

Feathers

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Chapter 1

A feather. White, pure, and alone, it cradled itself in an abandoned nest, perched deep in the Everfree forest. No matter how much the wind reached for it, the feather remained still in the empty home. It was as if it taunted the wind, laughing at its lame attempts to remove it.

The darkened skies began to glimmer by Celestia's rising sun as the hours passed, that one feather standing its ground, only to be jostled out of place by the sudden shake of the nest. Down the feather fell, parachuting itself as much as possible as if begging not to hit the ground right before the wind, which it had mocked so much before, picked it right back up. It seemed as if it were stuck in an eternal limbo, flying up and falling down, when the wind attempted its final assault with a grand gust. Much to the disdain of the moving air, the feather found not the gift of flight but, rather, the quick grasp of sharpened talons.

The white barbs seemed to bow repeatedly in the wind, as if in thanks, as the talons held it in place. Its time spent in gratitude was cut short, though, as the claw retracted itself back into the nest, gliding across the air with swift and precise motions into a pool of black ink. The ink dripped itself off of the white quill as the claws brought it over a small piece of parchment.

"Why?"

The short question froze the claws, and as if in pity for its master, the feather bent. A drop of what felt like rain landed upon the quill, flowing down to its tip and, after a moment of hanging in the frozen air, fell upon the undried ink. The one question that the claw had asked now stained the parchment, incomprehensible.

A second claw grasped the parchment, crumpling it up and, with a single motion, wiped the rest of the ink dry off the white quill, now with a dark, stained tip. The feather's head raised itself, as if looking up into the face of its master, before it found its point driven hard into the nest, sticking it in place. The wind, stubborn as always, began its onslaught again at the poor white soul, but cursed as the master curled around it.

The nest was spacious, with a simple design built out of sturdy materials. The home's owner, curled in a ball, only occupied a sixth of the open space. The rest of the space found itself housing parchment. Letters covered in many colors of ink, many text sizes, swapping back and forth between a very rough cursive and a careful print. The wind, as it had done to the feather, battered against the letters, hoping to pry them from the nest's grasp, but the edges of the nest were too high for the wind to pry them out, and many of the papers were stuck to the nest by many sticks pierced through them.

"Another day." Choked the voice of the teared up homeowner, squeezing herself into a tighter ball. Water fell between the branches in the nest, dropping down the long way to the ground. Not a cloud hung in the sky, leaving the only source to be the drops of the clawed one's sorrow.

"Why'd I have to be so stupid?" she muttered, surrounding the quill that pitied her with her claw once again. With a quick grip, the bladed talons diced the feather, leaving it a small pile of white fluff in the nest. Grasping the remains of her feather friend, she relented to the breeze as she tossed the scraps to the wind. Happy that it now finally claimed its prey, the dead white soul flew away. As if content with its prize, the breeze died down, nearly disappearing, letting the depressed sobs of the quill murderer fill the air.

Gilda. Her name was Gilda, a griffon now living alone out in the forest way beyond Ponyville, a town settled by ponies, unicorns, and pegasi. Ponyville had outcast her, and looking back she couldn't blame them. She had possibly been the biggest jerk to fly through town, originally planning only to visit one particular pegasus.

She had once been a Junior Speedster, spending her days flying in Cloudsdale. The whole time, she always had one good friend; a pegasus named Rainbow Dash. The same pegasus who she visited in ponyville, and the same one who she had called a flip-flop, claiming her to go from cool to dweeb. Her temper had been her strongest point back then, preventing her from accepting Rainbow Dash's new friends. Over a year after her last visit to ponyville, alone in her nest, she had time to think about what she had done. What had started as a feeling of betrayal, anger, and disgust, turned to loneliness, sorrow, and regret.

So few people lived in the Everfree Forest, and the only reason Gilda had moved here was due to an unbearable feeling she had when she stayed in Cloudsdale. It felt... wrong there. She couldn't describe it, no matter how hard she tried. It just felt unnatural.

From various gathered berries around the forest, Gilda learned how to make a pasty ink to start writing letters. First the letters were mean, nasty, and filled with her bottled up rage, but slowly turned into pleading, cries for help, sorrow, and regret. Not a single one left her nest, though, and every time she tried to gather the courage, her will collapsed, leaving her stranded another night alone in the dark woods.

Sobs flew from her mouth, cracked and pained, and descended like bricks to the ground below. The wildlife had learned to accept this as natural, and after various failed attempts to comfort the griffon, left her alone.

But this morning, the wildlife wasn't her only audience.

"I... is someone crying?"

Gilda jumped at the voice, the sound unnatural after living so long in isolation. Her jump shook the nest, causing a few loose sticks to fall off. Gilda ignored them, instead leaning her head briefly over the edge before retracting it near instantly.

A yellow pony stood far below the nest, a saddlebag on her back and her pink mane pushed out of the way to let her look straight up. Gilda curled up again, realizing who it was. Fluttershy. It was the same pony she had made cry back when she visited Ponyville, the shy, nature-friendly pegasi she bumped into by Sugarcube Corner. Gilda didn't like this situation; even if she wasn't a great flyer, Fluttershy could still make it up to her nest with no problem.

"Are you okay?" The voice was closer, much closer. Gilda turned, looking behind her, and saw Fluttershy slowly making her way up onto the branch leading to her nest. The pegasus seemed to be moving in slow motion, but Gilda had never expected her to climb the tree so quickly.

"G..Gilda?" Fluttershy said, fear filling her voice.

Gilda backed away, pondering whether to face her or retreat. She might screw up even worse if she talked to the pegasus, but if she left then she

couldn't really come back. She wouldn't be able to stay in the forest, as more likely than not Fluttershy would tell Rainbow Dash where she lived and she would come out to find her. Gilda didn't want to move again; it had taken so long to build this nest already, but...

Gilda ducked and covered her head, confused with questions of what to do blasting off the sides of her skull. The pegasus pony had somehow found her out of nowhere, and she couldn't decide how to react. In the end, her response came more on instinct.

"Wh... what do you want, dweeb?" said the griffon, tears choking her voice. The tone of what she said held no menace, but rather a dull, dry pleading.

Fluttershy took a step back. The sorrowful tone was a surprise, but the familiarity of the favored insult kept her cautious.

"I..." started the pegasus, turning her head a little bit. Sucking in air and letting out a sigh, she brought together as much courage as she could. "I... I'd like to k...know what's wrong..."

Gilda's talons spread out, now revealing her watered eyes staring out at the pink-maned pegasus. She had expected no words in response; she was planning on the sound of flapping wings followed by silence and the return of the forest's lonely grasp, but the pegasus stood her ground. She was trying to comprehend this; only a year ago the shy pony fled at her towering form, but now it seemed like they had swapped positions.

"Why do you care...?" Gilda asked, turning away. Her voice, still cracked, started to calm down.

Fluttershy looked at Gilda with sorrow. She stood in silence for what seemed like hours, looking at the brokenhearted griffon. The silence grew eerie, but was cut short with a whisper. "S... sorry. I'll leave you alone."

Fluttershy turned, her wings unfolding as she prepared to descend, when she felt the cold feeling of desperate claws gripping her hoof. They didn't hold her hard, they didn't cut her flesh, they just wrapped about her like a child desperate for attention. Fluttershy was stunned, but didn't remove her hoof.

"Don't go..." whimpered the griffon's voice, "I'm sorry..."

With a small tug, the yellow leg was freed from the talons, and a tear slid down Gilda's cheek. That was it. She was alone again. Once again the forest would envelop her; she'd be insignificant. Only the sounds of fleeing wildlife, birds chirping far, far away, her own footsteps, the flapping of only her wings. She was...

Being hugged?

Gilda opened her eyes, blinking twice to try and get the tears out, and looked up to see pink hair in front of her. She felt warm hooves wrapped around her, and for some odd reason she felt... calm.

"I forgive you."

Those three words pierced her like the strangest spear. She didn't bleed, she didn't feel any pain, it just... stuck her in place. Like those sticks she had used on her letters, she felt pinned down, and she didn't understand why she... liked the feeling.

"It's not fun to be alone."

Gilda couldn't see anymore. The tears were too thick; her cheeks were soaked with her streaming emotions. Why? Why had she been forgiven? This didn't make sense; nothing did. Panic sunk into her feathers as she felt the hooves remove themselves. She shrunk herself, coiled herself, and tears streamed faster than before.

"The sunrise is pretty, but the trees make it so hard to see." came the pony's voice. Gilda raised her head ever so slightly, rubbing her eyes with her claws, and opened them fully for the first time that morning.

"I never watched the sunrise before..." Gilda said, looking up at the glowing colors surrounding the trees.

"You can see it so much better back at my cottage." Fluttershy stated, standing up and walking out of the nest and onto the branch. "You could come watch it with me, if you want."

Gilda replied in silence, her comprehension thrown off by everything that surrounded her. She couldn't discern the birds waking up from the squirrels lower in the tree. She just couldn't understand anything.

"Why?"

Fluttershy turned, looking at Gilda, sitting with her head hanging down and her talons clenched on the nest below her.

"Why what?" Fluttershy asked in return.

"Why can you just forgive me like that? Like nothing happened?" Gilda's sobs could be easily heard through her words.

Fluttershy sat on the branch, a small smile on her lips. "I always apologize to everyone else. I don't want to hurt anybody, and if they forgive me like they do, then it isn't right for me to deny somepony who really needs my own forgiveness."

The concept seemed so foreign yet... so familiar to her. Her mind attempted to wander into another questioning section, but her attention immediately shifted back to reality as she saw Fluttershy jump down, using her wings to parachute her descent to the ground.

"Wait!" Gilda said, stretching her wings and, near instinctively, soaring down to the ground to land beside Fluttershy. Gilda stood at the bottom of the tree and only started walking after Fluttershy had moved a good five meters ahead. For the first time since she came to live here, the creatures of the forest openly greeted Gilda.

She just hoped that was a sign that she wouldn't be lonely ever again.

Chapter 2

"Rainbow Dash, dear, stand STILL!" urged the voice of the fashionista, Rarity to her somewhat unwilling model. The pegasus wasn't all too excited about standing still in the first place, so Rarity telling her to act even more like a statue wasn't all too welcome. Rainbow had to restrain herself from just bailing, and even that was getting hard after being at the boutique for over an hour.

"How long is this gonna take, Rarity? I needa bring in a storm by noon or Carrotop and Applejack'll be all over me about their crops! Hurry up!" protested Rainbow.

"If you'd just hold still for ONE MINUTE, I'd be able to get this done! You keep twitching when I most need you not to!" Rarity replied through gritted teeth, holding a pin in her mouth as she used her magic to bring a needle through the chestpiece of a new dress she had been working on all day. In and out the needle went, Rarity concentrating hard as she watched the thread make its way through the fabric. Rainbow Dash groaned, but kept as still as possible in order to avoid postponing the completion.

"And I'm just about... DONE!"

"Rarity stated with glee. Rainbow Dash released a huge sigh as she let her shoulders relax.

"Great; now can we get this off?" Dash asked, squinting at her friend.

"Hold on a minute; I need to take a photo and then I'll get it off for you!" Rarity said, jogging into another room to grab her camera. Rainbow wasn't too thrilled about the idea of the photo, but she knew Rarity wouldn't display it without her permission. It was primarily for her personal scrapbook, which Rainbow had the 'pleasure' of being shown multiple times already.

"Got my cameraaaa!" Rarity called melodically as she trotted back into the room, camera floating beside her. "Now give me a good pose and I'll get you out!"

Smiling and rolling her eyes, Rainbow had spent enough time as Rarity's model to know that "cool" poses weren't what she considered "good". Taking as elegant of a pose as she could, Rarity snapped a few photos and placed the camera aside.

"Alright; let's get you out of this thing." Rarity said, using her magic to undo a zipper on Dash's back. Rainbow didn't move. She didn't want to ruin another dress like she had done last month; she learned that the hard way. After about half a minute, Rainbow was free from her frilly restraints and, with a final nod to Rarity, left without even waiting for a thank you. She was running really late.

The door to the boutique burst open as a rainbow flash ran past two colts about to enter. Dash didn't take any notice of them, rushing skyward with only one goal in mind; clouds. Lots of dark rain clouds. She had 'til noon, which was only two hours away. She could clear the skies in ten seconds flat, but filling them was different.

"Oh! Hi Rainbow Dash!" came a calm voice from below.

Rainbow Dash looked down to notice Fluttershy waving up to her. Rainbow Dash was about to groan, but immediately retracted it knowing how she'd hurt her friends' feelings.

"Fluttershy, I really can't talk right now. I gotta get the clouds filled for today's storm ASAP or Applejack'll kill me!" Rainbow said.

"Oh! Sorry to interrupt. Well, if you'd be so kind, stop by my cottage after you're all done, please? It's pretty important." Asked Fluttershy, a pleading smile on her face.

"Yea, sure. It'll be about four hours or so. Seeya then!"

Fluttershy couldn't get in another word before Rainbow darted off. Smiling to herself, the pegasus began the trek back to her cottage, her feet hurrying along with a single goal in mind.

"I'm back, everyone!" Fluttershy said, entering her cottage. Critters of all shapes and sizes around the house greeted her in what was like a choir of high pitched little angels. Fluttershy often spent time singing with them, so it was to be expected that they would have some vocal talent.

Upon closing the door, the sound of a tapping foot echoed into Fluttershy's ears, as she turned to see Angel standing by the door with an impatient look on his face.

"Oh... uh... Hi Angel. I see it's... past your lunch time. I'm sorry; I had to find Rainbow Dash and I forgot to prepare a meal. Let me go fix it up for you!" Fluttershy's voice held in it a feeling of nervousness, not wanting to upset the rabbit. Passing through the living room, Fluttershy began to make her way to the kitchen when the sound of sobs made her stop. Adjusting her course, the pegasus made her way into an extra room where, on a temporary and makeshift bed, Gilda lay asleep. Her panicked motions made it obvious she wasn't having a very pleasant dream. Fluttershy stepped over and, after a short pause, retreated.

Fluttershy wasn't going to be on the receiving end of any premature claw swipes Gilda might react with. She didn't know how Gilda was with waking up in the morning. Still, she didn't want to leave her suffering like that, especially after all she had been through. The Pegasus remained indecisive, now contemplating if and how to wake Gilda up.

Idea! Just like Rarity, inspiration struck. Quick to move about, Fluttershy set up three or so bells above Gilda, left over from Winter Wrap Up. Tying a long string on, she stepped over by the door, standing far from Gilda, and pulled the string. The bells went off, with Gilda snapping her eyes open quickly.

"Wh... what's that!? Those blasted cicadas again?" Gilda cried, jumping up with tears still rolling down her face. It took a moment for Gilda to realize. "Oh... bells?"

"Gilda, if you don't mind, you might want to wake up. That is if you're alright with it..." Fluttershy said quietly, dropping the rope from her mouth with a timid smile.

Gilda glanced over at Fluttershy, noticing the elaborate set up made just to wake her up. She felt a little pang of guilt at this, realizing that she hadn't been completely forgiven. Or that's how she saw it. Feeling the tears still sliding down her cheeks, Gilda quickly rubbed at her face and put on a more serious expression. Stretching herself out, the griffon stood up to see Fluttershy walking into the kitchen. Not really well acquainted with the cottage despite its size, she decided to follow her.

"So what'd you wake me up for?" Gilda asked, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

Fluttershy, now concentrating on preparing a meal for Angel and the other bunnies, subconsciously ignored Gilda's question as she entered the Kitchen. Gilda stood in the doorway, awaiting a response but, considering Fluttershy's hospitality, deciding not to rush her. As Fluttershy finished up, Angel hopped into the room.

"Here, Angel! Take this out to all the other bunnies. And don't take any extra this time!" Fluttershy said, in her best attempt at scolding the bunny. She handed down a tray, small enough for Angel to carry, of steamed carrots. Angel, looking up at her with an irked expression, tossed one carrot into his mouth to chew on as he proceeded outside with the tray. Fluttershy smiled, but quickly remembered that she'd been asked a question. Turning around, Fluttershy smiled as if to give Gilda some great news.

"I wanted to make sure you were wide awake when Rainbow Dash gets here."

Gilda's heart sank at this, reflected vividly in her expression. Rainbow Dash was coming HERE? She wasn't ready. Oh, why was everything going so fast! Gilda placed a claw on her face, trying to calm herself down. Maybe it'd work out. Maybe everything would go great. Fluttershy forgave her so easily; maybe Dash would too.

Oh what was she kidding? She knew Dash more than a lot of people, and if she knew anything she knew that Dash wouldn't be that quick to forgive her for what she did. Fluttershy was a softie, but Dash wasn't that type of pony.

"G...gilda, are you feeling okay?" Fluttershy asked, noticing how the griffon wasn't exactly thrilled about the idea. "Did I do something wrong? Oh dear, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have... I didn't mean to..."

Gilda took a deep breath and released, trying her best to calm down. It wasn't helping as much as she wanted, but it did have a noticeable effect on the griffon. Looking up at Fluttershy, Gilda had to concentrate hard to repress her desire to yell at her. She had gotten this far and, knowing what she'd wind up going back to, she wasn't going to mess it up now.

"I... don't think I'm ready. I mean... I've been out of that forest for not even two hours, and I don't think... Geh..." Gilda's feet couldn't stay still as she

paced around the kitchen. A few of Fluttershy's animal friends looked into the room, hearing the scritch-scratching of the talons against the floor, but Fluttershy managed to put on enough of a face to ask them to leave the two alone.

"I didn't mean to. I mean... oh dear... I'm sorry. I didn't think it was too early. I wasn't really thinking about it too much, and I thought you'd want to..." Fluttershy's expression started to show more than a little bit of panic.

"No..." Gilda said, holding out her claw to tell Fluttershy to stop. "I'll be fine... it'll be fine."

Gilda wasn't sure of herself, but she made every effort to reassure Fluttershy. After all, it wasn't like Gilda could hide from Dash forever.

"Okay... when is she coming?" Gilda asked, looking at the pink-maned pegasus who had only just managed to calm herself down.

"Oh... um... about three and a half hours now. She has to set up a small storm, as she's been falling behind lately. I hope that's alright..."

Gilda nodded, taking a breather. She had time; she could prepare herself. She could formulate a strategy... wait, strategy? She wasn't that great at that; she and Dash were always the gung-ho type. Gilda's mind went spinning for a second as she started to think up ideas of how to deal with Dash. Would a direct approach work? Should she go slowly? Wait, what if Dash changed a lot since she'd been gone? It's been a year, and she herself had changed a lot. That had been evidenced quite clearly by the fact that she was right now in Fluttershy's house after she had been found crying of loneliness in the woods.

"Okay, okay. I have a good amount of time. I can figure this out. How has she changed? A lot? A little?" Gilda asked, finding it hard to get used to the concept of asking for help.

"She's... um... well, not too different. She's still a lot like you remember, but she's... I don't know, calmer? Well, not really, but... it's hard to describe, you see." Fluttershy stuttered out.

"Point is she hasn't changed much." Gilda summarized. As Fluttershy nodded, Gilda swapped back to her strategy mindset.

"I need to tend to some of the animals, Gilda. Are you going to be okay on your own? Is there anything else I can do to..."

"I'll be fine, just... go do whatever. I need to be alone for a bit, anyway..." Gilda said, taking a second to realize how contradictory that statement was. It was still true, though. She didn't want to be truly alone, but she did need a moment to herself to think about the upcoming confrontation. Well, she hoped it wouldn't be a confrontation.

As Fluttershy stepped out, Gilda pulled up a seat at a nearby table, presumably where Fluttershy ate her meals every day. Leaning her elbows on the table and cradling her face in her open claws, Gilda poured all her concentration into battle strategies. In her head, she sat across from Rainbow Dash on a warzone. Like a board game, Gilda placed her infantry on the board and, as she waited for Dash, she played a rather odd game of chess in her head.

"Mighty grateful, Dash! This here storm'll set us up straight fer Applebuckin' season!" Stated Applejack, thanking her friend for a job well done. Rainbow smiled, nodding her head.

"Glad I could help. But I gotta go; Fluttershy wanted to see me for something." The pegasus mentioned, floating up a bit higher.

"Well, then ah won't hold ya here. I'll be seeyin ya'll, Dash!" Applejack said, waving farewell to Rainbow Dash. She looked up to watch as she flew off, a rainbow trail following her, before retreating into the barn. The storm wouldn't be all too pleasant for the pony folk.

As the barn doors shut, the air went out of its way to move aside for Rainbow Dash, blasting a path to Fluttershy's cottage just outside of the Everfree Forest. Her mind remained occupied throughout the flight, curious of Fluttershy's reasoning. Did she need help with the animals again? Dash made guesses here and there, but in the end just decided to wait and find out.

All of five minutes passed as Rainbow landed on her friend's doorstep. Pausing for a second to catch her breath, having flown for the past three hours straight, the pegasus folded her wings in and tapped on the door. The sound of hoofsteps echoed through the cottage, though very lightly, and in less than a minute Fluttershy opened the front door.

"Hey, Fluttershy. What'd you need me for?" Dash asked.

Dash looked up to see Fluttershy with a very worried expression. Tears streamed down her face, and if Rainbow Dash knew anything, the sound of Fluttershy crying was one of the most depressing things she could ever hear.

"Fluttershy what's... what's wrong? Don't cry!" Dash said, trying to comfort her.

"G... Gilda's..." Fluttershy stuttered.

"Gilda? What'd she do to you!?" Dash asked, anger settling in. She expected the worst. She couldn't really see a trashed cottage, but she could barely see any of it at all. Maybe the animals were hurt? That'd be devastating to Fluttershy! She'd go beat that griffon senseless if she had to.

"She left..." Fluttershy stated.

Rainbow couldn't help but just stand there and blink. Why was that a problem? She was so confused.

"Please... come in... I think you might... might want an explanation." Fluttershy said, retreating back inside. With nothing but a strong curiosity at the top of Dash's mind, she didn't hesitate to follow her friend inside.

It was now early afternoon in the Everfree Forest, and the animals were moving every way possible. High above the trees flew a rather clumsy griffon, nearly blinded by her tears. She couldn't stop crying. She'd made an idiotic move; she left. She couldn't take the pressure at all, and she just had to leave. Did her chess game mean nothing? Well, it wasn't like she ever played a full game of chess.

Now twenty minutes into her forest venture, Gilda finally approached her self-made solitary confinement. Nothing seemed out of place, which didn't provide her any comfort. It made her feel like nothing had changed or, rather, that they had only gotten worse.

Landing in the one empty corner of the nest, Gilda brushed her tears away, trying to calm herself down as much as she could. She had to strategize again, but this time the plan was for how she could avoid two winged horses. If she knew much at all about Fluttershy, she'd never abandon her

so easily, and Rainbow Dash would probably try and beat her into a pulp for making Fluttershy sad again. She had to leave.

Gilda looked about her nest, trying to find some spare parchment, but was greeted with nothing but the many letters she had, already covered in ink, crumpled, and definitely not reusable. Trying to think fast, Gilda turned to the thick trunk of the tree she chose for her home and, taking in a breath of air, brought out a talon. The scratching noise was almost unbearable. Not because it was loud, or high pitched, but because she knew it meant another long trek to find a place she could even consider anything near being "home". Her message was short, but it would get out as much as she could manage saying at this point.

It only took her two minutes to finish the letter in wood. Removing her talon from the trunk, Gilda opened her wings wide. She made one last glance at the pile of letters. She couldn't take them; they'd weigh her down. It would take too long to destroy them, too. She'd just leave them there; it'd be the best apology she could ever leave.

The sun remained bright that afternoon as a winged silhouette flew into the horizon.

It had taken a while to explain everything to Rainbow Dash, and the pegasus could hardly believe what she had been told. Why didn't Gilda find new friends? Ones that she would consider cooler? Everything she knew about the griffon seemed to feel wrong now. Had she really caused her old friend to break down so completely?

"Fluttershy, you mentioned she lived out in the forest?" Dash asked, looking up at the saddened pegasus.

"Well... um... yea." Came the timid reply. After everything had been explained, Fluttershy seemed to sink into her own head. She was now acting extremely timid, especially in front of her own friend.

"Can you get me to her nest?"

Fluttershy simply nodded. Rainbow turned aside, walking over to the cottage door and bringing it open.

"Let's go." Dash said.

"Wait!" Fluttershy replied, seeming to regain a little of her composure, but not much. "Um... I need to tell all the... all the animals where I'm going..."

Dash sighed. "Quickly. Do it quickly."

Rainbow stepped outside to wait for Fluttershy. Even though this gave her a few minutes to ask herself questions, she really didn't want to. She wanted answers from Gilda, and waiting around was driving a hole in the soles of her feet.

The timid pegasus, making her farewells, stepped outside the cottage beside Dash. Without a word, she started to fly, followed by her impatient friend. She didn't speed up, but she made an effort not to slow down either. Rainbow Dash wasn't the only one who was tired.

"This is her nest?" Dash questioned, perched on the edge of the large woven home.

"Yes." Fluttershy said. She sat inside the nest in the one empty spot where Gilda had slept for so long.

"I never knew she could craft so well." Rainbow said, admiring the handiwork on the nest itself. She'd never really known Gilda as much of a constructive person in the first place, so this came somewhat as a surprise.

Fluttershy said nothing, deciding to let Dash make her own observations. They both knew she wasn't going to come back here, as the shakily carved letter on the tree made full note of that. "I'm gone" was all it said, followed by a sloppy signature.

It didn't take any time at all for Dash to notice the hundreds of letters lying about the nest, which brought a curious look to the pegasus' face. She didn't know Gilda to be a writer either.

"Did she mention anything about these letters?" Rainbow asked, and to this Fluttershy shook her head.

"I never noticed them. I was too busy concentrating on her." said the timid pony, a little more courage in her voice.

Dash leaned over to remove one letter from a stick it had been pierced on. Uncrumpling it, the pegasus glanced over it.

Dear Dweeb Crash,

You made a lame-o mistake, Crashie. You know you woulda never gotten anywhere if you hadn't met me. I made you what you are, don't deny it! You would have been nothing if I hadn't hung out with you, and the way you sided with those dweeby ponies just shows how much of an idiot you are. Hope ya feel happy, ya scuzzball.

Gilda

Dash, with an angry flick, stabbed the paper back onto the stick. Who did Gilda think she was? This letter was a lot more like the Gilda she had known.

The pegasus sighed. She had written hundreds of letters; were all of them like this? An embodiment of her hatred? Dash reached out, this time grabbing an unpierced letter lying on the bottom of the nest.

Dear Rainbow Dash,

I was wrong.

Rainbow Dash blinked at this. She was confused; this was clearly Gilda's handwriting, but admitting she was wrong? Curiosity gripped at her as she kept reading.

Dear Rainbow Dash,

I was wrong. I was an idiot, and it took me this long to realize. Cloudsdale just felt empty ever since I lost you, and for a long while I just thought it was because I couldn't stand all the pegasus ponies. But it wasn't them. Everything just felt empty without you. I tried to make excuses for months, but living in the Everfree Forest showed me how much I deserved that dunce cap back in Junior Speedsters.

I made a horrible choice, and just went and made myself into a pain. I ended the only thing that I could ever really grip. Our friendship. I just want it back... I j---

The rest of the letter was blurred into incomprehensibility by blotches of what could only be tears.

Not all of them were Gilda's, though.

Chapter 3

"Let's see... balloons? No. Streamers? No. Big cake? Ye-"

"Pinkie Pie! We don't need a party!"

Sugarcube Corner was rather empty, which at this time of night wasn't all too out of the ordinary. Other than Mr. and Mrs. Cake, who were fast asleep in their room, the only active ponies in the house were the Earth pony, Pinkie Pie, and her two pegasus friends who both looking distraught.

"Everyone needs a party, silly! Haven't I taught you that already?" Pinkie Pie replied to Rainbow Dash.

"We don't have time for..."

Dash's reply was cut short as a box of streamers landed on her head. Apparently Pinkie Pie was rethinking her party strategy, but the box of colorful and happy strips of paper didn't really make the pegasus want to smile.

"Where did I put that banjo? Oh it must be around here SOMEWHERE!" Pinkie was, at this point, only talking to herself. At another time Rainbow would be chuckling about this, but the pink pony really didn't realize she wasn't in the mood.

"PINKIE PIE!" Dash screamed at the top of her lungs, immediately garnering the pony's attention.

"Shhhhhhh! The Cakes are asleep! Do you want to..."

"Pinkie, listen to me for once!" Dash said, glaring at her friend at a near Fluttershy-level stare. The party pony finally complied, sitting down and looking at her friend.

"What is it, Dashie?" Pinkie asked, now a little worried as she tilted her head.

"We need your help. No it's not a party, no it's not a gathering, no it's not a meetup."

"Is it a parade?" Pinkie interjected, met quickly with another stare. The excited glimmer in Pinkie's eyes finally dulled.

"Look, it's gonna sound crazy to you, but just hear me out. It's about Gilda."

"Gilda? But she's..." An eerie calm settled over the room as she closed her mouth on her own. The Spirit of Laughter still had trouble realizing when things weren't all fun and games.

"Thank you, Pinkie..." Fluttershy interjected quietly before leaving the floor to Rainbow Dash again.

"Pinkie, I know you only remember Gilda as a big jerk. I can't really explain here and now, but if you come with us we'll explain on the way. She needs help, and we can't give it to her if we can't find her. Your pinkie sense is the only way we'll be able to follow her." Said the pegasus, taking a minute before to breathe a little.

The party pony looked at Dash, confused. She wasn't used to Rainbow asking for favors, which in itself helped her realize how serious the situation was. Gilda was a meany pants. That's what she remembered, but that didn't mean it still applied. It had been well over a year, and even Pinkie had changed over that time. Why couldn't Gilda change, too?

"Oki doki. I just need to leave a note, but I'll come. How long are we going to be gone?" Pinkie asked.

"We honestly have no clue. Could be a few days to a few weeks." Dash replied, a little bit of worry in her normally confident voice. She hoped this wouldn't make Pinkie change her mind.

"Ooh! This is gonna be a big road trip! I better pack party supplies! You guys'll have to help carry some of it~!" Said the party pony, a little bit of pep jumping back into her voice. Rainbow smiled a little.

"Sure."

At this, Pinkie bounced off into another room to gather her things. It was bound to be quite a trip.

They just hoped it would be a successful one.

"Hurry up! A mule could pull more'n you, ya feather brain!"

The port town of Fillydelphia was bustling with traders running to and fro, like a vastly disorganized swarm of ants with hooves. Ships of builds from Equestria and beyond docked in the port, carrying passengers and packages, reuniting and separating families, and earning some lucky foals a grand load of bits from the profits of running their trade. The dock was filled with all sorts of Earth ponies, pegasi, unicorns, buffalo, zebra, and...

"Hey! You trying to imply something, boss?" Grunted a rather irritated mule, overhearing his employer's derogatory put-down.

"Shut up, Mark. You barely do enough work as it is; just be happy I'm not barkin' at you!" Growled the boss, a rather tall and toned dog.

"This ain't the dark ages, sir. You're just as vulnerable to a lawsuit as any other business in this port." Mark retorted. "And either way you're barely here. You have no clue how hard I really work."

This wasn't new for Merhorse Mailers, a smaller Fillydelphia shipping company trying to grip its hooves into bigger business. The boss wasn't the kind of guy to dish out free coffee, and everyone in the crew knew it. That is, everyone except for the newest crew member, a rather disheartened griffon who wanted to be out of her current situation more than anything. Life in the forest had forced her to gain a work ethic, but she wasn't used to all the heavy lifting her boss expected of her.

"I'm sorry, boss. I'll try again." A meager attempt to interrupt the argument as the griffon gripped her talons around two large crates, spreading her wings to help her pull it along.

"That's better. Now hurry up; we gotta get twenty more crates moved ASAP!"

Mark grunted. He appreciated the fact that the boss wasn't pushing the issue, but he was really looking forward to that lawsuit. If anyone hated his boss more than Mark was a princess. He was always out looking for ways to get back at him for acting like he didn't deserve to exist.

The mule eyed Gilda for a minute, scanning her over like a computer trying to get everything it could. She didn't seem right. Everything he knew about griffons didn't seem like it could ever apply to her, and he knew his fair share of griffons from being in the trade business. It was almost like she just didn't care anymore... like she was a broken shell...

"Hey Mark! Quit eyein' the new girl and get over hea'!" The angered tone of his co-worker snapped him out of his mild daze as he jogged away. He was on loading duty, after all.

"Pinkie Pie, you're holding the map upside down!"

"Duh, silly! How else am I supposed to use it?"

The trio had been traveling for over a week now, and Futtershy was showing the worst of it. She rarely spent more than one day away from her cottage, and the idea of her beloved animals missing her had almost made her turn back on a few occasions. Sometimes she was too kind for her own good, even as the Element of Kindness, as each time she thought of turning back she couldn't bring herself to abandon Gilda. Her eyes sagged, tired as could be. Two sleepless nights had thrown her out of her loop.

Rainbow Dash was getting impatient. She couldn't abandon her old griffon friend either, but seven days of being forced to pace her speed to avoid leaving her friends behind had her itching to try out some tricks. Whenever the conversation had gone dry, Rainbow's head filled with intricate schemes for daring dives and wondrous feats of showmanship.

The only pony out of the lot who seemed to be keeping her sanity was, surprisingly, Pinkie Pie. All things considered, though, she was never sane to begin with, but the party pony thought of this whole thing like a game despite having been briefed entirely on the situation. She was happy to know that Gilda wasn't such a grumpy-gills anymore, even though she didn't have gills. What would be an equivalent term for someone with feathers? Grumpy-fluff? It could work, but it was stretching it a bit. Wait, what had Pinkie been thinking about? Pinkie's response to the whole deal had generally followed this same pattern, otherwise known as a lack thereof.

"How does that make any sense, Pinkie?" Dash asked, wincing a bit as Fluttershy let out a surprisingly loud yawn. The contagious nature of the act made her let out one of her own, but didn't stop her from returning her eyes to the party pony.

Pinkie Pie held the map in front of her as she walked using a strange contraption that she told them she made herself about four days prior. The odd thing was that it had taken Dash all four of those days to finally realize that the map was upside down the whole time.

"Dashie, don't you know anything about anything? If I don't hold it upside down then North will actually be pointing North. Duh."

If there were a drinking game for how many times Dash had blinked in disbelief at Pinkie Pie over the course of their venture, Fluttershy would have passed out at least twenty times from overconsumption. Then again, Fluttershy didn't drink alcohol.

"Pinkie, this means you've been leading us in the complete OPPOSITE direction the whole time!" Yelled Rainbow, angry and frustrated and, for once, stopping.

"Uh, no? Dashie you're a pegasus pony; of anyone, I'd expect you to know how to follow a map. I mean for hay's sake, we're almost there now!" Pinkie retorted, stopping as well to point a hoof over the horizon.

"What do you mean we're almost..." Dash couldn't finish her sentence before the glittering lights of a night-time Fillydelphia was spread out before them. At this point an alcoholic Fluttershy would have taken another sip.

"Pinkie Pie, you are so random."

"Alright, show's over folks. Now get outta here."

Gilda groaned, walking out of the portside warehouse with a good sized bruise on her eye. Way back when, Gilda would tell everyone she got it in a fight that she won. Now she just didn't want to talk about it. She just didn't want to bring any attention to it, which was hard with how bad it looked.

"How'd ya get that shiner, newbie?"

"Buzz off!" That's what she wanted to say, that's what she tried to say, but what came out was more of a whimper right before glancing away from the troublecausing mule who followed her out of the warehouse. She hadn't seen him at all since he mixed words with her new boss earlier that day, and she wanted to keep it that way.

"Hey, ya gonna answer me?" Mark sped up a bit to get ahead of Gilda, turning his head to look back at her face.

"If I say no, can I leave?" Gilda's voice held no malice, just a tired pleading.

"What's wrong with you, griffon? You don't honestly think you're gon' survive in a big city like this with an attitude like that?"

Gilda scowled at this, his first question bringing back a bit of her tempermental attitude.

"Leave me alone, dweeb. I don't wanna talk with someone like you." She retorted, speeding up her pace. Much to her disdain, the Mule seemed to be playing deaf as he sped up to match her.

"That's more like it. But seriously, I ain't trying to be a jerk. I'm just trying to give a newbie some fair warning. That boss o' ours is possibly the biggest jerk you've ever seen."

"I've seen worse." Gilda groaned, not sure why she even bothered replying to him.

"How worse?" Mark smirked.

"Wipe that grin off your face."

"No need to get snippy. I said you should have an attitude; ya don't have to act like our boss." Mark complied with her request, despite his retort, now frowning a bit. "You griffons really are all temper. Don't any of you know how NOT to be a jerk?"

"Shut up." Gilda said. Her feet stood like stone on the sidewalk as Mark turned to look at her. "Why the heck do you care? I'm just here to work, eat, sleep, and pay for my own tiny little apartment. I don't care about anything else anymore, and that certainly doesn't include you."

"Oh, seems like we've got a drama queen." Mark poked, chuckling a bit before shifting expressions. "Cry me a river. You think you got it bad? You got nothing."

"Nothing. You're right; I've got nothing." Gilda grunted, opening her wings to leave the ground mule below her.

The mule stood, a frown on his face. She wasn't all too friendly. Just as he was about to turn, Mark felt a few drops of water on his face.

"Weird; there's not a single cloud in the sky."

"This place really is a dump." Gilda grumbled, standing in the cramped apartment. Luckily the roof was high enough for her, but that didn't mean it was very spacious otherwise. A pull-out bed that also served as her couch stood nearby a radio. Gilda didn't pay much attention to it as she walked by it to inspect her kitchen, connected directly to the main room. A one room apartment. As far as she was concerned, minus the cramped space, it was much better than her nest.

Nest. Gilda frowned at this, shaking her head and trying to think about something else. She came here to forget everything that had happened, and that nest would certainly hinder her goal. Gilda sighed, closing the door to notice a small piece of paper attached. A letter? She couldn't help wondering if Rainbow Dash had read her letters. The griffon groaned to herself. No! Don't think about it.

"What's this letter about anyway?" She muttered to herself, breaking the silence in the room as she tore it off the door. Gilda couldn't help rolling her eyes as she realized it was just a generic welcome message. She took no time finding the trash bin as she rolled it up tight and threw it in.

"Yea. Home sweet home."

"Fillydelphia? Why would Gilda be here?" Fluttershy asked, a bit confused. "She was living in a forest before this. Why the sudden change?"

"I dunno, but she's definitely here. No mistaking my Pinkie Sense!" Pinkie confirmed, smiling at her friends. "Don't worry; I grabbed enough bits for a hotel."

"Pinkie, how the heck did you know we'd need a hotel room?" Dash inquired.

"Um... hoof flex? That always means I'm going to need money, Dashie." Came the simple response. Dash didn't bother blinking, just flying a little ahead.

"So where are we gonna stay anyway?"

"I. Need. Sleep." Fluttershy stated, sleep deprivation making her a little more blunt than usual.

"Don't worry, Fluttershy! Auntie Pinkie Pie's stayed here before way back when she worked on the rock farm!" Pinkie Pie stated reassuringly.

"I'm still a year older than you. Just find the hotel room." Fluttershy groaned in response, walking after Pinkie as she hopped along.

"You seem like a grumpy-pants, Fluttershy. Are you really that worried about your animals?" Pinkie asked, hopping along.

"Spike isn't the best caretaker, from experience." Fluttershy said. "I mean, he's a nice guy, and he's willing to help but... oh I need sleep..."

"We all do, Fluttershy. Let's find that hotel already." Dash interjected, looking left and right.

"We're already here!" Pinkie said, turning off the sidewalk into an alleyway. The two pegasi followed, wondering why they were going down here. This didn't look like it was leading anywhere.

The path continued for a bit, ending in a quick turn to the left before an abrupt stop in front of an oddly shaped door. Pinkie didn't hesitate to knock, but the look of the place sent a shiver down Fluttershy's spine.

"Are... are you sure it's safe, Pinkie?"

"Of course I'm sure! Why wouldn't I be sure?" Pinkie asked, just as the door shot open and a hoof dragged her inside.

"Pinkie Pie!" Fluttershy yelped. Upon her cry, Dash turned and flew over, about to charge through the door way, stopped only by the sound of giggling.

"Hey, Uncle Punch!" Pinkie said, giggling as her relative gave her a friendly noogie.

"Hey, what's my favorite niece doin' all the way out here? Come to visit little 'ol me?" asked the Uncle. Uncle Punch towered over Pinkie, a very fruity red coat with a short, dark-red mane that he didn't seem to spend much time maintaining. The large colt's cutie mark was that of a common pouch used for holding fruit punch.

"I came here with my friends. Not to be a party pooper, 'cus you know that's the last thing I want to be, but we're not here to see you sadly." Pinkie said. "I need a favor, Uncle."

"Name it and I'll do it if I can." Said Punch. "And dun' worry about the visiting thing, sweetie. You know you threw me a birthday part just last month. How can I repay ya?"

"We need to stay here in Fillydelphia for a few days, hopefully no more. We're here to find a friend who's gone missing. I brought some bits, so I can pay if you need me to." Pinkie explained.

"I can get you a room, sure. I'd love to be the hospitable and giving Uncle too, but I'll have to accept your bit offering. Hope ya don't mind me being a bumner, but business ain't been all too good lately." Uncle Punch replied.

"Oh it's okay, Uncle. We would have had to get an expensive hotel if it weren't for you. Oh! How silly of me! These are my friends, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy!" Pinkie said, stepping aside to point a hoof at her pals.

"Hey! A friend of Pinkies is a friend o' mine. Put 'er there!" Said Pinkie's uncle, holding a hoof out to Fluttershy who timidly accepted. The shy pegasus didn't expect how strong a hoofshake he was going to give, shaking her up and down. Fluttershy attempted to recover from a sudden bout of dizziness as Rainbow Dash accepted his hoof next, taking his handshake a little more in stride.

"The extra room's upstairs. Head down this hallway and take the third right, then head up the stairs 'til you get to the third floor and it'll be the first room on yer left. Hope it has enough room for all three of ya."

The three walked inside, too tired to keep questioning how safe it was. The promise of a bed was stronger than anything else.

Chapter 4

"So what does Punch do for a living around here anyway?" Asked the now well-rested Rainbow Dash.

"Uncle Punch is a bartender. He loves working with fruity flavors!"

The room that the three had spent their night in wasn't the most spacious they had ever slept in, but it worked well enough to offer them the sleep they needed. It hadn't taken more than a minute for the two pegasus ponies to get knocked out on the feathery pillows. Pinkie had stayed up a bit longer, catching up with her Uncle in the living room.

The early morning sun had broken through the window, only failing to wake Fluttershy. She lacked the endurance that Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie had, so the long travels took the most out of her. Her friends agreed to let her sleep in more.

"So Pinkie, do you have a more specific idea of where Gilda is?" Asked the pegasus, drinking a glass of water. Considering she still wanted to fly, the water was the only non-alcoholic beverage Uncle Punch had around the house at the time. It had been a few days since he'd gone shopping, on account of a low budget and slow business.

"Sorry, Dashie, but even I can't get that close. I know she's in the city, but we're going to have to do some sneaky detective work to find her!" Pinkie said, her excitement becoming obvious as she mentioned detectives later on in her response.

"Great. Well do you at least have an idea of where to start?"

"Dashie, I barely know Gilda. All I know is that she was a big meany pants who popped my balloons, crashed my hoof-powered minicopter, and acted like a big party-pooper at the party I threw for her in the first place after she managed to fall into all the pranks you had set up with nopony specific in mind. If anypony should have an idea of where to start, it'd be you and, as far as I'm aware, you don't come here often if not never having been here before." Pinkie explained.

"So that's a no?" Dash retorted, a little annoyed that she spent that much time explaining a simple answer that could have been stated in one word.

"No, that's not a no. I have a perfect idea of where to start!"

"Pinkie Pie, I have no time to play a drinking game with you..." Dash started.

"Drinking game? Dashie we're here to find Gilda, not drink! Which is a shame since Uncle Punch would love to make us some drinks. I didn't know you drank alcohol, though. Wasn't there something in that Junior Speedsters manual about Flying Under the Influence?"

"Nevermind! Just tell me your plan!" Rainbow grunted, placing her hoof to her face.

"Well, Gilda would need somewhere to work if she wanted to live in Fillydelphia. We could ask around some employment places and find out if anyone gave a griffon a job." Pinkie stated matter of factly.

"Did I hear somethin' 'bout employment offices?" came a voice from the door as Uncle Punch walked in. "You lookin' for a job or somethin? Hey, if you need a job, Pinkie, I could use yer help advertisin."

"Sorry, Uncle! No can do! We were talking about employment offices to try and find if anyone hired Gilda recently to see if we could find her!" Pinkie explained, a little less enthusiastic than she usually was.

"Ahh, alright. That offer's still open, but I don't mind. Hey, there's an employment office a few blocks away. Want some directions?" Punch offered, only to receive the excited nods of Pinkie Pie and her pegasus friend. "A'ight. When you get out of the alley, head left and turn at the corner. Walk about two blocks down and it'll be on yer left."

"Thanks, Uncle! We'll be off now!" Pinkie said, jumping towards the door.

"Hey, what 'bout yer other pegasus friend? Ain't you gonna take her with ya?"

"She needs sleep pretty bad. Let her rest a little longer." Replied the party pony, already out the door.

"A'ight. Be safe; this part of town ain't the nicest!" Punch called, hoping his niece heard him.

"Ya know, I envy you griffons. Ya all got 'dem claw things. I ain't a pony, but I still only got hooves. What's it like actually bein' able to grab stuff?"

Gilda, by now, had started getting used to the routine at her newfound job. It took her about twenty full hours of being yelled at and a few after-work scuffles, but the repetition and demand of the warehouse had finally started to feel like it could be normal. More importantly, she started to feel like herself again, and could finally start forgetting what she'd left behind. Her attitude had returned and, with the help of a certain mule that refused to give up, she'd found someone to vent on.

"You ever used a glass, Mark?" She asked in response.

"Yea. Set it on 'da table an' lick it up. Normally contains a nice round of liquor for me." Replied the mule, unsure of where her remark was going.

"I don't need a table to drink it." Said the griffon.

"Oh 'cus you can lift it... OOOOH! Wow. I really envy you griffons." Mark seemed completely fascinated for a second by this rather simple revelation.

"Mark?"

"Yea?"

"Shut up and get back to work." Ordered the claw-handed one, grabbing another box to move.

"'ey, I'm workin'! Sheesh, yer just like da boss. Can't we has a conversation once in a while?"

"Conversations imply that I don't mind listening to your voice and want to talk with you."

"Don't be like 'dat! Yeesh, ya griffons are such a bummer. 's like you'd be perfectly happy spendin' the rest of yer life alone." Mark retorted, unaware of the button he'd just pressed.

Crack!

"Hey, whatcha doin'? Ya gone loco?"

Gilda stood in front of Mark, crouched against the wall holding a hoof up.

"Can't you understand what SHUT UP MEANS!?" The griffon cried, tossing another box at the mule.

"Woah, woah, woah! Quit breakin' da crates; we only got so many a 'dose!"

"Well maybe if they lose an employee they'll have enough in the budget to buy more!" Gilda's claws reached out to grip another crate, but found the box immobile when she tried to pull it.

"Woah, woah! Mark may be an annoying idiot, but that don't mean you gotta break his head in! Calm down, missy!"

Gilda turned, glaring at her manager. Her eyes reflected a strong desire to break his head in too, but her desire to keep the only source of income she had forced her to take a breath.

"That's better. Get back to work. Those crates are coming out of your next paycheck, and you're gonna be cleaning 'em up afterwards. Just 'cus you don't work at no store doesn't exempt you from 'you break it you buy it', miss griffon." Stated the manager.

"Whatever." Grumbled Gilda as she turned and started grabbing crates again, once again empty of malicious intent. Or, rather, no attempts to utilize her malice.

The griffon didn't mind paying for the crates in the end, as the whole ordeal had gotten Mark to silence himself as she'd wanted in the first place. The silence allowed her to focus on her work, but it seemed the lack of annoying chatter came as a catch as her thoughts drifted to her reason for being here in the first place.

The rest of the work day, the silent griffon couldn't remove a saddened frown from her beak.

"Sorry we couldn't find anything out, Dashie. We tried like, ten employment offices! I never would have guessed there'd be so many in such a teeny weeny area!"

The trip had been a failure, which didn't surprise Rainbow Dash. Only two employment offices actually told them whether or not they had a griffon come in for a job, while all the others refused on the grounds of privacy. The only thing the two learned from their venture was where NOT to go if they wanted to keep their information private when looking for a job.

"It's okay, Pinkie. It was a longshot anyway." Dash said, sighing to herself a little. "But now what do we do? I doubt going to any more employment places'll get us any more info than we've gotten."

"We could just ask around, Dashie!"

"Pinkie," Dash said, looking down at her friend, "I haven't even been here before and I already know that 'just asking around' will either get us nothing or in a fight before we get what we want. It's the same chance of you stopping a party if somebody just asks you with no reason."

"Well if they had no reason then they wouldn't ask!" Pinkie chuckled, finding Dash's comment humorous.

"Nevermind."

"Dashie, if we don't ask anybody then we have no chance of finding her unless we just happen to see her, and this place is HUGE!"

Dash wasn't all too used to Pinkie making so many logical comments, but then again Pinkie was random as could be. Maybe she had logical mood swings?

"Oy. Where should we start then?" Asked the pegasus, turning only to see Pinkie already approaching a random stranger who happened to be passing by.

"Hiya! I'm Pinkie Pie! I was wondering if you could..."

"I'm not interested." Came the sharp reply as the older colt kept walking.

"But I'm not trying to..."

"Go bug some other pony."

Pinkie stopped hopping alongside the colt, frowning angrily.

"Well that wasn't very nice."

"They tend to be like that around here, Pinkie." Dash stated, floating nearby.

"Let's go find somepony else!" Pinkie said, bouncing away.

"ey, Gilda! Whadya do after work every day, anyway?" asked a stubborn work mule, unwilling to drop the idea of talking to the griffon even after their earlier ordeal.

"Why should I tell you? You can't seem to grasp how NOT to talk!" The griffon stated this half-heartedly, somewhat missing his chatter clogging up her thoughts.

"Hey, quit puttin' a mule down, eh? It ain't criminal to talk to a co-worker in the line o' work we got. Just answer the question!" Pestered Mark, shoving a crate into the loading bay.

"Why do they always have us on the same job anyway?" Gilda groaned, still refusing the answer.

"Come on, just answer 'da question griffy!"

"I go home and sleep. Ya happy now?" Stated the griffon through gritted teeth as she pulled a crate out into the loading bay.

"That's it? Yer a real borin' lot, Gilda. You don't seem to do nuttin' interestin' other'n try an' kill me with boxes."

"If you found it so interesting, would you like me to do it again?" hissed Gilda, once again liking the idea.

"Simmer down, missy. I'm just sayin you're missin' out on this here city. Heck, from the sound of it you ain't never had a sip o' wine."

"Wine? Pfft, no. I like being able to fly." Gilda retorted.

"Ha! You sound like a lightweight, Gildy. Can't take a pint o' beer?" Mark challenged, chuckling to himself as he pushed along another crate.

"Never said I couldn't take it, mule." Growled Gilda, not liking the taunt.

"Can ya prove it? You still sound like a lightweight to me!"

Sometimes Gilda hated pride. The last two things she wanted to do were to hang out with Mark and to back down from a challenge. Sadly, she couldn't avoid one without the other biting her in the rear. But she had a plan.

"Hey, I'll prove it. But let's make it a bet; if I can fly home after, you gotta stop talkin' to me." Posed Gilda.

"That bet implies that if ya can't, I can yap all I please. If so, issa bet!"

"Sure. You pick the bar, pal."

The work shift went on from there, but it only took another hour to finish up. This was the first day that Gilda didn't fly straight home after her shift was done.

"Well that didn't work at all." Grumble a rather disheartened pegasus as she flew into an empty bar. She and Pinkie had spent the greater part of four hours trying to ask people for information, but of the small percentage that actually stopped to answer them, none of them had any clue.

Pinkie hopped in, smiling at her friend despite their failure. The party pony wasn't going to let their days venture dishearten her, as after all she was quite the optimist.

"Dashie, we'll just have to try again tomorrow! Nothing ever said we needed to find her immediately!" Pinkie replied, hopping on a bar stool and sending it spinning.

"We can't stay here forever, Pinkie. Your Uncle can only host us so long, and we're gonna run out of money eventually. Besides, our friends back in Ponyville are probably worried sick about us. We've been gone for a long time."

"So I gather you've had a bad day, eh?"

Dash looked up at Pinkie's uncle, a look of sorrow upon her face.

"I'll take that as a yes." Punch said, cleaning out a wine glass with a towel. Being a pony, it was a little harder than it should have been.

"We'll find her, Uncle! Anyway, how was business today?" Pinkie asked, trying to get a cheerier conversation going.

"Slow. Got a few customers, though. Right before I closed up, a regular of mine walked in with a pal. Apparently they came in for some bet, and the girl didn't seem all too happy 'til she had a few." Punch replied.

"Ooh! A bet! Who won? Who won?" Pinkie asked, excited about the idea. She wasn't the betting type, but she always wanted to know who won them.

"I'd say the griffon won the whole ordeal, on account of how she could still fly after." Punch said matter-of-factly. "The bet was whether or not she could..."

"Griffon!?"

Punch barely managed to avoid dropping the glass as Dash flew up to him, looking him square in the eyes.

"There was a griffon here? What did she look like?"

"She was a griffon; what else is there to tell? Other'n the odd eye shadow that looked like it'd been near wiped clean by the end of the whole ordeal."

"That's GILDA! Why didn't you try and keep her here? Why didn't you send Fluttershy to get us?"

"Hey, whatcha yellin' at me for? You never told me you were lookin' for a griffon, so I had no reason to keep her around." Punch replied, not liking how the pegasus approached him.

"Oy, Pinkie! Why didn't you tell him who we were looking for? If you had we could be done with everything at this point!"

"I didn't think I'd need to! I'm sorry, Dashy. It slipped my mind when I was catching up with Punch anyway." Pinkie replied, a hint of regret in her voice.

"Oy. Do you know where she lives? Or where she might be now?" Dash asked, turning back to the uncle.

"After how much she had she'd better be home asleep. But I don't know where that is. Her companion was one of my few regulars, though. A mule named Mark. He'll probably be back tomorrow" Punch replied, hoping that the information would help get her away from his face.

"If he comes again, could you ask him about her for us?" Pinkie questioned, a look of hope on her face.

"Of course, Pinkie! Why wouldn't I? After all, you're all out here for her sake anyway." Punch replied, smiling. The smile looked a little more sincere as Rainbow Dash backed away.

"Great! Then we'll wait!" Dash said, before remembering a detail she'd forgotten. "Oh, how's Fluttershy?"

"Surprisingly still asleep. You weren't kidding when you said she was tired; she hasn't budged at all." Punch replied, finishing up the glass before placing it away.

"At least one of us can relax." Dash replied, yawning herself. "If she wakes up sometime soon, would you fill her in?"

"If I'm awake, sure."

The pegasus smiled. Pinkie's uncle wasn't such a bad guy.

Now to wait for the morning.

Chapter 5

Today was the day, thought a hopeful rainbow pegasi as she awoke from her slumber. Gilda was a friend, and whether or not she represented the Element of Loyalty, a friend who didn't help another friend in need couldn't be anything but a scumball. Besides, she hadn't seen Gilda for so long; she wanted to know how she changed, hopeful that they could fix things once and for all. The fact that both Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were here helping her must have meant something, right?

After a long, exaggerated stretch, Rainbow trotted out to the bar, not caring for the cramped space of the bedroom she had slept in. She wasn't used to sleeping on beds; the clouds she called home were much more comfortable, but she made due.

To her surprise, she found a rather shy friend of hers cleaning tables in the bar, with Punch behind the counter. Well, at least Fluttershy was awake; that was good news. Regardless, this brought up more questions that Dash wanted answers to. She was getting tired of everything bringing up questions; asking questions was what Twilight and the Crusaders did; she was used to doing more than asking.

"Oh! Hello, Rainbow! You're awake." Fluttershy stated, noticing her companion enter the room. A smile held on her face, and from the looks of it Rainbow could only guess that Uncle Punch had told her the news. She seemed like the weight of the world had been lifted on her shoulders.

"It's not surprising that I'm awake; it's more surprising that you are. You slept like a log all throughout yesterday." Rainbow replied, walking in a bit more. "Why are you cleaning up this place? Isn't that Punch's job?"

"Oh. Well, you see, he has been having trouble getting enough time to tidy up. He mentioned it when we were talking earlier, and I wanted to help him a bit. I'm good at cleaning, you know... with all the animals." Fluttershy explained, continuing her work as she did.

"That's so like you, Fluttershy."

The conversation died off at this point, as Rainbow walked off to let the busy pegasi get to her work. Rainbow wanted ever so badly to go outside and fly around to try and see Gilda early, but she didn't want to risk ruining the plan they already had; they had a link, and all they had to do was hope it wasn't going to break the chain of events leading to their reunion.

"Hey, Rainbow! Come over 'ere for a minute." called Punch from behind the bar, waving a hoof towards her. The pegasus took no time floating over, hovering by the counter.

"What's up, Punch?" the somewhat anxious pegasi asked.

"Calm down. You really need it. You got your sleep but you're still as stiff as a board." the colt stated, pouring a cup of clean, cool water. "Take a drink and get your mind off the whole deal. Worrying too much over your little reunion'll probably crash it too soon."

"It's not that easy, Punch. We've known each other..."

"For a very long time? Yea; I know. Did Pinkie Pie ever tell you 'bout her dad?" Punch interrupted.

"Uh... yea she did. What's that got to do with...?"

"Her dad, my brother. Heck, I'm Uncle after all. Pinkie Pie's dad was in the rock farmin' business, which was what I did for my childhood 'fore I found out 'bout brewing. When I found my passion in life, he didn't like it. For many years we had such a good bond, true brothers through and through. Of course nopony's going to be extremely supportive of any relative who finds their true passion working professionally as that guy who gets folks drunk. He was no different, but his whole traditional deal made it a bit worse. He wouldn't live with me; he wouldn't talk to me or anything. It was against his beliefs to the very core to even think of alcohol as an honest man's line of work. We pretty much broke up; I moved out of my home and went to live here. He stayed on the farm and married, and we didn't speak for about four years.

About a year back I worked a job in the area, catering for a big 'ol party held by my old next-door-neighbor's son who'd inherited the property. I would've never expected my brother'd be attending the party. It was awkward, I'll give you that. Don't expect your reunion to be any different, but he'd changed so much. Pinkie was to blame for a lot of it, but he

seemed much happier. He'd actually kept the party trend in the area going after Pinkie moved to live in Ponyville.

We felt like we were brothers again, and it was one of the best days in my life. A piece that had been lost got reattached, and another piece got sown on once I met Pinkie. But I know for a fact that the whole thing would'a gone horribly wrong had I known he was there, as I'da sweat up the biggest storm you'd have ever seen. Don't do that to yourself; you're obviously here for someone special, as otherwise you wouldn't be here at all."

Punch finished his monologue, proud of his speech, when he noticed a quiet sound which scratched at his eardrums; Rainbow's snoring.

"HEY! Wake up!" Punch said, slamming the counter. Fluttershy jumped at the outburst, turning to look in fear at him. Rainbow awoke with a start, immediately trying to act as if she'd been paying attention the whole time.

"Geh... whatever. Just do me a favor and don't screw yourself over more'n you have to." Punch said, waving Rainbow off as he went back to work.

Rainbow sighed. That was one boring speech.

"That Griffon's a real jerk, punch. She ain't even got the decency to thank me when I actually help her with somethin' for a change. I dunno what 'er problem is." Mark sat at the bench in Uncle Punch's bar, already with a few shots downed. He was off his balance, having nearly fallen off the stool twice, but didn't seem ready to stop anytime soon.

The mule had wandered in in the later evening, immediately asking for a big shot of Punch's strongest, claiming a need to get his mind off of a pesty pelican. It hadn't taken him longer than five minutes to be stone cold drunk, but luckily Punch had long been used to this side of the business.

"What's her name, Mark? She never introduced herself last time she came." Punch questioned, pouring another shot. He knew Mark's drinking tolerance up and down; he could survive about three more shots, then he'd be out.

"Her name's... Gildy er somethin'. I dun' care no more. She's such a stale person; ain't got no spirit at all. She should... she should come here more often. Maybe your spirits... could fill that hole." Mark suggested, chuckling a little at his weak joke.

"Eh, maybe she could. You got 'er here once before; think you could get her here again?" Punch poked, pretending to just be interested in her business.

"No... can do. I made a b... bet, and I lost... it. Can't even talk to her... no more at w... work or else she'll break a box... over my head." Mark replied, shaking his head.

"Aww, that's a shame. Well, can you do me a favor, regardless? I'd like to talk to her about a possible position here; I need some help, and she doesn't seem all too happy over there. Could you just hand her this letter?"

Punch pulled a letter out from under the counter, setting it in front of the drunk mule. Mark eyed it a bit, then chuckled.

"Sure I could, but it'll... cost ya." Mark replied.

"If you bring her this letter, your next round of shots is on the house. Sound fair?" Punch proposed.

"Heck yea! Sounds just fine by m... me!" Mark replied, downing his last shot before grabbing the letter in his teeth. "Puh ih ahn mah tahhb!"

"Sure deal. Seeya!"

Punch walked as the mule stumbled out of the bar, and just after the door shut he could hear three excited, happy cries from underneath the counter.

Punch couldn't help but grin.

"I thought I told you not to talk to me."

Gilda glared her eyes towards the one pest she had thought she finally dealt with permanently. Mark had approached her after the end of work, a greeting called through gritted teeth.

"I onnt. I aahv a ehher or oo!" The mule said, lifting his head to show her the envelope held between his teeth. He'd made a conscious effort to avoid slobbering over it, having already stained it a bit with alcohol.

"Who from? Is this some stupid attempt at an apology or something, 'cus I'm not gonna accept it!"

"Just shut up and take it! My work here is done, ya grumpy griffon." Mark said, as the letter floated slowly to the ground in front of her. Without another word, the mule turned and trotted off, headed home.

Gilda just blinked for a second, picking up the letter before it blew away in the mild breeze. Mark had tried to honor his bet for the most part, but generally slipped up every now and then. She wasn't used to him just leaving like this after work, though. Her curiosity peaked, the griffon used one talion to open the letter and pulled it out.

Dear Gilda,

Hello! My name is Punch, the owner and proprietor of Punch and Spirits. You visited my bar a few days prior to today, accompanied by my regular Mark the mule. Mark has told me that you aren't all too fond of your current job, and that you're a good worker. I wanted to formally extend to you an invitation to come in for an interview to possibly work here. I am in need of assistance at the shop, primarily with cleaning and waiting, and would be willing to pay well.

If you are interested, stop by the shop at eight PM on this upcoming Saturday. The shop will be closed, but just knock on the front door and I'll let you in for the interview. I hope you consider this offer.

Sincerely,
Punch.

This was sudden, and didn't make much sense. Mark had said good things about her? From the sound of things he wanted to get her out of his hair, now that he lost his bet and couldn't yap at her all he wanted.

Why was this Punch guy so interested in her of all people, anyway? Gilda couldn't understand what made her special; anybody else could probably do the job better. There were tons of ponies in this city.

"Ya know, I envy you griffons. Ya all got 'dem claw things. I ain't a pony, but I still only got hooves. What's it like actually bein' able to grab stuff?"

Claws! That's probably why. Such a simple thing, but that was the only explanation she could come up with. That and the fact that she was probably the only griffon in Fillydelphia. Still, it felt a little weird being targeted for something like that.

Gilda debated whether or not to go as she flew home. Taking the job meant losing the job here at the docks. Mark was right on one thing; the boss was a jerk. Regardless, it was a simple job and he payed well enough.

On the other hand, this Punch guy could very well pay more from the sound of it. He also seemed to be a lot nicer, and obviously would value her more than her current boss. But a waiter? She didn't want to talk to anypony around here.

It was an interview. She didn't have to accept the offer, and he wasn't necessarily going to hire her, right? What did it hurt? It's not like she had plans this Saturday, right?

Aww, to heck with it, thought the griffon. She might as well give it a shot.

The griffon unlocked her apartment door, walking in slowly before kicking the door shut. A calendar hung on the wall beside her bed. She didn't know why she bought it, other than the fact that it had tons of pictures of griffons all over it. It reminded her of home, she guessed.

Home...

"She's coming tonight!" Rainbow cried, excitement just as strong as worry in her voice. It had been three more days, and they were finally running out of money to stay at Punch's bar. If things didn't work out tonight, they would be forced to either find work or leave the next day, and Fluttershy couldn't bare staying away from the animals much longer. This was their all-or-nothing.

"I know! It's so exciting! We'll get to see her again! Oh! I wonder if she's still such a grumpy griffon. Does she look any different? Does she remember me? I hope she does!" Pinkie Pie was in her usual hoppy mood, bouncing around on top of the empty bar tables. The bar closed at 7:00, currently empty of all life except for the four anxious waiting ponies.

"Pinkie, stop jumpin' on the tables! We just had 'dem cleaned!" Punch called.

"Sorry, Uncle! I just can't stop bouncing! Hehee!" Pinkie said, jumping off the table and continuing her hops throughout the bar. "Oh! Should we set up a surprise reunion party? I could fix it up real quick!"

"No, Pinkie. This is important, remember?" Punch reminded her.

"Don't be a party pooper, Punch! That was Gilda's job! Or not job, but she was that! Your job is to make alcohooooo~!"

Pinkie was lost, which didn't surprise the other three at all. Her excitement and lack of worry helped cheer them up, giving them a bit more hope that things would turn out right.

"Pinkie, now's not the time to get way too loud! If we startle her too early, she'll run for it!" Rainbow said, a look of seriousness in her eyes.

"Aww, sorry Rainbow. I'll be quiet, but I won't stop being excited! I can't be anything less than overly extremely excited!" Replied the party pony.

"Um, sorry to interrupt, but... I think she's coming...!" Fluttershy squeaked, quickly flying over to the door leading to the back hallway of the bar.

"Pinkie! We need to hide!" Rainbow called, quickly flying out to grab her tail and drag her back.

The bar went silent as Punch worked his best at cleaning a glass on the counter. After a short pause, the four heard a hard knock at the door.

"It's unlocked; come on in!" Punch called, pushing the glass aside and offering a smile as the griffon walked in.

Gilda had taken the time to comb her feathers, but it seemed like a bit of a rush job and, otherwise, she hadn't prettied up too much. She wasn't incredibly interested in the idea of waiting, but she loved the idea of getting away from her boss.

"Oh, hello Gilda! Come in, come in! Seat yourself over at that table right there." Punch said, pointing a hoof over at one table that had been cleaned up.

Gilda nodded, her expression not very excited at all as she stepped over and sat down.

"I'm so glad you came. I've been in real need of some help around here, and all the other ponies I've interviewed in the past didn't seem to have the coordination to handle it. How are you, by the way?" Punch greeted, sitting down opposite her.

"Tired and irritated. Can we just move along?" Gilda retorted, not putting on any form of fake act to make herself seem more likable.

"Sure thing. Sorry to hear that, though. So, how long have you lived here in Filly?"

"Only about three weeks." Gilda replied, sharpening her talons a bit as she waited.

"Oh really? You already seem to have adapted well to city life. Where have you lived beforehand?" Punch asked in return, keeping the conversation as engaging as possible. He wasn't a star actor, but he knew how to keep someone interested.

"Cloudsdale, and before that I lived outside of Equestria." Gilda stated bluntly.

"What brought you here from Cloudsdale?" Punch asked.

A-CHOO!

The conversation stopped dead at this point, as Gilda peered over Punch's shoulder to look at the hallway.

"What was that?" She asked, trying to spot the source. "Someone else here?"

"There's nobody else here. You hear something?" Punch replied, trying to pass the subject.

"I know I heard something; that was too loud to be nothing. Who's back there?" Gilda asked again, a little less patient this time.

Punch, about to reply, was interrupted by a very light chuckling, followed by a noticeable hush.

"Who's back there!?" Gilda called, angered now. He was keeping something from her; was this a trap or something?

"Nobody, I swea..."

A-CHOO!

At this, a familiar pink shape flew across the room, hitting a table. The pink pony immediately burst out laughing.

"Pinkie Pie? What are you..." Gilda didn't finish her question, realizing the only thing this could mean. This had been a set up; they'd come after her. The slamming of a chair on the ground was nothing in comparison to Gilda's heart as she charged for the door, only to be tackled by a familiar blue pegasi.

"Let go!" Gilda cried, light tears dull in comparison to her frustrated and scared cries as she struggled in Rainbow's grasp.

"I don't want to!" Rainbow replied.

The deafening scream of Rainbow's cry pierced the night as three talons fell down Rainbow's right front leg, forcing her to release her grip to stop the bleeding. Gilda took this opportunity to push open the front door, fleeing her woes.

"My leg!" Rainbow cried out in pain, lying on the floor. It had been so many years since she'd last felt Gilda's claws, but this time it wasn't an accident during Junior Speedsters; she attacked her.

"Oh dear! It's bleeding badly!" Fluttershy cried, coming over. "Mr. Punch, do you have any first aid supplies?"

"I ain't got enough for that! I normally deal with small cuts 'n bruises during bar fights, not anything this bad! I'll get what I got, though; it'll help at least." Punch replied, running off to find supplies for the gaping leg wound.

"Fluttershy, go get Gilda!"

Fluttershy stood silently over Rainbow. She was bleeding, pained in more ways than one, and had just been attacked by her old friend, but her thoughts still went to her first? Loyalty was much deeper in Rainbow's veins than Fluttershy had ever thought.

"Rainbow, I... I wouldn't be able to catch up with her. Besides, you need medical aid... and..."

"I'll go get her~!" Pinkie interrupted, running out the front door. Her hopping, laughing demeanor had been dropped once Rainbow had been hurt.

"Don't hurt her! Just stall her, bring her back, whatever!" Rainbow called after her, just as Punch returned with the medical supplies.

The cleaning alcohol stung Rainbow, but not as much as the tears in Gilda's eyes did.

"Not cool, not cool, not cool!" Muttered Gilda in pained breaths as she landed on a skyscraper. She couldn't believe she had just done that; sure she wanted to get away, but that drew a line she couldn't uncross. Rainbow would never forgive that.

Where could she go now? What could she do now? When would she ever be able to just stop thinking about her past, and when could she stop asking herself questions all the time? Gilda couldn't concentrate on anything; her mind was once again in a whirl, and she couldn't take it.

Gilda looked down from the skyscraper, watching the city below her. She'd never taken the time to take in Fillydelphia. The scale of the city was glorious; the pony who layed out the plan way back when did a great job, but probably would have gaped at what it had become after so many hundreds of years. Why didn't she slow down more? She loved the speed of life, but couldn't she appreciate this?

"I can't appreciate it anymore." she whispered, as the image before her blurred.

"Can't appreciate what?"

Gilda shook her head, blinked about a million times, then looked down at the voice. Pinkie Pie peered up at her, leaning out the top story window. Her face held a smile, though it was much duller than what she normally had.

"Leave me alone!" Gilda cried, bolting off the top of the skyscraper before racing towards the dockyard below. She couldn't let Pinkie just follow her like that.

The fleeing griffon landed on top of a coast-side restaurant, closed, dark, and empty. Despite her athleticism, the dash still forced her to catch her breath.

"That was close..." She muttered.

"What was close?"

Pinkie Pie stood next to Gilda, wearing a chef's hat from the restaurant with a slightly bigger grin on her face than last time. Pinkie obviously enjoyed these chases.

Gilda didn't bother to scream at Pinkie this time, spinning on her heels and darting off once again. This time she settled herself in an alleyway about three miles away, hiding behind a dumpster. Couldn't that party pony just do her a favor and leave? She'd already made one mistake too many.

"Why are you sitting here? It smells in this alleyway!" Gilda looked up to see Pinkie hanging from the fire escape ladder of the building next to the dumpster, waving at her with a huge grin.

Her feet shuffled themselves again, but this time went nowhere.

"I give up." Gilda said, falling flat on her face.

"That's funny! That's exactly what Rainbow said when I chased her around the day before you came, except that was back in Ponyville. What are you two giving up anyway?" Pinkie said, jumping down from the ladder and landing beside Gilda.

"The chase. How the heck do you move so fast anyway?" Gilda asked, breathing hard.

"That's a secret~!" Pinkie said, giggling as she hopped around Gilda.

"Why are you even following me, anyway? I clawed Rainbow Dash, and I acted like a jerk to you back at the party you threw for me." Gilda questioned, looking up with curiosity at the pink pony.

"Well, DUH! I wanna bring you back to the bar! Or bring Rainbow here. But bringing Rainbow here would mean that she'd be with me and if she were with me than she'd already be here, so I'm here to bring you back to the bar! You ran away so quickly; you didn't even give us a chance at all!" Pinkie said, still hopping a bit.

"I didn't want to stay!" Gilda yelled in response, anger showing in her eyes. "Dash tackled me!"

"Why didn't you want to stay?" Pinkie asked, honest confusion covering her face as she sat and tilted her head. Why did she want to leave? Gilda knew the answer, but she would never tell Pinkie. That would just be so uncool.

Uncool.

Gilda stopped at this. It was uncool? What was uncool? Why should she even care if Pinkie thought she was cool? And what has cool ever done for her? She wouldn't even be in this whole mess if she had just ignored "cool" for once in her life, but no! She just couldn't stand to be uncool.

Gilda looked at the blurred Pinkie, a frown on her face and anger faded. Pinkie Pie didn't care about being cool, and look at her! Up until Gilda came along and acted like a party pooper, Pinkie had been smiling and laughing and enjoying her life. She sneezed herself across the room at the bar and hit her head on a table, but just kept laughing. Gilda would never be able to do that. She would have groaned, kicked the table, and walked away as if nothing ever happened; she wouldn't have associated herself with that table, and if anyone brought it up she'd just call them stupid. If anything she wasn't cool; she couldn't be cool.

She was a dweeb.

"I really don't know why, anymore." Gilda said, tears coating her voice. Her audible sobs and falling tears were absorbed by the junk strewn around the alleyway, but Gilda knew she was crying and, for once, she didn't care. She wanted to cry it out.

"Aww, don't cry Gildy! Pinkie Pie's here to cheer you up!" Pinkie said, poking Gilda's shoulder a bit. "Why don't we just get back to the bar?"

Gilda shuffled her claw, rubbing her eyes against the fur on her upper leg. Her tears were wiped, but quickly replaced. It took a half minute just for her to dry her eyes enough to see anything, and when she did she slowly raised herself from the ground.

"Lead the way."

"Rainbow, hold still! We can't do anything if you keep flailing like 'dat!"

Punch struggled to hold Rainbow down on the table, her hooves flailing in pain as Fluttershy nervously applied the small bandages Punch had on

hand. The pink-haired pegasus had barely managed to get one on after working on the wound for five whole minutes, as the pain of the wound and Fluttershy's hatred for causing her pain made the process even more slow and painful for the three of them.

Rainbow attempted to calm herself, her flailing reduced by quite a bit. This was the first time that Rainbow could even hear Punch, having been crying in pain earlier as they cleaned out the wound. She remembered how much pain she'd gone through the last time she got clawed like this, but for some reason this felt much worse.

Another painful minute passed before Fluttershy could finally say "They're all on", allowing Rainbow to move herself off the table and onto a stool. Rainbow held her arm to her chest, doing everything she could to avoid touching it to anything. She knew that the claws wouldn't heal anytime soon.

"Sorry you had to go through 'dat, Rainbow girl. Must hurt worse'n bein' applebucked." Punch stated, looking at the wound in case any of the bandages were coming off. "We really should get you to the hospital for that."

"No!" Rainbow blurted, angered at the idea. "I'm not leaving until Gilda comes back!"

"We can wait here for her! You need medical..."

"NO!"

Rainbow shook her head and held her leg closer. She wouldn't leave. Punch frowned, and prepared to open his mouth again, but was interrupted by the sound of the door.

Pinkie Pie hopped in, smiling and happy, but accompanied by nobody.

"Pinkie Pie! Where's Gilda?!" Rainbow asked, darting her head over in fear.

"Oh, she's right here silly!" Pinkie said, turning to point at the air. It took Pinkie a second to realize that nobody stood there, and as soon as she noticed she darted outside. Rainbow could hear a minor scuffle of words before seeing Gilda slowly skidding into the bar, pushed from behind by Pinkie.

"Get in here, Gildy!" Pinkie said, excited. "Rainbow's still here!"

Pinkie stopped pushing Gilda, bringing her to a halt before closing the door behind her.

"Here she is!" Pinkie reported, saluting to Rainbow before breaking off into giggles.

Gilda wouldn't look up, her gaze straight down and head tilted away. She was waiting for Rainbow to scream at her. She sort of wanted it, too. She couldn't just forgive herself like that.

"It's been so long since you last scratched me like this, right? It was way back in junior speedsters. Man, that hurt! But it was so weird to see you apologizing so much." Rainbow said, getting off the stool and trying to stand. The thought was short lived as she winced from placing her wounded hoof on the ground, forcing her to keep it up and stand on her remainder. For once Rainbow didn't feel like using her wings to float around.

"Must've been an accident this time too, right? Just pressed a little too hard and forgot to sheathe your claws, right? Whatever; it's not like it was the first time that happened. I'll recover just like I did way back when."

"Stop that!"

Rainbow looked over at Gilda, head held lower but no longer turned away. Her beak was clamped tightly shut, and her eyes seemed like they were glued.

"Stop what?" Rainbow asked calmly.

"Stop forgiving me like it's nothing! You know that wasn't an accident, Dash! You know I clawed you on purpose! Why can you just forgive me like that was nothing? I attacked you!" Gilda cried.

"Stop telling me what to do!" Rainbow yelled back. Gilda froze. This is what she had been waiting for; she wanted Dash to yell more.

A silence fell the room, and Gilda couldn't bear it. Where was the screaming? The anger? She was just about to break and run again, tears welling up in her eyes to blur her sight for about the thousandth time. That's when she felt something soft placed gently against her left eye.

Her right eye opened to see the side of Rainbow's wounded leg, wiping the tears with a medical rag. This was her first good look at the scale of the wound she had inflicted, and it was worse than she had imagined. The scars covered just over half of the full length of the leg, and the bandages left so many open gaps.

"I want to forgive you, Gilda. Stop trying to act so cool and just let me."

Gilda cracked. Her tears surged as she wrapped her arms around Rainbow's waist, wailing as she did. The pegasus held her close, ignoring the pain in her arm to hold Gilda as tightly as possible.

The journey had been long, painful, and tiring. It had wound itself over thousands of kilometers, yet it finally brought itself to rest here.

"I don't want to be cool anymore. I just want you back."

"You're still cool to me."