

## Intermission: Fluttershy's Song - Part 2

Another five days and nights spent in *La Détention Criminelle*. Another five days and nights giving last rites to the beheaded and to those who died in their cells, whether it was a bard or another criminal. Another five days and nights of being beaten, yet thankfully the Pura Razans were getting bored of their work and beat Fluttershy less enthusiastically with each passing day. Another five days and nights being spent recovering in her cell, constantly teased by Twister while the Dalish dressed Fluttershy's wounds with the old poultices the warden would give her.

It would be time for her to face the executioner soon enough, though. Bards were dying quickly, whether by sickness, the assaults by Pura Razan agents, or the new decree that the executions be expedited to two heads a day. At this rate, it would only be a week until Fluttershy was on the block.

As the despair crept onto her face, she noticed that Twister's jokes had become much less frequent as the Dalish kept more to herself, sleeping most of the days or simply sitting and mumbling in the strange language of the nomadic pegasi. The only time Twister spoke was to suggest a bedroom activity which Fluttershy could only blush and turn away from.

It was odd then that in the dead of night, Fluttershy awoke to find Twister slamming her shackled hooves against the iron door of their cell. The iron clods had a steady rhythm, though what was more surprising was the stern expression of the criminal's face. Never had Fluttershy seen Twister so focused and angry at something, and each strike against the door echoed throughout the prison's hallway.

Several of their fellow prisoners began to shout in complaint at the racket Twister was causing, with a pair of guards causing equal noise as they rattled their swords against the door. Twister ignored them all, still pounding the door with heavy strikes as Fluttershy stood aghast. What was this crazy pony trying to do?

"You shut up or we will *make* you shut up," called one of the guards, "I can wake Black Hood early, and get you on the block now. Warden wouldn't miss one deviation from the schedule, and that crazy mare loves her work at any hour of the night."

"Just like how I love your mother at any hour," taunted Twister. "Night, day, afternoon tea, midday brunch. Yum yum yum."

"One more word out of you and I'll skewer you myself!"

"Word your mother."

The guard swore, ordering his companion to ready his bow as he opened the iron door. Fluttershy shrunk back to her corner in fear as she watched Twister face the slowly

grinding door with a ready face. It was then that she noticed that the padlocks on the Dalish pegasus' wings and hooves were all unlocked.

As the door swung wide and the soldier charged forward with his sword, Twister laughed flinging the iron shackles with force towards the guards; the first struck the guard with the bow while the second clod smacked the nose of the other. The guard with the bow dropped his weapon, clutching his face, as the guard with the sword backed away while streaming a string of curses.

With a smirk, Twister rushed the pair, her wings flaring free of their bonds as she attacked. She struck with a ferocity Fluttershy had never seen before, a flurry of kicking and striking hooves that pummeled both guards, like an animal attacking its prey. This was the bestial wrath and savage fury of the Dalish pegasi warriors made real. The first guard was trampled under her hooves, while the second was quickly struck down by his companion's stolen sword.

Fluttershy gasped as she watched the guard fall in a pool of his own blood before looking up at Twister with disbelief in her eyes. "Snuck a lockpick in my mouth when they caught me," she said through the sword-bit, "Used it when you were asleep. I'm pretty darn nimble with my tongue. In more ways than one."

Ignoring yet another lewd comment, Fluttershy pointed at the corpses in from of their doorway. "More guards will come soon. If they find us they'll kill us!"

"You're right," acknowledged Twister before sliding the guard's bow and quiver of arrows towards Fluttershy, "Do you know how to use these?"

"Yes," answered Fluttershy, "When I was young, the foals were taught how to defend themselves against ponyspawn. But I never used a bow or any weapon against another pony."

"Don't think, act." Twister was close now, serious instead of her usual jovial jibes she made when they were face to face like this. "Let them come to you. When you see the whites of their eyes, let fly. Don't stop to think about the arrow, or who you're shooting at. It's them or you. It's *always* them or you."

Fluttershy looked down at the bow in horror, as if it had just grown fangs and was trying to eat her head. Twister was expecting her to kill with this weapon? How could she do that? These ponies were only following orders, they deserved a chance to repent and live a better life. What if they had families at home, or loved ones that needed them?

None of that mattered to Twister, as she searched the bodies of the guards and eventually found a ring of keys. Twister dashed off towards the hall, quickly using her mouth to unlock the cells with the keys. Doors swung open, releasing imprisoned bard and hardened criminal alike into the halls. The guards who rushed in were quickly

overwhelmed, slain by their own comrades' weapons as the escaped prisoners equipped themselves with whatever they could find.

“Riot!”

“Knacker them all!”

“Send them to Black Canter!”

“Kill the guards!”

Fluttershy kept close to Twister's side as they moved with the rioting prisoners. Angry shouts and orders came from both sides of the conflict as the pegasi duo finally made it to the courtyard. Waiting for them was a battlefield where prisoner fought guard, with several of the bards tossing torches into the fortress. Before Fluttershy could question how the other inmates, burning debris fell to the ground in front of her. The fire spread quickly, setting the castle alight in an unforgiving orange glow.

Together they galloped through the battlefield, avoiding arrow and sword from anypony who attacked in their direction. Fluttershy squeaked as one guard tried to impale her on the spear attached to his saddle, only to have his throat cut open by Twister's sword.

“The gate!” Twister pointed, “We make it through that, we're home free! Let's fly!”

Twister flared her wings, jumping into the air and quickly ascended into the sky. Fluttershy tried to follow, but the damage to her wings from the beatings made it impossible. She wouldn't be able to get the lift required to fly, and even if she did, she would be too slow and would quickly be shot down by an archer.

“Hey there,” came a familiar, disturbing coo. “Time's up pegasus. Trying to fly away? Tsk tsk. Can't be having any of that, now can we? Time to chop you up. Time to chop you up good. Time to meet Choppy!”

Standing in front of the gate were the two Pura Razans and the executioner, Black Hood. She smiled as she lifted the terrible axe with her mouth, holding it level with surprising strength for a mare her size. The executioner's crazed eyes terrified Fluttershy more than the axe itself as the advancing group moved ever closer.

Fluttershy backed away, her legs still stinging from pain as she fumbled with the bow. She had to defend herself, but a pony could not use such a weapon on the move; they had to stand still to fire. Instead she looked to the sky to find Twister turning in mid-air, sword in mouth.

The Pura Razans rushed the Dalish first, moving quickly for earth ponies as they brandished long daggers. One pony was tackled by Twister for his trouble while the other

came to a halt, eyes wide as his compatriot was stabbed to death by a mad mare. Twister looked up from her work, eyes filled with the same savagery as when she had killed the two guards in the prison.

“Finish will find you!” The Pura Razan shouted as he shed his armour to reveal two pegasi wings, “She’ll gut you for this! You won’t live to see the end of the night!” Before Twister could reach him he took to the skies, flying away with both fear and purpose to report the prison riot to his mistress.

“What are you waiting for?” barked Twister at the timid bard, “Shoot him! Stop him or he’ll bring more soldiers!”

“I-I can’t!” Fluttershy cried as her hooves shook while holding the bow, “I can’t hurt him!”

“Damn it, do I have to-” As Twister cursed, the executioner smacked the back of her head with the blunt end of the axe, knocking the Dalish pegasus onto her stomach. Black Hood stood tall over the downed rogue, pressing one hoof against Twister’s head while leaning on her axe, her grin unwavering as she looked on at Futtershy.

“I have so many punishments to dole out for so many penalties,” the disturbed earth pony drawled sadistically. “Trying to escape from prison. Assaulting members of the soldiery. Yet another count of arson. I’m sure this counts as more treason too.”

“I love weak ponies like you”, she continued, “So easy to break, so simple to make them scream and cry and beg for mercy. I’ll have fun with you before I chop. I have so many wonderful toys in my personal boudoir. The iron mare. The rack. The scavenger’s daughter. Ooh, I haven’t put anypony in the brazen bull for weeks. I miss the serenades they sing as they are steamed alive. Filly needs her lullabies.”

Fluttershy balked as she listened to Black Hood’s twisted words. How could anypony take such delight in the torture of their fellow equines? How could a monster like her be allowed to ply her supposed “trade”? Everything Fluttershy believed in, such as kindness, forgiveness, and mercy to all living creatures, was being challenged right now by the mare who was threatening the one pony, her *friend*, who had helped the yellow pegasus cope with being inside prison. As crass and lewd as she was, Twister had given some measure of comfort in a place meant to break a pony’s will. If it were not for the Dalish, Fluttershy would likely have become lost to despair.

*Her friend was being threatened.* Fluttershy did not blink as she steadied her aim and calmed the hooves holding her bow, reciting that one thought over and over again. Time seemed to slow down as Black Hood chomped down on the handle to her axe, bringing it upwards with the intent of severing Twister’s head from her shoulders. With the strongest flaps from her wings as she could muster, Fluttershy took to the air, where it was easier to aim.

*Don't think. Act.* Biting her lower lip, she let the arrow fly, concentrating on incapacitating Black Hood and getting her as far away from Twister as possible. The point embedded itself into the executioner's knee on her left foreleg, causing Black Hood to drop her axe as she cried in pain from the attack.

Fluttershy fired again, this impaling the other knee, wincing as Black Hood howled from her injuries. The executioner fell to her side as Twister returned to her hooves, the look of sadistic glee erased entirely to be replaced by eyes wide in stark terror. The executioner turned her dull grey eyes upward to where Twister stood over her, who was pressing a hoof against the hooded face of the killer earth pony. Slowly, the Dalish rubbed her hoof across the face of Black Hood, until the hood fell off and revealed a mangy pony with mottled coat, stringy hair, and a pair of wide, terrified and very bloodshot eyes.

"Mercy!" Black Hood called out from under Twister's hoof, "Please, I beg you! It hurts! I can't walk! I can't stand! I can't hurt anypony anymore! For the love of Celestia!"

Twister sneered, pounding her hoof against Black Hood's face, another shriek of pain lost under the roar of fire and ponies still in combat. *She hurt others for so long, yet she never felt the same pain,* Fluttershy thought as she landed on the ground, slinging the bow around her shoulder, *I shouldn't have hurt her so badly, just enough to keep her at bay, but now I have to stop Twister from taking revenge.*

"Twister, that's enough," Fluttershy said, laying a gentle hoof on Twister's shoulder, "She isn't going to hurt anypony anymore."

"How do you know?" snarled Twister, "The moment we get out, she'll put on her hood and start sending more ponies to her knackery. Shattered legs are nasty business, but a quick poultice, or some healing magic and she'll be good as new, hacking up some other unlucky soul. Slime like this shouldn't be allowed to live."

"Trust me, please. She won't hurt anypony ever again." Fluttershy looked down on the sprawled form of Black Hood, but instead of anger or fear, the yellow Pegasus looked at her once-executioner with deep disappointment. While she was disappointed in Black Hood for the path she had chosen, Fluttershy was more upset at what she herself had done to the executioner. The earth pony would likely never walk the same way again even if she received proper care soon, and if not would suffer longer from infection. Fluttershy wanted to do something to ease the pain, but she did not have any poultices or any other means of healing.

Time was also their enemy. The riot was still going strong and the fires consuming the prison stronghold were reducing most of the complex to ruins. If reinforcements did not round up the prisoners and kill them for the insurrection, the fires would surely do the job.

“*Nasalmek shol shiar*,” remarked Twister to the executioner as she spat Dalish curses, “You do not deserve her mercy. It is yours though, so do not squander it.” Twister turned to Fluttershy and motioned towards the heavy gateway leading to freedom. The executioner screamed at them, but whether she was shouting more pleas or curses, Fluttershy could not hear as Twister began to turn the crank.

“C’mon.” Twister coughed heavily as she turned the crank, spitting out some blood before smothering it with dirt. “We still need this gate open before the whole place burns our flanks. You keep watch; I’ll get the gate open.”

Gears and chains clanged together as the heavy steel gate rose up. The pegasi pair did not wait for the metal port-way to open completely, instead rolling under the sharp ends of the gate until they were well away from the large portcullis. They galloped into the night as the sounds of battle and fire continued to roar behind them.

Fluttershy turned around to watch as *La Détention Criminelle* burned. Even though she was there for less than a week, the scars, both physical and mental, she had accrued in the prison would remain for life. The sight of the guillotine would haunt her nightmares. The pain from the beatings would ache in her bones. The look in the eyes of the executioner, both of sadistic glee and sheer terror would stain her memories forever.

Twister said nothing as she slowed her gallop into a controlled canter, pointing out the border of the woods that would be their sanctuary, if for a little while. Fluttershy would pray for all those souls lost in the riot later. Right now, survival was the highest priority. As she followed Twister into the forest, Fluttershy swallowed hard as she once again entered the unknown.

\*\*\*

The two pegasi mares breathed heavily as they stopped in the middle of the forest to rest. The sun was cresting over the hills and its rays streamed through the trees. While both the warmth and light of the sun were pleasant and welcome compared to the cold grey of the prison, the light hurt Fluttershy’s eyes nonetheless. They had traversed the forest all through the night until the prison was little more than a distant, if unpleasant, memory, but they had not taken any rest until now.

As Twister slumped against a nearby tree, Fluttershy took a moment to explore her surroundings. She had never been in a forest like this before. Many of the wooded regions of Filais being deemed too dangerous as they were homes to wild and terrible beasts, bandits, and lurking ponyspawn. Still, she had never encountered such an environment before, and every new experience pleased her senses.

The wind rustled the leaves of the trees, a rather soothing sound to which Fluttershy closed her eyes to listen. Not an unusual noise by any stretch, but the conjoined harmony of so many trees was something she was captured with. The trees in the gardens on the

estate of General Puissant could not compare. The rustling leaves gave her a sense of peace as the wind continued to blow gently.

The smell of the forest was pleasant as well. The air was cool and fresh in her lungs compared to the prison's dank and stale air. Noticing the fragrances from nearby flowers, Fluttershy took a moment to smell a large purple one with yellow streaks along the petals, taking in the aroma.

Of all the sights around her, the forest critters were Fluttershy's favourite. Squirrels, birds and even the croak of a toad made her smile in delight. A cardinal high above glided away from its nest, sitting on a tree branch and waiting for its fledglings to follow. A raccoon emerged from a hollow tree and quickly dashed down the trunk towards a wildberry bush.

Fluttershy smiled as she approached the grove, ignoring her own fatigue and drawing closer to the animals. Her curiosity and awe pulled her towards the critters which were unlike anything she had ever seen. She was always good with animals, often taking care of the General's prized pets and menagerie of exotic animals from across the world. This was different though; the animals were wild and free, and she was an invader to their homes.

A small hint of uncertainty held her hoof from taking another step. What if they did not accept her? Worse yet, what if they attacked, feeling threatened by a strange pony in their home? Fluttershy did not want to disturb the critters in their habitats.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Fluttershy turned around and began to make her way back to Twister's resting place when a slight tug on her tail made her turn around. There, with one paw on her tail and another clutching a large pinecone, was the raccoon holding out the seed in offering. As she looked at the proffered pinecone, her stomach rumbled in demand for food. Having lived off of grey gruel and little else for a week, Fluttershy felt now was as good a time as any to have some real food, even if it was a simple pinecone.

"Thank you very much, little raccoon," Fluttershy said as she accepted the pinecone, "Though, I wonder if you could help me find some food for my friend as well. Something to last a few days through the woods, please?"

The raccoon darted off, the action soon followed by several animals as they went into several directions, gathering more cones as well as barrels, bright leaves and several varieties of nuts. The critters placed their bounty on the ground in a pile in front of Fluttershy, who looked on the pile with a newfound hunger.

A whistle from pony lips blew behind her, following which Fluttershy turned to see Twister up and about, though still fatigued. "Well I'll be a donkey's uncle," she commented as she looked at Fluttershy and her new animal friends. "I knew you were something else, Sunshine, but being *salanah'ishiel*? Colour me impressed."

*More Dalish*, Fluttershy thought as she blushed and turned away from Twister. Why was she giving praise to her just for being kind to animals? Yet, as the brash pegasus approached, many of the forest fauna fled to their nests and burrows, though the raccoon and the cardinal stayed near Fluttershy. Twister rolled her eyes.

“Figures they run, but then I’m *kalach*,” Twister explained, “Dalish for warrior, goes with the red ink. If you were Dalish, you would likely be a herder or one who takes cares of the clan’s animals, and would have green ink.”

“*Salanah’ishiel*,” Fluttershy repeated, “It sounds nice.”

In truth, Fluttershy was more curious about the Pegasi of the Eastern Dales now than she ever had before. Elders in the alienage had said that all pegasi could trace their roots to the Dalish, when the fabled skylords ruled in great cities made from the clouds. Fluttershy had always wanted to know more, but had to hold off on her quest for knowledge when her mother was sick with plague. Now that she was travelling with Twister, a real Dalish, she could learn more about a culture so foreign, yet so close to home.

Twister agreed to teaching Fluttershy about the Dalish, stating that she needed something to do as they travelled north. It was her plan to go to Equestria, where Filesian authorities had no jurisdiction. All they had to do was keep advancing north until they found a small chapel on a hill, *La Maison du Soleil*, then head east across the border. “The Frosttop Mountains will be in sight when we are close,” the wild pony said. “Then we will be free to live our lives how we want.”

They took refuge under large trees during the day, taking turns sleeping and eating, and moved out during the night. Travelling under the cover of darkness was difficult, as the moon was in a waning crescent, reducing the light to travel in. Making torches was out of the question according to Twister, who said scouts would be searching the forests for them and a flame would give them away too easily.

When Celestia’s sun was high in the sky, Twister would teach Fluttershy of the Dalish. First they started with language. Fluttershy learned simple words first, such as hello and goodbye, please and thank you. She found the language difficult and even harsh at times; despite the flow of the words, Twister said many of them in anger or bitterness. Whether it was the proper way of speaking in Dalish or just Twister’s frustrations, the yellow Pegasus could not know for certain.

Hello was “*faram*,” and goodbye was “*keelu*”. Please was “*meesha*” and thank you was “*melli san*”. Twister then taught her the words for ponies; earth ponies were ‘*hosan*’, unicorns were ‘*talla han*’, and pegasi were the “*nel’nier*”. Fluttershy liked the language, as the words rolled off her tongue, and many seemed to fit just right. *Kalach*. Warrior. *Massare*. Keeper. *Yethesh*. Healer. *Salanah’ishiel*. Friend to animals.



“Does that mean *salanah* is friend?” Fluttershy asked.

“That’s right,” Twister confirmed as she curled up against a tree, coughing into her hoof, “One friend. One dozen. Works both ways.”

“Are we *salanah*?” It was an honest question. Not once since they had left the prison fortress had Twister said or done anything lewd towards Fluttershy, only focusing on heading north, gathering food, and teaching the yellow sky pony about the Dalish. Fluttershy hoped that their time together would mean something.

Instead, Twister ignored the question, becoming cross and distant as she prepared herself for sleep. Fluttershy did not press the issue, not wanting to bother the rogue any more than she already had. Laying down on the cool ground, she let a sigh as she looked up into the clear night sky through the branches of the trees. The summer day was quite warm, and Fluttershy did not feel the need to sleep just yet as she stared at the clouds.

As she gazed into the blue sky, something crept into her voice that she had not done since nary a week or so ago. It was a small thing at first, the sound emerging from her throat, until she hit a single note. It was something simple, nothing too high, nothing too low, just a simple “*la*” to test her voice; to see if she could still sing.

One note quickly became two, to three, until she was singing a simple tune. From there she expanded, changing pitch and rhythm until Fluttershy was singing a song she had not sang since the plague. The song her mother had taught her, which they would sing together every day until the plague stole her mother’s voice. The song became silent after the plague stole her mother.

Her soft melody was joined by the rustling of the trees in the wind, but otherwise Fluttershy was alone with her song. It was not until she saw Twister standing up, contemplating the ground, that Fluttershy stopped her voice cold. Instead of harsh words, Twister shook her head, keeping her eyes away from her companion.

“That was real pretty,” she admitted, “Reminds me a lot of the Keeper. She used to sing too. She sang Dalish stories instead of simply telling them. Made them more interesting, more heroic, more worthwhile to listen to.”

“Where are the Dalish now?” Fluttershy asked as she sat next to Twister. From what she could see, the Dalish pegasus was fighting back tears, eyes closed shut and tight.

“Heard a clan was living in the Everfree forest in Equestria,” Twister replied, “Another clan crossed the ocean to the Free Plains, in a rocky region outside of Geldwall. Sure there are other clans in the Yokalach and others living next to the Broncos down to the south. Lots of clans dying off or simply no longer existing. Merging with the cities of other ponies, no longer being Dalish.”

“My clan... My clan is gone, Sunshine. Wiped out by a ponyspawn attack. Every stallion, every mare, every foal. Eaten and worse. I was out with a scout party then. Just three of us were left. Can't be much of a clan with just three pegasi.”

Twister turned her head to the sky, eyes still closed tight, as if forbidding any emotion. “I miss them all, Sunshine. I miss my clan. I miss the Keeper and the Healer and the other warriors. I miss the songs and the travelling. I miss them all so much.”

As Twister sobbed into her forelegs, Fluttershy came to her side and rubbed her shoulders to provide some measure of comfort. It was an odd thing to see such a strong and fierce pegasi so vulnerable. Fluttershy did not mind the display of emotion; all ponies had a vulnerable side and something that broke their barriers.

Twister shrugged away Fluttershy, moving into the shadow of a large tree. “Get some rest. We'll be close to the chapel in a few days, and I still have to teach you how to fight.”

Fluttershy did not like combat training with Twister. She detested fighting in all its forms, and always tried to find some excuse to skip training when she was a filly. It was the look of worry on her mother's face, and the knowledge that creatures like the ponyspawn existed and could not be reasoned with, that finally caused Fluttershy to take up the bow.

It was the same now, only with a Dalish pegasi who was a master of weapons, blade and bow alike. What disturbed Fluttershy the most was how good she was at using the weapons. She preferred the bow and arrow because she could fight at a distance, away from the heat of battle and from the eyes of enemy ponies. Yet as she remembered all too well from eyes of the executioner and her shot knees, no distance was great enough to make her ignore the eyes of the ponies she would fight.

Archery was easy enough to train with Twister. They shot mostly at trees and falling leaves, with the Dalish being impressed by Fluttershy's accuracy. She was able to shoot accurately from great distances, and was even able to fire accurately through the heavy bush of the forest. As far as day one of fighting training was going, this was a success. Twister then decided that Fluttershy did not need more training with the bow, but close combat instead.

Whatever praise Twister offered for archery was soon replaced with shouting.

“Duck and move, duck and move,” the rogue barked, facing Fluttershy with a large branch clenched in her teeth. “Blades like these only have one side, so your flank is unprotected! You're a pony, use those leg muscles to jump about, buck hard, and strike fast!”

To show her point, Twister jumped sideways, striking Fluttershy's rump with a sharp rap

from the stick. Fluttershy squeaked, dropping her stick as she shot her head up from the pain of Twister's counter. Twister took advantage, poking Fluttershy in the chest with several jabs.

Every time Fluttershy picked up the stick in her mouth and moved to attack, she hesitated; Twister was moving too quickly and striking her too hard. If Fluttershy thrust, Twister moved to the side and hit her. If she swung, Twister would either jump and hit, or duck and hit. Despite all this, however, Fluttershy did not complain. If they ever encountered ponyspawn or their pursuers, they would likely hit faster and strike with real flesh-rending steel.

“What are you going to do when a soldier or a ponyspawn is in your face?” Twister demanded with unusual aggression. “Are you going to play nice with it? Ask politely to stop gnawing on your wing? Maybe tell that soldier who finally has you not to slit your throat?”

“I'm sorry,” Fluttershy whispered. What was Twister expecting after just a couple of days of training? That she was going to become an elite warrior who hungered for blood and battle?

“You're sorry? Is that it?” Twister attacked again, this time swinging her head and the stick together in a powerful slash that left a scratch on Fluttershy's chest. The yellow pegasus yelped in pain as she fell, nursing her wound and completely ignoring Twister, who spat out the stick and turned away.

Fluttershy could feel the anger seething through Twister's features. The white pegasus turned her head slowly, giving Fluttershy the feeling that she was being judged for her combat performance, and the score was not good.

“Why are you so damn hesitant to fight?” Twister shouted, “There are creatures and ponies out there that would gut you the first chance they get, and what do you do? You whimper and cry every time I hit you with a stick!”

“I'm not a fighter!” Fluttershy yelled back, standing on her hooves. “I hate hurting ponies! I hate the idea of bringing them harm! I can't even crush a bug under my hooves, and you want me to shoot arrows into their hearts?”

She was surprised at her own raised voice, but Fluttershy kept her stare on Twister. She would not become a killer just because other ponies were making bad decisions. It was wrong enough what she did to Black Hood; that poor mare would likely never walk the same way again, let alone the trauma of taking two arrows in her legs.

“I'm doing all this out of the kindness of my heart to see somepony like you survive in this cold, harsh world,” snarled Twister as she moved menacingly towards Fluttershy. “Sticks and stones are going to break your bones, sunshine. I'm helping you learn how to

use steel to stop hearts. Some ponies would do anything to learn how to move like the Dalish. You need to be *hardened* to survive, damn it!”

“I don’t want to fight,” Fluttershy replied, only to be struck by a hoof from Twister. Fluttershy held her face for a moment as she felt fresh tears stream from her eyes. She looked at Twister with horror as she stepped away from the angry mare.

How could she have done that? That was a real hoof-smack of anger, of abuse. Now Fluttershy understood why Twister had not said they were *salanah*. They weren’t friends, just two prisoners using each other to escape from imprisonment. There was one difference between the two, though.

“You’re a murderer,” Fluttershy accused as she backed away from Twister. “You’re a killer, an arsonist, and... and... you’re a bad pony! You like hurting others, and you want me to be the same as you! If that’s what it means to be Dalish, then I want no part of them! I thought we were friends, but we’re not! You’ve made that abundantly clear. And my name isn’t sunshine, it’s Fluttershy!”

Before Twister could respond, Fluttershy galloped into the woods as fast as her hooves could take her. She cried as she ran, not wanting anything to do with the Dalish pegasi or fighting or Twister, only wanting a quiet place to be alone. Not even being in the presence of the forest critters or the rustling leaves would calm her nerves. All she wanted was some solitude and peace.

It was sunset when she finally slowed down to a trot, taking a moment to catch her breath. Looking back, Fluttershy could not see Twister behind her or anywhere. In fact, there was little around her except more trees and rocks. Suddenly the decision to leave Twister didn’t seem like such a good one.

There was a small mercy, though, in the form of a building nestled in the middle of the woods along a beaten dirt path. It was a wondrous sight to finally be near civilization for a change, with ponies that may be able to help her. Fluttershy noted the stained glass windows that decorated the sides of the building, as well as two small statues of Celestia and Luna outside. There were small, well maintained gardens in the surroundings, and an outdoor stove with a burning fire and the smell of baked bread wafting through the wind.

*La Maison du Soleil*. Fluttershy recalled the name of the chapel on the border between Filais and Equestria. Of all the places she could find, a simple chapel to the Alicorn Sisters was the best that could be offered. The Chantry sisters within would know the easiest way to Equestria, as well as some sort of comfort for all the pain Fluttershy had endured.

She stopped right in front of the doors to the *Maison*, looking at each of the statues. It seemed blasphemous to enter a house of worship as messy and disheveled as she was.

One did not go into a temple with rags, bloodstains and scraped knees. Still, there was no place to wash up that she could see, and maybe the sisters would let her use their baths.

With a careful hoof, Fluttershy opened the door until she crossed the threshold, taking in the smells of burnt incense and the beautiful light shining through the stain glass. The chapel was just as Fluttershy imagined: impeccably clean with pristine statues of Celestia and Luna standing tall over an immaculate altar. The floors were clear and shining, and the shelves were lined with well-kept books and scrolls.

Kneeling before the altar was an earth pony mare, perhaps only a decade older than Fluttershy. She had a bright golden mane and an orange coat and was dressed in the robes of the Mother Superior. In her hooves was the amulet used for prayer and meditation, the amulet of the sun and moon.

The Mother Superior of the chapel turned as the door clicked shut, a warm smile on her face as she let the amulet fall from her hooves against her chest. She stood tall and proud while walking towards Fluttershy, who turned red in embarrassment for her condition and for interrupting the Mother Superior's prayer time. She bowed to the religious pony, keeping her eyes to the ground.

"Forgive me, holy mother," Fluttershy said. "I've been in the woods for a long time, I did not have an opportunity to wash up, or be presentable or..."

"Fret not, child," the Mother Superior replied in a slight yet noticeable accent from the Yokalach. "The house of Celestia and Luna is welcome to all ponies, whether clean or not. As a house, one can expect a means to bathe. Come, I will help you as much as I can. You may call me Sonnenschein if you so wish. I like my given name over my title."

After introductions were made, Fluttershy followed Sonnenschein down into the basement, where the living quarters were located, noting how plain the Chantry sisters lived compared to other ponies she had known. A life of worship and peace seemed like a dream to Fluttershy; everything was so serene and peaceful. There were no signs of the templar, which added to the appeal of the chapel. No templars means no issues with unicorns or their dangerous magic, as well as demons and other such monstrosities.

Sonnenschein ushered Fluttershy into a large wooden tub, only to then dump buckets of hot water over her head. The water felt amazing on her coat. The tub was soon filled half way, giving her ample room to soak and simply enjoy the warmth.

Suddenly she felt something cool applied to her hair, only to feel the relaxing application of hooves scrubbing into her mane. The liquid soap and massaging hooves into her scalp felt excellent as Fluttershy nearly melted into the tub from the feeling.

"So much blood and dirt," said Sonnenschein as she continued to scrub, "I have to wonder how a pony such as you came here as such a mess. Did you run into some trouble

in the wilds? Perhaps a wild animal that did not like you coming near? Running from an abusive colt friend? You have my ear, my dear, not the ear of the Chantry.”

Fluttershy hesitated from answering right away, taking a moment to sink her mane into the water as she considered the implications. What could she say? That she was an escapee of the worst prison known throughout the world? That she had maimed a pony in self-defense, ran through the forest with a known killer, and now dropped her sorry flank on the door step of a chapel?

*The truth will set me free*, Fluttershy decided. If she could not trust a Mother Superior of the Chantry, the messengers of peace and harmony, who could she trust?

With a sigh, Fluttershy left the tub, looking to Sonnenschein with a sad look. “Can we do a proper confession, Your Reverence?” she asked, “I have a lot to say. A lot I am sorry for.”

Sonnenschein nodded, standing up and turning to the door. “There are linens to dry yourself, and a brush on the table. I will also leave you some robes. I have nothing for pegasi I’m afraid. There are not many pegasus Chantry sisters. Perhaps I should look into that.”

As the Mother Superior left, Fluttershy quickly dried herself and put on the robes offered before regarding herself in the mirror. The robes were clean, with the white and yellow of the sun on the left side and the black and white of the moon of the right. They fit well, although her wings did not feel comfortable under the fabric meant for an earth pony.

*I look like a proper Chantry sister*, Fluttershy mused as she took in the sight of herself. Could pegasi join the Chantry as proper sisters? Perhaps that was a life she could seek out if she ever made it across the border into Equestria.

Taking a deep breath to calm her quaking nerves, Fluttershy ascended the staircase into the chapel’s main hall. She found entering the confessional booth quite difficult, with the urge to gallop out the main door rising with every hoofstep. However, the moment she entered and closed the door, the tension seemed to cease even faster than it had appeared. The silence helped as she sat on her flanks and waited for Sonnenschein.

“Umm...” Fluttershy was unsure what to say, shaking as she heard a door slide open, but no outward sign that she was being listened to.

“As both heavenly bodies bring light to the world, so too does the admission of guilt and the deliverance of forgiveness.” Fluttershy jumped as the Mother Superior spoke, but quickly calmed herself down as she remembered she was safe in the chapel.

“Forgive me, Mother, for I have sinned.”

“Celestia and Luna will hear you.”

Fluttershy began to speak of everything: of being a bard and a spy in league with a real traitor, of betraying the trust of an innocent family of ponies, of not speaking in her own defense at the mock trial. She admitted her guilt in attacking the executioner, of shouting at Twister and leaving her in the middle of the forest. Throughout her confession, Fluttershy had to stop to sob once in a while, the old wounds from her time in the prison reopening even wider than before.

Sonnenschein said nothing as Fluttershy confessed, to the point where the pegasus wondered if she was even in the other side of the thin wall. Only when Fluttershy had finished pouring out the truth did the mother speak her words clear, concise, and warm.

“A great wrong was done to you, Fluttershy,” Sonnenschein soothed, “Celestia and Luna forgive your sins, though they were never done with malicious intent. You have a large heart, my child. Do not let guilt rule it. Come, I will help you in the best way I can.”

Both doors of the confessional opened, allowing the mares to stand before each other. Sonnenschein’s smile was bright and welcoming as she removed her amulet of the sun and moon from around her neck with her mouth. Fluttershy was surprised as the mother placed the amulet around her own head. The topaz and onyx pendant slid down her neck, and she took a moment to hold the jewel in her hooves. The surface shone in the light of the setting sun

It was the most beautiful thing Fluttershy had ever seen. Never before had she ever seen a simple Chantry sister, let alone a *Mother*, wear a piece like this. Before she could ask, Sonnenschein held up a hoof, requesting silence.

“You will go east into Equestria,” Sonnenschein explained. “You will go a small village called Ponyring and find the cloister to the north, on the road to Trotterim. Present that amulet to the Mother Superior there and she will welcome you with open hooves as a transfer sister of Filais.”

“This is very generous, Your Reverence, but...” Sonnenschein came close, causing Fluttershy to become silent once again. Her eyes held a strong will, one that would accept no arguments.

“I want to help you, Fluttershy,” the high priestess continued. “It is the Chantry’s way to give ponies in need as much charity as we can offer. I cannot help you if you are constantly in danger in Filais. Please, accept my gift. After a meal, you must travel at night to the east. Equestria is two nights canter away from here, Ponyring another night. Find a travelling group of merchants and stay with them if you can until you reach your destination.”

Fluttershy was immensely confused by the words of the Mother Superior of this chapel,

feeling that something was being hidden from her. Still, it was the best option yet, and Fluttershy agreed that staying in Filais would be detrimental to her health. Artistic Finish would surely have heard of the prison break by now, and would scour the countryside for her.

The plan was agreed upon, and the two mares returned to the living quarters of the chapel to prepare Fluttershy for her journey. They found and packed several items, from woolen blankets, hard bread, canteens of water and a few bottles of healing poultice for wounds. Fluttershy hesitated when she saw her bow, only to sling the weapon around her shoulder as well as the quiver of arrows. The roads would be dangerous, but perhaps the presence of a weapon would deter any prospective bandits and thieves.

*Like Twister, Fluttershy thought as she readied her supplies against the wall in front of the door, where is she now? Is she all right? Is she still mad at me? Why should I care? She's a bad pony who wanted me to be like her.*

Instead, Fluttershy leaned her head against the wall, still thinking of Twister. If only she could say she was sorry one last time before she left for Equestria. Then she would have a clear conscious going into the land where she was born. It did not feel right having loose ends.

They ate in silence on meals of bread and daisies, something Fluttershy enjoyed quite well. Having actual flavor besides whatever passed for food at the prison was a treat and a half, and she savoured every bite. Still, while Sonnenschein was pleasant company, she was no Twister.

It was after a bowl of milk that she heard the door open and the sound of a great weight slumping onto the wooden floor. Fluttershy and Sonnenschein galloped up the stairs to find a bloody and battered pegasus on the ground with several arrows jutting from her side in addition to multiple blade wounds.

“Twister!” Fluttershy ran to her side, fumbling for one of the healing poultices in her bag, only to stop as the mortally wounded pegasus held her foreleg back with a hoof.

“Save it, sunshine,” Twister said as she coughed up blood, “You’ll need it more than me. Ran into a group looking for you. Had that earth pony with the goggles with them. Made a good offer to turn you over to them for complete pardon.”

Twister turned her gaze to Sonnenschein, who looked at the bloody mess with horror. “I am loyal,” she said weakly, before turning to Fluttershy. “We went through the Black Canter of the world together, didn’t we? Said I’d get you outta there and into freedom, didn’t I? I don’t go back on my word. Call it Dalish honour.”

“We need to treat your wounds.” Fluttershy tried to find strength in the words, but could only choke on sobs. Twister chuckled, shaking her head.



“I’m done, sunshine. That Finish, she’s a wicked shot. Accurate for an earth pony, even with those goggles. Did what I could. Took out the rest of her group, including the one who got away. Oh... right. I’m in a temple. Forgive me Mother, for I have sinned.”

Sonnenschein said nothing as Fluttershy cried. “Don’t cry for me, Fluttershy,” Twister said as she closed her eyes. “You deserve to live. I’m a bad pony. I don’t.”

“You’re not bad! You just made bad decisions! I’m sorry I called you that!” Fluttershy was frantic now, looking for something to help Twister, who simply smiled as she lay in a pool of her own blood.

“Lellishan,” Twister said, snapping Fluttershy out of her sorrow, “Dalish name is Lellishan. If you ever find the Dalish, tell them that name. Let my name fly with the south wind.”

“You can tell them yourself!”

“*Salanah... Fluttershy.*” Twister lowered her head, and breathed no more. Fluttershy wailed as her friend from hell and back became cold in her hooves, ignoring the attempt at comfort from Sonnenschein. When her tears were spent, Fluttershy rushed out of the chapel with the Mother Superior shouting behind her.

Taking the bow off from over the shoulder, Fluttershy readied an arrow and waited. Hot anger fueled her every move as she breathed heavy, arrow trained and ready at the darkness. All she needed was the sight of Artistic Finish and she would end her then and there. One arrow, one shot. That’s all she needed.

“I’ll end this.”

*I can’t kill.*

“She deserves to die.”

*What happened to mercy?*

“She doesn’t get any.”

*You are making a bad decision.*

“I don’t care.”

*You are going to become a bad pony.*

Fluttershy stopped her hunt for Finish. What good was it going to be to finally end Finish

if it cost Fluttershy everything she was? She survived the trial, the prison, and the trek to the chapel with Twister and still kept who she was intact. One kill, even to a monster like Artistic Finish, would end all of that. One kill and she would be no better than Twister or the Bardmistress.

Instead, Fluttershy lowered her bow, releasing the tension in the bowstring and letting the arrow fall to the ground. She would face Artistic Finish on her own terms, not with anger or rage, but the same emotion she delivered to the prison guards and to the executioner; with regret and disappointment for what they had done.

She waited in the darkness, listening to the rustling of the trees. The doors to the chapel were still wide open, with Sonnenschien covering the body of Twister with a blanket. Sonnenschein was under threat by Artistic Finish as well so long as the vindictive mare lived. Whether from violence or being framed like she was, Fluttershy would not allow the Mother Superior to be harmed under her watch.

A laugh made Fluttershy turn. There, standing at the edge of the forest, was Artistic Finish with an arrow trained on Fluttershy. Her neatly cut mane was disheveled, her clothes were torn, and even her goggles were covered in mud and grime. It would have been humorous to see the once proper Bardmistress so mangled if not for the deadly weapon held ready to strike.

“I haff been looking for you for a long time, patzy,” Artistic Finish said as she grinned, “So many troubles since you were sent to ze prison. First your friend ze General returns from his ponyspawn battle and starts investigating me. Me! A Justice of Filais! How long I had worked to attain the title, ze riches to finally move about the nobility as I pleased! Lords and ladies feared how I played ze Game. Now I am ze one being played!”

“What vas odd was that his information vas correct. His soldiers found my contacts from Pura Raza, found most of the mercenaries I hired. Had zem all bound and gagged all ze way back to Pura Raza with a note from the Empress detailing new treaties and trade sanctions for trying to incite rebellion. I vas able to misdirect my involvement to others, but then zey received pardons as soon as new information came to light thanks to your precious General!”

Artistic Finish stepped closer now, bow still tight and arrow ready to fly. Her face contorted into one of anger. “The only way they could have known was if somepony vas feeding zem information! I know it is you! Somehow you learned of my plans and are informing the General! Well that ends tonight, as do you!”

“You’re insane,” Fluttershy shouted. “Listen to yourself! I was in prison the whole time. How could I know anything, let alone send any information to General Puissant?”

“I do not know nor care!” Artistic Finish stopped and took aim for Fluttershy’s heart. “No more loose ends! No more tricks or elaborate plans! I should have had you killed when I

had ze chance! Now I will finish you!”

*Don't think, act.*

Fluttershy watched as the arrow was fired from Artistic Finish's bow. With a quick and graceful step, she moved to the side, the sharp edge of the arrowhead slicing the air as well as a few strands of her mane.

*Let them come to you.*

As she pulled an arrow from her quiver, an enraged Finish drew her dagger from its sheathe and charged. It was a simple shot to make. Taking aim, Fluttershy readied an arrow at Finish's knees, just like the executioner. She needed to do something, anything, to slow Finish down and make her escape to the border.

*When you see the whites of their eyes, let fly. Don't stop to think about the arrow, or who you're shooting at.*

Thanks to the goggles, Fluttershy could not see the whites of Finish's eyes. Instead the gleam of moonlight would have to do as it reflected off fuchsia-tinted glass. Finish was getting closer now, the dagger shining in the light of the moon, ready to tear into flesh.

*It's them or you.*

*It's always them or you.*

“I'm sorry.” Fluttershy fired.

*CRACK.*

Artistic Finish stopped suddenly, opening her mouth wide in disbelief, dropping her dagger in the process. She mouthed something, but whether it was a protest or a plea Fluttershy could not hear. The earth pony spy simply rocked on her hooves as blood leaked under her left goggle. More trailed down the arrow jutting from the cracked glass where the arrow had struck her eye.

She moved too quickly for Fluttershy to make the debilitating shot she wanted to. Finish had dived her head low with the dagger in her mouth, hoping to bring the blade up and slit the yellow pegasus' throat in one swift movement. Instead of pinning the knee, her arrow flew into the blue earth pony's eye.

Finish fell as life escaped from her lips without a single word. Breathing ragged and eyes wide, Fluttershy slumped to the ground, her bow clattering at her side. In disbelief, Fluttershy held the amulet Sonnenschein gave her.

“Forgive me Celestia for I have sinned,” Fluttershy whispered, though it was choked back on sobs. “Forgive me Luna for I have sinned. Forgive me, forgive me...”

She stayed there in the darkness of the night for a while, begging to the high heavens for forgiveness that she would never hear. She would never hear the jibes from Twister again, or any more lessons of the Dalish pegasi, or how her swordplay was terrible. She would never know peace of mind ever again.

Instead, Fluttershy stood up. Slinging the bow around her shoulder, she returned to the chapel to pick up her supplies. Sonnenschein said something, but she could not hear the Mother Superior of the chapel, hearing only white noise. She couldn't hear anything but the rustling of the trees and her own voice.

“Please take care of Lellishan... Twister.” Fluttershy then slung the saddle bags meant for her journey into Equestria onto her sides. In a trance-like state, she left the chapel and its silent keeper, muttering the words of the Chant from the very beginning as she entered the darkness of the forest eastward into the unknown.

\*\*\*

Sonnenschein stood in shock following what had occurred. She had seen wounded soldiers before in the Yokalach, but never death this violent, this brutal, and this *swift*. The plan she and the Seekers had concocted had succeeded in sending Fluttershy to Equestria, where the Lunar Divine had said she was needed.

Something had gone wrong along the way, as now the Solar Divine was left with both the body of a Justice of Filais and one of her Seekers. As she left to get a shroud for Artistic Finish, a figure moved from the shadows, levitating a sheet of linen with magic.

“I am sorry, Your Radiance,” said Bright Star, the tall unicorn Seeker who had insisted on keeping to the shadows throughout the whole affair. “We tried to keep the unpleasantness to a minimum. This was Twister's plan all along though.”

“Was it?” Sonnenschein shot a dirty look at Bright Star. How many ponies had suffered through this entire torrid affair? Perhaps she did not want to know. “Was her plan to die in a blaze of glory, leaving only the leader of the conspirators, the one with the most history with Fluttershy, alive?”

“Yes.”

The way he spoke was matter of fact. His voice was so devoid of emotion that it chilled her to the bone. *How long has Bright Star been a Seeker, she thought, how many times have you killed in the name of the Divines? How many ponies did you send to their deaths in the Sisters' names? How many will you send in my name?*

“Twister decided that if Fluttershy was going to aid in the defeat of the ponyspawn, she had to teach her how to fight, how to kill.” As Bright Star recited the plan the Seekers approved of, Sonnenschein moved throughout the chapel to find the supplies she would need to give both villain and hero the proper cremations used for the departed. “We were concerned that Fluttershy would strike out in anger, a start to a dark path, but I have seen different. She aimed for the knee, like she did in the prison against the twisted mare. Artistic Finish moved her face, and received an arrow in the eye for her troubles. Fluttershy’s mental health will be a concern, but we have Seekers at the cloister that will help her.”

“Blanc Masque took on the role as warden of *La Détention Criminelle* without raising suspicions. His ability to disguise himself is rather uncanny, but proved effective. He was the one who changed the list of the executions with proper reasoning to satisfy the guards and the lords. Fluttershy was spared from immediate beheading. Twister then arranged for the riot amongst those Seekers who disguised themselves as prisoners and guards. I will say, however, that before our presence in that stronghold, the Veil was incredibly weak there. Our unicorn brothers and sisters arrived as members of the Filesian Tower, and spent several days repairing the Veil. We could have had a major demonic breach on our hooves.”

“We also sent many Seekers to discover the truth behind Finish’s conspiracy against Filais. As it turned out, she had plans on top of plots on top of schemes. Cast so many nets, however, and eventually you get a few tangled knots. We were able to feed the information to General Puissant without him knowing who was giving him information. I would say he is an avid chess player, as he quickly confirmed our information with his own sources and moved several steps ahead of Finish, who thought she had won the game.”

Sonnenschein simply nodded as she readied the scroll of the Chant, as well as several candles and a torch. Bright Star’s horn began to glow, levitating all of the supplies in the air as well as respectfully lifting the body of his fellow Seeker.

“And of Twister’s death?” Sonnenschein looked to Bright Star as they exited the chapel towards the funeral pyre. “Was that necessary?”

“Twister believed so,” Bright Star replied as he lifted the body of Artistic Finish with his magic, “We live and die in the service of the Alicorn Sisters and of their representatives in the world, until the day they descend to us from the Fade.”

Sonnenschein grimaced as Bright Star continued to use his magic to lay neat stacks of wood to make for funeral pyres. Enough secrets. She wanted answers now.

“As Solar Divine, I give this command to thee: why did Twister die.”

Bright Star hesitated as he unceremoniously dumped the body of Finish onto her

woodstack, yet still kept the body of Twister aloft. “She was dying, Your Radiance,” he explained. “A sickness that gave her months to live. Instead of waiting, she chose the time and place of her death. She was a meticulous planner. She even counted on Fluttershy not shooting one of Finish’s subordinates.”

“A good pony who is now gone from us.” The Solar Divine looked down on the still shroud holding the body of Twister. She stroked the head with a motherly hoof, trying and failing to hold back tears of her own. *She died in your name*, Sonnenschein thought in prayer to the Sisters in the Fade, *show her mercy at your hooves*.

“Two last notes I should report,” said Bright Star as Sonnenschein put on her divine robes, though neglecting the veil for Finish’s last rites. “Whatever friends and allies she finds to combat the ponyspawn will be very fortunate to have her. Such a heart only comes once in ten thousand ponies.”

“And the second note?”

“She will make an excellent Seeker.”

The rites for Finish were done and over without much ceremony. All Sonnenschein felt she could do was ask Celestia and Luna to show the bardmistress mercy when she arrived at their hooves.

For Twister though, the Solar Divine raised her veil with the help of Bright Star’s magic. Before lowering the fabric, the native of the Yokalach looked around as the sound of hoofsteps and rustling bush echoed in the dark of night. All around her came robed ponies of all kinds, all with their heads bowed in reverence to their fallen. Dozens of Seekers of Truth emerged from the bush until the funeral pyre holding Twister was surrounded by her comrades.

Sonnenschein raised a hoof to her chest, where her amulet would have been. She felt her heart thud in her chest as she silently prayed to Celestia and Luna to protect Fluttershy in her travels, and to heal her guilt ridden mind. Despite the prayer, she knew the road for all the ponies of the world would only be more difficult.

“Dear friends, brothers, and sisters in the light of the Sun and the Moon.” Sonnenschein began the prayer with a clear voice full of conviction. She was the Seekers’ Solar Divine. She had to be strong for their sakes. For her sake.

For Fluttershy’s sake.

“We are gathered here under the gaze of Luna to commend the spirit of the fallen, Lellishan Twister, Pegasus of the Eastern Dales and Seeker of Truth. She died so that others may live...”