

Heart of Gold, Feathers of Steel

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Chapter One

There were some days when being independent had its advantages.

I flew back to the cave that I called home. Hunting had been a waste of time; I had scoured the treetops of the Everfree Forest for a good half hour, looking for telltale movements, but the pickings had been slim. I wished that I could chalk it up to the midday sun that carried a strong hint of the upcoming summer's heat, but too many catches had slipped through my claws for me to honestly believe that the temperature had been the only problem. With the amount of energy it took to catch the few squirrels that I *had* managed to kill, I still wasn't sure if I would have been better off just staying home. "At least no one's here to depend on my hunting skills," I said bitterly to the wall.

Even as I said it, I looked around the inside of my cave. I had so few belongings in there that I figured an outsider wouldn't be able to tell that someone was currently living there. I didn't have a proper nest; that would only be useful for a griffin that had an egg or a cub she was rearing. Instead, I had a tattered, heavy blanket that I slept on to cushion myself from the stone floor. The only other piece of furniture, if it could be called that, was a small traveler's chest that sat on the floor. It held my scant amount of keepsakes that held some sentimental value to me.

I felt as if there was nothing else to do, so I went over to the chest and opened it. Inside were three things: a small leather sack, a large feather, and a photograph. The sack had been a gift for me from an elderly griffin who was the proprietor of an artifact shop back in my tribe. Apparently, it had belonged to a brave adventurer two hundred years ago. Despite being old and worn, it was quite sturdy. I currently used it as a wallet for when I decided to enter into pony civilization. These trips were few and far between: I usually only made them when my hunting was consistently bad enough to warrant buying food.

I was still hungry, even after hunting. If I had been hunting for anyone else, I *would* have had to make the journey to Farrington, the nearest pony city.

As it was, I only had to look out for myself. There were some days when being on my own with no one to support had its benefits.

The main problem with buying food in Farrington wasn't the cost of it. On my first ever visit to the city, I met a cheery writing supplies storekeeper who had informed me that my wing feathers were worth a substantial amount of money. Of course, this was connected to the root of the problems I faced when interacting with ponies: I was a rare sight to be seen. Coupled with several centuries' worth of political relations that were tense at best, the fact that I stood out in a crowd brought reactions that ranged from curiosity to fear to outright hatred.

I put the coin sack aside as I once again reflected on how much I disliked the extra attention that was always paid to me in pony society. Thus turned to another familiar train of thought: *why* I was one of the few griffins to ever visit Farrington. I pulled out the next treasure in my box: a large, brown feather. It was the one that my mother had given me before I was... before I left my tribe. I bit back a lump in my throat as the memories all came rushing back to me. Emotions, those cursed fires, welled up in my chest. It was bad enough to be completely alone in the world; it was another thing entirely to be alone *and* miserable.

With a pang of sorrow, I still remembered the cutting words of my father, telling me how I was a disgrace to my family as well as to griffinkind. Right on the tail of the sadness came a familiar anger: it wasn't *my* fault that I was a weak flier and consequently, a bad hunter. No one had ever taught me how to fly while I was growing up, so by the time I was old enough to seek out help on my own, I was self-conscious and ashamed enough that I avoided making the effort. My anger turned to hatred of my father: what right did *he* have to tell me that *I* was a failure and a disappointment when he had never even lifted a talon to try and help me?

At this, my hands began trembling, so I put the feather back in the chest before I could damage it. It was the only one that I had, and I would never be able to go back to see my mother again to get another one. I still remembered the rare moment when she had spoken to me and the amount of deep compassion that had been in her voice when she told me, "I'll always love you, Gilda." It was the last thing my mother ever said to me, and that had been *before* I left for Junior Speedsters' Flight Camp.

I glared at the feather for a moment longer. I supposed it was *nice* that my mother cared about me, but that did little to soothe the bitter rage I now felt. For all that I knew, she was dead. The legendary *Verbannung Suche* was a banishment that was both grave and absolute. Until I completed the 'quest' that was tied to it, I was not allowed, under the penalty of death, to make any contact with any member of my tribe. Of course, because it had been my father who had assigned me both the banishment and the quest portions of the *Verbannung Suche*, the terms of completing it were... unthinkable. My thoughts instead traveled to the scars that ran across my chest: three of them, parallel, formed a permanent reminder of my father's hatred of me. The more I thought back to that day, the more I realized that I barely even entered exile alive.

I let out a sigh, and most of my anger left with it. I was barely alive *now*, when I thought about it. Most of my days were spent trying to hunt or selling feathers in order to get enough food to survive... but why? I had no one to share my life with. I would never be a mother. I could never go back to my tribe, and even then, I didn't even have any friends there. It would be nice to see my sisters again, but I'd also have to deal with my brothers and father even if I could go back to my village. It wasn't like I could go to any of the other griffin tribes, either: one of the few inter-tribal laws was that the *Verbotenen* were to be shunned from *all* tribes, not just the ones they had been banished from. Outside of my race, in pony culture, I was regarded as a freak: at best, I merely *intimidated* the ponies that I came into contact with.

With that realization, I was suddenly filled with an emptiness that felt like a stone in my stomach. If I had an accident while flying, or came down with some sort of sickness, no one would be there to help me. My best prospect in either of those cases would be to die outright, because it beat the alternative was dying slowly and painfully as my hopes of a passer-by coming to my rescue slowly dwindled.

There were some days when being completely alone was at least bearable.

Today was not one of them.

I bit back tears as I was once again reminded of just *how* alone I was. My one desire in life had become to find someone to help ease the burden of loneliness that weighed so heavily on my soul. The main problem was that

my list of potential ‘someones’ was particularly short. I picked up the last item from my box: a group photograph from Junior Speedsters’ Flight Camp. I looked over to the left-hand side of the photograph, where I stood. I wasn’t hard to pick out of the crowd; I was the only non-pegasus in my camp group. *Young pegasi are so accepting of anyone who’s different*, I thought bitterly. I wasn’t looking for myself in the picture, though; I was looking for the pegasus pony standing next to me: she was the only pony I had ever met that didn’t seem to care that I was a griffin or that I was a terrible flier.

She was the only pony I had ever met that accepted me for who I was.

Rainbow Dash.

I smiled a bit when I remembered our first meeting. We had both thought that the other’s name was strange: I had never heard of someone named after two objects, and Dash had never heard of a ‘Gilda’ before. I was also a bit put off by the fact that she immediately looked at my hindquarters. I assumed that it was that I looked like a lion back there, but the next thing Dash said cleared up her intentions:

“So, do you have a cutie mark, or what?”

“What’s a cutie mark?”

“It’s a mark of what a pony is really, really good at!”

“I’m not a pony.”

“Oh, okay. Do you want to hear how I got my cutie mark?”

And that was the last time she mentioned our difference in species. True, there were some *cultural* differences that we ran into from time to time, but she was mostly patient with those, too. The rest of the pegasi at the camp were much less forgiving, though; even counting the counselors, it seemed that Rainbow Dash was the only pegasus there that didn’t view me as some sort of freak. Even if she did, at least she didn’t go out of her way to point it out in the cruelest way possible. It didn’t matter that I was the second-fastest flier at camp; I was still ridiculed because I was different.

However bad camp had been for me, I had never even dreamed that it had been just as bad for Dash. On our last day, we had been walking out of the front gates to go home, and she surprised me by quickly turning from a cheery conversation about her most recent aerial stunt to loud, shameless tears. Stunned, I asked her:

“Hey, hey... c'mon Dash, what's wrong?”

“It's... it's just not fair, Gilda.”

“What isn't?”

“Everyone treats me like I'm some sort of outcast, and it's all because I hung out with you over summer.”

I opened my mouth to give a retort, but she continued, “And I kn-know it's not your fault, I don't b-blame you for anything. These last few m-months have been some of the hap-happiest ever for me. It's just, whenever we w-were apart, no one would even l-look at me; the only thing that g-got me through it was thinking of w-what we would do, the next time we would see each other. And n-now we're never g-going to s-s-see each other ag-ag...”

Her sobbing stretched out the last syllable of ‘again,’ as she dissolved into tears.

“Hey, now,” I interjected. “It's not like one of us is dying. We'll still be able to keep in touch!”

“Y-you promise?”

“Yeah, Dash, I promise.”

At this, she had thrown herself at my neck in a hug that was so tight that I had trouble breathing. I hugged her back as tightly as I could without hurting her, and before I knew it, something hot and liquid had begun to leak out of my closed eyes.

It had been years since that farewell, though. At first, we had written letters to one another on a weekly basis. That had been during the months that I had been released from the hospital but was still too weak to fly too far. I

had a fairly minimalistic lifestyle, so my living expenses weren't *too* outrageous, but especially near the end of my stay, I had large, bald patches where the best quill-feathers used to grow. Between that and the visible injuries my father had given me, I must have looked like I was worse off, physically, than I really was. It hadn't mattered to me, however: those days, the replies I got from Dash were more than enough to sustain my spirits.

That had only been in the beginning, though. Slowly, the speed of communication had dwindled to the point where I only had to go to town once a month in order to see if she had sent me a new letter and to write one back if she had. Even more recently, it had become more and more common for a few months to pass before I received a reply. From what I could tell in her letters, she was very busy with her new friends in a city called Ponyville. She was the captain of the weather team there, which basically meant that she was in charge of clearing out clouds on sunny days or weaving them together to create the rain necessary to grow crops.

I was aware that my conversations had become repetitive, short, and bland: I had nothing going on in my life. I guessed that she picked up on how boring my life had become, because her letters were also getting shorter and less descriptive with each new reply I received.

I put the picture back and closed the box. *I wish you were here with me now, Dash*, I thought. *I could really use a friend right now.*

An idea suddenly manifested itself: *Why not send her a letter asking just that?* Sure, I had sent her a letter a few weeks ago and she probably hadn't responded yet, but there wasn't any rule saying I couldn't send two in a row, especially if I was asking something new. At the very least, seeing my best friend would be a much-needed break from the usual bleak and depressing days that I had.

I opened my chest back up and this time, I pulled out my coin bag with the intent of spending some of it. It was fairly heavy still; the last time I went to town, the price for eagle feathers had risen dramatically. Postage had remained the same, though, so the end result was that I had a lot of extra bits left over after selling just one feather. I looked at the sun, and figured that I had about four hours' worth of daylight: plenty of time to fly to the post

office and mail a letter. Invigorated by my plan, I took off and headed for Farrington.

Flying always filled me with a mix between exuberance and fear. On the one hand, I was going very fast. The wind felt good in my feathers. Everything also looked so very small from how high up I was, and I could see for miles. To the southeast, there were plains as far as my eyes could see. The hilly terrain was only marred by the crisscrossing patterns of rivers and streams. The grass blew in the wind, almost looking like a sea due to the waves that formed.

Regardless of nature's beauty, though, the height that I was at always led to a gnawing fear in the pit of my stomach. If I stopped flapping my wings just right, there was nothing to stop me from falling to my death. I would then start concentrating more on flapping my wings in rhythm, but then I would start making mistakes, which would make me concentrate harder...

I might have said so already, but I'm not the best flier in the world.

I managed to make it to a low altitude without dying, so I leveled off and headed to the city. As far as pony settlements go, it wasn't the largest I'd ever heard of, but it was definitely large enough to have city walls. The buildings were tall and made of stone, with small windows placed here and there to allow their residents to see outside. On businesses, wooden signs hung over the doors to tell the citizens the types of trades took place inside of them.

I landed near the main road heading into the city. Even though I had barely been conscious when I first came here, I had learned the hard way that the city guards didn't take to kindly to flying within the city limits. It made sense, to me: based on how far it was from Cloudsdale, they probably didn't have many pegasus ponies living in Farrington. It would be much easier to keep an eye on everyone if they kept four hooves-- or paws and talons-- on the ground.

As I passed through the gate, the guard there nodded to me out of recognition, so I returned it. I didn't know his name or anything else about him, but he was *a/ways* on duty when I visited during the day, so I imagined that he had some level of dedication to his job. I also figured that I was a

regular enough oddity that he could easily remember me, if only as ‘that griffin’.

I smiled darkly to myself as I wondered if he even knew what gender I was. The smile turned to a sad frown when I realized that if I had to take inventory of people who even knew that I existed, that nameless guard would definitely fall into the top five people.

Sighing, I turned onto the street that housed, among other buildings, the post office. I tried to ignore the stares of ponies who weren’t used to seeing a griffin. I eventually reached the post office, which was marked by a sign that had the outline of a wing and a picture of a letter inside of it.

After I walked through the front door, I made my way to the counter. Today, the aquamarine-colored clerk was working. She was definitely among the ponies that regarded me as a freak. To her credit, she only continued to stare at me for a *few* seconds after I was standing directly in front of her.

“Can I, er, help you?” she asked with what I *hoped* was timidity, but it almost sounded like contempt.

“Has there been any mail for a ‘Gilda’ in the last few weeks?”

“Let me check.” She disappeared behind the swinging door as she went into the back room. After about a minute, she returned and shook her head. “I’m sorry, but it appears that there hasn’t been any mail for you. Is there anything else I can help you with today?” she asked with a cheery tone that sounded *very* thin.

“I’d like a sheet of paper to write a letter,” I asked. It was a fairly simple request, but the clerk looked at me blankly. I had come to the realization in the past few years that my usual request for paper at the post office was uncommon; every time I asked, I was always met with a strange look or some sort of a pause. Maybe these clerks were used to ponies writing letters at their own homes and then bringing them to be mailed, but I didn’t see the need to buy my own set of ink and paper: at the rate I wrote letters, the ink would dry out and the paper would become yellow before I depleted half of either supply. I had to travel about an hour to get to the city to mail a letter either way; it was much more convenient to write my letters right there.

“Um... well, I have this sheet right here, but if you’re sending a letter, maybe you would prefer something a bit more... decorative?” She was obviously put-off by the idea, but I didn’t need anything fancy to send Dash.

Hell, I realized, *she might not like fancy stationary*. Dash held an aversion to most things that weren’t either flying or straight-to-the-point. “White’s fine,” I replied. “How much?”

“Well, if you’re mailing it, you can have it free of charge, *sir*,” she was tersely polite when she addressed me: I didn’t know if she had made an honest mistake or if she were trying to antagonize me.

“Thank you,” I replied, erring on the side of caution. It took a monumental effort to both refrain from saying anything else *and* to keep my expression blank.

I hid a snarl as I turned around to walk over to a smaller counter that housed a pen and an inkwell. I suppose that this was what ‘normal’ customers would use to address their letters, but I didn’t feel too distressed about writing my entire letters here. I never wrote more than a page, and those times had mostly been back when Rainbow Dash and I both had more to talk about.

I looked at the paper, gathered my thoughts, and began writing:

Hey Dash,

It’s been forever since we’ve seen each other, dude. Things are pretty boring over here. Do you think I can come hang out with you for a while?

I hope you’re doing well.

~G.

I smiled as I signed my initial instead of my full name. Within a week of meeting each other, I had started calling Dash by her last name; a little bit after that, she shortened my name to just ‘G.’

When the ink was dry, I rolled the letter up into a scroll. I wrote Dash's address on the outside of it, sealed it, and took it over to the clerk. By the look of her, she hadn't stopped staring at me in the few minutes that it had taken me to write my letter. Still simmering at her calling me 'sir,' I handed her my letter, paid the postage fee, and walked toward the front door.

I finally couldn't help myself; I was *not* male. Figuring that she was still staring at me, I flicked my tail straight up while I took a deliberately wide step with my right hind leg. I turned my head around to the left. By the look of disgust and shock on her face, she had *definitely* seen enough of me to have caught her mistake. Seeing that I had turned to face her, she caught my eye. I finished off the show by winking at her, sticking my tongue out, and raising my left hand. I curled my back and rightmost fingers on it in order to make a circle, leaving the two leftmost ones extended upwards to complete the gesture as I raised it at her.

The clerk looked at my hand with a look of annoyed confusion. I wasn't sure if the more *traditional* griffin sign of disrespect registered to her on any level, but it made me feel better, at least. I chuckled when I turned around and heard a disgusted scoff from behind the counter. I walked out into the street, smiling, and wondered what I should do next.

With my letter sent, the only thing left to do was wait...

Chapter Two

The three days after I sent my request to Dash passed quickly once I had something to occupy my mind with. In the back of my mind, I knew that it was dangerous to get my hopes up. Regardless, I couldn't help but dream about what it would be like to hang out with my old friend again.

The idea of seeing Dash again gave me a purpose for those three days. It was the reason to hunt and to preen the loose feathers out of my wings and chest. I started to clean myself in the river near my hunting grounds, something I had gotten out of the habit of doing. It wasn't that I had completely shunned personal hygiene before; bathing usually just happened as a side effect of trying my hands at fishing.

I visited Farrington daily while waiting for Dash's response. Each time, I brought the old feathers from my wings into the quill shop (the short, white ones from my chest and head were worthless), and each time, I left the place with more money than I knew what to do with. I eventually decided that I should save it for a present for Dash if she answered 'Yes.' As I looked around the market district for a potential gift, I found myself enjoying shopping so much that I wasn't even bothered by the stares of the ponies in the streets.

The first day I visited the post office, a colt was stationed at the desk instead of the filly from earlier. He regarded me with an almost blank happiness, which I decided was an improvement over his coworker's greeting from the day before. I didn't have any mail, but that hardly surprised me: when I returned home to my cave the day before, it had been getting dark. Ponyville was fairly far away, and I wasn't sure whether or not the city I sent the letter from even employed pegasus ponies for their mail service. At the very least, I was sure that they had waited until morning to send it out. Showing up that evening had been more of an excuse to get out of my cave and do something; waiting around made me antsy.

The second day I visited the post office, the female clerk was back on duty. Since my dramatic exit earlier, I had had time to mull over what our next encounter would be like. The visit was about as awkward as I thought it

would be. The moment she recognized that it was me, an interesting look came over her face. It wasn't the usual fear or curiosity that I was used to; instead, it was a mix between disgust and scorn. To her credit, she was at least *trying* very hard to keep a politely happy face, even though she was less 'smiling' than she was 'grinding her teeth with her mouth open.' Not wanting to make any *more* trouble with the filly handling my mail, I kept my cool demeanor throughout our verbal exchange:

"Hey there. Has there been a reply to my letter?" I said as politely as I could manage.

Her eye twitched and she ground her teeth even more as she replied, "Gilda... right? I'll check in the back." She took a little longer than the first day we met; I imagined that she was regaining her composure more than she was looking for my letter. Sure enough, when she came back to the counter, her face was much more neutral. "I'm sorry, *ma'am*, but there aren't any letters for you." She had the face down, but not the tone.

I sighed inwardly. Her failed attempts at politeness were testing my resolve to stay polite for this encounter. I had no desire to prolong my contact with this pony, but I wanted an estimate on how long this would take: "Damn. How long does delivery take, usually?"

"Well, *ma'am*," she cut the word off shortly again, which bothered me. I would be *less* annoyed if she just spoke her mind. "We don't have any pegasus couriers *anymore*," she almost bit that last word off, but she continued, "and Ponyville is a full day's ride from here. Because of how late you sent your letter, it probably won't have reached its recipient until earlier this morning. They employ the use of pegasi over there, though, so depending on how quick the recipient replies, you might have a response by tomorrow."

"Cool," I said as neutrally as I could manage. "And *thanks*," I bit off as I turned to leave. I walked to the door and left the post office. As the door shut, I heard a frustrated sigh that could have been a scoff. I turned back to the now-closed door, and considered teaching her some manners, but I thought better of it: I was here to get a response from my friend, not get into a fight with a mail clerk.

My mood was dampened as I walked outside of the city gates, but I still nodded to the familiar guard. Once I was a good distance away from the city proper, I took off, heading for home. Despite the hope that I had held earlier that day, a creeping doubt began to grow inside me. Sure, Dash and I *had* been good friends during that summer three years ago, but she also had a lot more responsibilities that she needed to take care of. Even as I planned for some activities for us to do, my imagination conjured a rejection letter. It would be polite, but to the point: she didn't have time to accommodate me.

On the third day, I got the male mail clerk again. I was glad; I definitely preferred him to his coworker. The reason for this was showcased by his greeting for me: as soon as he saw me, his face lit up into a smile.

"One letter for a 'Gilda' arrived this morning from a 'Rainbow Dash,'" he said cheerily.

"Awesome," I said, relieved. "Do I owe you anything?"

"Nope, the postage was paid in full by the sender," he answered, still smiling. He handed me my letter, and I shot him a quick smile back. His smile had changed to a pleased look, and I realized that he wasn't happy to see *me*, but that he was able to get me my letter. I wasn't offended or anything; I was just amused that he was such a mail geek.

Outside of the post office, I sliced through the adhesive seal with a talon on my right hand. Taking care not to cut the paper of the scroll, I unfurled it and began reading:

Hey G!

You're right! It HAS been too long since we saw each other. These letters are a nice way of keeping in touch, but actually taking the time to write them out is SO BORING!! I hope you're not mad or anything, but that's part of why I've been so bad at writing back to you.

OF COURSE you can come and visit! You can stay for as long as you want, too; I built my house myself, and it has more space than I know what to do with!

Just one condition, though: if you want to hunt anything like you usually do, can you do it in the Everfree Forest? One of my friends here in Ponyville loves the animals outside of town SO MUCH, it would be HORRIBLE for her to have to go through losing one (or more) just so you can get lunch.

I figure that you like writing letters as much as I do, so just stop on by! You'll be able to tell which house is mine (it's the one with RAINBOWS!) as soon as you enter Ponyville airspace. If I'm not at home, I'll be back shortly... a weather pegasus' job is never done, after all.

I hope to see you soon!
~Dash

At this news, my eyes began to swell up with tears, and I almost shouted with joy. Instead, though, I got a grip on myself; it wouldn't do any good to scare the ponies around me more than they already were. I threw the letter away, as was my habit. It wasn't that I didn't value my conversations with Dash, it was just that I didn't want them to clutter up the floor of my cave. I headed to the shopping district and bought the gift that I had previously decided upon for her.

After I picked up her present, I went to a travel supplies store and bought a map of the region. Using the scale and estimating my speed, I guessed that it would take about eight hours for me to get there. If I left right at that moment, it would be the middle of the night when I arrived. Not wanting to impose on Dash like that, I decided on a compromise: I would fly until the sun set, find someplace to sleep for the night, and finally complete the flight in the morning. I left the city through a different exit than I would if I were going to my home, so I missed my guard. I didn't care too much about my usual ritual, though: I was excited to start my trip.

Tomorrow was going to be perfect.

* * *

The sun woke me up in a way that I wasn't used to: usually, in the back of my cave, I only got a dim preview of the sun. I hadn't been able to find a suitable cave the night before, and I hadn't been able to find any clouds

that were suitable to sleep on. Even if there *had* been one, I preferred solid rock to something as whimsical and shifting as water vapor. As it was, I ended up sleeping out in the open on a narrow cliff near the top of a mountain. Being as exposed as I was, I got a full taste of the sun's radiance, which was more than enough to jump-start my day. I flew down to a nearby stream, and carefully dropped Dash's package on the ground away from the bank so that it wouldn't get wet. My first order of business came by shortly: the fish didn't even know what hit him until it was too late. *Or her*, I thought. *Who knows? Fish are weird like that.*

After breakfast, I decided to wash some of the sweat and dirt off. I wouldn't arrive in Ponyville in any pristine condition, as it was still a few hours' of flying away, but at least I could start out relatively fresh by washing away all the bugs that I had hit mid-air last night.

After my bath, I shook off as best I could, grabbed my package, and started off towards Ponyville again. Because I was at a lower altitude than I had woken up at, I got to see the sun rise a second time in my peripheral vision. I hoped that Dash would like what I got her; the clerk at the store I got it at had said that they were only made in that city and weren't that common anywhere else.

Finally, after another hour of flying, I saw a small village on the horizon. As I got closer, I made out a structure that was made of clouds floating above it. Closer still, and I saw that there appeared to be a rainbow cutting through it. I smiled, as I was now certain that this was my friend's house.

As I approached, I noticed that the rainbow wasn't cutting through her house at all; instead, it was *flowing*, redirected through the structure like an elaborate waterfall. I was within fifty meters of the house when the door flew open. All that I saw was a blur of rainbow-and-blue heading for me. Instinctively, I braced for impact, but it didn't matter: when Dash hit me, I was flipped upside-down by her combination of a tackle and a hug. I flapped my wings backwards and I was able to keep the both of us aloft.

"Oh my gosh, G., it's been forever! I was waiting at my door all morning! How was your flight?" Dash's voice was overflowing with joy.

My heart sang as I saw the enormous smile spread over her face. I had nearly forgotten in the three years it had been, but Dash could *never* keep

her emotions off her face. Her smile was contagious, and I felt myself chuckling.

“Buggy,” I replied through the laughter.

“Hah, yeah, you’ll get that on long trips,” Dash said knowingly. “Even someone as awesome as me can’t dodge all of those little guys. Come on, I’ll let you wash up in my pool!”

She let go and used her own wings to hold herself up. I flipped over and followed her to the cloud that acted as her front yard. Whatever it was that allowed pegasi to walk on clouds had also been granted to griffins. We landed and walked over to a pool of what looked like liquid rainbow.

“Just be careful about getting it in your eyes. It might tingle a bit otherwise, but I’ve found it’s the best thing for getting clean after a hard day’s fight!”

“Thanks Dash,” I replied. “Oh, before I forget, here.” I handed her the package that I had brought with me.

“For me?” she gasped, surprised. On any other pony, I would have thought it to be impossible, but Dash’s smile got *even larger*. “Oh, G., you didn’t need to bring a present!”

“It’s cool, Dash. Open it up!”

She tore into the brown wrapping paper, and then opened the box that was within. “No. Way. These are the COOLEST!” she exclaimed.

I smiled. If there was one thing I knew Dash liked, it was the aerial stunt team, the Wonderbolts. When I saw the set of trading cards in the sports memorabilia store, I had hoped that she didn’t have them already. By her reaction, I guessed that she didn’t.

Dash started to rant and rave about all of the intricacies of the team, including their ages, statistics, and stunts. I tried to understand it all, but eventually, it was too much for me to keep track of. I turned to the rainbow pool, trying to look like I was still able to make sense of all that Dash was saying. I stuck a finger in, and was surprisingly warm, like a hot spring.

“Sorry, G,” Dash said with a tone of apology. “I forgot that you’re not as big on the Wonderbolts as I am. Go ahead, get the bugs and gunk out of your feathers.”

Now that I concentrated on the task in front of me, I ran into a bit of difficulty. My hands weren’t broad enough for me to effectively bring the liquid up to my face, so I had to bring my face to the liquid. I shut my eyes and stuck my head underwater. I scrubbed a bit with the scaly edge of my hand, and then came back above the surface. I wiped the stuff away from my eyes as best as I could with my wrist, but I didn’t shake the liquid free: Dash was standing right by me, and she was holding *cardboard* trading cards. When I opened my eyes, she was trying to suppress a laugh.

“Heh... what’s funny?” I asked nervously.

“Oh, nothing, *Rainbow* Gilda,” Dash replied. She barely kept her voice straight.

“What?” I was confused now.

“Hold on, let me go put these away,” she answered while turning around and waving her Thunderbolts cards at me.

I sat by the pool, still puzzled by what she had said. *Rainbow* Gilda? I didn’t have to think about it for very long, though. About twenty seconds after she entered, Dash came back out of her home wearing a goofy grin and holding a mirror.

“See?” she held the mirror up to my face, sputtering. She was losing her fight to keep from laughing.

“Wha... bu...” I was too shocked for words. My head’s feathers, usually white, were now dyed in a rainbow of colors. I found my tongue, and managed to calmly ask, “Dash, what did you do to my head?”

At this, she collapsed onto the ground because she was laughing too hard. At first, I was annoyed by the situation, but she was laughing so hard that I couldn’t help myself-- I started in as well. As long as it was temporary, it was kind of a funny prank. If it were permanent, though, it would have been

a blatant reminder of a not-so-funny prank that a pegasus had played on me at Junior Speedsters' Flight Camp.

In fact, that prank had been outright cruel.

It was a little over a month into our summer at camp when it happened. I had awoken at the crack of dawn in our cabin, just like every other day. There was about a half-hour lag between the time I woke up and when all of the campers were required to line up for morning reveille; I usually filled the time with hunting. That morning, I had counted myself lucky after I had caught a salmon as soon as I set out. After I had eaten what I could from it, I went back over to the stream to wash the fish gunk off my face. It was then that I had noticed my entire head was pink.

I immediately had known who was to blame, even though I hadn't had any *direct* evidence at the time. Stormglider had been a snotty, self-absorbed piece of work that I had offended with my crass attitude the first time we met. The result was that she had been relentless in her mockery of me. When Dash and I started hanging out, she got caught some of the verbal bullets just for being near me. We had usually been good about giving it right back to her and her group of three lackeys that followed her everywhere.

As if having a pink head wasn't enough, a brief inspection also revealed that I also had the word "DYKE" emblazoned on my left side in the same pink dye. Dash had explained that word to me near the beginning of our troubles with Stormglider. Usually, it was a baseless accusation that we had both laughed at. This time, the word was much more tangible than a snide word spoken in passing.

I didn't wear the epithet for very long; there was a razor in the first-aid kit in my cabin that took care of it. Of course, I got flak *instead* about the large, ragged bald patch that removing it had left, but I felt better to not wear a false label.

A week and a half later, I got my revenge. Dash and I had, up until then, only participated in verbal sparring matches with Stormglider. She had changed the rules of engagement, though, when she had struck at me while I was defenseless and asleep. In the middle of the night, I grabbed

her out of her bed, bound her wings to her abdomen with a bed sheet, and dropped her on her back from about fifty feet in the air.

I did a good job of cleaning up after myself, and no one had missed my absence that night. When the counselors found the injured pegasus the next morning, she was barely alive. Because of our history, Dash and I were the primary suspects of foul play, but *she* could honestly deny any involvement and *I* was a good liar. With no evidence or witnesses to incriminate us, it had been deemed a tragic flying accident; that afternoon, we had all been instructed in the *importance* of staying in our cabins after lights out. I had later learned that one of Stormglider's wings was so badly injured that she would be never be able to fly well enough to function in pegasus society.

To my knowledge, she still lived in an earth pony city, and Dash never found out that I had been the reason behind her disability. I had no intention of telling her, either. My motives hadn't been completely selfish when dealing with our bully, but Dash wouldn't agree with my methods regardless of my intentions. I felt bad that I had permanently disabled Stormglider; my intention had been to only teach her a lesson and to get her to leave us alone. At the same time, though, she was a hateful little pony and had deserved *some* form of retribution for how she treated Dash and me for the first six weeks of camp. To me, the worst thing about the situation was that Dash had been needlessly harassed by the camp counselors over something she hadn't done...

Snapping back to the present, Dash was still rolling on the ground, laughing at my current head coloration. I felt bad for ruining her fun, but I had to ask, "This isn't permanent, is it?"

At that, she stopped laughing and stood back up. "Sorry," she said in a tone so apologetic it was almost fearful. "I didn't mean for that to--"

"I'm sure you didn't, Dash," I interrupted her. "This is different than last time; it's just that it took about a year for me to be white again after Junior Speedsters'."

Dash thought about this for a moment. Finally, her expression glowed as if she had found a solution. "Don't worry, G. I'll put you back," she said almost happily. Flying up into the sky, she grabbed a dark gray cloud and

brought it directly over my head. Something clicked in my head: *Dash is in charge of the weather. She wasn't going to...*

She began to shake the cloud by jumping on it, and I was the recipient of my own personal downpour. The end result, I saw in the mirror, was that I was no longer rainbow-colored. Instead, I was just soaked to the skin with rainwater. *Now*, the problem was that I could see the pink of my skin through my now rain-soaked feathers.

Dash could, too. She stared at my chest for a second before pointing at me. "Where'd you get those scars from?" she asked, with a bit of concern in her voice.

I thought about it for a minute. Here was the one pony in the world that I could tell all of my problems to. She wouldn't judge me and she would listen intently to what I had to say. She'd then find a way to make me feel better about the whole situation, and we'd end up laughing about it. After a bit of deliberation, I decided to lie. "I got in a fight a while back," I said after what I hoped wasn't too noticeable of a pause. I *would* eventually tell her about how I got the scars, but I still felt it was too early to start laying all of my troubles on her, especially right after bringing up memories of Junior Speedsters'. For now, I just wanted to relax and enjoy spending time with my good friend.

"Well, I'd hate to see the other guy... or girl," she said in a manner that told me she wanted to change the subject. I kept quiet and smiled back at her while she continued, "Here, let me dry you off! With my patented Rain-Blow Dry, you'll be dry in ten seconds--" I interrupted her by ruffling up my feathers and shaking as violently as I could. *My* tried-and-true method of getting rid of excess water took care of most of the rainwater very quickly; when I relaxed, my feathers no longer clung to my skin. "--flat," Dash finished her sentence. I looked at her and saw that my counter-prank was complete: she wasn't as wet as I had been, but her mane was now plastered to her head and neck.

"Gotcha," I said. We both burst out laughing, and I knew that everything was going to be okay. We had gotten off to a somewhat shaky start, but I had to admit that it felt good to see how quickly we were picking up where our friendship had left off. When we finished laughing, Dash took off flying upwards. When she was a good distance above me, she turned into a tight

circle and sped up. Because of the strange rainbow trail that she left behind when she flew, the effect was a rainbow-colored cyclone. Down where I was, I felt a mist of water, but it was nothing compared to the downpour from earlier. When she stopped flying a few seconds later, her mane now stood straight up on its own accord. She completed her drying ritual by smoothing out the mane on top of her head so it lay forward and to the side, which was her preferred style.

“Not bad, not bad,” I said when she finished. “We’ll definitely need to go out flying later so you can show me *all* of your new tricks.”

“And you can show me yours!” Dash added gleefully.

“Er... yeah,” I replied, trying to maintain an air of confidence. I hadn’t even been able to perform the simplest of rolls during our summer at Junior Speedsters; I hoped that I could come up with an excuse so that I wouldn’t have to try anything in front of Dash. If anything, griffins were more suited for speed than pegasi were, so I might be able to hold my own in a race, from a physiological standpoint. That might distract her from my flying, and get her to focus on hers...

Dash interrupted my thoughts with a hug. She rested her head on my shoulder as she exclaimed, “Oh, G. It’s so great seeing you again! Don’t get me wrong, I love it here, and I like all of the ponies in the city. It’s just nice to hang out with someone who knows how to fly!”

I returned the hug, smiling at the irony. If she was being sincere, then it didn’t say much for the flight capabilities of the pegasi of Ponyville.

“So, what have you been up to in the last few years?” Dash asked with what I feared was a hint of concern in her voice.

“Not too much, really. I’ve been training for speed instead of agility, in terms of flying,” I said as vaguely as possible. No matter how I tried to dress it up, though, this was a bold-faced lie. When I flew, it was to try and catch a meal; I never practiced flying just for the sake of getting better at it.

“Have you met any *boys*?” she asked. I heard the joking of the tone, but I knew Dash well enough to know that it was a defense to allow her to ask a serious, personal question without embarrassing either of us.

“No, no, nothing like that,” I said. “But that reminds me of something that happened when I mailed you this most recent letter...”

I told her the story about the mail clerk in Farrington. When she stopped laughing, Dash told me about how she had shown-up a bully at her flight school by beating him in a race while flying upside-down. When she was done, I told her about a tricky catch that I had managed one day, leaving out the fact that it had surprised me as much as it had the wild boar. We continued like this, sharing stories for what only felt like a few minutes.

Finally, though, the stories tapered off. There wasn't anything wrong with them, but Dash was getting bored. That was the type of pony she was: even at Junior Speedsters' Flight Camp, she could never sit still for very long.

“Are you ready to get some flying in?”

“As the day I was born,” I cringed inwardly as I spouted another half-truth: griffins were born with a fluffy coat of down that was physically impossible to fly with.

“All right, sit tight; I'm going to go see which part of the sky is best.” She flew up onto the roof of her house, which gave a better vantage point.

I sat waiting, trying to think of how I was going to hide the fact that I was a terrible flier from Dash. If she wanted to sit by and watch me, she'd *definitely* be able to pick up on my shortcomings. I lost my concentration, however, when I heard a strange sound coming from the ground... it almost sounded like a duck quacking, but it was too high pitched and loud. I heard a voice that was also too high pitched and loud, and it was calling up to where I was:

“Rise and shine, Rainbow Dash! It's a brand new day, and we've got a lot of pranking to--”

I stuck my head out over Dash's front lawn. My eyes were met with a ridiculous sight: a bright pink pony wearing a pair of bright green glasses, a joke mustache, and wearing a hat that was made to look like an arrow was sticking through her head. Sticking out of her mouth was what I guessed to

be the cause of the earlier quacking: from the look of it, it was some sort of whistle.

Almost everything about this pony annoyed me. Her voice was grating, and she was speaking very loudly. Looking at her absurd outfit combined with her natural color, I felt a bit of disgust. It wasn't just that pink had a negative association with me, either: there was literally *nowhere* in nature where that coloration would have any sort of benefit. I knew that ponies usually were more laid-back in terms of survival instincts, but the fact that this pony seemed to *purposefully* make herself noticeable instead of staying hidden clashed with my predatory nature.

The worst thing, though, was her *timing*. I had *just* gotten into town to see my best friend after three years, and now she came by to interrupt us with noisemakers and props? I remembered a whole host of names that I had heard at Junior Speedsters', and stupid some of them had sounded. I couldn't help but notice when I looked down at the pony below me, but I was seeing a very potent example of what a 'dweeb' was.

There was no way that I was going to enjoy spending an entire day in the presence of this pink pony. I hoped that Dash would find a way to lose her quickly so that I could spend more time alone with my best friend.

Chapter Three

I was staring at this pink intruder and mulling over just how much I wanted to get away from her when Dash spoke up from her rooftop. “Morning Pink!” she shouted down cheerfully at the other pony. My annoyance at the pony below me grew... her *name* was ‘Pink?’

Dash flew down to the ground. I joined her. It was less out of politeness and more that I didn’t want to make the situation awkward for Dash. “Gilda, this is my gal-pal, Pinkie Pie!” she said, introducing me to her friend.

I purposefully landed facing a different way while I fought to keep my face free of the annoyance I felt towards this newcomer. It was more than annoyance, I realized: Dash had referred to her as her ‘gal-pal.’ I felt a twinge of jealousy as I replied to the introduction, “Hey, what’s up?”

Dash completed the introduction, “Pinkie, this is my griffin friend, Gilda.”

“What’s a griffin?” Pinkie Pie asked, stupidly.

“She’s half eagle, half lion--” Dash started.

As good of friends we were in spite of being different species, it felt weird to listening to Dash describe me like I was some sort of mythical creature. I pounced over to Dash and put my arm around her to show Pinkie Pie that we were friends and that *she* was the outsider here. I finished Dash’s sentence by saying, “And all awesome!” I let out a mock roar, and Dash completed the display by raising her hoof. I punched it lightly with a fist, which was how she had taught me to complete the gesture. In spite of the situation, I *did* feel a sense of camaraderie.

“Gilda’s my best friend from Junior Speedsters’ Flight Camp,” Dash said brightly and with a smile. She turned to me and asked, “Do you still remember the chant?”

I tried to brush the question off. Dash had always been infinitely more enthusiastic about the camp’s culture than I had been. “Yeah,” I said,

deliberately opening my beak a bit too late for the word. “They only made us recite it every morning. I’ll never get that lame thing out of my head.”

“So...?” Dash looked at me expectantly.

I was reminded of the time that I had misjudged a wounded lizard when hunting. It was weak and breathing slowly: an easy meal. I grabbed it and brought it to my face, but when I grinned at it cockily, it had sprayed venom directly in my eyes. The agony of that moment *still* haunted me as a reminder to only gloat *after* killing: it had felt like my eyes were on fire.

Then there was the time where I had *actually* been on fire. I had flown too close to the top of a forest fire because I didn’t understand the nature of how *much* heat there was in a fire that large. Luckily, it had happened right next to a stream, so I hadn’t ended up having any permanent disfigurement. Regardless of the end results, though, the two months that my burns had taken to heal were full of wretched, festering pain. I still didn’t know how I managed to *walk* to the hospital of the pony city after that. My memories around the entire incident were fuzzy at best.

I would rather have both of those things happen right then, at the same time, than have to stand in front of the most annoying pony I had ever encountered while reciting the most annoying chant I had ever heard.

In the end, Dash’s smile won me over: I couldn’t say ‘No’ to something that happy. I let out a sigh. “Only for you, Dash.”

At this, she shot into the air, clearly more enthusiastic than I was. She started the cheer before I was even halfway to the same height as she was:

*“Junior Speedsters are our lives!
Sky-bound soars and daring dives!
Junior Speedsters: it’s our quest
To some day be the very best!”*

I was already doing the cheer, so I did the parts of the accompanying dance that had *also* been part of the daily ritual of morning torture. Dash remembered it much better than I did, but she was so wrapped up in her own performance that I didn’t think she noticed any of my mistakes. We

finally landed and ended the cheer by rearing up on our back legs and waving our forelimbs.

I was already in a bad mood from being roped into doing that ridiculous cheer, so Pinky Pie's giggle after it was over only succeeded in elevating my mood from 'annoyed' to 'pissed off.' I stared daggers at her while I smoothed the feathers on top of my head back into position.

"That was awesome!" she exclaimed. It figured that *she* would like that cheer. "And, you've given me a great idea for a prank! Gilda, you game?"

Finally, I saw the opportunity to get away from her. "Huh. Well, I groove on a good prank as much as the next griffin," I said, and it was true. The only difference was that griffin pranks were much more violent when compared to their pony counterparts, and usually ended with one or both members as a bloody mess. "But Dash," I continued, turning to her, "you promised me we'd get a flying session in this morning."

I took off before she could postpone flying or even point out that she hadn't mentioned that it would be 'this morning.' I felt bad for manipulating Dash like I had, but I could not *stand* to be around Pinkie Pie for much longer. She was simply too... *silly* for my tastes. Now that I was airborne, the part of me that liked flying immediately felt better. I held on to that feeling: I needed to put aside any negative feelings, for Dash's sake. We were supposed to be having *fun*, not getting annoyed by dweebs.

I looked back down where Dash was. The wind was stronger at my altitude, so I couldn't hear any of what she was saying. Eventually, she jumped up and started flying. She pointed at me and said one last thing to Pinkie Pie before flying towards me. She caught up to me, and we started flying together. I took a quick glance, and got a bit of sadistic glee from it: Pinkie Pie was sitting on the ground with a dejected look on her face.

Being able to ground such overly buoyant spirits greatly improved my mood. Turning my mind to the matter at hand, I asked Dash, "So, what do you want to do first?"

Without skipping a beat or waiting for any counter-suggestions, Dash simply told me, "Watch this!" She was so enthusiastic that I wondered for a moment whether or not she hadn't minded blowing off Pinkie Pie. She

loved flying more than anything else in life, so she could have just been stoked to fly. Regardless of her feelings, the sky-blue pegasus took off towards a formation of clouds. I hovered where I was, watching. I remembered how during our days in Junior Speedsters', Dash was always coming up with new aerial stunts. She was never satisfied with her own accomplishments, either. Once she got a trick down pat, she'd either work on making it more difficult or start on a new trick altogether. This striving for excellence had been what set her apart from the rest of the pegasi at camp, and it had also been why she had ended the summer as the best flier out of everyone there.

I was expecting to be entertained by her stunts, and Dash didn't disappoint. She started flying around one cloud so fast that it began to spin as if it were a solid object. I had no idea that clouds could actually spin like that; they were just dense pockets of water vapor. After the first cloud started spinning, she immediately flew to the cloud beside it, and started spinning it. She repeated this process until all five clouds in the formation were spinning at once.

She flew back over to me, "Neat, huh?"

"That was awesome! What do you call it?" I replied, awestruck.

"I haven't really thought of a name for it yet."

"Still, dude, that was awesome!"

"He he, thanks, G. So, what's something new you've learned?"

It was time to do or die. "Well... I've been training more for speed than for agility..." I tried, knowing that Dash wouldn't let me off easily.

"Aww... come on, G, you *must* have learned something since camp."

I racked my brain for something, anything that I could use. "Uh... remember how I used to have trouble flying upside-down?"

Dash chuckled, "Yeah. Do you think they ever fixed that hole you put in the side of the mess hall?"

I laughed at the memory, “Yeah, that was *not* one of my better moments. Anyway, watch this!”

I took a deep breath and hoped I could pull this off. I started flying around in a slow, horizontal circle, which was easy enough. I then tried to turn myself upside-down while keeping going in a circle. I misjudged the amount of roll I needed, though, and ended up doing three-quarters of a full roll. I kept going with it, though, and continued rolling. I kept on my original circle path, but I increased speed. After a few more seconds, I broke out of the circle and flew back over to Dash.

“Nice, G! You’ve got so much more control than you used to!”

“Thanks Dash,” I said, and I felt my face flush with embarrassment. Even if accidentally, though, I had pulled something off that was pretty difficult for me. Not only that, but I had done it almost flawlessly.

“Mind if I give it a try?” Dash always asked before she tried someone else’s tricks in front of them, out of politeness.

“Go for it!” I said, interested to see her take on what I had just ad-libbed.

Dash flew in a horizontal circle, just like I had, but she started off a lot faster than I had. She also turned tighter, so the circle was smaller. She *also* started rolling at a faster speed than I had. After a few seconds, I thought she had had her fill, but she then started to rotate the circle’s path until she was flying in a vertical circle. She then rotated the circle’s path randomly and increased her speed even more. Because of the rainbow path that trailed behind her, I was staring at a sphere that was built out of every color in the rainbow.

It was beautiful.

She broke out of the sphere and came back over to me. I tried to say something about how amazing that last stunt had been, but words escaped me. “That... what... but...”

“Heh, thanks,” she said, able to understand what I meant. “I’m dizzy now, though,” she said, and her eyes were having trouble focusing on any one point in front of her.

Dash took a quick break on a nearby cloud, and I took the opportunity to improvise a new trick. I started out by flying horizontally to gather speed. I then turned sharply upward and kept going as much as I could. Eventually, though, my speed died out as gravity beat out my ability to fly “forward” while facing upward. I stopped in mid-air, even though I was flapping my wings. I then used them to turn myself around so that I was facing the earth, and pulled them into my body. The result was one of my worst fears: I was plummeting to the earth because my wings weren’t flapping. Instead of letting the fear control my muscles, though, I accepted gravity’s pull and allowed it to grant me speed. After I had had enough, I flared out my wings and leveled off. I used my speed to curve around and head upward, and crashed through the bottom of the cloud that Dash was sitting on.

“That was so cool!” Dash yelled when I landed. Her wings, which had been resting at her sides, flared out as if to punctuate the sentence. I always wondered whether or not this occurrence was intentional or unconscious, but I figured that it might be embarrassing, so I never asked.

“Aw... they taught us dives in the first week of camp, Dash.”

“Yeah, but I never thought of stalling into one, or to keep going and coming back up after one!” She was smiling so broadly that it was impossible for me to not smile back. “Can I--” she started.

“Go ahead,” I finished, and she was off the cloud before I got out the second syllable of ‘ahead.’

When she finished her combinations of stalling and diving, she transitioned into a completely new trick involving many tight flips. We went back and forth like this for at least an hour; by the end of it, I had completely forgotten my annoyance at her pink friend.

“All right, Dash. Tricks and stunts are cute and all, but I think we know the *real* test of flying,” I said with a bit of confidence.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll race you to that cloud way over there,” I said, pointing.

“Okay, but G, we’ll need to slow it down around the village. There are pegasi over there, working. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Okay, then... whoever’s in the lead when we get over town gets to keep the lead.”

“Deal!”

“All right,” I said, hunkering down, ready to kick forward. “On ‘Go.’ Ready?”

“Yep!”

“One... Two... Three... *Go!*”

Dash shot off like a rocket, leaving me behind. She was better at accelerating, I gave her that. But I had a higher maximum speed in the end. I sped up until I was right behind her, but I stayed there instead of passing her: we were almost at the city and were going to have to slow down anyway. When we *did* enter the village’s airspace, she slowed down and I followed suit. She then did something unexpected: she pulled into a vertical loop. I followed her through it, and we kept going. Once we left the village behind us, we both sped back up. This time, I sped up to my maximum speed. I passed her, and landed on the cloud, claiming victory for myself. I turned around and Dash flew straight at me, tackling me into the cloud. She burst out laughing at this, and I followed in suit.

“Wow, that was sweet! Just like old times,” I said.

“Yeah, only *faster!*” Dash replied, raising her hoof. I punched it like before. “So, what now?” she asked.

I was about to reply when suddenly, Pinkie Pie’s head burst through the cloud we were standing on. It startled me, to say the least. “Hey there!” she said in that annoying, bubbly voice of hers.

“Huh?” Dash and I said in unison as her head disappeared below the cloud again.

Her head came back a second time, "It's later," she said, before her head vanished. It reappeared a third time, and she finished her sentence from earlier, "and I caught up!"

Her head reappeared a few times without saying anything, but Dash sat down with an earnest smile on her face. "Pinkie Pie," she said when the pink head reappeared. She paused until Pinkie's head reappeared, and then finished, "you are so *random*!"

Oh, Dash, I thought. What are you doing encouraging that loser? Back at Junior Speedsters', we would've torn her a new one behind her back! I decided to take things into my own hands and to try to move us away from Pinkie Pie again. "Hey Dash, think you got enough gas left to beat me to that cloud?" I pointed to a cloud that was higher up and *away from Pinkie Pie*.

"A race? You are so on!"

"One... Two... Three... *Go!*"

As we took off, I thought I heard a pink voice complaining, "Hey!" I ignored it, though: this race was a lot shorter, so Dash had an edge on me here. I had to concentrate. I gave it my all, and we broke through the cloud at about the same time. I thought I had beaten Dash by a little, but...

"I won!" she yelled.

"As if. I won, dude," I said defensively, pointing to myself.

"No way!" Dash argued, throwing her hooves in front of her in protest.

"Yes way," I said, crossing my arms.

"Come on, I was way ahead of you!" she persisted.

"Uh, I don't think so," I said, closing my eyes and shaking my head.

"Oh, please, dream on."

"Remember back in camp? I--"

“There is no way you beat me.”

“Whatever,” I said, holding up a hand for her to ‘talk to.’ It was all an act on my part: I didn’t care about the results of the race; the important thing was that we had gotten away from--

“Wow guys, that was really cool!” Pinkie Pie? I opened my eyes and turned around. She was floating there, supported by... a huge cluster of party balloons.

I was quite confused. *It was only ten seconds since we left her back at the last cloud!* I thought. *How the f--*

Pinkie Pie interrupted my thought process and continued, “but I think Rainbow Dash beat you by a teeny-weeny, itty-bitty hair, or a teeny-weeny, itty-bitty feather!”

In an instant, a new source of loathing opened up inside of me. Here was a pony without wings, *trespassing* in the sky! Never mind how she managed to pull it off so quickly, it *offended* me. I never thought that I’d see eye-to-eye with my father on, well, *anything*, but on this point, I agreed with his bigotry against creatures without wings: Pinkie Pie didn’t *deserve* to be in the sky like she was.

Despite my current annoyance at this situation and general hatred of him, I grinned a bit inwardly as I imagined what my father would do if he were here right now. He’d wipe that grin right off of Pinkie Pie’s face, that’s for sure. Hell, he’d probably rip her head off her shoulders, and damn the political ramifications.

Relations, if they can be called that, between ponies and griffins were notoriously fragile. A tribe of griffins had once hunted them as food, a right that some more traditional griffins like my father maintained that we should still have. The hunting had come to an end when the pony queen, Celestia, visited that tribe of griffins and slaughtered them. Because of the distribution of griffin population, in that one afternoon, the total population of griffins had been reduced to a third of what it had been that morning. The three survivors out of eighty were said to be left alive only so they could

travel to the other tribes to carry a single message: “*My subjects are not yours for the taking.*”

As I imagined this carnage and thought about all of its results, I suddenly became aware that my talons were cutting into the palm of my hands. I was startled by this: somewhere down the line, I had crossed from simple annoyance into a seething rage. I calmed myself down as quickly as I could, before Dash could notice. I turned and looked to see if she had seen anything. I caught her eye as she turned to face me and I breathed a quick sigh of relief: she hadn’t seen me just then.

“Hah, see? Good thing Pinkie Pie’s here to keep you honest, G!” The rage that I had just bottled away came back as anger at the injustice of the situation. I fought *it* down, too. I didn’t even care about the outcome of our race anymore; I just wanted to spend some more quality time with Dash. However, I couldn’t enjoy anything if we were constantly being interrupted by Pinkie Pie and her annoying... *everything!*

I decided to try a more *direct* approach with Pinkie Pie. “Okay, Dash:,” I taunted, “last one to that cloud up there is a gnarly dragon egg. *Go!*” At the word, Dash flew up to the cloud as fast as she could, but I stayed behind. I was now alone with Pinkie Pie. She didn’t seem to get the hint from being left behind earlier. I stepped up the anger in my voice a bit, and scowled at her. “I think the high altitude is making you dizzy!” I said, and popped about a third of her balloons with my talon. She said something in protest, but I turned to catch up to Dash, so I couldn’t hear it.

When I got to the cloud, there was a tense moment when I thought that Dash knew what I had done. She looked at me as if she were about to say something and I met her gaze, ready to defend myself. It wasn’t *my* fault that we were being stalked by such an annoying earth pony!

“Oh wow, you guys almost got away from me that time!” I froze. I turned around, and for a split second, I didn’t believe my eyes. Pinkie Pie was airborne again, but this time, she had some sort of... contraption. Apparently, she had to use her legs to power it, as all four were in motion. There was a large spinning blade at the top that I presumed was the source of the device’s flight capabilities.

Of course, that was just the functional part of the machine. She had also decorated it in the most annoying way possible: the thing had been painted purple; there were also flowers, stripes, and a small flag attached to it.

As I processed exactly how annoying this machine was, part of me began to despair. All that I had wanted, no, all that I had *needed* was to spend some time with my friend. I had come on this visit in order to take a break from my solitude and to talk to Dash about how bad my life had been. It was an extremely personal matter, and one that I took seriously, so I didn't want to divulge it in front of a strange pony, let alone one that seemed so... *childish*.

I came to the conclusion that I needed to assert my feelings toward Pinkie Pie. First, though, I needed to distract Dash. "So, Dash," I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. "Got any new moves in your tricktionary, or are you one hundred percent old school?" I hoped she wouldn't take offense to my calling her tricks from earlier "old," but I needed her to be occupied, and this was the best way I could come up to ask to see a difficult trick on short notice.

She looked back at me with a look of anger, and I realized too late that I had gone too far. This situation was going to come to a head one way or another, I supposed...

"New moves?" her expression softened as she replied, though. "Heh. Sit back, G; this is gonna take a while."

I smiled. This was perfect.

I then turned to the abomination that was flying behind me. "Hey Pinkie... c'mere," I said, pointing to myself.

She flew closer to me, "Yeah?"

I grabbed part of her flying machine and pulled it closer to me. When her face was dangerously close to the sharp end of my beak, I started speaking in as angry of a tone as I could manage, "Don't you know how to take 'get lost' for an answer? Dash doesn't need to hang with a dweeb like you now that *I'm* around. You're dorkin' up the skies, Stinkie Pie," I improvised,

wondering where that wit had been three years ago. “So make like a bee, and ***buzz off!***”

What I did next might have killed her, but near the end of my rant, I had become too angry to think about the effects of my actions. I used my wings to hold myself steady and grabbed the spinning blade at the top of the flying machine. Pinkie Pie, too slow to react, kept pedaling. Now that I was holding the blade still, the rest of the machine began spinning instead of the blades. I then used my grip on the flying machine’s blade in order to flip the entire thing upside down, and let go. This change in orientation combined with her spinning led to the limitations of her artificial flight catching up to her: apparently, she couldn’t control that thing if it wasn’t correctly oriented. The machine darted around drunkenly for a few moments, but finally, she began to lose altitude.

Venting my frustrations upon Pinkie Pie and her uselessly flashy machine did a great job at lifting my spirits.

Dash came back after finishing the trick that I had completely ignored, “Try matching *that!*” She looked around for a moment, and then asked in a concerned voice, “Hey, where’s Pinkie Pie and her crazy contraption?”

In my haste to get rid of Pinkie Pie, I had forgotten to come up with a suitable cover-story. Quickly, I threw one together: “Eh, she left. Something about being busy as a bee.”

After I said it, though, I felt sick to my stomach. All of this lying to my best friend was just... *wrong*. Surely it wasn’t Dash’s fault that this pony had been following us all morning: clearly, she was just desperate for attention and clinging to my friend like a parasite. For the time being, I convinced myself that I was doing Dash a favor. However, I hoped that I would have enough time later to set the record straight; she didn’t deserve to be kept in the dark like this.

For now, though, I just needed to relax and have fun. I didn’t want to have a serious discussion about everything with Dash just yet. For one, I wasn’t in the right mood anymore. I made the plan then to tell her my story and what I had done later on that day, around the afternoon. *That way, if there’s any problem, I’ll be able to get back to my cave before nightfall*, I thought bitterly.

*Father's tribe isn't more than a few hours past there if things **really** go bad,* a horribly dark thought crossed my mind. I almost threw up when it did: I had put away that line of thinking *years* ago, where had it suddenly come back from?

I sighed inwardly, trying to keep the look of fear and disgust off my face, and began to hope that this whole visit hadn't been a huge mistake.

Chapter Four

“Gilda, are you okay?” Dash asked in a suspicious tone.

At first I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know whether she was concerned that I was under mental stress or if she had seen more of my interactions with Pinkie Pie than I had originally thought. If she knew what I did to Pinkie, then it didn’t matter *what* my response to her question was. Instead of thinking about damage control, I started reflecting on *why* I had come to visit Dash in the first place.

The fact of the matter was that exile had left me extremely lonely. I could never rejoin griffin society under the terms of the *Verbannung Suche*, because I *wouldn’t* complete my father’s twisted quest. I wouldn’t feel comfortable living in a pony city, either, because I didn’t like to be constantly the center of attention because of how *different* I looked. While I was thinking about this, I glanced over at Dash. She looked back at me with concerned and anticipation as she awaited my answer. A pang of guilt and fear ran through my stomach as I thought about the terms of my banishment quest. *You don’t deserve that*, I thought with a twinge of bitterness. *You shouldn’t have to put up with me, either*, I admitted, sadly.

The idea crossed my mind to just leave Ponyville. I was trapped in an uncomfortable situation by a combination of both bad timing and my own sensibilities: I couldn’t enjoy the time I had with Dash anymore because she had *new* friends that were taking her time away, and I couldn’t unload my troubles on her so early in the ‘catching up’ phase.

I reflected on the tragedy of being so near to my friend, yet not being able to reach out to her. My mind turned to my father and I felt so angry and helpless that I almost started crying. *This is all your fault, you bastard*, I cursed him inwardly as I fought down a sob. My whole life, he had been nothing but a perfect role model-- for the exact *opposite* of the type of griffin I wanted to be. For example, he was incredibly sexist. This was common enough in griffin society, but it didn’t make it *right* for him to treat all of the females around him like dirt. I thought the only reason he *had* a wife was so that he could create more male griffins for him: there was no emotion at all

in his tone on those rare occasions where he actually spoke to my mother. His misogyny wasn't just reserved for her, either: when I left my tribe I had had twelve sisters, and he had treated all of us with little more than disdain. We were always given second-pickings after his sons at meals, we had the *smaller* of two sleeping chambers, despite there being more of us, and we had a completely different set of rules that we had to abide by. And if we so much as *looked* at my father or one of his sons incorrectly, we were punished severely. I knew how to take a punch by the time I was six.

As if his sexism wasn't intolerant enough, he was also a bigot whose hatred of ponies bordered upon the fanatical. Even before he sent me to Junior Speedsters', he always found ways to belittle the *beute*, his favorite slur to use against them. One of the few decorations in my family's cave was a pair of lime green pegasus wings that he had 'taken back from something that had trespassed into our domain' and nailed to the wall. His glee that day had been sickening, even to my young mind. The word he used for 'domain' was also a ghastly pun: I had no idea whether he meant our tribe's territory or just the sky in general. Judging by the fact that there hadn't been any light-pink sun gods who had shown up on our stoop with a bone to pick, I could only assume it was the former.

I shuddered inwardly as I realized that he had tried to pass on his bigotry to me. My father's motivation for sending me to Junior Speedsters' had been more than just to punish me for my lackluster flying. For how much I hated him, I had to admit he was intelligent: he knew exactly what would be in store for me from the pegasi there. He had wanted to instill in me his hatred of ponies, but his plan backfired when I befriended one instead of developing a prejudice toward them.

I smiled warmly at Dash as I thought about the cultural barrier we had broken. She had been sitting there that whole time, worried about me. I knew then that regardless of the price it carried, I wouldn't have traded my friendship with Dash for the world-- including the ability to go home to my tribe. I put my hand on her shoulder and she smiled back at me. "I'll be fine, Dash," I said. "It's just... Pinkie Pie *seriously* annoys me."

"Well," Dash started, cocking her head to the side apologetically, "that's just Pinkie Pie. She's annoying most of the time, but it's only because she's too busy being friendly to stop and realize it."

I resolved that I would try harder to enjoy the rest of my time in Ponyville. This included not letting Pinkie Pie bother me while she *wasn't* around me. I changed the subject from her by challenging Dash to her favorite game: "While she's busy with whatever, you up for a game of Pony?"

"As ever!" Dash said eagerly. The last remnants of her earlier concern had vanished.

The rules of Pony were simple enough: one player was 'it,' and performed a trick. If she messed up the trick, the other player got to be 'it.' If she nailed it, though, the other player had to perform the same trick. If the non-'it' player messed up while trying to copy the trick, she got a letter from the word 'pony.' Once a player spelled out 'pony,' she lost.

Dash let me go first, but it didn't matter. Going into the game, my record against Dash was zero and twelve. I managed to give Dash a 'P,' so her thirteenth victory wasn't a *complete* sweep.

Still, the point of playing the game hadn't been to win; otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered. It was all in good fun, and I even found myself enjoying flying for once. I laughed, enjoying myself even as we flew cautiously towards Ponyville proper. "That was sweet!"

"Ugh," Dash grimaced as if I had just noticed something was wrong. "I gotta take care of a few weather jobs around here. Shouldn't take long. Just, uh, hang out in town and I'll come find you."

Damn, I cursed inwardly. After spending half the morning trying to get some alone time with Dash, to have *her* be the one who had to put an end to our fun was a cruel twist of fate. Still, she had a job to do, and I had to respect that. "That's cool, I guess," I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice as I spoke. It also felt like it had been a long time since breakfast. "I'm gonna go chow down," I decided out loud.

She didn't even remind me of the condition of me staying here. She either forgot, or figured that I meant I'd eat something in town. "Later!" she called, as she took to the sky. I smiled sadly, watching her go.

A quick bit of planning told me to stay in town to eat these ponies' food. It would take me at least half an hour to get clear of the city, find something

to eat, kill it, wash up afterward, and get back to town. Washing my beak and hands after tearing something apart was a crucial part of hunting now that I was around Dash. I had made the mistake once, on my first day at Junior Speedsters', of coming back into camp covered in chunks of rabbit. The look of disgust and fear that she had worn when she realized *what* I was covered in was one of my worst memories from camp.

Having made up my mind to eat within the city, I looked around for a produce vendor. I found a produce cart, but that discovery took second place to the other thing that I noticed: an opportunity to have a little fun.

One of the many things that Dash taught me during our summer at camp was the difference between a *fun* prank and the 'pranks' that griffins usually played on one another. This had happened after I had a run-in with the counselors after sending a colt to the infirmary by playing one of *my* pranks on him...

"G... that was going a bit far," Dash had sounded disappointed.

"What?" I asked defensively. "I pull the old *schwitzschlag* on my classmates all the time when they pull crap like that."

"He just did a 'too-slow low-five'," Dash was starting to get upset now, "you didn't need to grab his head and start punching him like that."

"Sorry, Dash," I apologized. I didn't want her to be mad at me, so I added, "I'll tone it down next time."

"Just remember, pranks and jokes are supposed to be *fun*. If you hurt someone pranking them, then it's not fun for them!" she explained. "Whenever you're pranking someone, ask yourself first: 'Would I laugh if they did this to me?'"

In the Ponyville town square, I took note of my target and decided that no, she wouldn't be hurt by a little fright. The older green pony was walking up to a produce cart. I stalked over to the opposite side as quickly as I could.

One of the discoveries I had made in my ventures into of pony society was that they were, in general, freaked out by my prehensile tail. I found the

whole situation to be ironic because my tail was the part of me that was *least* likely to cause them harm.

Keeping low, I poked my tail out the other side of the cart. I was rewarded almost instantly with a shrill, fearful scream. “A rattler! *A rattler!* Run for the hills! Everybody, forsake yourselves!” the elderly pony’s frail, panicking voice called out. I stuck my head up to see the fruits of my prank: the green pony was supposedly running, but I figured that she would probably move faster if she tried walking. I smiled at the sight: *that* was funny. To prove it, I remembered Dash’s rule about pranking, and I asked myself if I would laugh if one of my sisters scared me with her tail. Yes, I decided, *That would be hilarious.*

The produce vendor was staring at me with a look of disdain. I tried a quick cover-up by poking a tomato with my tail. “This stuff ain’t fresh, dude.” I continued to glare at the vendor for a moment longer before turning to leave.

“What’ve you got against Granny Smith?” she finally spoke up. I turned back around to face her, confused. Then, I saw her barrels of *red* apples. I wasn’t a fruit expert by any means, but from the farmers’ markets in Farrington, even I knew that granny smith apples were green.

“Nothing... but those aren’t granny smiths. They’re red, dude. Are you new on the job or something?” I asked. The apples started to look good to my hungry eyes, so I added, “How much are they, even?”

“Two bits per, and *don’t come back here,*” the clerk replied curtly.

“Such a charmer with the customers,” I taunted her, and her glare deepened. I pulled two coins out of my bag and dropped them onto the counter, despite her outstretched hoof. I then turned around and left. Out of contempt for her and her produce stand, I snaked my tail around another customer, grabbed an apple at random, and put it in my mouth, all in fluid motion. I walked away and closed my eyes as I ate it: it was very sweet, which was different than the salty tang of meat that I usually preferred. Although I figured that I would be hungry fairly soon, for now, the sweetness in my mouth made me happy enough that I smiled.

I opened my eyes to an uncanny sight: a light yellow pegasus with pink hair was walking backwards through the street. With a moment of annoyance, I noticed that she was heading right toward me. I glared at this: what kind of person walked in a busy street without watching where she was going? I noticed that she was guiding a family of ducks through the city. It was cute, I supposed, but the only thing that the ducks *really* added to the situation was that they made the situation careless *and* impractical. They didn't live in the city, so why was this pegasus bringing them through it where they could get stepped on or--

I slammed into the yellow pegasus. My eyes teared up and I realized that she was standing directly on top of my right hand. She had also hit the scars on my chest directly with her flank. They didn't still hurt or anything, but the skin there had always been a bit more tender and sensitive than everywhere else after they had healed. Getting hit there during the collision took the pain I felt to a new level of discomfort.

"Hey!" I shouted in frustration.

"Please excuse me," the yellow pegasus said quietly. She didn't seem to register that she had even hurt me, which added to my frustration.

"I'm walking here!" I shouted even louder.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry. I-I-I was just trying to..." she started stuttering and backing away from me out of fear. In the back of my mind, I felt a bit of relief as she stepped off my hand. In the heat of the moment, though, her fear drove me to an even *more* annoyed state.

"*I'm sorry, I'm sorry!*" I said, not even trying to hide the fact that I was mocking her. Somewhere between the pain in my right hand and the annoyance at the pegasus in front of me, my temperament had switched over to full-blown anger. I took a few steps towards her, which scattered the family of ducks she had been watching over. "Why don't you just watch where you're going, stupid?"

"B-b-b-but I... I..." she was now stammering with fear.

This fear snapped something in the back of my mind. I was tired of constantly being feared by all the ponies I came into contact with over

nothing. *You want something to be afraid of?* I asked her in my mind. As I did, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and let loose a roar. Powerful, and loud, it was meant to intimidate weaker opponents. I had no delusions about there being *any* pony in the town square who would be unable to hear the sound I was now belting forth.

I opened my eyes and looked at the pegasus in front of me; she was now shaking in place with fear. I suddenly found myself hating everything about this pegasus: her color was too light. Her voice was too soft. She was blubbering like a baby because I had confronted her after she walked carelessly into me. My hatred solidified as I watched her start to cry. First, her lower lip started trembling, and then her eyes started welling up with tears. She took a few quick breaths, which were as soft as her voice had been. Her mouth stretched downward, making her eyes appear even larger and sadder than they already were. Finally, the dam burst, and she turned around, sobbing and running.

I watched her take off flying in fear, but I only felt a feeling of disgust. *How did she even manage to get a pair of wings? She was a disgrace to all pegasi with an attitude like...*

I suddenly realized where I had heard those exact words, years before. Shocked, I looked at the now-fleeing pegasus. I saw her stumble in mid-flight, and couldn't help but imagine that it because of the injuries that I had inflicted on her for being 'unworthy.'

When I realized exactly *who* I had just acted like, I wanted nothing more than to disappear. I looked around, and all of the ponies from the town was staring at me with shock, anger, or fear. Their stares changed whatever shame I felt into anger: they didn't even know *half* of why what I had done was so wrong. As they kept staring, my anger kept growing. *What is wrong with these ponies?* I asked myself. *Hell, what's wrong with ponies in general? All I ever want when I visit their stupid cities is to mind my own damn business. All I ever get, though, is for them to stare at me like I'm some sort of freak! Are they afraid that I'm going to eat them? Or do they just hate all outsiders?* Finally, my passion overrode my logic and I decided, *Do they want a jerk? I'll give them a jerk!* "Ugh, please, all these lame ponies are driving me buggy. I gotta bail," I said to no one in particular. I flew off, hating them all.

Eventually, my rage subsided, and was replaced with even *more* regret. *Damn it*, I thought, *if Dash saw me doing that...* I didn't want to think about it. Right now, Dash was my only friend; if that were to change... I didn't want to think about *that*, either.

I found a cloud floating low in the sky and lay down on it. I shut my eyes and tried to push what just happened out of my mind. Regardless of my efforts, though the same scene replayed in my head: a yellow pegasus breaking down and crying because of what I had said to her. I fought with getting it out of my mind, but that just made it play over and over again all the clearer. This vicious cycle continued until finally, the scene replayed in my mind, but slightly differently...

"So what if I made a friend? You were the one who sent me to that stupid camp in the first place!" the yellow pegasus said to me.

"I did not send you to wallow with the *beute* for you to become one of them! If you had but a tenth of the talent of Gerard, you would not need *help* to be able to fly in a manner that is not a complete embarrassment to our race!" I rebuked her childish vehemence. I was angered by the fact that she had subverted yet *another* of my punishments for her.

"Dash could fly circles around pretty-boy Ger--" I balled my hand into a fist and brought it to her eye before she could finish disgracing my son with her insolent tongue.

I was almost angry enough at her ineptitude to start using my talons to hurt her, but I cleared my head of that desire and spoke again, "You burden my mind with your incompetence, and now you burden my ears by giving a name to your *precious friend* who, despite being physically inferior to you in every way, still ***managed to humiliate you in every possible way!***" I finished my speech by raising my voice to full volume. I had been disgusted when I learned that my daughter had been beaten in every round of the competitions that she had entered by a *pegasus*, our *prey*.

"B-but she... I..." My earlier disgust returned when I saw that the yellow pegasus in front of me was about to cry. Here I thought she had been expressing anger to defend herself, which was a much better alternative to this... *cowardice* that I saw in front of me.

“Such *weakness!*” I shouted in rage. “From whom did you manage to steal a pair of wings? It is becoming more and more apparent by the minute that you were not born with them. Griffins have *dignity*, which you clearly *lack*, because here you are, blubbering in front of me like a cub who has lost her toy! Get out of my sight! You are lucky *my* father is no longer alive to see what weakness his line has come to; unlike me, *he* lacked the mercy to abstain from culling it!”

To my credit, I didn’t scream when I woke up terrified and shaking. It wasn’t because I didn’t want to, though; it was because as soon as I opened my mouth, the apple and what was left of this morning’s fish came spilling out instead. In the back of my mind, I noted that while *I* was supported by the cloud, the contents of my stomach were not. They fell below to what was fortunately an unpopulated field.

I didn’t care about the vomit, though. All that I was interested in was what the hell had just happened to me. I had fallen *asleep* in the middle of the day, which was strange enough: I had never had that happen to me before. Worse than the sleeping, though, was what I had just dreamed...

I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want to think about how much I hated the “pegasus” from that dream for being so weak and unable to stand up for my friend. I didn’t want to think of the conversation that had occurred ten minutes later, and left me a broken, bloody mess, barely clinging to life. I didn’t want to think about how I had been lucky: *I* had eventually recovered enough where I could fly again. I didn’t want to think back to Stormglider from Junior Speedsters’: she hadn’t been so lucky.

And that was all you. A voice in my mind spoke sweetly to me, adding to the guilt and terror that I now felt.

Most of all, I didn’t want to think about how I could relate to every single part of my father’s thought process as he had stood there, berating me.

I couldn’t hold back anymore: with a painful sob, I started crying. I knew that Dash would be looking for me by now, and that even if I stopped, she would be able to see the evidence of my tears. I didn’t care. Everything that had happened today was so distressing to me that I couldn’t hold myself back anymore.

Almost every wound from my past had been reopened in some form or another so far that day. As I sat there crying, memories from my childhood began flooding into my mind: being picked on at school, the seemingly nice boy I asked out on a date *laughing* at me to my face, not being able to sleep indoors for a week after I had tripped over and woke up Gregor one night. I began to cry even harder for each memory that came into my mind.

I lost track of time, but eventually, I calmed down. I didn't have any way of knowing what I looked like, but I figured that I could definitely do with a quick dip in some water. I eyed a lake below me, and dove into it.

When I broke through the surface of the water, I noticed how peaceful it was. Under the surface of the lake, there were no sounds, no troubles. There was only water. I completed the curve of my dive, though, and broke back above the water. I definitely felt a bit better, even if I was now soaking wet. I shook off whatever water I could and lay next to the lake.

"There you are!" a familiar voice called out after a few minutes had passed.

I turned around expectantly to Dash. "Hey, dude. What took you?"

"I've been looking everywhere for you. I thought I said to stay in the city!" Dash said, throwing her hooves out in front of her. She was obviously a little ticked.

"Crap, I forgot about that. I got bored waiting and decided to stretch my wings. Sorry, Dash," I lied to her, noting with discomfort how easy it had become to do so.

"Oh, it's okay," Dash said. As long as I was flying, she couldn't be mad at me. She put her hooves back in their usual resting spot and continued,. "The only reason I wanted to find you was for your party!"

"My what now?" I asked with dread.

"Pinkie Pie is throwing you a party in order to introduce you to everyone."

You should leave, now, a voice in my head spoke with a surprising amount of sense. *There's no way that this is going to end well.*

“Pinkie Pie?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Yeah,” Dash confirmed. “I know she’s annoying sometimes, but she throws the *best* parties! Lighten up a bit, G, and you’ll have fun! Anyway, it’s going to happen in half an hour at Sugarcube Corner. So... uh, I guess... keep doing what you were doing.”

“Aren’t you going to hang out?” I tried to keep the pleading out of my voice.

“Nah, G. I just remembered that I have to help with the preparations,” she replied. “We’ll hang out at the party, though. Promise.”

She flew off, and I was now left alone with my thoughts. I sincerely doubted that this party was going to be ‘fun.’ Pinkie Pie had a lame sense of humor. However, Dash was my friend, and she only ever looked out for me. If she told me that it would be fun, I could trust her. Plus, she was helping with the preparations; she’d at least keep them from being *too* annoying.

I decided that I would give this party a chance after all.

Chapter Five

I continued lying by the lake for a while. Though it was still a cool, breezy spring day, there was a hint of warmth to the sun that let me know that summer was right around the corner.

When I felt that it had been about a half hour, I stood up, stretched out my wings, and took flight toward Ponyville. I got a few glares that were harsher than the usual pony fare, but considering what I had done about an hour ago, I felt they were justified. Because Dash had forgotten to tell me which building ‘Sugarcube Corner’ was, I had to ask a pony for directions. When I found the place, I had to sit down for a moment as I glared at it.

The bakery was designed to look as if it were made out of desserts. The pillars that formed the front door’s frame were painted to look like peppermint sticks, the roof had white trim that resembled icing, and there was a giant pink cupcake on top of the whole thing. I remembered Pinkie Pie’s flying contraption from that morning; this building had taken that same aesthetic to an extreme.

Sighing, I stood up and walked through the front door. On the inside, it looked remarkably saner, regardless of the amount of party decorations that were now hung everywhere. I barely had time to register any of this, though, as I was greeted very quickly by my party’s host. “Gilda!” Pinkie Pie yelled, leaping across the room to land in front of me. “I’m so honored to throw you one of my signature Pinkie Pie parties!” she continued, leaning a bit too close to my face for my comfort. I grimaced at her words. *Pinkie Pie party? What, is this some sort of dweeby name-brand now?* I bit back the sardonic retort even as it formed in my mind. As annoying and pink as she was, she was still one of Dash’s friends, so I at least needed to try to not be *overtly* hostile towards her.

Where is Dash? I asked myself. I hadn’t seen her since she had left me alone at the lake. I sighed inwardly: the balloons and decorations were all very bright and colorful-- the exact opposite of what I preferred when choosing, well, *anything*. At first I thought that Dash didn’t know the type of decorations that I liked; I changed my mind when I saw the pink pony

smiling in front of me. If anything, Dash had probably talked her *down* to this level of decoration.

I realized that I felt very uncomfortable in that room. The decorations weren't my favorite, but a large part of my discomfort was that I didn't know any of the ponies here. A quick glance around showed me that none of them were glaring at me, at least, but it didn't make me feel any better. I figured the only thing that would do *that* would be if Dash was with me.

"And I really, truly, sincerely hope--" she was obviously new to the whole 'lying' thing and she overdid the descriptions of sincerity. "--that you feel welcome here, amongst all of us pony folk," she ended and her hoof out in front of her. I was familiar with the gesture: it indicated a more formal welcoming and display of honor than Dash's 'hoof pound.'

I stared at her hoof for a moment. I felt that this could be a symbol of a fresh start. If she was serious about offering friendship, I could put aside my annoyance with her personality; maybe I could even end up tolerating her like Dash did.

I honestly wanted to believe this. However, I also knew better than to go about expecting the best of others. I stared at Pinkie Pie with distrust, but decided to go along with her hoofshake. I figured that the worst thing that could happen was that it was some sort of--

Pain.

I stood there, motionless with surprise for a moment, as sudden, sharp pain shot up my arm and into my torso. The worst part was when I realized that I couldn't move on my own volition anymore. Somehow, Pinkie Pie had paralyzed me and put me in pain with only her hoof. I began to panic when I realized that I was trapped in this painful hoofshake.

As suddenly as it started, the pain ended. After all of my muscles had turned against me, I was now thrown off-balance by having them come back under my control. My balance wasn't helped any by the tingling, burning sensation that stayed in my arm, and I collapsed into a heap on the floor. For all the types of pain I had ever felt, that sizzling paralysis had been new to me. It wasn't the worst amount of pain, though, and I was still

breathing. My attention turned to Pinkie Pie, who started *laughing* at what she had done to me.

That *bitch*!

Driven by both anger and the adrenaline that came from the pain, I got up. *She thinks it's funny to do something like that with her hoof? I'll show her just how 'funny' the things I can do with my hands are.* Much like a lesser bird of prey, my fingers ended in talons that served as curved blades that easily sliced through flesh. Unlike a bird's legs, though, my arms were attached to my chest with in a sturdier fashion. I not only had cutting capabilities, but I also had a good deal of strength to work with as well.

That strength was about to come into play: I mentally prepared myself to rip Pinkie Pie's front leg out of the socket. She wouldn't *die* from blood loss, nor would she be unable to walk in the future. However, she *would* think twice before offering false promises of friendship to strangers and then laughing at them as she electrocuted them instead.

Right as I moved to deal out justice, I was interrupted by a familiar laugh. I turned and saw Dash walking over to us. My anger subsided, or at least it took a backseat to the sense of betrayal that I now felt: *Dash* was laughing at what had happened?

"Oh Pinkie Pie, the old hoofshake buzzer. You are a scream," she congratulated her pink friend.

Finally, it dawned upon me: *hoofshake buzzer*. Pony and pegasus hooves were made of a thick, almost bony stuff. When I compared hooves to my own scale-covered hands, the skin almost seemed paper-thin by comparison. A thought crossed my mind: *Maybe these buzzers are designed for ponies, and it doesn't hurt them so drastically?*

I felt a bit sick when I thought about what I had just stopped short of doing. My regret didn't *completely* sate my anger, though: the 'harmless' prank was still a cruel subversion of an otherwise cordial and friendly act. The worst part was that now Dash thought it was funny, I had to pretend to like it, too. I didn't want her to think I was unable to take a joke; if she did, she'd always be on-edge around me. "Yeah," I started. I couldn't fake a laugh very well, so I continued, "Good one, Pinkie Pie."

“Come on, G. I’ll introduce you to some of my other friends!” Dash called. I liked her suggestion: it would at least be a break from Pinkie Pie. There might have been some other cool ponies that I could hang out with.

“Right behind you, Dash!” I called out, ready to meet these ‘other’ friends. Before I left, though, I turned to Pinkie Pie. I wanted her to leave me alone, and decided that a bit of intimidation might cause her to back off on the pranks. Gone were the thoughts of friendship and tolerance from earlier. Instead, they had been replaced with loathing. If she thought her plan to torture me through a party was even the *least* bit subtle, she had another thing coming. “I know what you’re up to!” I growled at her.

“Great!” she said, smiling. To her credit, she played dumb fairly well.

“I know what you’re planning,” I repeated in order to make my point.

Again, she laughed. “Well I hope so,” she said, rolling her eyes, “this wasn’t supposed to be a *surprise* party,” she replied merrily.

I was a bit taken aback by this. Maybe she *actually* thought I was talking about the party and hadn’t picked up on what I was implying. “I *mean*, I’ve got my eye on you,” I said as menacingly as possible.

She surprised me by getting very close to my face, “And I’ve got my eye on you!” she said.

Despite everything that physiology told me about who would win in a fight, this scared me. I was in *her* territory now, which was *not* the best place to be during a war. I pondered over what this threat meant for me as I walked over to Dash to meet her friends.

She first gestured to an orange pony with light blond hair. “Okay. First up: Gilda, this is my friend Applejack. She’s pretty cool; she grows and harvests all the apples we eat in Ponyville.”

“Gosh, Rainbow,” I noticed that her accent stretched out the “Rain” part of Dash’s name. “I *told* you: don’t be spinnin’ no yarns about all the goin’s-on at Sweet Apple Acres.” Applejack turned to me with a look that was neither curious nor fearful. It reminded me of Dash’s face when we met at Junior

Speedsters'. She offered me her hoof, and I shook it: as Pinkie Pie had shown earlier, it was *hard* to fake sincerity. I was rewarded with my trust by a very vigorous hoofshake.

"But aside from Dash's tall tales, how d'ya do, Gilda?" she asked when we finished the hoofshake. "We don't get many griffins out in these parts no more, but my great-grandpappy used to have all sorts of dealin's with the... Gross Feeders. You know anyone from around there?"

I smiled openly at this. Although she had somewhat botched the pronunciation, the *Grosfeder* tribe was the second-largest tribe of griffins. The largest was the *Scharfkral*, of which I, well, *my father* belonged to. The *Grosfede*rs had much better political relations with non-griffin societies; after Celestia's massacre, the griffin representatives who visited Canterlot to draft a treaty of boundaries had all been from the *Grosfeder* tribe. They lived out near the sea and they made most of their livelihood from fishing. Their most famous cultural aspect was that they cultivated crops to augment their diet. Between their relative tolerance of ponies and their love of produce, I could easily believe that they would have sent merchants this far from their nesting grounds in order to buy apples.

"Uh... can't say I know anyone *originally* from there by name, but I have an uncle who went and joined them," I answered. "I don't know too much about *him*, either: we only saw him once a year during holidays."

That had been until father and he had had a huge fight during the *Festerjag*, a huge feast to celebrate autumn and the last few months of good hunting left in the year. Father effectively ruined the first course for our family by throwing Wallace at the table. Although Wallace got in a few blows, eventually he had realized that he was fighting a losing fight, and fled. As he had flown away, Father roared after him to 'never taint these lands with your unwelcome cowardice again.'

I sighed inwardly. I missed Uncle Wally.

"Haha, a black sheep," Applejack said knowingly. "I know what that's like; some of my relatives on my mom's side went south to grow *oranges* a few generations back, of all the darndest..."

“Excuse me, dear Applejack, but not all of us have yet been introduced to the guest of honor!” a white unicorn interrupted the pony I was talking to. We both turned to look at her, and the first thing that I noticed about her was that her entire appearance was well-maintained. When combined with her accent and her spoken vocabulary, I figured that she was quite ‘civilized.’

“I am Rarity,” she began her introduction by taking a step forward and extending a hoof. It wasn’t quite a hoofshake, so I improvised by grabbing her leg and bowing my head. Apparently, this was acceptable, and she continued speaking, “And might I be the *first* to compliment your plumage. Your feathers are simply *beautiful*, it’s a shame that they appear so rough and unkempt.”

“Uhh...” I didn’t know how to react to this. I was honored that she liked the patterns in my feathers; every griffin had a distinct pattern that set us apart from one another. However, she had also called me ‘unkempt.’ I had never met anybody who had the ability to simultaneously compliment and insult me.

Dash must have picked up on my confusion. Before Rarity could object, my friend grabbed my arm and pulled me in front of a purple unicorn with indigo hair. “This is Twilight Sparkle,” she introduced the unicorn to me and continued, “She’s almost as good at magic as I am at *everything*.” Twilight Sparkle looked at Dash with an annoyed look on her face; I wondered if she realized, coming from Dash, how big a compliment that was.

“Thanks, Rainbow, but I’m nothing special.” Turning to me, she offered a hoof for shaking. Her face brightened a bit when she continued, “If you want to see some *real* magic, you should see Princess Celestia in action sometime!”

I felt my beak fall open out of shock. I sincerely hoped that she *didn’t* realize what she had just said. Ignorance would be proof that Celestia was making an effort to rewrite history in her favor; however, I would prefer that to someone *purposefully* making a joke about the genocide of my people. I stood there staring for too long, and a dejected look came over Twilight Sparkle’s face. Trying to fix *my* mistake, I quickly grabbed her hoof and shook it, but it was too late: the damage was done. Because I had shunned her hoofshake, she now had a sad look on her face.

At least I hadn't said the first thing that came to mind: *Yeah, we should make an afternoon out of it.*

Dash picked up that something wrong had been said, so she led me away and I followed. "Last but not least," she said, "my oldest friend, Fluttershy!"

I felt like I had just involuntarily entered free-fall. The yellow pegasus pony from earlier was now standing right in front of me. I recognized her *name* from some of Rainbow Dash's stories at Junior Speedsters', but this was the first time that I had a face to go with the name. Unfortunately, this wasn't my first time meeting her.

She looked at me and cowered backwards, whimpering. On the one hand, I now felt terrible for what had happened earlier; on the other, though, it *had* been an hour, and she was now surrounded by friends. If she was still scared of me, I couldn't believe that it was *completely* my fault.

"Aww... Fluttershy," Dash complained with a disappointed look in one eye. The other was obscured by the fact that she was wiping her face with her hoof out of frustration.

"Dash, it's okay. I'm used to stuff like this happening when ponies meet me."

At this, I saw anger cross the yellow pony's face. She glared at me, but she still didn't say anything.

"Yeah," Dash said, "It's just..."

I never found out what 'it' just was. At that exact moment, Pinkie Pie began performing her duties as a hostess. She cried out, "Everyone, I'd like you to meet Gilda, a long-time dear friend of Rainbow Dash!" I didn't like being made the center of attention like she just did; ponies already took too much notice of me whenever I walked around in public. As if putting me in the spotlight wasn't bad enough, Pinkie Pie added *personal* level of discomfort to the situation by jumping over and hugging me. I didn't know her that well. I did not like what parts of her I *did* know. I wanted her to let go. "Let's honor her and welcome her to Ponyville!" she finished the introduction hug

and let go of me. Annoyed after having my personal space violated so badly, I glared after her.

“Yay, Gilda!” I heard, as the ponies in the room cheered. All that I could do was to put on an awkward smile, as now, it was *appropriate* to stare at me. Dash came over and put her front leg around me, which at least took the edge off my discomfort.

“Please, help yourself!” Pinkie Pie said, gesturing towards the food. I remembered the hoofshake buzzer from earlier, though: the only reason I even *considered* her offer was because she was allowing me to choose what food to eat. She couldn’t have tampered with *all* of the food.

I hoped.

I saw a bowl that looked suspiciously like my favorite candy. “Vanilla lemon drops?” I asked. I still enjoyed them after the run-in I had with them at Junior Speedsters’; since then, I learned to limit the amount of them I ate to avoid a stomachache. Two or three wouldn’t hurt, though, so I went for it, “Don’t mind if I do.”

I popped one in my mouth, and--

Hot.

For the second time in under ten minutes, I regretted taking Pinkie Pie up on an offer of ‘hospitality.’ The candy had been filled not with lemon-and-vanilla flavored jelly, but with some sort of extremely spicy liquid. My mouth was on fire.

I needed water. Anything, really, would have washed the burning out of my mouth. I tried to vocalize this request, but all I could manage was to yell, “Hot!” I glanced around desperately, and met Dash’s eyes.

“G! The punch!” she said, pointing to the bowl of green liquid on the other side of the room.

I ran over and grabbed a glass. I tipped it up into my mouth and waited for the relief of the drink. Instead, I felt a cool, splashing sensation on my chest. “Huh?” I said, in spite of the pain in my mouth.

“Well what do you know? Pepper in the vanilla lemon drops, and the punch served in a dribble glass!” Pinkie Pie gloated. The fire in my mouth made me want to teach her the lesson that that lizard had taught me about gloating after only *maiming* someone.

For the second time, a wave of sadness came over me as I saw that Dash was joining in with everyone else at laughing at me. “Ha! Priceless. Priceless!” she said, kicking the ground.

Unlike the hoofshake buzzer, I couldn’t find any way that this *wasn’t* supposed to be a painful prank: ponies, if anything, would be *more* susceptible to spicy foods like that... yet there was Dash, laughing at me.

I was glad that my eyes were already watering from the ultra-spicy vanilla lemon drop. I looked to the other side of the room, and saw someone’s glass unattended. I went over and drank the whole thing in one swallow. It didn’t completely take of the burn out of my mouth, but it helped quite a bit. My mouth was merely stinging when I said, bitterly, “Yeah. *Hilarious*,” to Dash.

She didn’t say anything, but she shot me what looked like an apologetic glance. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt, and accepted her apology.

“Hey, G! Look, presents!” Dash’s look turned into a smile as she prompted my attention to a pile of boxes that she was standing next to.

I put aside my indignation at the pranks for a moment as I smiled at the pile. From what I understood, all of presents on the table were for me! I hadn’t expected anything in return for the Wonderbolts cards, but Dash had certainly come through. I grabbed one and pulled the ribbon off it with my beak, being careful not to destroy it with my talons. Suddenly, it exploded, sending venomous snakes in every direction! Unconsciously, I puffed up: almost every hair and feather on my body stood on end.

After the initial shock of the snake explosion, however, I realized that they were made of cloth. Anger replaced fear, as I realized that once again, Pinkie Pie had replaced something that could have been *kind* with something that was instead *cruel*.

"Spittin' snakes. Hah, somepony pulled that prank on me last month!" Applejack said with a smile.

"Ha, ha." I laughed sarcastically. "I bet I know who that was."

"You do?" Pinkie Pie said, grinning at me.

It was all that I could do to stop myself from pouncing on her and knocking that smile off her face. I shook the violence out of my head, though. Dash wouldn't like...

A twinge of pain gripped my chest. I still had trouble comprehending that Dash was finding all of these cruel pranks funny. The hoofshake buzzer, I could write off. However, the spicy vanilla lemon drops and the fake present... *Maybe her standards for pranking have lowered in the past three years*, I thought with some confusion. I retreated to the corner where I had grabbed someone's drink earlier. I thought about joining in on some conversation, or trying some of the party festivities. However, I didn't want to get pranked anymore, so I just stayed in my corner where I imagined it was safest. I looked over at Dash. She was chatting with Applejack, and I could tell by her expressions that she was enjoying it.

What did you expect? I thought to myself. *Did you really think that she wouldn't replace you at the first possible opportunity?*

I thought that I should be sad, seeing how many friends Dash had to keep her busy. However, all that I felt was bitterness. *She* hadn't been kicked from her home; she had left it freely to get a job that left her enough time to train for flying. *Her* father hadn't sabotaged her days in school by beating her mercilessly instead of teaching her basic flight control.

I stayed in my corner for at least ten minutes. Eventually, Fluttershy brought in a flock of songbirds and treated the whole party to a musical score. I might have enjoyed listening to it if I hadn't been in such a lousy mood; then again, I still felt guilty from losing my temper at her earlier.

When the songbirds were finished, a pink voice called out, "Cake time, everypony!" Pinkie Pie came through two swinging doors, pushing a cart

with a fairly large cake. It lifted my spirits: she wouldn't poison an entire party full of people just to prank me.

That's what you thought about the party food, I reminded myself as I walked over to the cake.

A small, purple reptile spoke up, "Can I blow out the candles?"

"Why don't we let Gilda blow out the candles, Spike. She is the guest of honor after all," Twilight Sparkle reprimanded him, almost like a parent would a child.

At that, a strange realization came over my mind. What sort of kinks was this Twilight Sparkle into? I couldn't imagine what the father must have looked like to result in something bipedal and scaly. I decided not to judge, so the only other thing I consciously thought on the matter was that, all things considered, she was fairly young.

Twilight Sparkle's son let out a grunt of frustration. I elbowed him out of the way because I wanted to blow out the candles, "Exactly," I agreed with Twilight Sparkle.

I took a deep breath and blew out all the candles in one try. Success! I heard a faint sizzling sound, though, and looked back at the candles. They were lit again! I blew them out again. And again. And again. All the ponies in the room started laughing at me, but I kept trying to extinguish the candles. I got lightheaded and, panting, I stopped to catch my breath.

"Relighting birthday candles!" exclaimed Twilight Sparkle's son... Spike, had she called him? "I love that prank. What a classic."

"Now, I wonder who could have done *that*," Pinkie Pie said coyly.

She had been alone with the cake in the back, and had brought it out to the front. "Yeah, I wonder," I said, not even trying to keep the suspicion out of my voice. However, I was distracted by a wet, squishing sound coming from next to me. I looked at the cake, and saw Spike's tail disappearing into it. He was burrowing through my cake like a mole.

"Who cares?" he said. "This cake is amazing!"

“Spike,” Twilight Sparkle said flatly.

“What? It was great, try some!” Spike retorted.

Woman, control your child! I thought angrily. There had been nothing wrong with that cake, save for the candles; now, yet *another* thing had been ruined at this party. I seethed with righteous anger...

“Hey, G. You’re not upset over some silly candles, are you?”

All things considered, I realized, that I *wasn’t* mad about the candles. They had been harmless fun, like the dribble glass.

“No way Dash,” I replied, trying keep anger out of my voice. “Like I said, I’m down with a good prank.”

It’s these painful, cruel pranks that I’m upset over, I added silently.

“Come on, then. Let’s have some cake!” Dash said, running to go get some plates. Pinkie Pie caught my eye, though, as she simply took a bite out of the cake. I imagined that Dash was going to at least cut some out of the part that wasn’t ruined; however, this blatant disregard for etiquette struck a new nerve with me.

Based on with my previous conversations with Pinkie Pie, I decided to abandon all pretext. I grabbed her around the throat and pulled her behind the cake. I bent my tail so that no one on the other side could see us.

“Hey. I’m watching you. Like a hawk,” I said. I wasn’t threatening her; I was just venting some of my frustrations toward her.

With a note of disgust, I felt the cake in her mouth slide down her throat as she swallowed. “Why?” she said with her mouth clear. “Can’t you watch me like a griffin?”

Touché, I thought in spite of myself.

“Hey, y’all!” Applejack called out. I let go of Pinkie Pie and came out from behind the cake. “It’s pin the tail on the pony! Let’s play!”

Rarity let out a gasp of delight, "Oh, my favorite game! Can I go first? Can I have the purple tail?"

Everything at this party had gone wrong so far. I wanted to try this game before it did, too. I butted in, saying, "Well, I *am* the guest of honor." I grabbed the purple tail, which was on the floor in front of Rarity, "I'll have the purple tail," I added. I didn't even know the rules of this game, but I figured I would improvise.

"Yeah, Gilda should definitely go first," Pinkie Pie agreed with me. Suddenly, I didn't want to play this game so much after all. "Let's get you blindfolded," the pink host continued.

Spike walked up to me with a strip of cloth. He was surprisingly quick for a mixed breed, and before I could do anything about it, he had wrapped the blindfold around my head. "Hey, what," I grunted as the pressure increased, pulling my eyelids into my eyes, "what are you doing?" I grunted, this time in frustration: being blind was torture to a griffin; sight was our main sense.

As I came to terms with being blind, my world began to spin. I had no idea what was going on because I was still blindfolded. "We're spinning you around and around and then you pin the tail on the pony," Pinkie Pie explained. Suddenly, I stopped spinning, but I was still dizzy. "Now just walk straight ahead and pin the tail."

"Now just walk straight ahead and pin the tail," I said, mockingly. I was blind, not stupid. "Yeah, right," I said, sarcastically. "This is another prank, isn't it?" I turned around completely and said, "I'm going this way."

I heard Pinkie Pie's voice from behind me, "Wait!," she said urgently, "The poster is..."

I didn't hear the rest of the sentence, though, because suddenly, I slipped on something wet and paste-like. I fought to keep my balance, but there was more of the paste stuff everywhere and I couldn't get a grip on the ground. I slid forward, screaming. I felt two pieces of wood part on either side of me, and finally, something hard and wooden stopped me: some sort of table?

With a quick swipe of my talon, I cut the blindfold off my head. I had slid all the way from the room with the party into the kitchen. Looking down, I saw that my hands and feet were now covered in cake frosting. I didn't remember why, but I knew that I wanted to go back out into the parlor. I walked back through the wooden doors of the kitchen, still dizzy and dazed. Some of the feathers around my eyes had become ruffled in the impact, too: something purple was obscuring my vision.

"Uh, Gilda? You pinned the tail on the wrong end."

I was confused at Pinkie Pie's words. Then, I focused on the purple thing that was obscuring my vision. It was the purple tail from earlier.

One last time, every pony in the room started to laugh at me. I felt something in the back of my mind snap. All of my frustration from this morning, all of the shame and sadness from this afternoon, and all of the anger from this party burst through in a white-hot, vicious rage. I let out a roar, which did nothing except build up adrenaline.

I opened my eyes, and saw that I was in the air above the guests. They were all staring at me. I hated being stared at! I was so thoroughly pissed off that I shouted the first thing that came to mind, "*This* is your idea of a good time? I've never met a lamer bunch of dweebs in all my life! And Pinkie Pie," I felt my eye twitch, "you... you are *queen lame-o* with your weak little party pranks!" Finally, I saw a bit of fear cross the pink child's face. "Did you *really* think you could make me lose my cool?" I spoke the words, but was too angry to note the irony in them. I landed and walked over to my friend, saying, "Well, Dash and I have ten times as much cool as the rest of you put together." I put my arm around her, but I felt her pull away from me. I looked at her, and she was frowning angrily at me. Too angry to realize what this meant, though, I continued. "Come on Dash, we're bailing on this pathetic scene!" I said, walking over to the door.

I looked back, but Dash was still where she had been a moment ago: she hadn't moved to the door with me. I should have realized what this meant. Instead, it only made me angrier, "Come on, *Rainbow Dash*, I said, 'We're leaving!'"

I stood there for a moment, staring at Dash. She had her eyes closed, like she was thinking hard about something. As I realized why she was hesitating, my rage subsided and I was left with sadness. The full weight of what I had just done hit me, and I dreaded what she was going to say next. When Dash opened her eyes, she had a look of righteous indignation on her face. "You know, Gilda?" my heart broke at this. I guessed that I had *started* the "whole names" thing; however, all I had ever been to her was "G." Having her call me by my full name made the bottom fall out of my stomach. "*I* was the one who set up all those 'weak pranks' at this party," she continued.

I gasped at this. "*What?!*" I couldn't even understand the implications of what Dash said; all that I felt was shock. I had been so sure that it was Pinkie Pie...

I looked over at Pinkie Pie, and she let out a quiet, "Ooh."

Dash stepped in front of me, with offended anger showing on her face. "So I guess *I'm* queen lame-o," she accused.

"Come on, Dash." *Please*. "You're joshin' me." *That's all this is, it's another cruel joke.*

"They weren't *all* meant for you!" Dash said apologetically. "It was just dumb luck that you set them all off!"

"I should have known! That dribble cup had Rainbow Dash written all over it!" Pinkie Pie added, inanely. Even during a fight, she just *couldn't* stop getting between Dash and me!

I felt my whole world crumbling around me. I denied it some more, "No way. It was Pinkie Pie! *She* set up this party to trip me up, to make a fool of me."

"Me?" Pinkie Pie denied. "*I* threw this party to improve your attitude! I thought a good party might turn that frown upside down!"

"And you sure didn't need any help making a fool of yourself." This time, Dash was just angry. She flared her wings up and leaned forward at me. I shrunk back. "You know, this is not how I thought my old friend would treat

my new friends! If being cool is all you care about, maybe you should go find some new cool friend someplace else.”

I tried to keep my cool as she stood there, berating me. It didn’t work, though: she was right, I had been out of line on many things today. The worst part of it, though, was how she had said, ‘find some new cool friend.’ First, it was cruel of her, when she had seen firsthand that it wasn’t easy for me to make friends. Secondly, by using the singular ‘friend,’ she was bringing up how she knew that she was my only friend.

The part that hit me hardest, though, was that I needed to find a ‘new’ friend. As I realized what she was saying, it was a monumental effort to keep from breaking down and crying right then and there. My sorrow was so absolute, it was violent, almost angry. I fought hard to keep my voice from shaking as I lashed out blindly, “Yeah? Well you... you... you are such an, a flip-flop: cool one minute and lame the next.” I turned to the door. “When you decide not to be lame anymore, gimme a call.”

I slammed the door behind me, and took off in a random direction. I couldn’t see anymore: I was crying too hard. I felt something heavy bounce off me, and then there was a sort of slow voice that complained sadly, “Mailbag... noooo...”

I didn’t care about some stupid mail pegasus, though. I had nothing left. This trip had been a complete disaster. I had come looking for solace; instead, I had succeeded in turning my one remaining friend against me. I couldn’t think straight. I wasn’t even watching where I was going, I just flew as fast as I could, sobbing.

* * *

About an hour later, I was too tired to continue flying. I found a cloud and lay down on it. I was hungry, but more noticeably, I was thirsty: I was still crying, though it had tapered off into a sniveling, quiet affair. When I thought about what I was doing, I became angry at myself for being so weak and impotent to just be sitting and crying. Hating myself made me start crying again with renewed vigor.

Eventually, even the saddest thoughts left me unable to continue crying. Instead, I was filled with a great, heavy sorrow. I shut my eyes, feeling

tired. I thought about what I was going to do for dinner, but then I realized that it didn't really matter anymore.

It was during this train of thought that I heard a fluttering. All of a sudden, I was falling! I brought up my wings to steady myself, but I didn't need to: there was a second cloud waiting, right below this one.

Sitting on it was Rainbow Dash, staring at me with hatred. The fear I felt from seeing her like that made it hard to breathe. She tried to keep a cool demeanor while talking, but her anger marked every word as she said, "Do you mind telling me what the *hell* is *wrong* with you?"

"I..." I tried speaking, but this was the wrong thing to do.

She shouted over the meager defense that I had attempted, "I knew you tried getting rid of Pinkie Pie. *That* was fine. But what *business* did you have bullying Fluttershy like that?" She shouted the last words, and I could do nothing but bear the brunt of her assault. "I *knew* it was a mistake inviting you to visit!" she continued, "It's no wonder you don't have any friends when *this* is how you act."

If she had wanted to incite me to anger, it was this line that did it. *She* had caused all of the problems I faced during the last three years, and now she was going to bring up how *I* didn't have any friends because of it? It was *her* fault that I was an outcast amongst griffins.

I can end that right now. I realized. *It will be so easy.* I looked at the pegasus in front of me, no longer as a friend, but as the focus of my *Verbannung Suche...*

Despite the anger present in his non-scarred eye, my father hadn't minced any words as he spoke, "I have come to the decision that you are a waste of my effort. Your flying is as laughable as your hunting skills; griffins half your age can do better." His voice turned malicious as he continued, "You defy my will at every turn. Every bit of aid that I give you, you subvert with your uselessness. I no longer take responsibility for you."

I had cringed at his words: in our tribe, children were the responsibility of their parents until they were an adult. By saying what he had, my father had just disowned me.

“Furthermore, I do not wish to see you clamoring about our respectable village begging for scraps from those who have not yet grown tired of your ineptitude. Therefore, I am levying against you the *Verbannung Suche*,” he said in a cold voice. At this, I started crying. He had simply ignored my tears as he finished, “As you know, you are entitled to a task to complete in order to rejoin our race. So, I am giving you one that will either impart upon you some hunter’s spirit or will require you to fly at least as well as a cub,” he paused, and a wicked look crossed his face.

“Bring me the head of your little ‘friend,’” he had said, smiling down at me with malice.

Outside of my memories, I felt his smile cross my own beak as I sized up Rainbow Dash. I saw a glimpse of fear crack her anger, and she tensed backwards while opening her wings. It was this, more than anything, that drove me to action: it was now or never.

“What--” was the only confused word that she got out. I interrupted by pouncing on her before she could fly away. I grabbed her slender neck with my left hand, and I pinned her hind legs to the cloud with my thighs. She grabbed my left arm with both of her front hooves, but she couldn’t shake my grip. I raised my right hand into the air, talons out, and I wondered whether I could take her head off with one swipe or if I’d have to hack away at her spine in order to break it. I was relishing the power I held over her, but at the same time, my violent hunter’s nature was screaming for me to finish the act.

“G... Gilda?” Rainbow Dash managed to rasp out right before I brought my talons down. She was having trouble speaking because I was holding her neck so tightly. “Please... no...,” she begged as she began to cry.

At this, I was struck by the realization of exactly *what* it was that I was doing. I was seconds away from killing a pegasus who, more than anything, had always acted as a friend to me. Even after everything I had done today, she had found me. She was angry, but she probably would have given me a chance to answer for my offenses against her *other* friends.

I realized with disgust that we had still been friends when she had shown up at my cloud. Now, though...

Dash was beneath me, trembling and sobbing. As a I felt warmth spreading between my legs, I realized just *how* terrified I had made my former friend. I saw that my talons had cut into her neck, and she was now bleeding. The sight of her blood solidified the grave nature of what I had done. I let go of her neck and stepped off of her, but it didn't matter. There was no return from where I had just gone. I started walking backwards away from her, horrified at myself for what I had done.

She sat up and looked at me with fear and betrayal in her eyes. For one last time, we locked eyes. I wanted to cut my own throat open for what I had just done, but she had been through enough without having to have *that* image burned into her memory. Instead, I just continued walking backwards. "Dash... I'm so sorry," I finally whispered as I took the last step and fell over the edge of the cloud.

I didn't flail my arms in protest as gravity pulled me down, nor did I open my wings to stop myself. I simply falling like I had when I was diving earlier. The difference was that this time, I didn't intend to pull out of the dive.

As I rushed towards the ground, a few good parts of my life flashed in my mind. The few, rare moments of begrudging respect that my father offered. Gretchen, my only older sister, giving me flying lessons. Dash and I winning first place in a relay race at Junior Speedsters': the only race I won that summer.

These fond memories gave way to a new train of thought: regrets. I regretted that I hadn't been able to do more with my life. I wished that things hadn't turned out so... *wrong*. I wished that I hadn't ended up so alone. I would never be a mother, something that deep down, I had always wanted more than anything else.

My memories and regrets subsided as quickly as they came, and for once in my life, the emptiness had substance to it. I was filled with peace as I realized that soon, everything would be over: the pain, the suffering... *everything*.

I took a peek at the ground: it was close and getting closer by the second. I closed my eyes: I didn't want my last thought to be of impact. Instead, I thought of Dash. We had had a lot of good times together, and I was happy

to have had her as a friend. I smiled when I thought of all the mischief we had gotten into over that one, perfect summer.

I heard a sound that was like wind blowing through reeds, but ignored it. Instead, I thought of Dash's rainbow sphere from this morning. It had been one of the most beautiful things that I had ever seen.

I heard a tremendous explosion, though, which broke my concentration. I felt something slam into me from above and grab hold of me. My orientation changed, too: instead of falling headlong towards the ground, I was facing upwards and moving horizontally.

I opened my eyes and saw Dash above me. She was cradling me, and she had a look of immense concentration on her face. Her neck was streaked with lines of blood and we were traveling faster than I had ever moved before, but what struck me the most were the streams of tears that were flowing out of her eyes.

Chapter Six

We didn't keep flying at as high of a speed for very long. Dash slowed down before flying upwards. We came to a stop when she set us down on a low-lying cloud.

No longer carrying me, she shifted her forelimbs as she collapsed on top of me into a tight hug. I put my arms around her gently, so as not to hurt her any more than I already had, and held her close to me. "Don't ever do something so... so..." she began, but she choked up too much to continue. Instead, Dash buried her face into my neck, so I felt it more than I heard it when her silent tears turned into deeper, heaving sobs. As I felt my neck becoming wet, the full weight of the mistake I had almost made hit me, and I couldn't stop myself: I started crying along with her.

As we lay there holding each other, I was filled with an entirely different emotion than my tears were expressing. In that moment, I felt a deeper connection to Dash than I had ever felt with anyone. Ironically, sharing in this sadness with her made me feel complete inside. The sensation was deeper and more vivid than the peace I had felt earlier when I had resigned myself to death. For the first time in what had been years, I felt happy. I wished that we could stay together like that forever.

It was a fool's wish.

I lost track of how long we *did* stay like that, but eventually I stopped crying. As I slowly opened my eyes, I saw that the sun was now hanging low in the sky. Dash's crying finally tapered off with a few last sobs and she asked, "Krrndmm?" The words were lost in my feathers; she must not have realized that her head was still buried in my chest. Pulling her head back as she looked up at me; her tear-reddened eyes were pleading me for something. "Gilda?" she asked a second time. I knew what she wanted to ask, but I let her finish her question. "What... what happened back there?"

There were so many factors leading up to today, I didn't know where to start. All that I knew was that I was done with lying. I had done more than enough of that today. At the very least, she deserved the truth for saving

my life, let alone as an apology for what I had done. This included, I admitted, stopping my habit of choosing words before I said them in an effort to be 'cool' around her. I couldn't *quite* decide how much information would be too much, so in keeping with my new desire to be completely open with her, I decided to start from the beginning.

"We..." I stopped to clear my throat; crying for so long had left a lump in it. "We used to be such a proud race. There are stories of griffins from long ago that were brave heroes, had great honor, or had exceptional wisdom. But that was long ago..." As I paused, Dash nuzzled her head into my feathers again. This made me smile in spite of the dark history I was about to delve into. "We lost that, though," I continued with genuine regret. "It happened sometime around when the gender ratio shifted and females started to outnumber males by a wide margin. Our culture shifted away from our traditional values and towards the survival of our race." As I recounted the choices my ancestors had made, my tone turned bitter: "It didn't help, though. We forsook our honor, our compassion, and our culture for nothing. Families became more about creating children than about sharing love. They were just playing a twisted numbers game, where they would increase the *total* number of children just to increase the total male population. The only problem was that families had a limited number of resources they could use in order to raise their children. Around this time," I swallowed another lump in my throat. It was terrible, having to tell Dash this, but she deserved to understand. "It wasn't uncommon for a newborn female to be killed within minutes, just to make things *easier* for the parents."

As I said this, I felt Dash gasp. I didn't blame her one bit; it had been one of the darkest times in griffin history. I continued, feeling the resolve to finish what I had started, "It still didn't help: the griffin population kept shrinking with every generation. There just weren't enough males to go around. Still, it was, and to this day it *is*, looked down upon for a male to take more than one wife. At least *some* of the old values remain," I said, but this time, I was completely bitter. Mathematics favored polygamy over infanticide as a solution, yet we were desperately holding on to the 'mate for life' paradigm out of tradition.

"Over the centuries," I continued, "tribes either died out or merged with each other. Eventually, there were only four tribes left. The *Schnelfluge* was the largest of these because they didn't kill their daughters. They lived

far to the west, in the desert mountains, which made it hard for them to hunt to get all the food they needed. Eventually, some of them got the idea to start hunting ponies in a nearby city for food.”

At this, Dash hugged me even tighter and I heard her whimper. Compared to her usually bold personality, it was such quiet and soft action that I felt a pang of sorrow deep in my heart. “That’s where my tribe’s records of the events get kind of hazy. I don’t know how long they did it, or how widespread it was.” I left out the part where it was usually the youngest ponies that were targeted, so that the population could more easily replace its losses. Dash didn’t need to know that for me to make my point. “But I do know that one day, about two centuries ago, they stopped.”

Dash moved her head away from my neck and let go of me a little. “Why?” she asked, trembling.

“Because the pony queen, Celestia, came and visited them one day. The way that the records tell it, there was a huge flash of white light. When it faded, only three griffins from the tribe were left alive,” I answered. I bit back as much anger as I could when I continued, “There had been eighty members in the tribe that morning.”

The look of horror on Dash’s face said more than she could voice. “Celestia... killed...”

I interrupted her and gave one of my more pony-centric interpretations of the incident to ease her mind. “Yes. Personally, though, I don’t give her *full* blame of the incident. It might have been *proportionally* greater than what we did to her society, but she was only doing it to keep her subjects safe. Going around killing like that was an act of war, one that Celestia answered swiftly.”

I wasn’t expecting to see Dash smiling. It was a dark, kind of sad smile, but nonetheless, it was a jarring reaction. “I guess that explains,” she said, “your reaction to what Twilight said at the party.”

“Yeah. Griffins have seen enough of Celestia’s magic to last us quite some time,” I replied, trying to avoid a tone that was either too bitter or too joking. “But anyway, after that afternoon, there were barely a hundred griffins total left alive. The three survivors each went to a tribe and told them what

happened. The benefit, if you could call it one, was that the infanticide stopped somewhat. It's not completely uncommon these days, but it's a lot less prevalent than it used to be.

"So, that's the story of how I was born, I guess," I braced myself inwardly, because I was about to delve into events that were much more personal, if less of a tragedy. "My father, for what it's worth, didn't *kill* me. That's basically the first and last thing he did for me, though. He didn't kill any of his children, but that doesn't make him a saint."

"You've got brothers and sisters?" Dash said joyously, her expression brightening.

"Yeah. Last I heard, there's seventeen of us total: thirteen daughters, four sons."

"*Seventeen?*" Dash asked, amazed. It was a fairly large amount for a family, even of griffins.

"Yep. One child per year, like clockwork," I said flatly. At this, Dash's expression turned sad. I tried to lighten it again by adding, "All of our birthdays fall within a week of each other, so we usually celebrate them all on the same day. It's not as... brightly decorated as pony parties, but it's become a sort of unofficial summer holiday in our tribe because of how big of an event it is."

Hearing this didn't help Dash like I thought it would, "So you missed your party at Junior Speedsters'? Why didn't you tell me? I could've--"

"It's okay, Dash," I interrupted her to calm her down. "You came along with me when I told you I was ditching activities that day. I got to spend the day with my best friend, it was already my best birthday ever."

At that, Dash finally smiled again. She put her head back into my chest feathers and tightened her hug.

"But yeah. My father wasn't very creative about punishment most of the time; he usually just hit us. There were some special occasions, though, where he put extra thought into punishment. That's where Junior

Speedsters' came into play: it was punishment because I'm such a poor flier."

"Nhh yhh nnn" Dash said.

"Yes, I am," I corrected her. "I didn't even learn to fly until I was eight; most of my class could do it before they even entered school. I was always behind them, athletically. It didn't help that I was more interested in our lore and culture than learning how to fly or socializing with them. It all finally came to a tipping point, a bit more than three years ago. One day, my father tasked me in catching food for our whole family. I came back, ten hours later, empty-handed. He backhanded me, left, and came back ten minutes later with a stag, so that everyone 'who was not a gross disappointment' could eat. A few days later, he told me that I was going to be sent to learn with the *beu*... well, he's got his names for pegasi, and none of them translate to anything pleasant. He doesn't respect the flying abilities of any non-griffin. I was sent to Junior Speedsters' with you because of a punishment."

Dash turned her head to speak. Her ear tickled as it brushed across my chest, which made me smile again in spite of all the dark memories I was bringing up. "That's why you were so bummed the first week of camp?"

"Yeah. It took me a while to warm up to the whole idea of flying with a bunch of pegasi, especially growing up with my father bad-mouthing them at every chance he got."

"I bet the others didn't make that easy," Dash said quietly.

"Nope," I sighed sadly. Dash's head was a pleasant weight on my chest every time I took a breath, and a deeper breath made me feel her presence even more. "But you beat me in every event, except for the relay. My father was not happy at all."

"What... what did he do?" I felt her tense up with guilt.

"Basically, he kicked me out of the tribe, except on one condition," I paused, trying to find the best way to say this, "it being that I killed you."

At this, Dash sat up and looked at me with an echo of the fear that I saw in her eyes earlier. “*What?!*”

“So I told him, ‘No.’ Well, actually... I spat in his good eye. I think he got the message, though,” I said this part a little too quickly, but I was afraid what Dash’s reaction might be.

Dash looked a bit relieved at this, but she didn’t lie back down. I wished she would, but all she did was ask, “What did *he* do?”

It would be awkward to lie there and talk up to Dash, so I sat up. “He tried to kill me. He missed on what should have been a killing blow,” I said, tracing the three scars on my chest with my talons. “If I had been any later with dodging, I would have died. I guess he got even angrier when I dodged, so he beat me to within an inch of my life. I tried to get away, but I couldn’t...” I choked on tears at this point. The pain had been unbearable, and was still too hard for me to talk about. My father had broken almost all of my ribs, both of my legs, and cracked my skull. Luckily, *someone* from our tribe had intervened before he was able to rip my wing out at the socket. I still had no idea who it had been, but they had definitely saved my life.

“I flew to Farrington, which was the nearest pony city I found. It was still about five hours’ flight,” I said, finally having found my voice. “*That* almost killed me. They netted me out of the sky, and I hit the pavement pretty hard. I don’t remember too much after that, I was fading in and out of consciousness. The last thing I *do* remember before blacking out was someone shouting, ‘Get this griffin to the hospital, on the double!’

“And... I’ve been alone ever since.” My voice started shaking, despite my efforts to keep it together. “I-I’m sorry that everything g-got s-so screwed up today, Dash, b-but I was in a really b-bad place when I s-sent you that letter. All I wanted t-to do was to g-get some time alone to t-tell to you all of this, b-but the time was n-never right, and then P-Pinkie Pie started interrupting, and then you had t-to work...” I couldn’t continue. It felt good to get all of this off my chest, but at the same time, it was overwhelming to relive everything in such a relatively short amount of time.

I bowed my head as, once again, I began to cry.

Dash walked over, and put her forelimbs around me. She kissed the top of my head, and whispered, "I forgive you, G." Griffins didn't really 'kiss' one another; the beaks would make that impractical. Instead, I put my head between her neck and wing, which was a griffin display of affection. Dash mirrored my gesture and we stayed like that for a while as I cried into her shoulder.

It didn't take long for me to finish crying this time. Although being in an embrace with Dash was comforting, I think I just ran out of tears. When I was finished, Dash made a sound as if she wanted to say something. She hesitated as if she was finding the right words to say, so I stayed quiet to let her. "I'm sorry for all the pranks... and for what I said earlier," she started. "You know, about it being a mistake to invite you here. I was so mad that I wasn't thinking straight. I never knew..." her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat, "I never knew how *bad* things were for you, though." She pulled out of our embrace before she continued, "But that doesn't excuse your actions today. You were pretty mean to everyone. I know you were frustrated, but I need to think of *all* my friends, not just my best one. You need to apologize," she said with a hint of fear in her voice.

Even though I had known this demand would be coming, I still felt sad when I heard it. Laying myself bare like this to Dash was one thing: she put up a tough front, but she was very compassionate underneath it. She was my *only* friend, but that didn't diminish the quality of her character when I called her my *best* friend.

I was sad, though, because she asked me to do something that I just... didn't feel right about doing. I don't know whether it was pride or fear, but something inside me just wouldn't let me make amends properly.

"I know, but Dash, I... I can't. Not yet, anyway," I hated the words even as they came out of my mouth..

At this, her lower lip began to quaver. "I... I thought you would say something like that. And I-I'm sorry, but it's not f-fair to my o-other friends if you d-don't make th-things right. I h-hate myself for this," she said, looking away from me, "but if you don't apologize to them... then you c-can't come to visit ag-ag..."

As she sobbed out the last syllable of 'again' again, I remembered the sadness of the first time we had to say goodbye. I went over and gave her a hug, which she returned. This time, though, I didn't join her in crying: I was too ashamed of myself. "I'm so sorry," I said as I stared off into the distance.

We stayed like that until the sun finished setting and the moon came out. It was Dash who finally said, "I need to head home, G."

"Well," I started awkwardly, not sure of what to say, "have a good trip."

"You too, G."

"Goodbye, Dash."

She didn't say anything in return. Instead, emotions conflicted across her face. For a second, I thought she was going to throw herself at me and kiss me, like a lover. *That* would have been an awkward moment. Despite the time we had just spent holding one another, I wasn't interested in her like *that*.

Finally, sadness won out, and she opened her mouth to say goodbye. She had trouble starting the word, though, so instead, she waved her front leg at me. I returned the gesture with my hand. After I did that, she turned towards Ponyville and took off flying.

With my eagle's sight, I could see her tears trailing her in the moonlight.

I considered spending the night on the cloud I was on, but I decided that I wanted to be back at my cave. When I arrived there ten hours later, the morning sun was shining brightly. In order to get to sleep, I wrapped my blanket around my head and lay down on the bare stone.

* * *

I woke up and for a panicked second, I thought I was blind. I dismissed this fear quickly as I felt a weight on my head and remembered my blanket. I tried moving my arm to unwrap my head, but my elbow reminded me of why I usually slept *on* the soft cloth instead of *under* it. With a bit of resolve

and a very loud popping sound, I eventually loosened the joint enough to move my arm freely.

When I unwrapped my head, I saw that the sky outside of my cave was beginning to fade, meaning that it was late in the afternoon. *Crap*, I thought to myself, *I just slept through the whole day*. My personal disappointment in myself suddenly gave way to the logic behind *why* I usually slept during the night: my stomach growled with an acidic emptiness. A new bout of panic hit me when I realized that I might not be able to catch anything for dinner. If I left now, I'd have a few hours of sunlight left to hunt by; if I couldn't find anything by nightfall, I'd end having to go another night without any food to eat.

I stood up, despite pained complaints from my knees. *Never again*, I vowed to myself. I bounced in place a few times trying to loosen all of my joints. I heard a strange jingling sound, and there was a brief moment's confusion until I figured out the source of it: my coin bag was still hanging around my neck from the day before.

As I looked down to see where the bag had moved along its string, I noticed something unpleasant: there were dark brown stains on my chest feathers. With a mix of horror and disgust, I realized that I hadn't washed Dash's blood off me; now, the coloration was probably going to stay with those feathers until they fell out.

I found the coin bag, and it at least provided a solution to my hunger problem: there would likely be a tavern or a diner in Farrington that was open late. I walked gingerly outside of my cave, still stiff from the day's sleep. As I unfurled my wings I was grateful that I had been spared the stone floor of my cave. Pain still lingered deep in the bones, though: they were still sore after I had flown for ten hours straight the day before.

This's only going to be one hour, I told myself. I had performed some interesting stunts with Dash the day before, but I still felt the fear of... *Falling?* I asked myself with a dark bit of humor. It was this humiliation more than anything that finally convinced me to take off flying northeast.

As I cleared the mountain that my cave was set into, I saw that the sun was still up. It was lying low in the sky, but not low enough to start tinting it the orange color of sunset. *I guess it's not too late, then*, I thought, which filled

me with a bit of relief. I had never found my cave at night, nor did I want to try it when I was stiff enough to pass as a statue. If I found a place to eat in time, I would still have enough daylight to navigate home by. This thought came with a depressed train of thought, though: I was flying an hour to go get food so that I could return home and... sleep some more? Then what, more food? *What was the point of it all?* I despaired.

No! I interrupted my thought process. It was a dark, lonely road for my mind to go down. Instead, I reflected on the previous day's visit with Dash: the happiness of the morning, the frustration of the afternoon, and then... I felt a great weight of shame as I remembered almost killing myself. It wasn't even that falling from a great height was one of the most shameful deaths that a griffin could endure. My older brother had gone so far as to taunt me with, "You're going to fall one day, and no one's going to be there to scrape you up," but even my father took offense at that: he had cracked Gerard's beak open with a single punch.

My shame had more to do with the events leading up to my decision. I should have *never* snapped like that at Dash. She had been angry at me, sure, but that didn't warrant *any* violent reaction, let alone how I almost... I couldn't bring myself to think about what I had *almost* done. Instead, my mind turned to my chest, which was now stained with Dash's blood. I figured that I could buy something in Farrington that would turn my feathers white again, but even as I thought it, I knew I didn't want that. I resolved instead to get some dye and permanently mark myself. It would be more sanitary and even than the real blood that was spattered on my chest, and it would serve as a constant reminder of what I had done.

Suddenly, I felt like I was the greatest fool that had ever lived. After everything that had happened, I had forgotten to mention all of my *current* problems to Dash! She had listened to my story, true, but she hadn't been able to give me any advice on what to do about my current loneliness! *In fact*, a dark thought crossed my mind, *now there's the whole 'you can't even go visit her anymore' thing*. I bit back a curse as I felt the injustice of the whole situation. *I was so happy to visit her, but it all just blew up in my face like those damn snakes*.

A bit of clarity shone through my despair, though: the days leading *up to* my visit had been busy because I was waiting for a response and making plans for if Dash had said 'Yes.' I hadn't felt so burdened with loneliness when I

had a task at hand to focus on. *That's what I need*, I realized, *something, anything other than just subsisting*. I ransacked my mind for ideas on just *what* that would be. I could get a job, true, but most jobs seemed like they fell under the 'put up with this crap and we'll pay you' paradigm. I didn't need money; even the broken, withered feathers that fell off me were worth a substantial amount coins. Even then, I had shelter and hunted for my food; I only sold feathers so I could send letters to Dash.

I saw Farrington in the distance. The sun was setting now, and the city was dark enough that some stores had their inner lights on. I had about five minutes left before I reached the road, so I continued thinking of a pastime. *I could read every book in their library*, I joked to myself. When I thought about it a bit more seriously, I decided that didn't want an arbitrary goal. I wanted a *purpose*, something to do with my life.

I landed on the right side of the road to be polite to traffic coming out of the city. *I would destroy any sort of musical instrument*, I thought with a somber sadness. There was a reason that griffins weren't renowned for their music: our talons weren't made for the delicate, gentle movements required by some instruments. The only "instrument" we *could* play, if it could be called that, was a large drum used during ceremonies.

As I passed through the main entrance to the city, the guard posted there caught my eye. *Does he ever go home?* I wondered to myself. "Yes, I have a life," he spoke suddenly. I instantly recognized his voice from somewhere, but I couldn't quite place it. It wasn't from when he had ever greeted me *verbally* when I entered into the city; until today, he had always just given me a nod. "I'm just covering my night watchpony's shift this week," he continued.

I felt a huge embarrassment at this; apparently, I had been giving him a weird look as I had approached him. "S... sorry," I stuttered when my dry throat botched the first words I had spoken all day.

The guard laughed at this, but it seemed more of a joyous laugh than a sardonic one. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot, ma'am. You're just the first person to come through here in a few hours." I was very aware at the sheepish concern that formed on my face in response to *that* fact... how the hell was I supposed to just leave him there *now*? The guard picked up on this, though, and waved his hoof at me, releasing me from the situation,

“Please, go about your business. It’s *my* duty to stand here bored, not yours.”

I waved farewell to him and continued into the city. The restaurant that I usually ate at was dark, so I went further into the city until I saw a promising wooden sign over a building: a tankard overflowing with some sort of beverage. I went into the tavern hoping that the floor wouldn’t be sticky: pony hooves were immune to such inconveniences, but whatever fur on my back feet that didn’t get painfully ripped out would take a force of will to get clean again.

I saw an empty table near a wall and walked over to it. Some of the patrons were staring at me, but I was more concerned with the fact that my feet were sticking to the floor. *This better just be someone’s spilled drink*, I hoped. I sat on one of the cushions near my table and a barmaid came over.

“Can I get you started on something?” her faux cheeriness annoyed me.

“Do you have anything that used to be alive?” I asked gruffly, more to shock her out of her act than due to a belief that there would be any meat on the menu.

Sure enough, she stuttered a few times when she replied, “W... well, there’s... eggs we use for... cakes?”

Touché, I thought, horrified. She definitely won our contest of being socially inappropriate: she had just suggested eggs as a meal for a *griffin*.

She immediately caught her mistake and stammered out an apology, “Ohmygosh... I didn’t... oh...” Words were failing her, and I saw tears welling up in her eyes.

Crap. I thought. I didn’t mean to make her cry. Thinking quickly, I tried to defuse the situation. “It’s okay,” I lied. “Just bring me... whatever the soup is today.” She nodded, relieved, and I was glad. Part of me wondered just how much of her cheeriness had been an act.

She reappeared a few minutes later carrying a steaming bowl and a tankard. The latter, she said, was ‘on the house,’ which made me feel

terrible inside. As I drank both parts of my meal (griffins don't really use utensils), I vowed that she was going to get a substantial tip.

I tipped the bowl all the way up to finish it off. When I brought it back down, there were three colts standing on the opposite side of my table from me. Before I could ask what they wanted, the middle one spoke up, "We heard you're giving Rosilee a hard time."

This is going to get worse before it gets better, I thought to myself.

"It's such a shame, how some," the pony on the right paused as he found the right word to use for me, "*individuals* have to go through life picking on sweet, innocent fillies."

"Yeah," chimed in the left pony. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size."

The drink had left a fuzzy, warm feeling in me. I couldn't place a finger on it, but for some reason, I instead of worrying about the three colts in front of me, I was overwhelmed by giddiness. I responded sarcastically, "Well, Gerard usually wins when it comes to fists, but he's got a year and testosterone on his side. I haven't really gotten into a physical fight with Gretchen or Gunnel, and by the time you get down to *Gustel*, there's enough of a size difference where she's not really 'my own size' anymore." It took a lot of effort to keep from bursting out laughing as I added, "Not saying that *she* doesn't deserve a good smack from time to time, but there's not really any honor in *that*, right?"

The colts in front of me stood in stunned silence. They looked at each other, confused, before the one in the middle asked, "Are you mocking us?"

"Did it take all three of you to pick up on that?" I shot back. I was thoroughly enjoying myself.

Without warning, the middle pony threw the table against the wall. "*Do you think that's funny?*" he yelled, clearly looking for a fight.

I hoped he had more than two friends, or this was about to become very one-sided. I stood up to reply, "Throwing tables? The setup needs a little work." I was smiling now, and the stiffness of earlier had all but given way

to a new feeling of euphoria. The middle pony charged at me, but before he reached me, he pivoted counterclockwise on his front legs and brought the back two up for a kick. I caught both of them, one in each hand, and used his momentum to start myself on a clockwise spin. Three-quarters of the way through the rotation, I released him and he flew headlong into the same table that he had thrown against the wall.

I completed the spin, and one of his cronies was about a foot away from me. His head was lowered, which meant that was trying to perform a tackle. I sidestepped him, and as he passed me, I grabbed his head and slammed it into the floor. He stopped moving, which concerned me: I hadn't intended to break his neck with that blow. I saw that he was breathing, though, so he was only unconscious. That only left the third member of the group...

As if on cue, I felt an immense pain across my neck and shoulders. From the splintering sound and all the bits of broken wood that flew onto the floor, I surmised that the third pony had broken some sort of wooden weapon over my head. I turned to face him, slowly, hoping that it would intimidate him. It did, and he dropped the handle of the sporting equipment that he had been holding. Before he could react, I grabbed his neck in one hand and I-don't-want-to-think-about-what with the other, but with my hands on opposite sides of his body, I had enough leverage to easily lift him up over my head and throw him through the window by the table his friend now slept on.

I looked back at the rest of the patrons, and they were regarding me with a bit of fear instead of anger. Figuring that I had probably overstayed my welcome, I walked over to the bar and emptied my coin sack onto it. "Sorry about the window... and the fighting too, I guess, but that one wasn't all me," I said to the bartender.

He looked at me with a scowl as he swept all of the coins into a pile in front of him. "Take your business somewhere else," was all that he said in a gruff voice.

The soup wasn't that good anyway, I thought but I kept it to myself. I had broken his property, so he was justified in kicking me out. As I was about to leave the tavern, the door swung open, and the guard from the city's entrance stood there. "All right, break it up, break it up!" He spoke with

authority, but I still wondered where I had heard his voice before. He looked eagerly around the room, but once he realized that the fight was over, his expression deflated. The guard then focused on me and said, "You! Did you do all of this?"

"Not the table. The window was because he pissed me off," I replied bluntly, even though I now felt a little bit of dread. The guard went over to the bar and started talking to the barkeeper. He pointed at me, the two ponies on the floor, and over to the now-broken window.

I considered simply leaving, but the guard turned around and walked back over to me. "Well, I might as well take your statement, as you're the only other one involved that's..." his eyes widened and he stared into space above my head and looked for the right word. "Conscious," he eventually finished. My dread turned to fear: I had broken the law, now I was under arrest. I couldn't even escape because the guards in the watchtowers along the perimeter of the city walls all were equipped with anti-flight net launchers

He turned and led me out of the tavern, and I had no choice but to follow him down the street. As I passed the alleyway, I saw two guards reviving the pony who I had thrown through a window. He was bleeding, and I realized that I might have killed him.

We finally reached the tower by the main gate, and he held the door open for me as we went inside. The insides of the tower were somewhat barren, but there was enough furniture that I supposed a pony could work out of it.

The guard who was leading me went over to the desk and pulled out a form. "Have a seat, please," he said almost too politely as he gestured to the leather pad on the opposite side of his desk. I sat down while he grabbed a pen and started writing. The pen was huge in diameter compared to the spines of the feathers that I sold for quills; however, as I saw how he was holding it by pinching it to his forearm with a hoof, I realized that quills were probably too narrow to be used by non-unicorns. When he finished writing, he looked up at me and asked, "From whom am I taking this statement?"

"Gilda," I said. Despite my situation, I was annoyed by the fact that I was going to have to explain that griffins didn't have second names.

“Okay, Gilda,” he said, without asking any further. My annoyance evaporated and he continued, “What is *your* account of what happened at the tavern?”

“I was accidentally rude to a waitress,” I admitted. There was no use trying to lie to cover up the situation, not when there were five ponies left unconscious by my hands. “She offered me eggs... *to eat*,” I was *still* taken aback at that.

“Eggs?” he looked at me with a confused look before it clicked. A horrified look came over his face as he understood. “OH! Er... right,” he said before he composed himself. “Did you say anything or make any threatening gestures?”

I shook my head, “No. I just made a bit of a face and she got upset, so I just ordered something quickly to change the subject,” I continued. “She brought me my soup, and when I finished, three colts came over to pick a fight. I... I let them,” I wondered how long jail time would be for assault. “The one in the middle threw my table into the wall and tried to buck-kick me. I threw *him* against the wall. I dropped one into the floor when he tried tackling me, and threw the last one out the window.”

“After he hit you over the head with a pool cue?”

“Yeah,” I said, guessing that that was the weapon that he had used.

“I see,” he said, writing. After a few moments, he asked, “Forgive me if this is rude, but why didn’t you use your talons to just kill them?” I was first shocked at the question, then offended. Picking up on my reaction, the guard clarified, “What I mean is, the fight could have ended sooner if you had so desired.”

“*Gleikampf*,” I replied. “Basically, we don’t escalate fights when we’re on the defensive. Not all griffins are bloodthirsty animals that revel in carnage,” I finished a bit curtly.

At my accusation, it was the guard’s turn to have a shocked look on his face. “I wasn’t implying anything like that,” he said sincerely. “*I* would have

broken out *my* sword in that fight. I just find it interesting that three ponies jumped you, yet you still maintained a code of honor.”

“It could have been twenty-to-one for all I care. If *they* didn’t pull any blades, I wasn’t going to use *mine*,” I told him as gravely as I could manage. I was less worried about jail, now, and more about defending what little honor my race had left.

The guard blinked as his eyes widened at this. “Twenty?” he asked.

“It would be a bit closer of a fight,” I said, rubbing the sore spot on the back of my head.

He rolled up the paper he had been writing on, and put it back in his desk. He sat pensively for a while, which began to unnerve me. Finally, the guard looked at me from top to bottom. I didn’t like being appraised like this. I was about to say something when he finally said what was on his mind, “Do you have any sort of vocation that you are beholden to, Gilda?”

Great, I thought, *now that I don’t have a job, I’m even less credible than I was when he brought me here.* “N... no,” I stammered, my fear finally growing to the level where it was showing in my voice.

“Is there any history of violence in your family?” he asked.

As I looked at him, incredulous, I suddenly remembered where I had heard his voice before: he had been the guard that called for aid when I had half landed, half crashed into the street. “Yes,” I admitted, “but I’m not like that! Well, I try not to be...,” all out panic broke out in my voice as I began defending myself, “What happened in the bar wasn’t all my fault! *They* came up to *me*, please--”

The guard held up a hoof and I shut up. “The pony that you threw through a window will be out of the hospital tomorrow morning, if not tonight. That’s a hell of a lot shorter than forty-six days,” he looked at me, knowingly. “I just wanted to hear *you* say that you weren’t as violent as wherever you came from, or else we might have a problem.”

“What, that I’d be beating up the other prisoners?” I said, letting the dread I felt come into my words.

“Exactly,” the guard said surely before pausing out of confusion. “Wait, prisoners?” he asked, puzzled. The situation dawned on him and his face suddenly turned apologetic. “No, no... we don’t throw people in prison for defending themselves in bar fights and then paying for the damages... Gilda, I was talking about offering you a job.”

My mind blanked as I processed this information. The first thing I felt was relief that I wasn’t going to prison. I wasn’t afraid of the other inmates, but I didn’t want to spend *any* of my time locked up in a cell. The next thing I felt was a twinge of annoyance that this guard – well, the *Captain of the Guard*, if he was the doing the hiring – hadn’t been direct with me, which would have saved me a lot of worrying.

The biggest thought that crossed my mind, though, was considering his offer. As much as I tried *not* to be violent like my father, I had to admit that I liked the rush I had felt while fighting those colts in the bar. This was weighed against massive self-doubt though: I wasn’t sure if I’d be any good at being a city guard, or that I wouldn’t end up hurting someone.

I knew that it would be a huge responsibility, which added to my doubt. However, I also knew that this could be exactly what I was looking for: something that I might enjoy doing and that would give me a feeling of personal satisfaction. For better or worse, I decided to throw caution into the wind.

“When can I start?” I asked, and my new life as a city guard of Farrington began.

~~*HEART OF GOLD, FEATHERS OF STEEL*~~