



Dashes, Dots, and Pegasus Spots

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Chapter 1

It was past noon when Twilight Sparkle finally finished her latest report to Princess Celestia. It was a list of all the new games she had learned to play while in Ponyville, complete with rules, diagrams of the various boards or playing fields, and drawings of the pieces used. She was particularly proud of her pictures of chess pieces and, when the final line was drawn, she released the magic manipulating her quill pen with a satisfied sigh.

"There!"

"All done?" her small assistant Spike asked. The baby dragon put away the last two books he had been reshelving in the library they shared as a home and joined her at her desk. "Hey, nice! I like how you make Princess Celestia into the king piece—though if you ask me, you don't really need to suck up to her. You *are* her favorite pupil, you know."

"Ha ha, very funny." When the ink had dried, she rolled the parchment into a scroll. "Please deliver that, Spike...then we can go and get some lunch."

"Excellent! I'm starving!"

Twilight Sparkle's belly rumbled suddenly and she gave the young dragon a rueful grin. "Me too. Sorry I made you wait so long, but I was really into my work."

"That's okay...as long as you make it up to me with a nice, big ruby or sapphire." Picking up the scroll, Spike belched a thin streamer of green flame into the air. The flammable parchment instantly ignited and vanished, magically transported through the air to Twilight's mentor, Princess Celestia in Canterlot. "There, all done! Lunchtime!"

He hopped up onto Twilight Sparkle's back and the young unicorn trotted from the library out into the brisk coolness of an early autumn day. She paused at the doorway to enjoy the sight of all the trees taking on the first glimpses of their fall colors, but her grumbling tummy cut her appreciation short.

"Alright, Spike, where should we go for lunch? A pastry over at Sugar Cube Corner?" She turned her head right. "Or a salad at the café?" She glanced to the left and grinned brightly when she spotted a familiar blue figure lying in the shade of a nearby tree. "Hey, look, it's Rainbow Dash. I haven't seen her for days...I think AJ said she was off in Manehattan or something. Let's go say hi."

"But what about lunch?" Spike asked plaintively.

"Oh, well...we'll just ask her to come with us. If she's been to Manehattan, I'm sure she's got some interesting stories."

The lavender unicorn trotted to the tree, calling out to her friend as she did so. When Rainbow Dash didn't reply, Twilight paused briefly, one hoof off the ground. Maybe she was wrong and had mistaken some *other* pony for her friend...but no, that was definitely Dash's rainbow-colored lightning bolt cutie mark she saw on the pegasus's flank.

"Hey, Rainbow Dash...did you hear me?"

This time, the cyan pony raised a wing halfheartedly in answer, but she didn't come rushing up to Twilight with the stories of her amazing adventures bubbling on her lips as she normally would have. In fact, she didn't even turn around.

"Huh, rude," Spike complained.

"No...no, I don't think so, Spike." Something was not right about Rainbow's attitude, or even her posture. She was slumped on the ground, her forelegs stretched out before her, her hind legs splayed to either side of her body. Concerned, Twilight took a few steps closer and tried again. "Rainbow, are you alright? I heard you'd gone to Manehattan...Spike and I wanted to know if you want to join us for some lunch and tell us about it."

"No thanks." Rainbow Dash's voice was listless and dull. "I'm not hu—" The young mare broke off as she fell into a harsh fit of coughing. Her hooves scrabbled at the ground as the fit shook her slender frame. Twilight gasped, for it looked as painful as it sounded.

"Ow," Rainbow Dash whimpered when the coughing abated. She pressed her hooves to her temples. "My head!"

"My gosh, Rainbow...that sounded awful! Are you getting sick?"

"Sick?" Rainbow repeated, her voice now tinged with scorn. "I don't get sick! I have a perfect consti—" She sneezed rapidly three times and moaned again.

"Rainbow, that doesn't sound good." Twilight walked around beneath the tree to face her friend. "Maybe you should go see—oh my Celestia!"

"Whoa!" Spike exclaimed, tumbling off Twilight's back in his shock.

"What?" Rainbow Dash asked anxiously. She wiped her hoof under her nose. "Something green?"

"N-no! Something pink!" Spike said

The Pegasus flinched back slightly, looking confused. "Huh?"

Before Twilight Sparkle could explain what had startled her and Spike, another voice rang out sweetly, "Hellooo ladies! Fancy meeting you here—I just finished up a large order and was on my way to a late lunch. Would you both like to—my goodness, Rainbow Dash! What in Equestria has happened to your face!" Rarity the unicorn stopped in her tracks and quailed, raising a hoof over her eyes.

Now Rainbow Dash looked thoroughly perplexed and frightened, as well as utterly exhausted. Eyes wide, she touched her face. "What is it?" she demanded, her voice breaking off into another fit of coughing. "Tell me!"

"Well, it's...it's hard to explain," Twilight began, but rarity quickly nudged her out of the way and flipped open the saddlebags she was wearing. Using the magic of her horn, she levitated a small hand mirror.

"It's probably better if we show you, dear." She exchanged a worried look with Twilight as she edged the mirror forward to float before Rainbow's face.

"*Oh my gosh!*" the pegasus squealed. She leapt to her feet, swaying unsteadily. "What...what happened to me? I didn't look like *this* before! I'm...I'm..."

"Spotted," Spike supplied for her.

Rainbow Dash's pretty, pale blue coat was mottled by dozens of bright pink dots, which crisscrossed her face, body, wings, and legs like freckles. They were quite vivid and it was only due to the tree's shade that Twilight hadn't noticed them when she'd first seen the pegasus.

"What *is* this?" Rainbow asked, looking at her friends pleadingly.

"What's *happening* to me?"

"I'm not sure. It's all very odd." Twilight stepped closer to nuzzle her friend comfortingly, but she hissed when her nose touched Rainbow's cheek.

"Dash, you're burning up. You have a fever."

Rainbow Dash's rose-colored eyes suddenly swam with tears. "Okay, I'll admit it...I haven't been feeling well since I got back from Manehattan yesterday. I came down from home to see if I could get some tea or something, but I was so tired I couldn't even make it to the café."

"Why don't you come into the library and sit down then—Rarity, could you please run for Nurse Redheart?"

"Oh, well, Twilight dear, I would gladly, but she's not in Ponyville right now. I heard she got called to Canterlot to help with a badly sprained hoof." The white unicorn rested a hoof briefly against Rainbow's flank and nodded seriously. "Oh, she is right, darling. You definitely have a fever. Come along."

Normally Rainbow Dash would have bristled at being bossed around by the prissy seamstress, so it was a show of how terrible she really felt when she meekly followed Rarity to the library, her head hanging so that her rainbow forelock fell into her eyes. As she walked, she began to cough again violently and shivered from nose to dock.

"Poor dear," Rarity crooned, leading her towards the sofa in Twilight's reading room. "Come on, you lie down right here. And don't you worry...even with the nurse gone, I'm sure Twilight will be able to find out what's happened to you in one of her books."

"Right. I'm on it." Twilight cantered through the library, pulling books off the shelves seemingly at random. Spike followed her closely, catching the

books she tossed over her shoulder and piling them up on the sofa by Rainbow Dash. The stacks were soon taller than the baby dragon and Rainbow Dash tilted her head to read some of the titles.

"A Modern Compendium of Common Ailments. Dr. Fetlock's Encyclopedia of Equine Illness. 101 Perfectly Easy to Find Herbs for Illness. The Medical Manual of Mare Maladies?"

"There's got to be something in one of these that will explain your symptoms." Twilight joined them at the sofa and sat on her haunches. Using her horn, she levitated a book before her eyes and started flipping rapidly through the pages. "Now, let's see...you have a fever, a cough..."

"Achoo!"

"Sneezes."

"Don't forget that she's trembling like a leaf in the wind," Rarity pointed out. "You wouldn't have a spare blanket about, would you, Twilight?"

Twilight had her nose buried in a book, but pointed over her shoulder to the balcony loft where she and Spike slept at night. "In the trunk at the end of my bed." While Rarity trotted upstairs to fetch a blanket, she continued, "And pink spots spreading randomly. Now, Dash, you said you started feeling sick after you got back from Manehattan?"

"Uh huh. I was really tired on the flight back, but I thought it was just the distance...though a long flight has never really bothered me before. And when I got home I noticed that my throat felt scratching, but I figured that was just the dust."

"Oh, so a sore throat too. You didn't say that."

"You didn't ask...and if you want a list of everything, my head feels like an outraged dragon is stomping through it."

"Hey!" Spike protested. He was perched on one of the stacks of books and was busily flipping through a thick, green encyclopedia. Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes at him.

"My legs and wings ache too." She lifted her feathered wings and frowned at the way they shook. "And they feel all weak."

"Hmm...now *that* is interesting. How about your appetite? You said a few minutes ago that you weren't hungry. Have you eaten anything today?"

"Uh, no...and come to think of it, I didn't eat anything yesterday either. Not since I left Manehattan. But I'm not hungry at all."

"Upset stomach?"

The pegasus nodded as Rarity returned with a pink and white striped afghan, which she tucked in around her friend.

"Okay..." Twilight went on, her eyes still riveted to her books. "Now, why were you in Manehattan?"

"Oh yes, how thrilling!" Rarity bubbled. "Did you get to go shopping? All the fall fashions should be out by now."

"No. Some big shot scientist there discovered a new way to distribute snowflakes so they fall more evenly and keep their designs better. I was sent for the Weather Patrol to take his class."

"Did you notice if any of the other ponies in the class weren't feeling well?"

"Well, now that you mention it, my roommate in the dorms *was* coughing, but I didn't see any spots on her." She gasped suddenly. "But she was as pink as Pinkie Pie, so maybe I just didn't notice them."

"I think that's exactly what happened. You must have caught whatever this is from your roommate and it took until you got home before you felt any of the symptoms."

"But what *is* this? I've never heard of a pony breaking out in pink spots before." She paused, biting her lip, and her eyes watered again. "You'll be able to find a cure, won't you? It's not...I mean, I'm not going to..."

"Oh, nothing like *that*, darling," Rarity quickly and kindly assured her. She raised a corner of the blanket to dab away the cyan pony's tears. "I'm sure it's nothing serious."

"Actually...it kinda is," Spike suddenly spoke up. "According to this," he held up the Medical Manual of Mare Maladies, "you have a bad case of pegapox."

"Pegapox?" Rainbow Dash squeaked.

"Let me see that, Spike." Twilight took the book from her assistant and rapidly scanned the text. "He's right...aches, fever, upset stomach, coughing...and bright pink spots." She glanced up at the pegasus, whose spots seemed to have multiplied in the few minutes since they'd been inside. "It says it's rare, but highly contagious once the spots appear."

"Contagious?" Rarity backed up a step, but quickly returned to Rainbow Dash's side, her expression contrite, when the pegasus glanced at her in surprise. "Sorry, Rainbow. Instinct, if you will."

"It'll be alright, Rarity. You and I are in no danger. It's called pegapox because it is only caught and carried by pegasi. Unicorns and earth ponies aren't affected at all. Rainbow, when was the last time you spoke to any other pegasi here in Ponyville? In Weather Patrol?"

"No. Since I took the snowflake class, I got a few days off. I didn't even check in when I got back. I just went straight home."

"Not even Fluttershy?"

"She's been busy with a family of chipmunks that moved in with her. That storm last week knocked down their tree," Rarity supplied.

Despite her illness, Rainbow Dash clucked her tongue scornfully. "Never would have happened if I had been in charge of the winds..."

"But that's good, right?" Spike asked. "Not the chipmunks, I mean, but the fact that nopony's had the chance to become infected here in Ponyville. All we have to do is make sure Rainbow Dash stays away from all pegasi for..." He glanced over Twilight's shoulder at the book. "...two to three weeks until the disease runs its course."

"Excuuuusse me? Rainbow *Rash*?"

"Pretty good, huh?"

The pegasus narrowed her eyes at the dragon, then chuckled. Her eyes suddenly squeezed shut and she moaned. "Oh, my head. I'm gonna feel like this for two to three weeks?"

"Not this badly, I'm sure," Twilight advised. "The majority of the symptoms are just like the flu...you've had the flu before, so you know how it progresses. The first few days are always the worst. This says that the spots will turn purple and then blue within a week, maybe ten days, and after that, you won't be contagious anymore, though you'll probably be weak and fragile for the full three weeks."

"Fragile? Ugh, fine...then I guess I'll just go home and sleep." She slid miserably off the sofa, the blanket falling from her withers, and slunk towards the door.

"Uh, Rainbow..."

"Are you sure you have enough supplies in your house?" Rarity asked. "Because, dear, you're going to need plenty of juice and soup to keep your strength up and, as you know, none of us earthbound can easily get to your door without the balloon. And we won't be able to get a pegasus to deliver anything."

"Sure, I've got lots of...uh...ah, darn it!"

"Rainbow, wait..."

The pegasus pushed the door open and winced at the light in her eyes. "Ow," she murmured. "Well, guess I'll go to the market first and..." She lifted her trembling wings and flapped them, rising off the ground.

"Rainbow, no!"

"Whoa!" Rainbow Dash's wings wilted when she was only six feet in the air and she plummeted to the ground in a flurry of slender legs and feathers. The two unicorns hurried to her side, helping her up as she spat out a mouthful of dirt and grass. "What just happened? My wings totally gave out on me!" She raised them again, staring at them in confusion as she wriggled the feathers.

"I'm sorry, Rash—oh, I mean, Dash! You didn't let me tell you...pegapox affects your wings too. Now that the spots have appeared, you won't be able to fly until they turn blue and fade."

"Oh horse apples!" Rainbow swore. "You're saying I'm grounded? For *two* weeks?" She began to march rapidly in place, stomping her hooves in a mini tantrum. "This. Is. Not. Fair!"

"Well, fair or not, there's no way you're going to be able to fly up to your house." Twilight stepped up behind the little pegasus and gently pushed her back into the library with her head. "You're going to have to stay with one of us—at least we can help take care of you."

"Who?" Rainbow wanted to know as Rarity took charge from Twilight and nudged her back onto the sofa, using her horn to pull the blanket over her.

"Well, Fluttershy would have been my first thought, but you can't go anywhere near her while you're spotted pink or she could catch it too...maybe you should just stay here."

"No, she can't do that, Twilight," Rarity said with a shake of her mane. She carefully smoothed the wrinkles out of the blanket. "You live in the *public* library—ponies are always coming and going for books. She won't get any peace or quiet, especially on that balcony you call a bedroom."

"Oh, I suppose you're right...though I do have Spike and Owlowicious to help out...um, how about Pinkie Pie. She loves to have company and I'm sure she—"

"Not Pinkie Pie!" Rainbow Dash yelped, her voice breaking. When the two ponies and Spike stared at her in shock, she hung her head over the edge of the sofa and amended in a lower voice, "Don't get me wrong, Pinkie is great and all. She's one of my best friends...but if I stay with her she's going to want to throw me some kind of I'm-Sorry-You're-Sick party, and then a Get-Better-Soon party, and when my spots finally go away an I'm-So-Glad-You're-Well-Again party. With the way I'm feeling right now, I can't deal with all those parties."

"I guess that's probably true," Rarity agreed. "And you don't need so much excitement. Right now you just need lots of rest and quiet, so I think..."

"I suppose Applejack and the Apple family would—"

"Absolutely not, Twilight! She's in the middle of her, uh, applebucking, as it were. If you would let me finish, I was about to say that Rainbow Dash will come stay with me."

"You?" Twilight and Rainbow asked in unison.

"Why of course, darlings. It makes perfect sense. It's just me and Sweetie Belle, and she's in school all day. The boutique is usually quiet and my living space is separate from the shop, so she will have plenty of quiet privacy. You can take Sweetie's room, Rainbow. She won't mind, she'll just stay in with me." The unicorn clapped her snow-white hooves together, then put an arm around her ill friend's neck, hugging her gently. "And I will play nurse. Don't worry, Rainbow Dash, with me taking care of you, you will be back on your wings in no time!"

Rainbow Dash managed to smile gratefully, but Twilight Sparkle couldn't miss the glint of utter horror in the blue pony's eyes. It was going to be a *long* three weeks.

Chapter 2

Twenty minutes later, Rarity led an uncommonly quiet and earthbound pegasus from Twilight's library, keeping up a steady stream of encouraging chatter like she did when she was trying to coax her cat out from beneath the bed. Rainbow Dash was still wrapped in Twilight's striped blanket, but shivered so violently she had trouble walking.

"I'm going to keep looking for some remedies," Twilight assured them both from her doorway. "Even if I don't find a cure, I'm sure I'll come up with something to alleviate your symptoms, Dash."

"Mmhmm," Dash murmured, and sneezed.

"Feel better, Rainbow," Spike called out, wisely omitting the Dash while he was still within kicking distance.

"I'll bring back your blanket later, Twilight," Rarity promised. "Come on, Rainbow dear...let's get you home and straight into bed."

Rarity's boutique smelled like flowers and made Rainbow Dash sneeze. The sneezes made her head throb, and her pained groan brought a curious *meow* from Rarity's white cat.

"Mummy's back early, Opal, darling," Rarity cooed. "And I've brought us a guest. You remember Rainbow Dash...she's going to stay with us for awhile."

Rainbow Dash and the cat eyed each other warily, then Opal sniffed and sauntered away.

"Nice to see you too," Rainbow muttered.

"Don't mind her. She does that to me too. She only really gets along with Fluttershy." Rarity shucked her saddlebags and waved a hoof to Rainbow Dash. "Sweetie Belle's room is this way..." She stared at the pegasus for a moment, her head cocked to one side, and *tsked* sadly. "It really is a

shame your spots are such a garish hot pink—a light pick or carnation would have looked lovely with your coat."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Yeah, Rarity, *that's* what I'm concerned with right now."

The unicorn tapped her chin with a hoof, her lips pursed thoughtfully. Suddenly, she gasped, and her dark blue eyes began to twinkle with excitement.

"I know *just* the thing, Rainbow Dash." She grabbed the weakened pegasus, pushing her backwards into the room until she stood in the center of a small area rug. "You stay *right* there. I'll be right back!" She rushed away, returning only a moment later with a folded bundle of pale pink cloth.

Rainbow Dash took a hesitant step backwards, her eyes growing wide and worried.

"What is that?" she asked, voice breaking into a cough.

"Just the thing to make you comfortable." Before Rainbow Dash could escape, Rarity grabbed her and flew into a flurry of frantic dressing.

"Ow! Stop it! What do you think you're...? What's with the pink! Is that—lace, are you crazy! No, not ruffles! Rarity...I'm not...ow...there's no place for my wings! *Aaiih!* Watch out with those scissors!"

"Hold still, Rainbow Dash! Ugh, will you stop trying to sit! This would go a lot easier if—ow, your wing just hit me."

No matter how prim and delicate Rarity claimed to be, at the moment she was able to overpower the ill pegasus and, moments later, she backed away from a thoroughly disheveled and disgruntled Rainbow Dash, who stood in the middle of the rug with her head hanging and her hooves splayed in a defensive posture. Realizing Rarity was finally done with her, she glanced down and let out a distressed little whinny, for she was now clad in a pale pink silk pajama set with pearl buttons and flared sleeves that came halfway down each leg before ending in a cuff of delicate, filigreed lace with a decorative bow. Rarity had cut holes in the back for her wings and had used her magical skill at sewing to neatly hem the edges so they now looked as though they had been made for the pegasus.

"Oh, Rainbow!" Rarity's eyes closed as she smiled with delight. "You look absolutely adorable!"

Rainbow Dash stuck out her tongue in disgust. "Are you nuts? I look ridiculous, Rarity! I can't wear this...I'm..." She sighed suddenly, her tail drooping and her head hanging low. "I'm too tired to even fight over this...I just wanna take a nap." Her rose-colored eyes suddenly widened and she lifted a hoof. "But I draw the line at the bunny slippers." She kicked off the offending, fluffy white footwear.

The unicorn grinned playfully. "I'll admit, the slippers were just a little joke on my part, I never expected to get away with them for long. Now, let's get you upstairs and into bed...Sweetie's room is right this way." She led the cyan pony through the boutique to her living quarters, then down a tastefully decorated hall to a door emblazoned with a Do Not Enter sign and a crayon colored shield with the letters CMC in the center. Rarity pushed the door open and gestured Rainbow Dash into a cheerful, bright room decorated in shades of pink, lavender, and aqua. The plump bed was covered in a thick, fluffy quilt edged in ruffles, and the pillows seemed to call out to the exhausted pony.

"You're sure Sweetie Belle won't mind me taking her room?" she asked, looking around at the wooden toybox, shelf full of books, white desk, and braided rug strewn with toys. As she edged closer to the bed, she noticed several drawings pinned to the wall and recognized a childish sketch of three little ponies: a yellow earth pony, a white unicorn, and a bright orange pegasus. The letters CMC were scrawled at the top.

"Oh, not at all. She's not called Sweetie for nothing, you know. She'll be thrilled to have company and will probably want to help me nurse you back to health."

"You really don't have to, Rarity...I probably just need lots of sleep. I don't want you to go all out for me."

Rarity trotted to the bed and pulled back the quilt in a neat line. Turning the Rainbow, she patted the mattress. "Into bed now. And don't you worry about putting me out. I *want* to help."

Rainbow Dash suppressed a groan as she climbed into the bed and flopped down on her side. Her entire body ached now and her head was

throbbing with each breath. She wriggled and nestled into the pillows, trying to get comfortable.

"I must say, Rainbow Dash," Rarity said as she pulled the blanket up over the pegasus, "No matter what you think, those jammies look wonderful on you. I simply must make you a set of your—Rainbow Dash, what are you doing?"

The sky-blue mare had turned over once, then rolled back again abruptly. Now she was batting the pillows with her hooves. "Trying to get comfortable," she answered, flopping onto her back, then turning onto her belly. "These sheets feel scratchy and the bed is all lumpy."

"Scratchy? Lumpy?" Rarity laughed. "Oh, dear, it must be the fever talking." She scooped up a fold of the lavender sheets and rubbed them against her cheek. "These are 1200 thread count cotton sheets that I brought all the way from Fillydelphia. There is *nothing* finer for bedding, I assure you."

"Maybe if you don't sleep on a cloud!" Rainbow tossed about one final time, then finally came to rest on her side, her head nestled in the pillows. She gave a sad little sigh.

"You never even need to fluff cloud pillows. They always stay soft and don't go flat."

"Oh, well, I guess that must be true. Hmm, let me see...ah, I know. I'll get you more pillows and you can sleep on them and pretend it's your cloud. I'll be right back!"

Rainbow Dash watched her trot quickly out of the room and smiled as her eyes drifted closed. Despite the pajamas, Rarity was being so nice...truly the spirit of generosity. Maybe being grounded wouldn't be so bad after all.

Rarity returned with a pile of spare pillows, all covered in striped pink shams.

"Well, Rainbow Dash, these don't exactly match Sweetie's décor, but I think they'll do for—" She paused in the doorway and smiled. Rainbow Dash was already fast asleep, her wings tucked close to her body and one hoof hugging the pillow.

"Poor thing," the unicorn said, shaking her head. She piled the extra pillows by the door, then tiptoed to the bed. Using her horn, she levitated the quilt over Rainbow Dash's slumbering form and carefully tucked it around her. She turned to leave, but paused and trotted quietly back to the braided rug. Selecting a small green plush teddy bear, she gently slipped it beneath the covers and lifted Rainbow Dash's hoof over the toy. The pegasus sighed in her sleep and unconsciously hugged the bear close.

"Oh, she will love this when she wakes up," Rarity whispered slyly. "Best Young Flyer and Teddy. Oh, precious!" Turning off the light, she added, "Sleep well, darling," and slipped out of the room.

She was in her sewing room, drawing out the designs for a new pair of silk pajamas, when the front door opened to a wave of giggles and youthful voices. Her little sister, Sweetie Belle, pranced into the boutique, followed by her two best friends and fellow Cutie Mark Crusaders, Apple Bloom and Scootaloo. Rarity hurried to cut them off before they could head upstairs.

"Hello girls!" she said. "How was school?"

"Boring!" Scootaloo exclaimed, her face crumpling in disgust "Miss Cheerilee gave us all a report to write on the history of pony made irrigation in Equestria and we have to get it done by Monday!"

"Yeah, it's so unfair," Apple Bloom said miserably in her gentle accent. "It's gonna take all weekend."

"We were just going upstairs to study," Sweetie added, shrugging to show the large schoolbooks in her saddlebags. She started around her sister, but Rarity side-stepped to block her. "Hey!"

"You can't go in your room, Sweetie Belle...at least, not right now."

"Huh? Why?" The tiny unicorn's light green eyes widened in shock. "Did Opal get in and mess up all my toys again? Ooh, that mean cat!" She tried to edge around Rarity, but her sister spun and caught her fluffy pink and purple tail in her mouth.

"No, dear, Opal hasn't done anything lately...and I think you owe her an apology for that. No, the reason you can't go in your room because Rainbow Dash is in there right now...and she's sleeping."

Sweetie Belle sat on her haunches, looking thoroughly confused. "What?"

"That's weird." Apple Bloom cocked her head to one side, squinting.
"Why?"

Scotaloo's purple eyes brightened and her mouth dropped open in excitement. "Rainbow Dash is here! Hey, maybe we should ask *her* about irrigation in Equestria. She knows all kinds of things!"

"Well, uh, Scotaloo...while Rainbow is very bright and knowledgeable about many things...you'd probably be better off asking Applejack about irrigation. Besides, Rainbow Dash is in no state to answer questions right now, and actually, Scotaloo, I'm very sorry about this, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

The little orange pegasus visibly wilted and Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom looked stunned.

"But why?" Sweetie wanted to know.

"Y-yeah? Did I do something wrong, Rarity? I didn't mean to."

"Oh, darling, no, not at all. It's not your fault. You're always welcome here...just not today...or tomorrow...or for the next three weeks or so."

"Rarity, what are you talking about?" Sweetie demanded. "What is going on? Why is Rainbow Dash in my room?"

"It would seem she contracted a very contagious illness called pegapox while she was in Manehattan a few days ago. It's made her feel quite miserable and tired, and it keeps her from flying."

"Oh no!" Apple Bloom exclaimed. "That's awful!"

"She can't even fly?" Scotaloo was horrified by the thought.

"Not right now. And since she can't fly, she can't make it up to her house, so I invited her to stay here with us for awhile. But Scotaloo, pegapox is only contagious to pegasi, so you cannot be anywhere near her right now...that is why I have to ask you to leave. Neither Rainbow Dash or I want you to become ill."

"Oh...okay." A flicker of nervousness entered the normally fearless filly's eyes and she took a hesitant step back from the stairs. "I guess I should go then. Tell Rainbow Dash I hope she feels better."

"Ah'll go with y'all," Apple Bloom piped up. "We can go home t' Sweet Apple Acres and ask Applejack about the irrigation."

"Yeah, I guess so." Scootaloo sounded disappointed, but brightened quickly and said, "We should make Rainbow Dash a Get Well card...I'll bet she'd like that."

"Yeeah! That's a good idea! Ya wanna come w' us, Sweetie?"

Sweetie Belle looked from her friends to her sister, and then up the stairway. "I'll stay here. If Rainbow Dash is really sick enough that she needs Rarity to take care of her, then my sister's gonna need help. I'll study up for the report though and we can meet tomorrow to put our notes together."

"Okay."

"Yeah, that'll do fine. See ya tomorrow, Sweetie!" The orange and yellow fillies left the boutique, the door slamming behind them. Sweetie turned to her sister.

"Is Rainbow Dash really, really sick? She's going to get better, isn't she?"

"Oh, of course, darling. It's like when you had the flu that time...she's tired and achy and has a fever, but it will run its course eventually. I hope you don't mind that I put her in your room. She needs peace and quiet right now—you can sleep in with me. It'll be fun."

"That's okay...she can even play with my toys when she gets bored." Sweetie remembered very clearly when she had been sick with the flu. When she hadn't been napping, the sheer boredom of being bedridden had nearly driven her crazy.

"I'm sure she'll like that," Rarity murmured, her eyes twinkling. She returned to her sewing table and the sketchpad she had laid out. Curious, Sweetie followed her.

"What are you doing?"

"Designing a pair of fabulous pajamas for our guest."

"Oh, that's a good idea!" Sweetie looked at the sketches, cocking her head to the side. "They're really pretty...but does Rainbow Dash really like that much pink?"

"Well, not really. But this is just the rough design. I'm sure I have a fabric that will work for her."

"I know!" The unicorn raced for the storeroom where Rarity kept all her bolts of cloth. There was a slight thump and a crash, followed by an *oops*, and the filly cantered back with a bolt of cloth balanced on her back. Two spools of ribbon rolled across the floor after her. "What about this one, Rarity?"

The cloth she had chosen was cream-colored cotton and covered in tiny spirals of every possible color. Rarity recognized it immediately as a bolt she had gotten in a special bulk shipment she'd purchased sight unseen. She hadn't been able to think of a project for it yet, and so had tucked it away in the back of her storeroom. Now she rolled out a yard and stroked the soft cloth, pursing her lips thoughtfully. It certainly wasn't pink—and the spirals were funky enough to work for Rainbow Dash's quirky style sense.

"You know, Sweetie...this might just be the thing!" She picked up her sketchpad and started adding color to the drawing with pencils. Satisfied with the result, she spread the cloth out on her table and lifted a pair of scissors with her horn as her little sister smiled up at her. "Rainbow Dash is in for a real surprise when she wakes up!"

Chapter 3

Rainbow Dash was having the strangest dream. She was lying on a pile of itchy, scratchy pine needles, her legs and wings tied up tight, while an ogre stared down at her. It seemed to be debating on how to cook her dinner—broiled, fried, or baked. She could even feel the fire it had started for the task, the heat blazing on her skin and making her sweat.

"No...don't eat me..." she murmured. "I'm all stringy and boney..."

"Stringy and boney?"

Now, that was weird. Why would an enormous ogre have such a sweet, high voice?

"Rainbow Dash? Are you awake?"

And how in the hay did it know her name?

Confused, the pegasus drifted up from the dream and peeked out from under the blanket...only to find herself staring into a pair of bright green eyes hovering no more than three inches from her face.

"Aaiiih!"

With a hoarse scream, she jumped up and flailed away from the eyes, but the sheets and blankets had tangled themselves around her legs while she'd slept and she was trapped. She struggled and fought the confinement until exhaustion took over again and she went limp, hanging facedown off the bed with her eyes squeezed shut.

"Forget it," she mumbled. "Go ahead, ogre. Just make it quick."

"Ogre? I'm not an ogre. What are you talking about?"

Rainbow cautiously opened one eye and peered sideways. A tiny white unicorn was sitting on the bed beside her, watching her curiously.

"S-Sweetie Belle?"

"Yeah!" The unicorn smiled. "Were you having a bad dream or something? You were talking about an ogre and you called yourself stringy and boney."

Rainbow Dash groaned and levered herself back up on the bed to lean against the pillows, kicking her legs free of the blankets. She noticed a little green teddy bear lying on the mattress beside her and picked it up, staring confusedly into its button eyes.

"That's Bobo. If you squeeze his tummy, he squeaks!"

The pegasus curiously squeezed the bear around the middle, raising an eyebrow as it let out a high-pitched wail. The unwavering, sewn on smile and beady eyes started to give her the creeps so she tucked the toy under the pillow beside her.

"Rarity says you're sick and we've got to take care of you. You look so strange, all spotty like that."

"Thanks. Oh, my head is killing me." She rubbed her temples with her hooves before looking at Sweetie Belle again. "How long have you been sitting there? I thought you were in school."

Sweetie scoffed. "Yeah, like *four* hours ago. You've been asleep a long, *long* time."

"Sure doesn't feel like it. I'm still so tired."

"Aren't you hungry? Rarity said you might be hungry, so I made you a snack. You need lots of nutrients when you're sick so you can get better. Look!" She bounced off the bed and lifted a tray from the floor, holding it out to the pegasus proudly. "See! I made you toast, and apple juice, and some cookies, and an orange, and pickles!"

"Pickles?"

"Uh huh! I love pickles."

Rainbow Dash glanced skeptically at the food arranged on the tray. There was a small glass filled to the brim with amber apple juice, a plate with two slices of toast charred to a blackened crisp, an unpeeled orange, and the

aforementioned cookies arranged on the same china plate with half a dozen pickle spears.

"I, uh, th-thanks, Sweetie..." Her stomach clenched at the thought of eating anything, let alone the odd snack before her. "It looks, um...well..."

"I know! Yummy, right? Here, have a cookie!" She held up a sugary circle covered in pink and purple sprinkles, one edge soggy and discolored by green pickle brine.

"Sweetie, I don't think I can..."

"Oh, you're awake! Wonderful! Sweetie, you haven't been bothering Rainbow Dash, have you?" Rarity appeared in the doorway. "I told you she needs to sleep."

"I didn't wake her. I was just watching over her and she woke up on her own." The filly set the tray down on the bed, hopped onto the mattress again, and sat back on her haunches. "I think she was having a bad dream or something. And I don't think she's hungry, sis."

Rarity stepped up to the bed and peered at the tray, one sculpted eyebrow lifting. "Yes," she gave a light, uneasy chuckle as she met Rainbow Dash's pained eyes. "Well, I don't think she's ready for cookies and pickles yet. She's probably better off with some soup."

"Aw!"

"Maybe in a little while. The juice is a good idea." She carefully plucked the full glass from the tray before it could spill and set it on the bedstand. "Why don't you get her a straw to make it easier to drink?"

"Okay!" Her face brightening again, Sweetie Belle jumped from the bed and pranced out of the room.

"Well, she tried." Rarity lifted the tray, wrinkling her nose at the burnt smell of the toast, and set it on the floor. "She's been so excited to help me nurse you back to health. She even said you could use all of her toys if you get bored."

Rainbow Dash reached under the pillow to pull out the green teddy bear, shuddering at the fixed grin.

"Yes, adorable, isn't he? Now, how are you feeling, darling? You've been asleep for more than six hours. I was beginning to get worried." As she spoke, Rarity walked around the bed and straightened the twisted covers. "My my, you certainly tossed and turned, didn't you? It must have been some dream."

"Ogre," Rainbow Dash replied, and sneezed.

"Well, that's uncalled for! I was just asking."

"What? No, not you...in the dream. It was...it was an ogre." She slumped down into the pillows, coughing into her hoof. "Six hours? Really? I feel like I haven't slept in a week."

Rarity *tskd*, tucked the blankets around her friend again, then held up a thermometer. "Here. Twilight sent Spike over with some instructions. She wants me to keep track of your temperature. Open up."

The pegasus shook her head. "No thanks. I hate those things."

"We need to know how high your fever is. Open up."

"I'm fine." Rainbow clamped her mouth shut.

"Open up, Rainbow Dash. Stop being so stubborn. Oh! Don't you shake your head at me! Open up. Open. Open!" Her white hoof suddenly shot out and clamped onto the blue pony's nose. Dash gasped, startled, and Rarity immediately popped the thermometer under her tongue.

"There! Now that wasn't so hard, was it? Don't forget I have a little sister, Rainbow Dash. I know all the tricks."

Rainbow Dash glared at her over the bulb of the thermometer and crossed her legs over her chest stubbornly.

"Now...I'm going to make you some soup to go with your juice. What do you like best, clover or carrot?"

"Mmockli."

"What was that, dear?"

"Mmnocoli."

"Sorry, I didn't catch that."

Pulling the thermometer from her mouth, Dash said, "Broccoli."

"Rainbow Dash, how can we get a proper reading if you don't keep the thermometer in your mouth?"

Groaning in exasperation, Rainbow Dash returned the thermometer under her tongue. "Weh oo axd!"

"What was that?"

The pegasus threw up her hooves helplessly. "Nvv mnd!"

"Whatever, darling. Broccoli, you say? Are you sure you wouldn't rather a nice clover broth?" She watched her friend shake her head. "No? What about a sweet carrot puree...lot's of vitam—you're sure? Well, I guess I could make broccoli soup. I would have to go to the market to get some broccoli, of course."

Rainbow tilted her head so she was peering up at the unicorn from beneath the fringe of her hair, her large magenta eyes pleading. She held out a pale blue hoof covered in bright pink spots and Rarity sighed, relenting.

"Alright. I suppose Sweetie could keep you company while I'm gone and come get me if there's an emergency."

"Cn tak care mmsef!"

"Yes, dear, I'm so sure you can. You just lie back and relax, drink your juice, and I will be back before you know it." Picking up the tray, she left the room calling out, "Sweetie! Have you found that straw yet!"

"Erm, Wawity? Oo fegot th' mometer! Wawity?"

A few moments later, Rainbow Dash heard the front door slam downstairs and hoofsteps as Rarity left for the market. Almost immediately after, Sweetie Belle appeared with a pink swirly straw.

"Found one!" she announced, plunking it into the juice and rearing up to put her hooves on the mattress. She gave Rainbow Dash a severe look. "Rarity said I have to make sure you drink all that juice before she gets back...so start sipping."

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow at the bossy filly, but Sweetie Belle only frowned back and pointed to the glass.

"All of it."

Shrugging, Rainbow Dash dropped the thermometer on the side table and picked up the glass. As she took a long, cool sip of Sweet Apple Acres apple juice, Sweetie checked the thermometer, shaking her head grimly at the reading.

The apple juice was cold. It felt nice on her sore throat, but caused her to shiver.

"Oh no...that's not good. How can you be cold when you have a temperature? Do you need another blanket? How about a hot water bottle?"

"N-no...I'm good." After seeing what the filly had done to the toast, she didn't Sweetie doing anything with boiling water. "The j-juice is c-c-cold." She took another sip, satisfying the little unicorn.

"Okay. Uh...are you tired? If you're not we could play a game? I have *lots* of games."

"A game?" Rainbow thought about that for a moment and realized that she was tired, but didn't feel like sleeping yet. Not if her fever was conjuring up dreams of pony-eating ogres. "Okay...whatcha got?"

"All kinds of things." Sweetie bounced off the bed and went to her closet, flinging the door open and rooting around. Rainbow Dash heard a series of thumps, bangs, and crashes and pushed herself up on the pillow to peer

across the room. From her vantage point, she could only see a fluffy pink and lilac tail twitching back and forth as the unicorn dug about.

"You okay in there, Sweetie?" she called, coughing harshly.

"I'm fine! Do you want to play dominoes or checkers? Ooh! Never mind...I just found Bubble Jump. Have you ever played that? It's really fun." She backed out of the closet, a sweater caught in her mane, dragging a brightly colored box. "Here it is! You're going to love this, Rainbow Dash." She shook herself rapidly, dislodging the sweater, and jumped back on the bed. Sitting on one of the extra pillows, she unpacked the box and started arranging the board, explaining the rules as Rainbow Dash watched.

"See...you have to get all your colored pieces to the home space by going around the board. But if you land on a bubble, it bounces you right back to the start. Here, I'll go first and show you!"

Selecting the yellow tokens, she rolled a pair of dice across the board and moved two of her pieces, counting each space out loud. Her second token landed in a space marked by a bright blue bubble and she dutifully moved it back to the starting circle.

"Your turn!" she quipped. "You can be green."

With a shrug, Rainbow Dash arranged her pieces and rolled the dice. Both of her numbers moved her forward on the board, avoiding bubble spaces and pulling ahead of Sweetie Belle.

"Aw yeah! I could get to like this game."

Twenty minutes later, her opinion was rapidly changing when Sweetie moved her second yellow piece onto a yellow home square, while she had landed on three bubbles in a row.

"Are you kidding me! How do you keep doing that?" She lifted one of the dice and squinted at it. "Are these things weighted or something?"

Sweetie Belle laughed. "No, silly. It's all luck...though you sure don't seem to be very lucky."

"Hey, this is my first time. I'll bet you weren't very good the first time you played."

"Yes I was. I beat Rarity sixteen times in a row." The little unicorn smiled smugly. "It's your turn again."

Grumbling under her breath, Rainbow reached for the other die, but stopped when she heard a door open and close downstairs. Sweetie immediately perked up.

"Rarity's home."

As if she had heard her sister, Rarity called out from the stairs, "I'm back! And look, Rainbow Dash, I brought you a visitor."

"Visitor?"

"Hey there, Sugarcube! Ah heard you was feelin' poorly and came to cheer you up." Smiling broadly, Applejack sauntered into the room behind Rarity. "Ah was in town deliverin' some apples to Twilight's and she mentioned you'd caught some itty bitty bug so—" The orange earth pony stopped in midstride, her green eyes growing round as saucers at the sight of her friend. Her mouth hung open briefly as she got over her initial shock, then the corners twitched upwards in a snicker.

"It's not funny, AJ," Rainbow Dash said sulkily.

Applejack let loose a roar of laughter, tipping her head back so hard she had to hold her hat to her hair. "Lansakes, Rainbow! Look at you! You got more spots on you than a dalmation!"

"They're called pegapox," Sweetie announced. "They're really bright, aren't they, Applejack?"

"They sure as sugar are, Sweetie." The country pony sidled closer to the bed, staring at Rainbow Dash and shaking her head slowly. "It's just too amazin'. Why, if Ah wasn't seein' it with mah own two eyes, Ah'd never have believed it...Sweetie Belle, you got any markers around here?"

"Markers? Yeah, I have some." Moving carefully so as not to upset the game, Sweetie raced to her desk and rummaged through a drawer until she found a purple marker. "Will this do?"

"Perfect."

The filly carried it to the orange pony in her mouth. "What do you need it for?"

Applejack uncapped the marker and grinned slyly. "Ah wanna try to connect the dots and see if Ah can find a hidden picture."

"What! You wouldn't!" Scowling, Rainbow scurried back into the pillows as her friend approached. "Applejack, you keep away from me!"

Applejack laughed again and passed the marker back to Sweetie Belle. "Just kiddin', Sugarcube. Now what in tarnation happened to you?"

Rarity and Rainbow Dash filled her in on the story, explaining the trip to Manehattan and the sick roommate and the sudden inability to fly that had left Rainbow Dash grounded in Ponyville.

"So Sweetie and I have taken her in to nurse her back to health," Rarity concluded. To Rainbow Dash she added, "They were out of broccoli at the market, darling, and won't have any more in for three days...but I got a wonderful bunch of watercress and some alfalfa so I'll whip you up something fabulous."

"But, Rarity, I don't even like wat—"

"You sure you're up to this, Rarity? If you want, I can take her off your hooves. We've got plenty o' room down at the farm...and we both know how difficult Rainbow can be when she sets her mind to it."

"Wh—hey! I'm sitting right here!"

"It's quite alright, Applejack," Rarity said, ignoring Rainbow Dash's outburst. "I'm perfectly capable of handling her myself, especially in this pathetically weakened state."

"Helloooo! You do realize I can still hear you two!"

"Well, of course you can hear us, Rainbow...we're only standin' two feet away!"

Rarity shook her head worriedly and leaned in close to Applejack. "The poor dear...I think the fever has made her delirious."

"I'm not deliri—oh, forget it!" Rainbow fell back against the pillows and crossed her arms angrily over her chest. "When did I go back to being a foal?"

Sweetie Belle climbed back onto the bed and took her place across the game board. "Aw, cheer up, Rainbow Dash...it's only going to be a couple of weeks." She held out the dice, smiling innocently. "And it's still your turn."

Applejack stayed long enough to help Rarity make dinner, then left with a promise to come back tomorrow with a few bottles of fresh apple juice. After winning the game and the two following it, Sweetie left the room to start on her homework. Rarity excused herself as well, saying she had some sewing to do while Rainbow Dash got some much needed rest.

Alone in the bedroom with a bowl of watercress and alfalfa soup cooling on the table beside her, Rainbow Dash kicked fitfully at the blankets and tried to get comfortable again. It was dark outside, for Celestia had lowered the sun, and she was tired, but she couldn't fall asleep. Every time she closed her eyes and started to drift off she would begin to cough or sneeze and her head would pound fretfully.

Moaning, she turned onto her side, then flopped onto her belly. A moment later, she spun to the other side and yelped as she came face to face with the beady, unblinking eyes of Bobo.

"This is not going to work...I don't care *how* cute they think you are...to me, you're just creepy." Picking up the offending bear, she slipped out of the bed and, swaying woozily with every step, crossed to the closet. The interior was a jumbled mess of toys, clothing, blankets, and books, completely at odds with the rest of the room.

With a sigh of relief, Rainbow Dash hid the bear beneath a pink bathrobe and a picture book, then crept back to bed. She yawned as soon as her head hit the pillow and snuggled deep into the soft blankets.

She was sound asleep when the bedroom door cracked open and emitted a shaft of light across the floor. Sweetie Belle tiptoed inside, but stopped when Rarity's voice filtered in from the hall.

"Don't disturb her now, Sweetie. She really needs her sleep."

"I won't," Sweetie called back in a whisper. "I just need to get my pajamas." She trotted to the closet and dug through its depths until she found a nightgown. As she was backing out, she spotted a small, green plush teddy peeking out from beneath her bathrobe.

"Bobo...how did you get in here?" Picking up the bear in her mouth, she brought it to the bed and carefully tucked it in beside the slumbering pegasus. "There. Now you stay put and take care of Rainbow Dash. She needs you right now." Flinging her nightgown over her shoulder, she stepped into the hall and shut the door behind her, plunging the room into darkness.

Unaware of the visit, Rainbow Dash slept on, watched over throughout the night by the bright, shiny eyes of Bobo.

Chapter 4

The day dawned crisp and cool, with pale grey cloud cover and a breeze that sent the fallen leaves dancing across the ground in a swirl of autumnal color. There was a hint of moisture in the air, but as far as Rarity knew, the Weather Patrol had no rain showers scheduled for today. Still, the chill in the air put her in the mood for something warm and comforting, so she bundled up in a scarf and hat, then slipped quietly out of the boutique.

The delightful aroma of cinnamon and apples already filled the air, drifting from Sugarcube Corner. The Cakes were both early risers so they could supply Ponyville with their delicious baked goods. With the abundant harvest from Sweet Apple Acres, it seemed apple muffins and cakes were on the menu.

"Hi Rarity!" A bright pink pony with wildly curly hair greeted the unicorn at the door. She carried a small basket covered with a blue checkered cloth. "This is funny running into you here because I was just on my way to your house! Don't you think that's funny? Of all the ponies to show up at the door...I'll bet you woke up thinking that some muffins would be really nice on a cold day like this and I woke up thinking that you and Rainbow Dash would probably want muffins on a cold day like this, especially poor Rainbow Dash...I know I sure like a good, hot muffin when I'm sick!"

Rarity blinked, startled by Pinkie Pie's sudden appearance, though she was not at all surprised by her rapid fire speech or the fact that she knew about Rainbow Dash's illness. Such odd insight was an everyday occurrence with the hyperactive pony.

"Oh, good morning, Pinkie...you're up early. Yes, I thought some warm muffins would be just the thing on a morning like this." She glanced over her shoulder at the grey sky and winced as a cold droplet of water struck her nose. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was going to rain." She shivered delicately, then smiled down at the basket. "Are they apple cinnamon?"

"Mm hmm! Applejack dropped off a big, huge, *giant* bushel of apples last night. We've got so many apples we don't know what to do with them all.

We're making cakes and fritters and turnovers and muffins...such yummy, yummy muffins! I know these are some of Rainbow Dash's favorites. Is it true Dashie is covered with lots of spots?"

"Unfortunately yes. She's very sick with pegapox...she can't even fly right now, so she's staying with me and Sweetie."

The pink pony's cheerful grin fell and she shook her head. "That's too bad." Perking up again, she continued, "Maybe she should come stay here with me! I'll take extra super duper looper care of her!"

Rarity chuckled uneasily. "Yes, well, Pinkie, that was mentioned actually...and Rainbow *did* say that you're one of her best friends...but right now what the poor dear needs is lots of peace and quiet and it will be hard for her to get that above a bakery." She paused to breathe deep of the delicious aroma of baking muffins. "Especially with such delightful treats to draw everypony here. The boutique is much quieter. But I'm sure she would love to have you visit..."

"Oh." Pinkie looked disappointed again.

"Besides," Rarity quickly went on, "I'm sure you'll be far too busy here since the Cakes absolutely depend on you."

"I guess..." Her bright blue eyes began to sparkle. "And I'll be busy planning too!"

"Planning?"

"Yes! Dashie's gonna need a party when she's all better. All that time cooped up in bed with nothing fun to do...ooh! I know! I can make her a fun package with games and music and toys—"

"That's a fine idea, darling! You can bring it by later...maybe with some more muffins?" The unicorn pulled the basket closer with a hoof, briefly closing her eyes with pleasure as apple-scented steam wafted up from beneath the cloth. "And I should really be getting back, dear. I'm sure Rainbow and Sweetie will be waking up any minute."

"Oki doki loki!" Cheered by the task before her, Pinkie Pie waved frenetically, then bounced back inside the bakery, the door slamming

behind her. With a sigh of relief, Rarity picked up the basket in her mouth and cantered back to the boutique just as the sky opened up and fat drops of rain spattered down.

"That's odd...I was *sure* there was no rain forecasted for today." She slipped inside and hung her scarf and hat by the door, shaking rain from her mane. "Brr...and it sure is cold."

She heard clattering coming from the kitchen and followed the noise down the hall. Sweetie Belle was awake and hard at work, the counters covered with a messy array of dishes and boxes and bottles. The filly was standing on a stool, struggling to reach a jar of cocoa powder on the top shelf. Her little horn glowed as she tried to levitate it down, but her magic powers were not fully developed and she could manage little more than an erratic wobble.

"Sweetie! What in the world...oh, don't move, darling!"

Her sudden appearance startled the little unicorn, who overbalanced on the chair and began swaying back and forth precariously. Rarity dropped the muffins and hurried across the room, catching her sister before she fell into an open bag of flour.

"Thanks, sis!"

"Darling, what are you doing in here? I've only been gone a few minutes."

"Oh this? I'm going to make breakfast for Rainbow Dash!"

"Breakfast?"

"Uh huh...pancakes! I was thinking about it last night...maybe this is what I need to do to get my cutie mark. Maybe I'm going to be a nurse pony and I'll help take care of everypony whenever they get sick or hurt!" She scrambled free of her sister's hooves and clambered back onto the stool. "Do you think Rainbow Dash would like some cocoa with her pancakes? I can't reach it and—what's that smell?"

"Smell?" Rarity was looking helplessly around her normally spotless kitchen, wondering how a few moments of absence had resulted in a mess that would take hours to clean up.

"Yeah, it smells really good."

"Oh, that...I got some apple muffins from Sugarcube Corner. It's so cold out I thought something freshly baked would warm us right up."

Sweetie Belle drooped visibly. "But what about my pancakes?"

"I didn't know you wanted to make pancakes, darling." Despite the mess, her sister's forlorn eyes nearly broke the generous unicorn's heart. "But I'll tell you what...I will help you make some cocoa to go with the muffins today, and we'll save the pancakes for tomorrow."

"Well..." Sweetie looked ready to argue, but the aroma of muffins won her over and she hopped from the stool. "Okay. Mmm! These smell so good! Did Pinkie Pie make them?"

"Of course. Why don't you get out a nice plate and some butter for them? I'll start the cocoa and we'll—"

"Aaiiih!"

Sweetie dropped the basket of muffins and looked towards the kitchen door in shocked horror. "That was Rainbow Dash! Oh no! She's dying!"

Rarity burst out laughing and quickly hugged her little sister. "No, Sweetie, she's probably just having a nightmare—fevers can do that sometimes. The poor thing—it must have been a bad one." Rarity quickly levitated the cocoa powder from the top shelf. "You stay here. I'll go check on her."

"Okay..." The filly didn't look entirely convinced, but nodded. "I'll get her some juice."

She hurried to this important task while Rarity trotted upstairs and into Sweetie's room.

"Rainbow, darling...are you alright? Did you have a night—" She stopped in her tracks raising an eyebrow. "Um, what are you doing?"

Rainbow Dash was fully awake and pressed against the wall, all four hooves squeezed together on one of the bedposts, her chest heaving erratically and her mane and tail had standing straight up. Her eyes were

wide and white, the magenta irises and pupils shrunk in her terror. Seeing Rarity, she pointed a trembling hoof down at the little chartreuse teddy bear lying on one of the pillows.

"H-h-how did *th-that* g-get there?" she stammered.

Rarity laughed for the second time in as many minutes. "I put it there yesterday afternoon, remember? Really, Rainbow...it's just a teddy bear."

The pegasus shook her head emphatically. "N-no...I moved it before I went to sleep last night. It wasn't...I didn't...I swear that I..." She swallowed hard, her mane dropping back against her neck. "Rarity, it's *staring* at me."

"Darling, you're being silly...it must be the fever." Rarity scooped up the bear and plunked it on Sweetie's desk. "Come down from there. Honestly, I don't know how you manage to perch like a bird on tiny things like fenceposts and branches and headboards, yet you still crash into barns and houses on a daily basis."

"Not a *daily* basis." Rainbow cast the bear a wary, suspicious glance, then crept down to the bed and slipped down between the covers once more. Rarity tucked them around her and held up the thermometer.

"Open up."

Rainbow opened her mouth without a struggle this time and even suffered the unicorn to feel her forehead with a hoof. Her fever was still high, making her mane cling damply to her face and neck.

"Are you feeling any better this morning? No? Well, I have something that will cheer you up...freshly baked apple cinnamon muffins! I got up early and went to Sugarcube Corner...so they're still warm and steaming from the oven. Sweetie's downstairs getting one ready for you with a cup of cocoa. I'd say that's just the start for such a cold, rainy day, wouldn't you?"

Rainbow Dash sat up with a start, looking confused. "Waiwy?"

"What was that?"

"Waiwing? Iz waiwing?"

"What in Equestria is a waiwing? Is that some kind of bird?"

Rainbow shook her head and pointed a hoof at the curtained window.
"Wain!"

"Oh!" Rarity laughed as she finally understood. "Rain! Why didn't you just say so? Yes, it's raining...it started when I was leaving Pinkie's." She opened the curtain to show her patient the heavy droplets sheeting hard against the glass. "Fall is definitely here. But I must have gotten the days wrong—I didn't think we were getting rain for a few more days."

"Nt spsd wain!"

"I'm sorry? Honestly, darling, I can't understand a word you're saying." Rarity closed the curtain and trotted back to the bed, plucking the thermometer from Rainbow's mouth with her magic and checking the reading.

"I *said*, it's not supposed to rain today!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, her voice squeaking and breaking into a fit of coughs. "Who've they got doing the weather? It's Cloudkicker, isn't it? He can *never* stick to the schedule! Remember that big storm we had at the beginning of summer? All his fault, because *he* decided to skip a shower that was meant for the farms." She slapped the blankets angrily with a hoof. "Ooh, when I get back on my wings I am going to give that pigeon-headed pony a piece of my mind! You know he's been trying to steal *my* weather duties out from under me, don't you?"

Rarity had listened to this tirade with wide eyes. When Rainbow Dash finally paused for a breath, she interjected with a carefully straight face, "Well, I hardly think an unprecedented and *cold* storm like this is going to win him any votes to oust you, darling. Sit forward please."

The flustered pegasus huffed but leaned forward so Rarity could plump her pillows. The motion made her cough violently, but she continued to complain about the unscheduled storm.

"This is *all* going to fall back on me, you know. I'm gonna get better and then I'll have to work my feathers off just getting the weather back to normal. The mayor will probably even blame me when he decides to make it snow tomorrow or some—"

"Lie back." Rarity didn't wait for her to obey, but shoved her rather brusquely into the pillows and pulled the covers up to her chin. "Comfy?" She leaned over the pegasus until their noses were almost touching, staring sternly into her eyes until Rainbow Dash meekly nodded just to escape the glare. "Good. And don't worry so much about the weather—a little rain is expected in autumn. I'm sure you can skip a storm next week or something and make up for—"

An incredibly loud crash from downstairs made them both jump in fright. A moment later, a tiny voice drifted up.

"Uh oh."

"That doesn't sound good."

Rarity groaned, hanging her head in despair. "That filly..." With a fierce glance at Rainbow and an order to remain in bed no matter what the vicious teddy bear did, she raced downstairs to the kitchen.

Suddenly reminded of Bobo's presence, Rainbow leaned back in her elbows and watched the teddy bear closely. It stared beadily back, the sewn on grin seeming to sneer at her. She blew a snorting breath out her nose.

"I'm watching you," she said, then yipped in fright when a strong gust of window shook the boutique and the bear toppled forward, tumbling off the desk to land on the floor. Rainbow Dash stretched her neck out, straining to keep it in view while staying safely under the covers. She fully expected the bear to leap over the edge of the bed at any second, so when Sweetie Belle pushed the door open and whispered good morning, she screamed and jumped backwards, falling off the mattress in a tangle of hooves, blankets, and feathers.

"Oh no! Are you alright! I didn't mean to scare you!" The little unicorn bounded around her bed to help, but stopped when she saw Rainbow Dash sprawled upside down on the floor, her hind legs folded over her head so her tail swished in her eyes. Her spotted wings were flapping uselessly as she tried to unwrap herself from the blanket and muttered under her breath. Sweetie's lip twitched and she began to laugh helplessly.

"What was *that* for? I only said 'good morning'." She watched Rainbow Dash struggle for a moment longer, then shook her head pityingly. "Hold on...you're just making it worse."

With the filly's help, Rainbow managed to get free of the binding folds of blanket and fell over onto her side. With a groan, she sat up and rubbed her aching head, then hopped back into the bed.

"Do pegapox make you fall off things too?" Sweetie wanted to know. With an effort, she pulled the blankets back onto the mattress. "Because that was just weird."

"No." Rainbow petulantly smoothed the blanket and leaned back against the pillows. "It was the bear."

"The be—oh!" Sweetie bounced to the floor and collected the fallen Bobo, placing him back on the bed. "He must have fallen off. You should keep him close, Rainbow Dash. He'll take good care of you. He's one of my favorites."

Rainbow Dash stared at the bear now sitting only inches from her hoof and tried to think of a way to tell Sweetie that it was evil without hurting the filly's feelings. But there was no denying the fondness in the unicorn's green eyes as she looked at the bear and even Rainbow Dash had enough tact to swallow her words. Instead, she asked, "What was that crash down there?"

Sweetie ducked her head ruefully. "Oh, you heard that, huh?"

"Princess Celestia probably heard it in Canterlot. Did you knock down a wall or something?" She tipped her head to one side with a smile. "I've done that before."

"No...I was getting you some juice and, well, I kinda spilled some flour...and the juice...and a brand new jar of cherries. But it's weird...I thought Rarity was gonna yell at me when she came downstairs, but her eye only started twitching a little and then she said that you were lonely up here and you wanted me to keep you company."

"Oh, uh...ye—" Rainbow Dash burst into a fit of coughing, doubling up on the bed from the sheer force of them.

"Ouch. That sounds bad," Sweetie observed. "And you've got more spots than before... but don't feel bad," she added quickly when Rainbow Dash glanced at her from under her eyelashes. "They're really pretty. At least the spots aren't brown or a really ugly green. Rarity makes clothes with pink polka dots all the time." Sweetie sat down on the floor, looking thoughtful. "So, what do you wanna do? You just woke up, so you're not sleepy anymore, right? We could play a game or color or maybe I could put on a puppet show for you or..."

"Uh, Sweetie..." The pegasus cleared her sore throat with a small whimper. "You know you don't have to hang out with me all day, don't you? It's Saturday. Don't you usually play with Apple Bloom and Scootaloo all weekend?"

"I don't mind! I'm gonna go over to Apple Bloom's later do so some homework, but it's too wet and cold to play outside."

"Homework? On a Saturday?"

"We have to do a four page report." Sweetie Belle stuck out her tongue in disgust. "How *boring* is that? We get to work together, but we have to turn it in on Monday. We're gonna meet at Sweet Apple Acres so Applejack can tell us what farmer ponies do for irrigation."

"Irrigation? Why didn't you say so before? I can tell you *all* about irrigation."

"You can? Really?"

Rainbow Dash crossed her arms over her chest and fixed the filly with a withering look. "*Duh*, weather ponies *have* to know about irrigation...we're the ones who bring the weather to the farms. It's important for us to know where to drop the rain so the ditches will channel it properly to the fields and orchards."

"Ooh! Hold on!" Sweetie raced from the room to get her school saddlebags. When she returned, she plopped herself on the bed, notebook on the mattress before her, pencil held ready in her mouth. "Okay...how does a weather pony know where to send the rain?"

Rainbow Dash was still explaining the long standing relationship between Ponyville's weather patrol and the farm ponies when Rarity arrived with a

tray of muffins, juice, and steaming cocoa. The white unicorn looked slightly frazzled and there was still a dusting of flour in her purple hair, but she managed to smile.

"And what are you two discussing so seriously up here?" she asked.

"Rarity...you were wrong! Rainbow Dash *does* know all about irrigation! Farm ponies like Applejack *need* the weather ponies to make sure the rain goes to the right places. I can't wait to show all this to Apple Bloom and Scootaloo—I'll bet no one else in class is gonna write their paper from the weather si—ooh, those muffins smell good!"

While the filly helped herself to breakfast, Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow at her friend. "What did she mean, you were wrong?"

"Wrong? Oh, it's nothing. Here, I brought you some juice too and some cough medicine." She poured a generous dollop of thick, green fluid onto a spoon. "That cough of yours is getting worse." Lifting the spoon with her magic, she expertly popped it into Rainbow Dash's mouth before the pegasus could protest.

Unprepared for the sudden, bitter taste, Rainbow Dash gagged and sputtered, then grabbed frantically for her glass of juice. Draining it in a single gulp, she made a face at Rarity.

"Yuck! A little warning next time?" She licked her lips and grimaced into the empty glass. "You'd think ponies would have figured out a way to make medicine taste good by now," she muttered.

"I agree...but hopefully this will keep you from coughing so much. Now, have a muffin and some cocoa—even if you don't feel like eating, you need to keep up your strength." She gave Rainbow an apple muffin, watched her take a bite, then added almost as an afterthought, "Oh, by the way, Pinkie Pie will probably be stopping by later today with a...a care basket for you. And she's already planning your party for when you're better."

Rainbow started to protest, but the delicious muffin buoyed her spirits. She shrugged resignedly and leaned over to sip her cocoa. "She's Pinkie Pie. It was bound to happen. She can throw me a hundred parties if they all have muffins like this."

"Well, *that's* the spirit! Now, I have an order I have to work on today, Rainbow, but I'm going to be right downstairs, so you yell or send your 'nurse' if you need me." She gestured to Sweetie Belle, who beamed at her with a cocoa mustache coloring the tip of her nose.

The little 'nurse' dutifully kept Rainbow company for the next hour, working on her essay and then playing another game of Bubble Jump. Sweetie was in the process of winning, again, when a cheerful voice exclaimed, "I *love* that game!"

Pinkie Pie suddenly appeared on the bed, a bulging basket in her mouth.

"Hey, Dashie! Wow, look at you! If you get anymore spots, they're gonna connect and you'll look like me! Ooh! We'll be twins! And I *love* the pjs! Is it true you can't fly right now because you're all spotty? I'll bet you hate not being able to fly. I would hate not being able to fly too...well, I would if I had wings. Did you like the muffins? I love muffins on a cold day like today? It is really cold, isn't it? I didn't think it was supposed to rain today, but I had to walk all the way here in the rain, so I guess it was supposed to rain today, but it was alright because I had muffins for breakfast so I was nice and warm."

She finally paused for breath, smiling brightly. Sweetie Belle and Rainbow Dash both stared, then exchanged glances.

"Whoa," Sweetie murmured. "How does she do that without passing out?"

Rainbow shrugged. She had no idea.

"I brought you some goodies so you won't be bored since you have to stay in bed for so long." She pushed the basket closer to Rainbow Dash.

"There's books, and games, and stuff to color—I *love* to color when I don't feel well—and some yummy snacks, and—"

"*Aaahh!*"

Rainbow had reached curiously into the basket, but jerked backwards, frantically shaking her hoof in an effort to dislodge the tiny, purple-eyed alligator that had clamped onto her.

"Oh, *there* you are, Gummy! I was looking for you everywhere!"

Laughing, Pinkie tugged the little reptile from Rainbow's leg. Gummy snapped toothlessly onto her mane and hung there, blinking rapidly. "I guess he wanted to come and say get well to you, Dashie."

"Gee...uh, thanks, Gummy."

"Ooh! Look at all this stuff!" Sweetie Belle examined the contents of the basket and laid them out, piece by piece, on the bed. There were coloring books and crayons, card games, a packet of cookies, a yoyo, and several books bearing the stamp of the Ponyville Library. The cover of one had an elaborate picture of a pony in armor, wielding a long sword and battling a legion of goblin-like creatures.

"I took those out a few days ago from the library and I was supposed to return them, but then I heard you were sick and I got to thinking that you might like them, especially since you can't really do much when you're sick but lie in bed and I figured Twilight wouldn't mind if I lent them to you first and brought them back a little late."

"Cool! Thanks!" Contrary to belief, Rainbow Dash actually liked reading, but between her flight practice sessions, Weather Patrol chores, and her general dislike of sitting still for any extended period of time, she couldn't find much time to curl up with a book. Now, with three weeks of enforced stillness to look forward to, she could probably get through half the library.

"That looks good!" Sweetie said.

"It is!" Pinkie Pie assured her. She stood on her hind legs and mimed swinging a sword through the air, then batted her eyes and fell into a phony swoon. "It's about this really handsome prince who has to go on a long and dangerous journey to save the pony he loves, and along the way he meets all these really strange friends and fights these really big meanie monsters. But I'm not gonna tell you anymore because then it'll ruin the surprise at the end and it's a really, *really* good one. Oh! And one more thing...check this out, Rainbow Dash. You're going to *love* this!"

Pinkie dove head first into the basket and emerged with the wooden handle of a bronze bell in her mouth. She shook her head from side to side and a loud, melodious note chimed out.

"Nice...what's it for?"

"To ring when you need somepony to come and help you. You know, what if Rarity's all the way downstairs and you really, really need her help but your throat hurts or you're coughing too much to call her? Then you can just ring this and she'll know to come!"

"Oh! Well...that can be useful I guess."

"Useful and fun!" Pinkie shook her head back and forth rapidly, making the bell sing out until Rainbow winced and Sweetie covered her ears. When the pink pony finally stopped, her eyes shook briefly in her skull and she had to blink to straighten them again. Laughing, she placed the bell on Sweetie's nightstand, within easy reach of Rainbow Dash.

"Did I hear something ringing in here?" Rarity suddenly appeared in the doorway with Twilight Sparkle at her side. The purple unicorn was wearing a heavy set of saddlebags and had a troubled look on her face that turned to surprise when she saw Pinkie Pie in the room.

"Oh, hey Pinkie."

"Hi Twilight! See, Rainbow Dash? I *told* you it would work. Did you come to give Dashie a care package too? What's in yours? Books, I'll bet. I brought Dashie those books I took from the library—I hope you don't mind."

"Huh? Oh, uh, no...no, that's alright." Twilight glanced at the floor and scuffed a hoof on the rug. "Um..."

"That's not a good look," Rainbow Dash remarked, coughing into her hoof.

"Twilight's had news from Canterlot," Rarity said. She also looked subdued.

"What news?"

"It seems the pegapox has spread over Manehattan. We don't know if your dorm mate was the first to have it or if she caught it from some other pegasus, but over half of the city's winged ponies are grounded with spots. There are even a few cases reported now from Fillydelphia. It's..." Twilight paused and fidgeted again. "It's pretty bad, Rainbow. With so many pegasi down, the princess is worried that the rest won't be able to manage the weather properly. She's called out an Equestria wide quarantine for all pegasi showing symptoms so no other ponies will get sick."

"Quarantine!" Pinkie repeated, looking shocked.

"All ill pegasi in Manehattan and Fillydelphia are ordered to present themselves at special infirmaries so they can be cared for by unicorns or earth ponies until they get better. And, uh, Princess Celestia wanted to know if we'd had any cases here in Ponyville and—"

"You didn't tell her about me, did you?" Rainbow Dash was horrified and began to sink down beneath the covers. "I have to be quarantined? Is she gonna make me go back to Manehattan?" She was now buried beneath the blanket up to her nose, but her eyes were wide and upset. "I don't want to leave—I feel awful. And do you have any idea how long it will take to get to Manehattan when I can't fly?"

"Does Rainbow Dash really have to leave, Twilight?" Pinkie asked. She looked ready to cry. "Because she doesn't have any friends in Manehattan to take care of her and make sure she gets plenty of rest and lots of juice and reads really good books so she won't be bored and—"

"It's alright, Pinkie!" Twilight interrupted. "Rainbow's not going anywhere."

"She's not?"

"I'm not?" Rainbow had sunk even further under the blanket so only her magenta eyes, ears, and forelock were visible. Now she crept out again, staring at Twilight suspiciously. "So...you didn't tell the princess I have pegapox?"

"Of course I did! I'm her most trusted student." When Rainbow, Pinkie Pie, Sweetie Belle and Rarity gaped at her, she added, "But it's alright. Rainbow has the only case of pegapox in Ponyville and we were very lucky that she didn't meet up with any other pegasi when she got back from the city. Princess Celestia said she'd be better off staying here—there's less of a chance that she'll infect anypony. We just have to make sure she doesn't have contact with any pegasi. So, Rainbow, you're effectively under quarantine like all the others, but your quarantine is here in the Carousel Boutique."

"Oh, well that's not so bad!" Sweetie Belle piped up. "She was staying here anyway. We can take *much* better care of her than some stranger in an infirmary." The little unicorn crossed the mattress to lean against the pillows

beside Rainbow Dash and gave the pegasus a hug. Grinning at Twilight, she announced, "I think this could even help me get my cutie mark! Maybe I'll be a nurse pony!"

Twilight smiled at the filly. She was always trying to gently guide Sweetie Belle and her friends in their search for their cutie marks. "Well, it looks like you're in good hooves, Rainbow. I'll write Princess Celestia and let her know. And in the meantime, I was reading through the book on herbal remedies and I whipped up a couple of tonics, a tincture or two, and even an herbal bath that might make you feel better." She lifted a small, dark green bottle from her saddlebags and unstopped it. Instantly, an incredibly sour, putrid odor filled the room. Rarity gasped, turning slightly green, while Rainbow and Sweetie Belle both hid their noses under the blankets.

"Twilight! What is *in* that stuff!" Pinkie Pie crept closer to the unicorn and leaned over to sniff the green fumes leaching from the bottle. She stiffened, her pink hair standing straight up, then toppled off the bed as her eyes rolled back in her head. A second later, she bounced up again and stuck out her tongue. "Yuck! You want Rainbow Dash to *bathe* in that stuff? She'll smell like a skunk...oh, maybe it'll make her look like a skunk too. Could you see Dashie with a black coat and white mane, though I guess she'd have a black coat covered with pink spots so she wouldn't look *completely* like a skunk but..."

"Actually, that's one of the tonics. She doesn't bathe in it...she has to drink it."

"What!" Rainbow pulled the blanket from her nose and stared at Twilight, outraged. "No way! Are you crazy!"

Ignoring her, Twilight stoppered the tonic, then removed a large paper envelope from her bags and opened it. "*This* is the herbal bathe," she said, revealing a mixture of salt crystals, pink powder, and tiny leaves. A new smell filled the room, but this one was immensely wonderful, sweet and herbal and flowery all at once. "You just shake about a cupful of this into a hot bathe and soak until the water cools. It should help with your achiness."

"And...that?" Rarity pointed a hoof at the tonic bottle.

"That one is for her sneezes. And I have one here to help lower your fever and...oh, *this* one is neat." She lifted out a small clay jar and showed them a creamy salve that had a strong, almost minty smell that wasn't unpleasant. Scooping out a dollop, she smeared it on Rainbow's throat before the pegasus could stop her. The blue pony's nostrils were immediately filled with the sharp smell and she winced, but as she breathed in she noticed that the annoying tickle she'd had in the back of her throat and the urge to cough had diminished. She took another deep breath and let it out in a snort of surprise.

"Whoa! That's even better than Rarity's cough syrup."

"Really? Oh, good, because I wasn't sure I was making it right and there was a slight chance that it wouldn't stop your cough so much as set you on fire, but it looks like..." Twilight broke off with a nervous giggle when the other ponies all stared at her. "Well, anyway, these will make you feel a little better even if they can't make the pegapox go away completely. I'm going to head home to write Princess Celestia and let her know how you're doing." She winked at Sweetie Belle. "And that you have a great nurse taking care of you here in Ponyville. Let me know if you want me to make any more of these." She quickly emptied the contents of her saddlebags onto the nightstand and pointed out the hastily written labels that described what each one did.

"Thanks, Twilight. And tell the princess thanks too...you know, for not making me go back to Manehattan."

"I will. Feel better, Rainbow. You'll be good as new before you know it."

"Ooh, Twilight, wait up. I'll come with you. I need to take out some more books to read while I'm baking muffins." Pinkie Pie bounced after the unicorn as she left the room and they could hear her babbling away all the way down the stairs. "What do you think is a good baking book? Something about volcanoes? Ooh, or how about a desert?"

"Well, that was nice of her," Sweetie Belle spoke up when Pinkie's voice had finally faded away. She hopped over Rainbow to inspect the array of bottles. "I wonder what's in all of these?"

"It's probably better if we didn't know," Rarity said dryly.

"Yeah, I agree," Rainbow drawled. "In fact...um, dump that one down the sink for me, would you?"

"What?" Sweetie turned to scowl at the pegasus. "You can't do that! Twilight made it for you so you would feel better."

"If it's a choice between sneezing and drinking that...stuff...I'll sneeze my nose off. There's no way I'm drinking that...whatever it is."

"But it's *medicine*. Medicine is good for you."

"Sweetie, don't badger her. If you want to know the truth, I probably wouldn't take it if it was me." Rarity lifted the bottle with her horn, her lip curling in disgust. "I don't even think I could take opening this again."

"But, Rarity! How am I supposed to become a nurse pony if I can't even get my patient to take her medicine?"

Rainbow Dash narrowed her eyes at the filly. "Tell you what, squirt, I'll take some if *you* take some."

"I...um..." Sweetie Belle glanced at the bottle, then back at the ill pegasus. "Uh...okay. I guess sneezes aren't so bad." A clock in the hallway started to chime and she gasped. "I have to go over to Apple Bloom's and work on my report." She grabbed her notebook and pencils, shoving them into her saddlebags. "Thanks for your help, Rainbow Dash! You get some sleep and drink lots of juice and I'll read you our report when I get home!"

The filly skipped out of the room and Rarity waited for the sound of the front door slamming before smiling at Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow, thank you for being so nice to her. I know this can't be easy for you—being sick, being grounded, and now being quarantined—and Sweetie can be a little...enthusiastic."

"It's fine. She's pretty cool." Rainbow snuggled down in the bed and yawned suddenly. "Though she's freaky with that Bubble Jump game...I think she cheats, but I can't figure out how."

"It's uncanny, isn't it? I haven't won a single game against her yet." Seeing that Rainbow Dash was getting drowsy, the white unicorn excused herself

so her friend could get some sleep and went to her own room to work on the sewing order and pajamas she had started the night before. With Sweetie out of the house and Rainbow Dash sleeping, she had the peaceful atmosphere she preferred for her work. Even when Sweetie returned from Apple Bloom's several hours later, she volunteered to bring juice and soup up to their guest, leaving Rarity to complete her work. The afternoon passed so smoothly that Rarity was startled to look up from her sewing machine and see that the sun had set.

Realizing she hadn't heard from her sister or her friend in hours, Rarity trotted upstairs to Sweetie's room, but froze in the doorway at what she saw.

The nightstand was still cluttered with Twilight's remedies and empty juice glasses, but now held a pair of handmade Get Well cards from the other two Cutie Mark Crusaders and Sweetie's report. Rainbow was curled under the blankets, her head resting on the pillows with her mane spread out in a messy fan. Sweetie Belle, a book tented open on her belly, was cuddled up beside her. Both ponies were sound asleep.

Charmed by the scene, Rarity crept into the room, carefully draped the blanket over her sister, and kissed her on the forehead. "Goodnight, darling," she whispered, placing the book on the nightstand. "Keep this up and you'll have that cutie mark in no time."

Chapter 5

The bathroom was filling with steam as hot water gushed into the gilt-edged tub. Humming brightly to herself, Rarity carefully arranged a pile of thick, fluffy, pink towels on the white wicker hamper. When the pile was secure, she turned off the water, then opened the herbal packet Twilight had given them and added it to the tub. The powder and small leaves immediately sank into the bath, tinting the water a delicate mauve and lending the steam a delicately sweet and odd scent of flowers and cotton candy. Rarity breathed in deeply, then followed the groans of agony down the hall to Sweetie's room.

Rainbow Dash was draped across the bed, her front hooves and head hanging over the edge, the rest of her tangled up in a cocoon of blankets. Her bedraggled mane covered her spotted face, hanging in limp tangles over her pain-filled eyes. As Rarity watched, she struggled upwards, flopping sideways onto the pillows with a moan. She only managed to lie still for a few seconds before she turned again, facing the footboard with her forelegs stretched before her and her rump and tail sticking up in the air.

"Still achy?" Rarity asked sympathetically.

"This is awful! I've *never* felt this bad before—and I've flown face first into mountains! I can't get comfortable no matter what I do! My legs ache, my head and back ache, my wings ache...even my ears ache!" She changed position again, squeezing her eyes shut, and ended up on her back with her four hooves flailing above her. "When will it stop!" she wailed.

"It's only been five days, darling. These things take time. But don't fret...I have *just* the thing for you. A nice, soothing bubble bath!"

Rainbow lifted one of the pillows and pressed it over her face, but the unicorn heard a muffled, "No way. I can't move."

"Oh, but darling, it's *sure* to make you feel better. We'll get you a new pair of pajamas and your mane and coat will be nice and clean..." Rarity waited, smiling, but Rainbow Dash didn't move. For a moment, she feared

the sick pony had fallen asleep again, but when she tapped her friend on the shoulder, Rainbow spun over and tried to escape by burrowing into the blankets.

"Oh no you don't!" Rarity caught the rainbow tail in her teeth before it could disappear and unceremoniously hauled her friend backwards and onto the floor. Rainbow landed in a graceless heap, looking momentarily dazed, then groaned in pain.

"Ow, Rarity...what was *that* for?" She tried to clamber back onto the bed, but Rarity swerved to block her. "Leave me alone...I just want to go to sleep."

"You *need* this bath, Rainbow Dash. You're running a fever and you've been all sweaty. I've already drawn the water and added Twilight's herbal mixture, so you can have a long, soothing soak and it will give me a chance to tidy up in here and freshen your bedding. Come along now."

Her horn suddenly glowed, surrounding Rainbow Dash in a bubble of shimmering color. Realizing what Rarity was doing, Rainbow gasped and tried to bolt, but was soon encased in the bubble and lifted into the air. Her hooves galloped frantically, unable to come in contact with the floor.

"Hey! Put me down!"

Rarity grimaced as she backed out of the room, dragging the hovering pony in a sphere of bluish light behind her. She wasn't used to using her telekinesis on more than a pair of scissors or a few bolts of cloth and the struggling young pegasus was almost too much for her.

"Hold still, Rainbow Dash!" she said through gritted teeth. "You wouldn't want me to drop you, would you?"

"Yes! Put. Me. Down!"

Rarity finally did, plopping her indignant friend on the fluffy bathmat, then dragging the pajama top over her head before she could right herself. Sitting on her haunches, Rainbow Dash glowered at the unicorn from beneath a fringe of limp mane.

"Not cool, Rarity," she protested. "No levitating me without my consent!"

"Oh, quit complaining. You will feel so much better after this, I promise you. Come on, up you go." She shoved Rainbow Dash with her forehead, nudging her unrelentingly to her hooves. Still scowling, the blue pony wriggled out of the pajama pants and grudgingly plopped into the water.

"Yow!" she screamed, immediately shooting back out and landing on the curved rim of the tub. She frantically shook each of her hooves in turn, mincing along her perch as steaming water streamed down her legs. "Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"Too hot, darling?" Rarity asked, watching her.

"Oh, not at all..." Rainbow said, flicking water off her tail and wincing. "If you're trying to make *pegasus soup*!"

Rarity laughed. "Rainbow Dash, now you're just being silly. Look, it's perfectly fine. Nice and..." She dipped her horn into the water and jumped back with a squeal. "Ouch! Oh...oh, my...I guess that is a tad on the warm side. Let me fix that for you."

She added cool water until the temperature was no longer scalding and watched as Rainbow Dash tentatively tested it with a hoof before stepping down into the tub. The water covered the pegasus to the neck when she folded her legs beneath her and she sighed as the heat leached into her aching limbs.

"There! Now that's better, isn't it?" Rarity folded a small hand towel and draped it over the edge of the tub, patting it invitingly with a hoof. "I told you a good bath would work wonders for you."

"Hmmm," Rainbow murmured, resting her chin on the towel and closing her eyes. "Not so bad, I guess."

"Good. Hold still then and keep your eyes closed. This'll just take a minute and then you can relax." Rarity lifted a cup of water from the tub and tipped it over her friend's head, letting the warm liquid drench Rainbow's neck and mane. Picking up a bottle of shampoo next, she lathered the multi-colored locks, then rinsed them thoroughly.

"This is my favorite shampoo—it'll make your mane and coat so soft and shiny." She *tsked* sadly. "A pity you won't really get to enjoy it. With all

these beautiful colors in your mane and tail..." Her blue eyes lit up suddenly. "Idea!" Spinning about, she started rooting through the drawers of her vanity, pulling out brushes, combs, and hair ribbons.

Rainbow Dash was relishing the heat of the water and the wonderful relief of all her achiness being soaked away when a slight tugging on her mane wrenched her from a sleepy doze. She forced one eye open and looked up at the smiling white unicorn.

"Rare, what are you doing?"

"Nothing...just getting all this wet hair out of your face."

"Oh, okay." The pegasus let her eye drift closed. Relaxing fully, she began to hum to herself, a quiet little tune that surprised Rarity. Normally Rainbow preferred rock music and anything with an energetic beat, but this was a sweet and lilting melody like a lullaby.

"Rainbow, that's really pretty. That's not a Stratosphere song, is it?" she asked, naming the group Rainbow currently favored.

"Hmm?" Rainbow tilted her head and opened her eyes halfway. "Stratos—no...it's nothing...just something my mom used to sing when I was a filly and I got hurt or sick."

"Really? It's so nice. What are the words?"

Rainbow opened her mouth to reply, then cocked her head to the other side, frowning. "You know what? I don't remember. I used to know them by heart, but...wow...I haven't thought of this song in years. It was...there was something about stars, I think, and getting older. Oh, I don't know!" She shook her head, the motion pulling her mane from Rarity's gentle magic. A strand of red and orange hair fell into her face, neatly coiled and wrapped in a curling ribbon. Her eyes crossed to bring it into focus.

"Uh, Rarity...?"

The unicorn giggled guiltily. "Okay—I'm styling your hair! But give it a try, Rainbow. It'll look wonderful, I promise—and even if you don't like it, it's not like you could show it off around Ponyville anytime soon. We can always change it back." Rarity put both hooves on Rainbow's cheeks, tilting her

head up and staring pleadingly into her eyes. At the same time, she pooched out her lower lip, making it tremble. "Please?"

For a long moment, Rainbow toyed with the idea of refusing—she *liked* her mane the way it was and all she really wanted to do was soak in the warm water and maybe take a nap.

Then Rarity started prancing in place, the clacking of her hooves on tiles making Rainbow's head throb.

"Please, please, please, please, please! I have such an *amazing* idea for you and I *really* think you'll like it and I hardly ever get a chance to give you a makeover!"

"Okay. Okay!" Rainbow's voice was muffled by Rarity pushing her cheeks together. As soon as she agreed, the unicorn squealed happily and abruptly released her. Rainbow's head dropped back to the edge of the tub, clipping her chin on the porcelain.

"Ow!"

"What was that?" Rarity had already turned away to rummage through her drawers for more combs and curlers. She glanced over her shoulder to see Rainbow Dash wincing and rubbing her sore chin. "Oh, do be more careful, Rainbow Dash. The tub is slippery."

"Me? Are you serious?" Rarity stared at her, uncomprehending, and Rainbow sighed. "Whatever." She sloshed around in the tub until she was comfortable again, sighing contentedly as Rarity started styling her mane.

"This will be absolutely adorable," the unicorn crooned, separating strands of yellow and orange mane and rolling them into curlers. "Though it could be even better if you'd let me give it just the tiniest bit of a tr—"

"Not a chance."

"Fine. Well, it will still look lovely...it won't be as curly as mine, of course. We're going for something softer and playful—almost like Sweetie's, but a little more mature and hip."

Rainbow had started humming again, but stopped at the mention of the filly. When Rainbow hadn't been sleeping, Sweetie Belle had been her constant nurse and companion throughout the weekend, and had raced home each day after school since to help Rarity care for her. At first Rainbow had worried that the little unicorn would get annoying, but then found she really enjoyed her company...especially when Sweetie read the library books out loud and tried to give different voices to each of the characters.

"How much longer is Sweetie gonna be staying with you?"

"Another whole month, can you believe it? We were all so surprised when Mom and Dad won that sweepstakes in the Equestria Weekly."

"A three month, all expenses paid tour around Equestria," Rainbow said dreamily. "I must have sent in fifty entries and I didn't win so much as a free subscription." She snorted. "But it's given you a good chance to spend time with Sweetie, hasn't it? She's really cool."

"Er, yes, she is...cool. It was a bit of a trial at first, having her here *all* the time, but we've gotten used to each other. I must say that I'll be sad to see her go when Mom and Dad get back." Rarity finished with the last few curlers, then settled a shower cap over Rainbow's mane. "There! We'll just let that sit for awhile. Are you feeling better now? The water still warm enough? Good. I'm going to freshen up your bed, so you call if you need me."

There was no response from the blue pony—she had finally dozed off. Leaving the door open, Rarity went to Sweetie's room and busied herself stripping the blankets and linens from the bed and bundling them into a ball for washing. Using her magic, she neatly spread new sheets and a plush comforter, smoothing out all the wrinkles before shaking the pillows out of their shams to change them. To her surprise, a little green teddy bear fell out of one of the pillowcases, no doubt hidden there by Rainbow Dash. Shaking her head and laughing to herself, Rarity picked up the toy and placed it in the nightstand drawer.

When she finished with that, she turned her attention to the nightstand itself, lifting crumpled tissues into the waste basket, arranging the pile of library books, and straightening the small collection of Get Well cards Rainbow had received in the last week. There was one from each of her

friends, one from Spike, another from Apple Bloom, and five from Scootaloo. The orange pegasus filly had made one for each day Rainbow had been ill and had given them to Sweetie Belle to deliver. She had been determined to bring them over herself at first, and Rarity had been forced to gently but firmly turn her away. She hadn't even been discouraged by the sign the mayor had hung on the boutique door which read Quarantined Pegasus Within.

When the burly colt had shown up on Sunday evening with the hand painted plaque, Rarity had vehemently complained, sure that it would affect her business by scaring away potential customers. The mayor had insisted, however—she didn't want any of Ponyville's pegasi to forget about Rainbow Dash's presence in the boutique and possibly spread the pegapox. Rarity even had to get her mail from the post office since the mail mare was refusing to deliver it. It all seemed a little unfair to Rarity, but she was willing to put up with it for Rainbow Dash's sake.

When the room was tidy again, she checked in on Rainbow Dash—still dozing—and trotted downstairs to fix dinner. A frigid breeze made her shiver as she entered the kitchen and she hurried to the window she had left open earlier, slamming it shut against the cold. Glancing outside, she saw a small, yellow shape rapidly filling the sky with roiling grey clouds and realized they were in for another unplanned rainstorm.

"Rainbow won't be happy about that," she murmured, resigning herself to hearing the pegasus complain about the mismanaged weather all evening. "Oh well. The best thing for cold weather is a nice, hot soup!" Taking out a bunch of freshly purchased carrots, she began cutting them into thin, perfect circles, absently humming Rainbow's little tune.

The creamy carrot puree was simmering on the stove and a tray of cheese biscuits were browning nicely in the oven when Sweetie Belle burst through the door with a blast of cold wind, rain, and blowing leaves.

"*Brr!* It sure is cold out there!" she squeaked, turning and struggling to shove the door closed while the wind blasted against it. When the latch finally clicked shut, she spread her hooves and shook vigorously, her normally curly hair puffing out in a large, frizzy pouf. "Isn't it only supposed to be this cold in *winter*?"

Rarity brought her sister a towel and spent a moment drying the filly's rain-dampened coat.

"Seems the temporary weather pony still hasn't gotten the hang of the schedule. Just another reason Ponyville will be happy when Rainbow's pegapox finally go away."

"How is she feeling?"

"Still pretty lousy, but I made her some soup and she's been relaxing in a hot bath. She's probably ready to go back to bed though." Rarity winked at Sweetie Belle. "And I think she could use something to cheer her up, so what do you say we unveil the surprise pajamas?"

"Yeah!" Sweetie exclaimed, shaking off the towel and following Rarity to her Inspiration Room. "And we should let her wear them too!"

"Y-yes." Rarity laughed weakly and lifted the pajamas she had made for Rainbow Dash off the mannequin. She was really quite pleased with the way they had turned out and very excited to present them to her friend.

Rainbow Dash lifted her head from the towel when they entered the bathroom.

"Water's getting cold," she murmured drowsily, and yawned. "Wow, did I fall asleep? How long have I been in here? I remember talking about your parents and their trip...and then nothing after that."

"You've been out for a little more than an hour. I'd say it's time to get you back into bed. It's all clean and ready for you."

"Yes! Bed...that sounds awesome right now—oh, hey, Sweetie Belle."

"Hi! Are you feeling any better?" Sweetie put her front hooves on the edge of the tub as Rainbow Dash shakily rose to her feet. The little unicorn scrutinized her wet coat closely and gave a delighted gasp, then frowned and sighed. "Aww, for a second there I thought your spots were getting darker, but it was just the water."

"It'll happen eventually," Rarity told her. "We just have to be patient." She helped Rainbow out of the tub and wrapped her in a huge towel. The blue pony's teeth began to chatter as soon as the cooler air struck her wet coat.

"Ooh, it's cold!" she exclaimed, unconsciously repeating what both Rarity and Sweetie had said earlier. "Wait...it's not supposed to be so cold yet. *What* is that feather-brain doing to my weather!"

"Making it rain again," Sweetie announced.

"*Again?* Is he *crazy!* He's going to bring the leaves down too early and cause floods and...and..."

"Calm down, Rainbow. There's really nothing you can do about it now." Rarity carefully folded the wet towel, then held out the pajamas and smiled excitedly. "I have a surprise for you! Look! Brand new pajamas! Aren't they *darling?* I made them just for you. They're going to look smashing with your new hair style and—"

"You let Rarity style your hair?" Sweetie was amazed. "Really?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Call it a moment of weakness. I was tired."

"Haha," Rarity said, deadpan. "You two are utterly hilarious. Rainbow...hurry up and try these on before you get even more chilled."

Rainbow complied and turned her head about to look at herself in the new clothing. She had to admit that she really liked the spiral pattern, and the way Rarity had added a drawstring hood to the long-sleeved top. The inner lining was a bright, vibrant green that brought out the green in her mane and tail, and the back had been fitted with comfortable slits for her wings. There were no ruffles, no lace...all in all, the pajamas were incredibly—

"Cool!" she announced.

Rarity's face lit up and she clapped her hooves together happily. "Really?" she squeaked, then settled into a more dignified pose. "I mean, yes, cool...I'm so glad you like them."

"They're so cute!" Sweetie said. "And I helped pick out the fabric!"

"Yeah? Very cool. Thanks guys. They're great."

Despite the cold weather and continual rain, Rainbow's spirits were lifted by the bath, pajamas, and the tidy state of the room when she climbed back into bed. As she snuggled down into the clean sheets and Rarity began removing the curlers from her mane, Sweetie rummaged through her schoolbags for another Get Well card.

"From Scootaloo," she announced, holding it up so Rainbow could see the stick figure ponies rendered in crayon beneath the large Get Well Soon the little pegasus had painstakingly written across the top. Sweetie placed it on the nightstand with the other cards, then sat on her haunches and grinned. "And you'll *never* guess what she did today!"

"Who? Scootaloo?"

"Uh huh! She showed up at school and she was coughing and shivering and her coat was *covered* in little pink spots!"

The two mares gasped and looked at one another in horror.

"No!" Rainbow cried. "I haven't been anywhere near her."

"It's spreading?" Rarity asked, visibly upset. "But we've been so careful—oh, what if the other pegasi catch it too and aren't able to fly? Then the weather really will go all—"

"Hold on!" Sweetie held up a hoof imperiously. "I'm *not* finished." When she had their wide-eyed attention again, she continued, "So, she comes to school and she tells Miss Cheerilee that she's sick and that she probably has to be quarantined here at the Boutique too, but she doesn't have any fever and her wings were beating fine when she rode her scooter up to the school and her cough didn't sound anything like yours, Rainbow Dash. Then I noticed that some of her spots seemed...weird."

"Weird?" Rainbow's eyebrows rose briefly in confusion, and then her mouth fell open. She laughed weakly. "No! Sh-she didn't!"

"Yes, she did!" Sweetie beamed. "She *drew* them on with a marker! She *said* she didn't when we told Miss Cheerilee that she was faking, but then Apple Bloom threw a cup of water at her and the spots started to run!"

Rainbow Dash burst out laughing, grabbing one of the pillows and pressing it over her mouth to cover her wild giggles. Even Rarity couldn't keep from chuckling.

"That *silly* filly! Wh-what happened?"

"She got better real quick after that...and then she jumped on Apple Bloom and the two of them ended up staying after school for fighting."

"That's terrible," Rarity lamented, pursing her lips at Rainbow Dash, who was still shaking with laughter. "Poor Scootaloo...she must have been so upset."

"*Hahahaha!* That is so awesome! Only Scootaloo could think up something as craz—ow! Rarity!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I pull too hard?" Rarity's voice was syrupy sweet. "Hold still, darling. I'm almost finished."

Rainbow Dash scowled and crossed her hooves over her chest, but let Rarity remove the last of the curlers from her mane and brush through the resulting ringlets. Sweetie Belle sat on her haunches to watch, her eyes growing wider with each passing moment as Rarity's vision unfolded.

"There!" she announced, arranging a few strands of orange hair so that they fell artfully over Rainbow's eye. "*Tres magnifique!*"

Rainbow looked askance of Sweetie Belle, whose mouth opened and closed soundlessly before she exclaimed, "I...uh...*love it!*"

"Really? Can I have a mirror?"

Beaming, Rarity fetched a small hand mirror, using her magic to levitate it before her friend's face. "See? You look *gorgeous!*"

"I...I..." Rainbow's mouth dropped as she stared at her reflection and the soft ringlets that now framed her face and lay gracefully against her neck.

"You're speechless! I *knew* you'd love it! Didn't I tell you?" Rarity threw her hooves around Rainbow's neck and hugged her fiercely.

"You did!" Rainbow squeaked, her friend choking the breath from her.
"I...uh...*thank you?*"

"You're so welcome!" Rarity released her after another tight squeeze, then looked concerned as she coughed and gasped for air. "That awful cough. It just won't stop, will it? No worries—Twilight brought over more of her salve. It's downstairs, so I'll fetch it for you and bring up some dinner. Are you hungry? I made cream of carrot puree!"

"Carrot? But you said you were gonna make broccoli."

"Yes, well, I *would* have...but the broccoli just didn't look as nice as the carrots." The white unicorn left and Rainbow Dash flopped against the pillows, sighing and staring up at the ceiling.

"Great. Now I'm sick, I have weird hair, *and* I have to eat carrot soup."

"Aw, it's not so...bad," Sweetie told her, rearing up to put her hooves on the mattress. "It's just a little different, that's all. You might get used to it." Her green eyes widened suddenly, focusing on something behind the pegasus. "Besides...there *are* worse things."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

Sweetie dropped to the floor and trotted around the room. Rainbow's eyes followed the filly, who paused before the window and gestured to the cloud-covered sky outside. Thick, heavy flakes of white were spiraling swiftly to the ground.

"Like it's only autumn...and it's starting to snow."