybe coming back later when the

princess wasn't so busy. But Rarity and Ory and those big ponies with their carts were on their way. So should she just stand here and wait? Is that what one of the princess's ministers would do? Or would she be expected to walk up to the throne, all the way up at the front of the room where everypony could see her??

She already felt more than a little out-of-place in the gown Rarity had set out for her this morning: not that the Ministry ponies weren't dressed well, of course, but she could feel more and more of their eyes turning toward her, a pressure building around her worse than before one of Rainbow Dash's electrical storms or--

"Minister Fluttershy?" a deep voice asked softly behind her; she barely stopped herself from screaming, just leaping sideways instead and whirling to see one of the soldier ponies blinking at her. "Have you a message for the princess, miss?"

Panting, telling herself over and over again frantically, He's being nice! He's not going to throw me in the dungeon! she finally manage to nod, and by then, she could tell, even more of the ponies at the desks were staring at her. Eyes clenched, she could almost hear their thoughts, almost hear the words 'cute' and 'stupid' and 'famous' and 'useless' simmering around her

like the sizzle of the deep-fried eggplant Angel like so much, and she wished so very much she was out with her animal friends who didn't think at all, who didn't make the air thick and heavy and hard to--

A rustle of wings above her, and a little gasp from the guard pony. "Your Highness, I thought she might be--"

"Yes, thank you, lieutenant." Princess Luna's voice touched Fluttershy cool as an evening breeze, gently ruffling her wings and letting her draw what felt like her first breath in minutes. "Minister? Are we needed at the barracks?"

"Yes, your Highness," she managed to say though she couldn't quite manage to pry her eyes open. "I'm sorry, your Highness."

"Not at all." The breeze this time was so real, Fluttershy had to look up, had to stare at Princess Luna standing above her, a smile on her muzzle, her great dark wings caressing the air. And while a little part of Fluttershy still quailed back with a cry of 'Nightmare Moon!', most of her just saw her newest friend. "I had a feeling it might be time," the princess finished.

"Yes," was all Fluttershy could get out, but this time, it was happiness blocking her throat.

Not that the ponies at the desks would know that, that same annoying little part of her whispered. They'll still think you're nothing but a foolish, flighty filly who doesn't know the first thing about--

Princess Luna bent down suddenly, puffed a rose-scented breath into Fluttershy's face, touched her horn to the ribbon in her mane, and the nasty voice whisked away like dust.

"Surprise," the princess whispered, then she straightened up, looked back at Minister Daybreak. "Carry on, Minister, and I shall look forward to our lunchtime briefing."

"Of course, your Highness." He bowed and started down the carpeted ramp that led up to the Day Throne.

Smiling, the princess nodded to Fluttershy. "Shall we?" And she stepped out of the throne room.

Fluttershy followed, the sort of calmness smoothing her jangled nerves that she hardly ever felt anywhere except in the woods around Ponyville. "What--?" she found herself asking out loud, hurrying to catch up with the princess. "Your Highness? Did you just...just--?" She didn't know how to ask. "Blow away my nervousness?"

"No." Princess Luna cocked her head, glanced sideways at Fluttershy. "Well, not really. But I've been thinking a great

deal about what Minister Pie said to me last night, and it looked to me as if you could benefit from a bit of that same advice."

For a moment, Fluttershy could only blink. Last night--after all the scary parts were over--had been the most wonderful time she could remember in a very long time, all her friends gathered together and talking beside the fire. But the things Pinkie Pie had said to the princess, well, Fluttershy found that she usually understood maybe three of every five things Pinkie said....

"It's just..." Princess Luna was looking down the hallway ahead, but her gaze seemed to be focused well beyond the stone walls of the palace. "I'm not the sun. And trying to be the sun was what led me to...led to all my problems." Her head shifted, and Fluttershy found herself caught up in the princess's dark eyes. "I am the moon and the stars and the night. You are a beautiful, gentle, kind and quiet pony. Trying to be what we imagine other ponies want us to be, well, that's just going to make us both unhappy. Don't you agree?"

A giggle rose up inside Fluttershy's chest, and because it felt so good to do so, she let it out. "Oh, princess! I think that's exactly right!"

"Good!" Princess Luna brought a silver-shod front hoof down smartly against the marble floor. "Be it hereby resolved, therefore, that I will be dark, sad, and grumpy, and you will be bright, naïve, and frightened! In other words, I will be Luna and you will be Fluttershy no matter what else happens!" She stopped suddenly, seemed to shrink a little as Fluttershy looked back at her. "And more is going to happen, I'm afraid, more good ponies getting thrust into harm's way because of me."

"No." Fluttershy said it quietly, but she put as much force into it as she could, feeling bolder than she had in months. "It wasn't because of you that somepony pushed me and Rarity and Ory over that waterfall."

Princess Luna's head came up, her eyes wide. Fluttershy stepped forward. "It was just like you said. It was because of some imaginary Princess Luna they've got stuck in their heads. That's why the party tonight's so important, why we'll have a party every night if we have to! So everypony in Canterlot can get to know you as well as..." She swallowed. "As well as I have."

Silence, then for the second time that morning, Princess Luna leaned down and touched her horn to Fluttershy's ribbon. "Becoming Nightmare Moon was the best thing that ever happened

to me," the princess murmured, and Fluttershy couldn't help starting back, the princess smiling down. "Because it led me straight to the six of you."

Then she was turning away, once again as tall and regal as she'd been earlier, the flare from her horn pulling a door open, and they stepped through into an open-air courtyard, the whole city of Canterlot spread out down the slope and across the plain before them. The wall behind them was black marble, and Fluttershy realized that they'd somehow passed through both the Day Palace and the Night Palace to reach this place, though she didn't remember walking all that far.

Princess Luna's doing, she decided...

Looking around, Fluttershy saw a tall wrought iron gate stretching off to her right, a paved road following it around the corner of the Night Palace, some large and fancily decorated buildings on the other side. And to her left, she blushed at the hindquarters of maybe thirty earth ponies and unicorns huffing and puffing through some movements that could've been an exercise or a dance, Fluttershy not at all surprised to hear Pinkie's voice up front: "OK! Left brush knee and--! Oh, hey! Your Highness! Fluttershy! Hi!"

The other ponies all froze, Pinkie scampering through their

ranks. "At ease, ev'rypony!" she called out, skidding to a halt beside Princess Luna and hopping up and down. "This has been so much fun!" She seemed to spin in mid-air, her mane frizzing into even higher tangles. "We are totally gonna try square dancing next! You guys wanna join in??"

"Company!" a thin blue unicorn with some sort of stripes on the front of his workout vest shouted. "Salute!" And all the ponies sprang to attention, stomped a front hoof against the cobblestones, then touched it to their chests. "Your Highness!" the same unicorn called. "Night Guard ground troops at your service!"

Princess Luna had gone completely still, her mane barely flowing, but she stepped forward, bowed to the soldiers, and said, "Thank you, commander. And my thanks to every single one of you. I...I know we got off on the wrong hoof, but, well--" She smiled. "Minister Dash set me straight on a few things last night." She looked over at Pinkie. "Speaking of whom, Minister Pie..."

"Whom?" Pinkie blinked at the princess.

Fluttershy cleared her throat. "She means Rainbow Dash, Pinkie. Is...is she here somewhere?"

"Oh! Yeah!" Pinkie reared back on her hind legs, put her

front hoofs to her mouth, and shouted, "Dashie! The princess is here!" She landed with a little dance step and glared at the thin blue unicorn. "And c'mon, Foxy! I told you guys 'at ease!'" She started hopping again. "'Cause you're gonna be getting presents!"

"Yes, ma'am!" from the blue unicorn. He barked, "At ease!" and the troops swung into less formal stances, some of them even smiling at Princess Luna, Fluttershy was glad to see. Some of them weren't smiling, though, and a couple looked downright unhappy. Nervous, even, she thought...

A whoosh from the bright blue mid-morning sky, and Fluttershy's heart leaped into her throat as Rainbow Dash and another dozen pegasi swooped around the corner of the low building squatting along the back of the Night Palace. Their wings arching in unison, the whole company landed with perfect precision behind her friend, Rainbow whirling on her front legs to tell the others, "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

"Company!" The chubby pegasus behind Rainbow whirled as well. "Salute!" They all faced Princess Luna, did the stomp and chest touch, and the pudgy pegasus called out, "Your Highness! Night Guard air troops at your service!"

Rainbow Dash, grinning from ear to ear, came sauntering

across the courtyard, and Fluttershy wanted to start hopping up and down like Pinkie was. "Hey, guys," Rainbow said. "Whaddaya think, Princess?"

Princess Luna again stood stock still for a moment, then said, "I think, Minister Dash, that I have been a fool."

"What??" Rainbow's mouth dropped open, and Fluttershy felt her own doing the same.

"My own shortsightedness has led me to ignore these excellent ponies for more than a year." She shook her head. "But I intend to learn from this mistake as I am learning from all my others." She raised her head and her voice. "That you have all chosen to remain steadfast to your oaths humbles me to the greatest degree, and I will strive from this moment onward to be worthy of your dedication."

Most of the ponies started clapping their hoofs against the cobblestones, some even whistling, but the same few who'd looked nervous to Fluttershy's eye before now seemed even jumpier, their expressions the sort she usually imagined she had on her own face. But why would they be scared? They were soldier ponies! She couldn't imagine what--

Rattles and rumbling creaks began echoing from the walls of the palace and the barracks, whistling and deep breathing and a

rough voice shouting, "Slow up, there! Steady now! Steady!" Ears folding, Fluttershy looked around, tried to see where the noises were coming from, and the teamster ponies came galloping around the corner, the carts behind them clattering on the courtyard's cobblestones, the big pony with the hat hauling from the front harness.

"Slow up!" he shouted again, the unicorns trotting alongside each cart pointing their glowing horns at the wheels. "Steady, there! Steady!" And the whole parade crunched and ground to a halt, the soldier ponies staring wide-eyed at the five heavily-laden wagons.

"Ah!" Princess Luna was moving past Rainbow and Pinkie, the teamster ponies turning, their jaws dropping. "And unless I'm greatly mistaken, this will be the shipment with your new uniforms arriving."

The big pony with the hat had the same look on his face as the others, his head tipping back as the taller princess came up to him, her silver shoes tapping in the sudden silence. "Your Highness!" the big pony blurted out, then he dropped into a bow, all the other teamsters doing the same. "I didn't know you was gonna be here, ma'am!" He straightened up, grabbed his hat, and pulled it off. "I'da worn my good hat otherwise!"

The princess nodded. "Quite all right, strawboss. Have you need of any assistance in offloading your freight?"

The strawboss blew out a breath, sat back, slapped his front hoofs at the straps of his harness, the buckles unsnapping and dropping the thing to the ground. "I won't say 'no,' ma'am. This's the biggest load we've hauled all year!"

Princess Luna turned to look at Rainbow. "Minister Dash?"

Rainbow grinned and waved at the pudgy pegasus pony. "Captain Custard?"

The captain glanced at the pegasus beside her, a white stallion with ice-blue mane and tail, his cutie mark one big yellow star. "Commander Rigel?" the captain said.

And the commander, when he started barking order--"I want flyers up top undoing those ropes! Any of you zappers with lift magic, get your horns popping! And you grounders! Line up! Let's move!"

Fluttershy felt her whole insides freeze. She knew that voice....

Dash hadn't had a better day in months, rousting the Night Guard up just after dawn, leaving Commander Foxfire and the infantry in Pinkie's hyper hoofs, then slipping into one of

their workout vests and leading Captain Custard, Commander Rigel and the rest of the flyers out in some simple manuevers over the roofs of Canterlot. Like any group she'd flown with, some were better at the straight speed stuff while others had the fancy moves, but all in all, a pretty balanced outfit.

And Rigel! She grinned, watching him order the troops into place to help the teamsters with the crates. That pony was almost as good as he thought he was....

A familiar little clearing of throat beside her, and Dash turned her grin to Fluttershy. "Looks like you and Rarity got your mission accomplished." She looked around. "Hey, where is Rarity, anyway? I thought she'd wanna be here to make sure we didn't dent her suits or whatever."

A blush glowed over Fluttershy's cheeks. "She, uhh... She and Ory, they...they--"

Pinkie gave one of her full-throated laughs and pushed her lips out, wiggling them up and down like a fish.

Dash rolled her eyes. "Well, I guess we can manage to get 'em unpacked without breaking anything. Is there, like, a list inside of which ones are which size? Or--"

"Ummm,..." Fluttershy, of course, looked nervous and scared, but something about her shifting eyes, her folded ears,

the way she kept trying to get her mane to fall over her face even with the ribbon holding it back made the hair stand up along Dash's neck. "Rainbow? I...can I...can you...?" Her voice trailed off.

Pinkie stopped hopping beside them. "Fluttershy? What's wrong?"

"That...that pegasus." She jerked her nose in Rigel's direction. "He...last night, when Ory and Rarity and I got...when those ponies in black stopped us." Fluttershy swallowed, her voice getting even softer. "The one who was giving the orders. He sounded just like him..."

Dash's wings flared. Last night. Custard had said Rigel was out patrolling the city with--

"And, uhhh..." Fluttershy's gaze shot over her shoulder toward the ground troops lining up by the carts. "That blonde earth pony with the bells for her cutie mark? She's been looking scared at me, and I just..." Her breathing came faster and faster. "I think she's the one I gave the Stare to! The one who kicked Ory and cut his face!"

A cold lump of anger began forming in Dash's gut. "You sure about this, Fluttershy?" she asked as quietly as she could.

Fluttershy gave a convulsive nod. "I'm sure about that

voice. And after I do the Stare, I can...I can kind of smell it for a while afterwards..."

Pinkie was turning slowly to look at the whole Night Guard. "That one," she said, nodding to one of the unicorns. She went all the way around, nodding to one more earth pony, pegasus, and unicorn in the troop and saying, "And that one" each time till she was facing Dash again, the look on her face the most serious Dash had ever seen there. "All those ponies are really, really nervous right now."

The lump in her gut getting hotter and hotter, Dash whirled and shouted, "Captain Custard!"

"No!" somepony screamed, and the blonde with the bells on her flanks broke formation, took off galloping for the road at the corner of the Night Palace.

"Mirabelle!" Another voice--Rigel's this time--and when Dash snapped her glare over at him, absolute panic flooded his face. "Scatter!" he yelled, and took off into the sky.

More commotion, the other ponies Pinkie had picked out darting suddenly in different directions. "Custard!" Dash planted her hoofs. "Detain all ponies who were out on patrol last night! Now!" And she launched herself after Rigel.

He'd had a few seconds' head start, his white wings a blur

against the clear blue above; Dash narrowed her eyes, stretched herself thin, front hoofs feeling the wake of his passage, and pounded the air in the way that made it flow around her, made it curl back and lift her from behind. The consternation in the courtyard dropped away, no sound in her ears but the streak of the wind, the only scent in her nose the clean, clear in-and-out pumping of her own breath, the only sight in her eyes the traitor Rigel, the guy who'd tried to hurt Fluttershy and Rarity.

She gained quickly, the walls of Canterlot's volcano whizzing past them, and got within hailing distance as they shot out into the open air. "Rigel! Heave to, you hear me?? You're under arrest!"

He jogged sideways, a move she would've bet money he couldn't do, spun in a tight circle, and lashed out with his rear hoofs, nearly clipping the tip of her nose. She snarled, dove to the left, swooped around under him, and aimed a front hoof for the commander stripes on his vest.

His backflip at full speed in mid-air pulled him out of the way, but she did a jackknife of her own, wrenching her stomach muscles in a way she knew she would feel in a couple hours, and slammed her hind legs into his. The impact jarred her all the

way to her back teeth, sent her into a tumbling forward roll, and she heard Rigel give a cry; flaring her wings, Dash leveled out, banked hard in case he was coming down for another pass.

Looking up showed her nothing but empty blue. And looking down--

Rigel was falling, spinning, his wings flailing, the open mouth of Canterlot's volcano gaping like it wanted to swallow him.

"No, you don't!" Dash shouted, and she shoved herself after him, sliced through the air, cut through it so fine and so close, she almost felt the suction of it pulling her downward. He was still thrashing around at least, still conscious and trying to slow himself, so she didn't need Sonic Rainboom speed to catch up to him and yell, "Go limp, you moron, or I'll let you splatter all over the landscape!"

For an instant, she thought the anger in his face would win out over the fear, but he closed his eyes, spread his wings and all his legs; she plunged beneath him, grabbed him hip and shoulder, spun them both around so he was below her, his back toward the ground. Straining upward, then, she fought the pull, fought the draft, fought to dump the speed she'd just worked so hard to build, her back arching, her teeth gritting, her back

joining her stomach on the list of muscle groups she was going to hear complaints from later on.

Fortunately, they hit a tree; she'd been trying to steer for some of the parkland near the palaces since, in her vast experience of crash landings, she found she liked the extra braking power of a tree canopy to the straight-out slam into, say, a building or the ground. She'd already slowed them a lot, too, and, well, there was a reason she'd made sure Rigel was on the bottom...

The leaves and branches still gave her a good slapping around, and the "Oof!" when they came bouncing out and finally hit the grass was both deep and heartfelt. She was able to draw a breath, though, and that was a whole lot better than any of the alternatives.

Rigel sucked in a breath, then, and Dash heard cries above her, Captain Custard and some of the other Night Guard pegasi winging over the treetops toward them.

Nodding, Dash looked back down at the pony beneath her. "Once again," she panted out. "You are under arrest."