

Blunder and Lightning

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Chapter 1

Dawn was fast approaching in Ponyville, with everypony still asleep... except for one.

In a clearing not far from Sugarcube Corner, Pinkie Pie stood next to a large contraption while leafing through a hard-bound book. Eventually, she found what she was looking for, and closed it, reading the title on its cover once more: "Winged Species of Equestria."

It would serve her well. Then again, most the books she borrowed from Twilight usually did.

After placing the book inside the contraption's side basket, she hopped on its seat, placed her hind hooves on its pedals, and used them for their intended purpose. The contraption's wheels turned, allowing her to roll, as she steered straight ahead with her front hooves, first along a smooth meadow, and then down a speed-yielding hill.

Once she was satisfied with her acceleration, she made sure the path before her was clear, and then moved one front hoof from the vehicle's secondary controls. With a pull of levers, the adjustments she had recently made to the machine shifted into action. Rotor blades on the top and tail spun, giving her lift, and soon, she was airborne.

Now, for the final test. Another shift of levers... and she was able to turn to her heart's content. Left, right, down, higher still... no angle, no direction, was denied her.

"Yes!"

Pinkie Pie sighed in relief, her first destination already clear in her mind.

"All systems go," she whispered to herself. "Just you wait, Dashie. I'll save you..."

With a gleeful cackle, she flew off into the sunrise.

Later that morning...

"*Twilight!*"

Rarity dashed in as soon as Twilight Sparkle answered her door, and clutched her in her forelegs. "I came as soon as I got word! Are you all right? Emotionally, I mean, it didn't sound like you were *physically* attacked, or-" She stopped and froze. "Oh my gosh, *were you?*"

Twilight gently pulled back and giggled. "Rarity, I'm fine. It's not nearly as bad as all that." She looked at the small crowd of ponies that Rarity had just joined. "Okay, I think that's everyone. Let's take roll. Applejack?"

"Yes'm!"

"Don't call me 'm", I'm hardly old enough. Rarity?"

"Ready and waiting, Mademoiselle Sparkle!"

"Errr... wow, thanks. Fluttershy?"

"Oh! I, um... I-"

"Got it! Aaaaand Pinkie Pie."

"Pinkie?" asked Rarity.

Twilight nodded. "She wanted in. Says she's been having problems even predating yours."

Rarity did a double-take. "You don't say? Color me curious, then! I do so wonder what could offset *her*..."

"Oh, hang on, I just remembered," said Applejack. "Pinkie left this in my mailbox this mornin'. Envelope said to give it to you when I got here."

"Let's see it." Twilight took the letter from Applejack's offering mouth,

magically unwrapped and unfolded it, and read.

"Dear Twilight: I got your call for the meeting, but I have something really really Really Really REALLY REALLY important to take care of! I promise I'll be there as soon as I can, but please, start without me! In my place, I've already made your house as totally festive as possible, so it'll feel like I'm there even when I'm not! Kisses and Smiles, Pinkie Pie."

Twilight looked up from the letter. "'Festive?'"

All ponies present looked above and around themselves, and were greeted with balloons and streamers completely spread around Twilight's living room.

"Um... how long have those been there?" asked Fluttershy.

"I... I don't *know*," said a bewildered Twilight. "I... for crying out loud, I *live* here, how did she-"

"S'just Pinkie bein' Pinkie," said Applejack. "Best not to pay it no mind. You'll go loopy otherwise."

Twilight sighed and motioned for everypony present to sit. "I guess you're right. Okay, so, secret meeting. I'm sure you already know why, since this was originally Rarity's idea. Simply put, strange things are happening in Ponyville, and I want to put a stop to it."

Twilight's eyes narrowed.

"Which means we've got to figure out what to do... about Rainbow Dash."

Rarity smiled as she put the finishing touches to Rainbow Dash's weekly Pegasus Special--a full intense grooming of her mane, tail, coat and wings. "All done, Dash! You can get up now." She became slightly giddy when she saw Rainbow Dash smile--Rarity had learned that this was the part her clients loved the most.

"Really? Awesome, thanks Rarity!" Rainbow Dash rose to all fours, went to

the mirror, and examined herself. Seconds later, her face twisted into a small frown. "Hmmm..."

Quick as a shot, Rarity noticed that something was amiss. "Something the matter?" she asked her friend.

Dash continued to hem and haw as she slowly spun around in front of the mirror. Finally, after some time, she said, "You missed a spot on the left part of my mane. Buuuuuut I'll make do."

Rarity gasped in shock. "Oh, did I? Curses! Hang on, then, I shall correct the error posthaste!"

Instead of walking back to Rarity, however, Rainbow Dash flew towards the door. She looked back at the boutique's central grooming station with slanted eyebrows and a sneer that Rarity had hardly ever seen on the blue pegasus. "Nah. With me, you only get one chance. See ya."

Rarity blinked, taken slightly aback. *What?* What was all this, now? "Then won't you at least say 'thank you' as per common courtesy before you leave?"

Dash's sneer persisted. "I only give out thanks for *one hundred percent* jobs. Stuff that's as perfect as I am. And that's if I'm in a *good* mood. You want someone to shower you with kisses?" She nodded her head towards a corner of the house. "Talk to your cat!"

At that, Rarity cast a sideways glance at Opalescence, who hissed, instantly nipping such thoughts in the bud. She looked back at Rainbow Dash, her perspective of the young flyer quickly changing with each passing second. Her muzzle turned towards the ceiling. Challenge Rarity in the art of indignance, would she? She knew not what she was getting herself into! "Hmph! Well then, perhaps I will simply begin *charging* for my services from this point onward."

"Do what you gotta." Dash took a cursory look around the boutique, and snickered. "Then again, from the sloppy looks of this place, I'm betting you need my charity."

Rarity gasped, placing her hoof to her heart in genuine offense! "Well,

I never!..."

Dash outright laughed. "Exactly your problem, I'd say! So long, sister!"

And she zoomed off, leaving Rarity at the peak of frustration. Rarity galloped to her window, calling out after her.

"*Dash!* Rainbow Dash, you come back here right now, you... you..." She stopped yelling, defeated. "I swear! You think you know a pony!..."

"And you say this was a couple of weeks ago, right?" Twilight asked as she took notes in a pad.

Rarity nodded. "Yes, nearly. We've avoided each other since. She didn't show up for what would have been last week's appointment. I suppose that was a relief--I'm somewhat wary of a future conflict."

"Well, I sure wouldn't mind gettin' into one with her," Applejack said, slamming a hoof on the floor. "Y'all know what she did just last week?..."

"Aaaaand... there," Applejack said as she finished putting the last of the icing on the cake she'd been baking at Sugarcube Corner. "So glad Mr. and Mrs. Cake had those extra ingredients in stock. Everypony's gonna love the special spices in this one!"

"Hey, Applejack!" A smiling Rainbow Dash flew in through a nearby window, then focused on the cake. "Oh, wow, I've been following that smell from halfway across town! I've been herding clouds all morning and *I need calories!* Let me at it!" Seconds later, the cake was in her hooves.

Applejack quickly held up her hoof in denial. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Sorry, Rainbow Dash, no can do. I need that cake for today's Apple Family Gathering."

Rainbow was nonplussed. "So make another one."

"Th-that'll set the party back an hour! And even then, you'd have to pay for the stuff that went into it!"

"What? Pinkie Pie rarely pays, if ever!"

Applejack chuckled. "Oh, c'mon now, sugarcube. You and I both know she does. Just with cheap labor, s'all..."

"What, and I don't?"

"...huh?"

Applejack found herself forced to step back as Rainbow Dash abruptly got *in her face*.

"After all I've done for Ponyville since I got here? Managing the weather, using my speed to save ponies from danger more times than any of us can count, helping to *save the world*..." Rainbow Dash scowled. "Shoot, I've even had to give up part of *myself* for you guys, haven't I? Otherwise I just wouldn't *measure up* to Ponyville's niceness standards. Now tell me, where's the fairness in *that*?"

"Wh-..." Applejack gasped, clearly having been thrown for a loop by the sudden outburst. Her response, however, was soft, muted, almost... hurt? "Rainbow... darlin', I don't think that's quite fair to say. Is something wrong?"

Applejack stared at Rainbow Dash, waiting for a response, and for a second, those words seemed to reach her. Dash's face softened. Her eyes widened. Applejack met them, trying to find some rhyme or reason for the events currently taking place...

...and then Angry Dash was back.

"Pfft. I don't want this stupid cake anyway. Pretty sure it's terrible. You want it?" With the cake in one hoof, she reared back. "*Go fetch!*"

"Rainbow Dash, *no!*" Applejack cried out as the cake sailed out the window and landed on the grass, unsalvageable. Two seconds later, she saw red. "All right, now see *here*, little missy, that was downright uncalled for! I don't

care no more *what* your issues are, it's time somepony taught you the ins and outs of re-

It took her that long to realize she was speaking to an empty room.

"-spect?..."

With a tearful growl, Applejack galloped off to Rarity's.

While the "secret meeting" continued below, Pinkie Pie was still high above Equestria, fighting the fatigue inherent in the practice of wingless flight.

However, she knew she couldn't give up now. She reached into her basket, pulled out a triple-decker-icing cupcake, and gulped it down in one go. Almost immediately, she gained her *fifth* wind, and soared higher as her pedaling hooves brought her back to cruising speed.

Just then, overhead, she heard a confident screech from *another* flyer, soaring over her, moving *faster* than her, doing loop-de-loops every so often... probably just to taunt her.

"Show-off," Pinkie said, continuing to pedal.

Still, she let it be, because that flyer's presence served to reassure her that everything was going according to plan...

"In all my days livin' here, I ain't *never* seen Dash get that uppity!" Applejack took a few moments to calm down, then said, "Still, if I saw her again, I wouldn't knock her out straight away. She seemed a bit... I dunno... disturbed. An' I wanna know why." She looked towards Twilight Sparkle. "What about you, Twilight? Y'all didn't agree to this meeting until today."

Twilight Sparkle sighed. "I know. but I didn't see enough evidence that something might be *really* wrong before. One bad day can happen to anypony. Two warrants keeping a close eye on her. But... last night..."

"Last night?" Rarity echoed, cocking an eyebrow.

"Well, yes." Twilight's eyes took on a cold, faraway gaze, her body shivering as she prepared to recollect something she *really* didn't want to-- at least not so soon. But she had no choice. "I'd invited Rainbow Dash on one of my stargazing balloon rides..."

The moon shone high as Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash shared a leisurely ride in the former's balloon. As far as Twilight was concerned, the skyscape was absolutely *perfect* tonight, with millions of celestial bodies dotting anywhere and everywhere one could look in the distance. And here she was, prepared to capture glimpses of them all with her basket-mounted telescope.

Wait... was that *a shooting star*? No, it was... several of them, all in different directions! Twilight was on cloud nine... or failing that, she was pretty sure she could see *it* from this height.

She only hoped Rainbow Dash was having as much fun right now as she was.

"...this is so *slow*. Why'd you even bring me on this again?"

"Remember when you took me through that thunderstorm? That was one of the most interesting things that's ever happened to me. It was dangerous, but... fulfilling and educational. So I wanted to share with you what makes me happiest."

"Oh, okay." Rainbow Dash paused. "So... when does the 'interesting' part start?"

Twilight stiffened a bit, but resolved to keep her optimism. "Right now," she said. "This is the real reason I brought you up here..."

Twilight pointed in a direction, and soon enough, shining waves of color appeared in the sky for miles around. They sported nearly all the hues of the rainbow, but instead of keeping static, they danced in the sky, moving across it as if professionally choreographed. By itself, the display was

enough to make both present forget all about the rest of the sky's wonders for a good minute.

"I give you... the *aurora borealis*," said Twilight, as the two ponies gasped at the sight.

"Oh, wow," said Rainbow Dash, now remembering. "You've been keeping up on Cloudsdale's schedule! They haven't made one of these for almost a year!"

"That's right. We've never seen one this close to Ponyville, so when I got word of it, I knew I had to bring you." She turned to face Dash directly, and met her eyes, intoning softly. "A rainbow in the night, beautiful and bright..."

"I..." Rainbow Dash fought her blush as best she could, but failed miserably in the wake of the violet unicorn's smile.

Satisfied, Twilight turned her gaze back to the phenomenon before them. "I envy you pegasus ponies sometimes. You have the option to slow down every once in a while and appreciate the wonders above, wherever and whenever you find them."

"It gets old faster than you'd think," said Rainbow Dash after a few moments.

That did it. Twilight was officially concerned and annoyed at the same time. "Look, Rainbow, I've heard you've been having some problems lately. If you want to talk about it, I'm here. I set up this ride because I felt like doing something nice for you. You're the one who said we could 'hang' any time I gave you a call, right?"

"Y... yeah," said Dash, "it's true. And I appreciate you remembering that. But... look, things were stacked against you from the beginning. It's not your fault."

"*What's* not my fault?"

"It's just..." Rainbow Dash was visibly fighting for the right words. "I've realized something since a few weeks ago. You're slow, Twilight. Way too slow for me. Everyone in Ponyville is! I *can't* hang. Not anymore."

"Rainbow, I-"

"*Exactly!* That's just it! I can't be 'Dash' around anypony here!" Her statement made, she sighed, and flew out of the balloon. "I can only be 'Rainbow.'"

And before Twilight could protest, she was gone.

"Oh, *Twilight*," Rarity said with a gasp. "No wonder you summoned the rest of us. Something deeper clearly lies at the core of all this. Still, you must be as beside yourself with frustration as we are!"

"Actually, no, I'm not mad at her. But just the same, that..." Twilight exhaled sharply. "...sort of came out of nowhere. Anyway, before confronting her, I think we should first analyze her words, to try to find out what she meant by-"

A knock was heard at Twilight's door just then, with a letter slipping through the mail slot.

"-huh?" Twilight grabbed the envelope. "It's addressed to the four of us. From Pinkie. She says she's figured out what was wrong with Rainbow Dash--and she did it all without decimals. She wants us to meet her at the edge of town!"

"Well, that's just great," said Applejack. "Would it have killed her to explain things just a mite more there?"

"P.S.: Sorry, AJ, no time," Twilight said, finishing the rest of the letter out loud.

"Celestia-danged certifiably-crazy party-pony..." Applejack muttered under her breath.

"Come on, everypony," said Twilight in her best leadership voice. "We've got no time to lose! And we should probably also think of our own plan, in case whatever Pinkie's is fails!"

It was now late afternoon, and dark, rumbling clouds surrounded Rainbow Dash's castle in the sky. Said castle was also floating far higher above Ponyville than usual.

Probably to scare ponies away, Pinkie Pie thought to herself as she landed her vehicle on the cloud mass connected to the estate. She gingerly placed one hoof on the cloud, making double-sure it would support her before fully getting out.

No sooner had she done so, though, than a voice from inside the castle shakily shouted, "Wh-who's there?"

"Special delivery," said Pinkie Pie, taking out a sheet of paper. "I've got one order of smiles here for a 'Dash, Rainbow.' Know if she's around?"

"...no!" said the voice, which was clearly Rainbow Dash's--still, Pinkie decided to humor her. She'd had a feeling this would happen.

"Kay! Well, I'll just stay here until she shows up, if that's all right with you."

"No, it's not. Go home alr--wait, *Pinkie Pie*? You're not a pegasus. How are you even *here*?"

Pinkie Pie patted the flying machine she'd arrived on. "Pinkie Flyer, Version 2.0. Made a few improvements. Twice as sturdy, holds three times as many snacks! And we're both here because Twilight's cloud-walking spell lasts way longer than we all thought it would."

Silence for a few seconds. Then Rainbow Dash flew out of a window to get a look. She looked quite the worse for wear; her mane was disheveled, her coat not much better off, and she wore an ever-present stern look on her face. After looking Pinkie and her Flyer over, she said, "Well, I can still eject you the old-fashioned way. So go home before I do! I've got sleep to catch up on." She flew back in the house.

Pinkie Pie waited for a while, then, once she was sure there was no other way, reached for the book she'd brought with her. She opened to a

bookmarked page, and began to read as loud as she could:

"Winged Species of Equestria, Chapter 6: The Griffon. Of all of Equestria's flighted beings, the griffon is one of the most powerful, and by far the most aggressive. Its makeup of lion and eagle, kings of both the land and sky, give it an air of arrogance, unrivaled in scope, and impossible to tame! Because of this, and due to conflicts throughout Equestria's history, friendship bonds between civilized ponies and primal griffons are said to be impossi'--*whoa!*" Pinkie Pie cried out as she found herself being airlifted by a now very angry pegasus.

"Pinkie, what are you *doing?*" said Rainbow Dash. "Why are you reading me that tripe?"

"What?" said Pinkie, smiling to mask her fear. "You don't like brushing up on social studies?"

"No, I *don't!*" shouted Rainbow Dash, and the storm clouds above rumbled again in accompaniment. "Not like that! That book's got it all wrong! They're *not* all like that! And if it weren't for *you*, I'd still be able to prove it!"

"Funny thing," said Pinkie, fighting off the slightest twinge of guilt. "Here's your chance."

"What are you--*gah!*" Rainbow Dash found herself struck hard from the side, and she fell to the cloud mass beside her castle, dazed. Meanwhile, Pinkie Pie was still being airlifted, but this time by a set of *talons* rather than hooves. She was shuttled into the castle, and placed safely on Rainbow Dash's bed.

"Thanks," said Pinkie, looking up at the griffon who'd just saved her.

"Don't bother. You're a moron, you know that?" said the griffon. "Way too many of you ponies are. I can't *believe* you let Dash get to this point after a whole month!" She stretched a wing towards outside, where the storm had finally begun to grow stronger and more intense.

"Look, we can all chew each other out later," said Pinkie. "But can you help *now?*"

"Tch. I'll do what I can, but no promises!" The griffon flew outside to where Rainbow Dash was just regaining her senses, and waited for her to rise to her level.

Once Rainbow Dash did so, and saw who had blindsided her earlier, she could barely believe her eyes. She flew a little closer, just to make sure she was seeing straight:

"...Gilda?"

"Yep," said the griffon. "It's me. I *told* you to come see me again. Why didn't you? Were you really that serious about dumping me for Ponyville?"

"*Gilda*," Rainbow Dash slowly said again, a toothy grin appearing across her muzzle as lightning flashed overhead. "*Finally*. You. Me. Now."

"Dash? What's gotten into... whoa, it's worse than I thought."

Gilda braced herself. If her words weren't reaching Dash, then that meant there was only one way to communicate with her now. Something they'd done before, but only in desperate times. Only when it was *really* called for.

Only when they'd had the worst of arguments.

"All right, Dash. We both know what you need." Gilda spread her wings in beckoning. "Think you can finally take me? Then come on, girl! Let's see what you've got!"

As she flew towards Gilda with her strongest cry and one hoof outstretched, it was clear that Rainbow Dash intended to do just that...

Chapter 2

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrgggggh!"

Rainbow Dash screamed as she flew in a vertical line, directly upwards from the center of Ponyville's town square. Once at the correct height--and out of earshot of everypony else--she kicked at every cloud in her path, shouting in frustration each time. Every cloud she came in contact with popped instantly, yielding a loud CRACK! in the process.

One thunderstorm; hold the storm.

"All... of these ponies... are CRAZY!"

A griffon who had been watching from some distance away flew to meet her, and grinned. "That's my motto. What's gotcha down, Dash?"

"Just... all the ponies. The ponies in this town! This Ponyville place! They're crazy, and I can't take it!" From high altitude, she pointed one hoof toward an expanse of greenery. "There's one pony who thinks her farming is more important than what I do, just because she's been here longer!" She pointed to the local boutique next. "There's a unicorn who thinks she's Celestia's gift to ponykind even though all she does is play Dress-Up and Makeover Queen every day!" Finally, she gestured towards the bakery. "And then there's one more--this pink one--who's just... just crazy! Seriously, I don't know how Fluttershy manages to deal with any of them! They're driving me insane!"

As Rainbow Dash screamed again, she closed her eyes and barreled through the rest of the fluffy white patches in the sky, once again bringing loud thunderclaps to the nicest of days. When she re-opened her eyes and surveyed her handiwork, she realized that her frustration had proven been more effective than planned. "Well, at least cloud-clearing's done for the afternoon."

Gilda snickered. "Yeah. I can tell you're doing a bang-up job."

Rainbow Dash groaned. "Oh, no, G, no. Please. No puns. I get enough of those from the pink one."

"I'm serious, though." Gilda looked down at Ponyville, which seemed to have hardly noticed Rainbow Dash's tantrum. "It looks like you've got a good thing going here, especially given how little I see you now. But, if you want, if you think it's too much for you, you can always leave." Gilda turned her gaze towards the western sky. "We can go back to what we used to do. Follow the sun, sleep on clouds... go where the wind takes us." While she was still smiling, part of her voice belied a certain wistfulness about it. "Just you and me, Dash..."

"Yeah, I hear you. That's... wow, has it already been two weeks since I took the weather pegasus gig here?"

"By my calendar, yep."

Rainbow Dash gave it some thought, then shook her head. "I... thanks for the offer, G. It's tempting. But as much as I complain about a few ponies here, there's just something about Ponyville as a whole. Something about it that says I belong here. Even if they are... kind of weird, everypony's just so nice. Nice in spite of me."

Gilda raised an eyebrow. She hoped this wasn't going where she thought this was going. However, as she witnessed Rainbow Dash's expression become progressively sadder, she knew she was about to be disappointed.

"Any other town probably would have kicked me out as fast as any flight academy by now, especially given who I am, what I've done... and what I've failed to do. I'd still be Rainbow Crash anywhere else. But at least here, even if nopony ends up actually liking me, I can still be useful. I... I think I'm willing to settle for that." With a heavy sigh, she looked to Gilda for a reply, and was surprised to see that she wasn't there. "Huh? G? Where'd you go?"

She felt a huge splash of cold wash over her seconds later--literally.

"WAUGH!"

Rainbow Dash sputtered and spat as she found herself dripping wet and

shivering seconds later. Soon, in front of her, was Gilda, holding a giant just-emptied bucket.

"What'd you do that for?" Rainbow Dash cried out in her shrillest voice.

"Sorry, had to check if your cutie mark was wash-off." She looked at Rainbow Dash's flank, and saw that it was still there--if now a little messy now due to the wet fur. "Nope. Guess not. So how about you start living up to it?"

"Gilda, I--"

"-no! You don't get to argue this! You're Rainbow Dash, and you always will be! The day you start believing all those lame-os who've been harassing you is the day you let them win. And I didn't spend all those years coming to your defense for you to start feeling sorry for yourself anyway!"

Rainbow Dash spun in place, causing a personal tornado to form around her and dry herself off. "You're right, G. I know you're right. It's just that sometimes..."

"I know," said Gilda, wrapping the pegasus pony close in one wing. "Look, Dash. Being angry at life is fine. It happens to all of us, and when it does, I'm there for you. But I draw the line at weeping. Only losers do that."

"That's fair," Dash said as hoof and talon met.

"Glad we agree. Cause I've got a challenge for ya'."

"Name it!"

"Looks like there's a forest not too far from here. How about a tree slalom, the whole way through? First one to bonk themselves buys dinner. And pep talks always leave me with a huge appetite."

Rainbow Dash looked towards the Everfree Forest. Ponyville's populace had constantly warned her never to go there.

But she was Rainbow Dash. And she always would be.

With a huge smile, she looked back towards Gilda, smacking her hooves together.

"You're on!"

"Come on, everypony! We've got to get to Pinkie and Dash!"

Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Fluttershy and Rarity galloped (or in Fluttershy's case, flew) towards the Ponyville town limits, where Rainbow Dash's home could just barely be seen hundreds of feet up.

What could also be seen surrounding it were thick, foreboding gray clouds, slowly spreading outwards and darkening the land around them. The rest of the town quickly shuttered themselves inside their homes, fearing the worst. Twilight knew, however, that she and the others with her had no such luxury at their disposal.

"My word," said Rarity with a gasp. "Are all of those clouds Rainbow Dash's doing?"

"I'm pretty sure I don't like the looks of this," said Applejack as the four arrived at their destination. "Those storm clouds look like they could flood Sweet Apple Acres three times over!"

"You think *you* don't like it?" said Pinkie Pie, galloping up to meet the rest of them. "Try being in the middle of it! Actually, better idea: don't. You do *not* want to be up there right now!"

"Pinkie," said Twilight, "what's going on?"

"Search me! Old pegasus custom? Or maybe griffon? I-I-I don't really know!"

"G-... *griffon*?" said Fluttershy, shivering.

Twilight concentrated, and a second later, her telescope was in front of her, mounted and ready. "I think it's explanation time, Pinkie."

"Well, um, okay! You all remember Gilda, right? Rainbow Dash's griffon friend? Party, pranks, argument, ended badly? Right. Well, not too long after that, Rainbow Dash started avoiding me again. Then she started *ignoring* me! Like she didn't even *care* if I showed up around her or not!"

"Truth be told, I was downright appreciatin' the break from all them pranks," said Applejack.

"Ignoring that," Pinkie shot back. "Anyway, I thought I'd just managed to make her really mad! I wanted to go talk things out with her, but then I heard about what happened to Rarity, so I backed off. Then I heard about Applejack, and I started getting curious. *Then* I-"

"-started asking me for books on flying species," said Twilight. "Under the guise of making a new flying machine?"

"'Guise', nothing! I *made* the machine," said Pinkie, pointing to her Pinkie Flyer. "But yeah, that book also helped me with some other things. And not a moment too soon, after hearing what happened to you! Can you see them up there?"

Twilight adjusted her telescope, swiveling it in all directions, until she excitedly stopped at a single point. "There! ...no, now they're over there... now over *there*! Oh, this is making me dizzy..."

"Let me take a look, sugarcube," said Applejack, taking the telescope. "I've put up with so much of Dash's zippin' around it don't even bother me no more." She looked through the eyepiece. "Yyyyyyyyyep. Uh-huh. Hoo boy, that be them, all right. Rainbow Dash, and that Gilda griffon gal, plain as day! Well, I'll be..."

"What is it, Applejack?" asked Twilight.

"That's the most energy I've seen Dash with all month. And from the looks of it, there's a good ol' fashioned slobberknocker takin' place as we speak!"

"They're *fighting* up there?" gasped Twilight and Fluttershy in stereo.

"Tch. It *does* happen," said Applejack with a snort and mischievous grin. "If

y'all knew how many colts I humiliated back when I was a schoolfilly... well, just be glad I only use these legs to buck apple trees now. Anyway, given what we know about those two, are you really that surprised by something like this?"

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "Nope. But you know what *is* weird?" she asked, her voice now uncommonly serious.

"Whassat?"

Pinkie looked back up at the sky, where two streaks could barely be seen amongst the clouds. "When I found Gilda? She looked just sad as Dash did. But don't tell her I said so--she was trying real hard to hide it."

Lightning flashed and thunder roared around both griffon and pony. Rain came down in what would normally be a drenching sheet--but so fast were the two flying that very little of it actually touched them.

Actually, correction: *one* of them was flying. The other, Gilda, was dodging for all she was worth. Between the manic expression and constant collision-course darting, it was easy to see that Rainbow Dash had it in for her; the tough part was making sure she didn't receive a subsonic kick for her troubles.

Fortunately, Gilda knew Rainbow Dash's flying style as well as Dash knew it herself: elegant and flowing, rainbow-trailed, full of arcs and twists, but with the occasional bullet lunge thrown in to keep things fresh. She used all of this knowledge to stay out of harm's way. As time passed, Gilda's patience began to pay off.

"Grr... *get back here!*" the angry pegasus yelled.

"Sorry, girl," taunted Gilda. "You know the rules: you gotta *earn* me."

"Arrgh!"

More rushing, more dodging. Even during the times when Dash tried sneak attacks from cloud cover, Gilda's heightened hearing saw her through.

"You're getting reckless, Dash! I remember when you could actually keep up with me! What happened--all those daytime naps make you soft?"

"Oh, I'll show *you* soft!"

Once more, however, it was the same song and dance. With each dive or lunge, true to Gilda's words, Rainbow Dash became sloppier, more predictable, and finally slower as a result. Soon enough, the adrenaline she so prided herself on was sapped, leaving her forced to hover in one spot to catch her breath.

Gilda flew over, slowly lowering her guard. "Yep. Guess you showed me. You ready to talk now?"

Dash looked at Gilda, opened her mouth as if to do so... then closed it again, and took off in the other direction. With an annoyed grunt--honestly, all of this "patience" was trying *her* patience!--Gilda gave chase, and the two zoomed through the murky sky.

"Come on, Dash, this is getting old! I'm here 'cause I'm worried about you! Your pink pal told me you'd gone off the deep end, and I ain't seen you do that in years!"

Rainbow Dash kept flying... but after ten seconds that seemed like an eternity, finally slowed down a little, and replied. "Why'd you *let* me, huh? Where've you been this whole time?"

"Waiting for you! Duh."

"Are you kidding? Like I'll believe that! You don't 'wait' for anypony, Gilda!"

"I do when they throw me out of their town!" growled Gilda, catching up. "Out of their lives! *In front of an audience!* Or have you forgotten *everything* about me that quickly?"

"Never! But I didn't have a choice! You... you set *yourself* up at that party, G!"

"No more than you set *me* up! So you decided to gang up on me, and then

just let things hang there? I thought I was worth more than that, Dash!"

"I..." Rainbow Dash slowed down even more, and in turn, Gilda caught up with her. Their flight paths were now in sync, with only a couple of yards between them.

"If you'd given me *two seconds*," Gilda said, "maybe we might've worked something out. Instead I had the whole Saddle Squad coming down on me. 'Cause once again, a griffon just doesn't measure up!"

Rainbow Dash flew closer, her temper and voice rising. "Oh, there you go again with the 'griffon' thing! You always play that card at times like this!"

Gilda did the same. "What else am I supposed to think? Okay, so I wasn't the best guest Ponyville ever had, but you still turned your back on a *longtime best friend* without giving them a chance to make up for it! Tell me, Dash," she said, glowering, "what's your precious Element of Loyalty have to say about *that*?"

"I... but that..."

For a few seconds, Rainbow Dash simply hovered, dumbstruck. Then on the fourth second, Gilda was caught completely unawares by two hooves slamming into her face.

"*That's not fair!*" she barely heard Rainbow Dash yell through the ringing in her ears.

From then on, it was all Gilda could do to stay aloft as Rainbow Dash, having doubled her speed, buzzed past her again and again, bolting through clouds while landing glancing blows in the process. The sky further darkened around her as a result...

...then, as Dash cried out in anger, lightning fell from the heavens with as much fury as the rain, which had itself gotten even stronger.

"Oh. Right," Gilda spat as she observed the dangerous skies around her. "Weather pegasus."

Fine, then. It was time Rainbow Dash remembered--she'd picked a friend

who never, ever backed down from a challenge.

Redoubling her efforts, Gilda flew straight into the now literal lightning storm, fighting the wind, the water, the bolts and crashes... because she knew she still had one chance.

One chance to reach Dash, literally and figuratively. And if she could, it'd all be worth it.

"Not fair,' huh?" Gilda said, navigating as best she could through the torrent of electricity. "I kept saying that to myself the past few weeks!"

Even with her expert flying skills and aerial instincts working in harmony, a stray bolt managed to strike the edge of her wing, lightly scorching it. Gilda fought through the sting, her mind fixed on one single purpose...

But guess what, Dash? You're still my best girl, whether you like it or not! So you want some tough love? Then that's what you're about to get!

With a roar, Gilda flew head on at Rainbow Dash... who, once again, mirrored her movements.

Full throttle. Maximum speed. All limiters, thrown to the wind.

From ground level, as she and her friends used trees as shelter from the elements, Twilight Sparkle looked through her telescope and watched in horror as a blinding and deafening explosion took place the second Dash and Gilda met. The storm died down quickly after that, but when they could see again, Twilight had to react quickly:

"Guys! They're falling!"

"Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh..." a flying Fluttershy chanted until she made sure Rainbow Dash was safe in her grip. As for Gilda...

"SUPER PINKIE TRAMPOLINE, GOOOOOOOOOO!" cried the pink pony, carrying and unfolding the toy she'd packed into her flying machine's cargo basket on a hunch.

One two-point landing later, the two flyers were unconscious, bruised, and

even singed in some places... but still breathing. Still alive.

Applejack shook her head as she looked over them. "Y'know... I sure hope all that was worth it."

Darkness.

Then voices.

"Ewwwww, Fluttershy, stop poking her! Who knows where she's been?"

"Oh, c'mon, now, Rarity! She's a griffon, she touches dirt less than any of us!"

"Come on, girls! We should give her some space!"

"I think it's working! She seems to be coming to..."

"WHAT? But I... can I still use this water bucket?"

"No, Pinkie."

"Awwwwww..."

Gilda opened her eyes to see four multicolored ponies she barely recognized... and a pink one she'd come to know all too well. She groaned. "Aww, no. Not again."

"Um..." The violet one stepped forward. "Hi. Gilda, right? I'm Twilight Sparkle."

Gilda searched her memories, her talks with Dash... "Twilight Sparkle?' Twilight, Twilight... where have I heard that--oh, *right*. The Princess's Pet."

Twilight Sparkle did a double-take in surprise. "What?"

Gilda simply grinned, and nodded towards the still-unconscious Rainbow Dash, currently in another cot close by her own. "Not my words. How were those all those air rides Dash gave you, by the way? I taught her those. You're welcome."

"Look," Twilight said, fighting a blush with all her strength, "we just want to talk to you. It's about-"

"-Dash, yeah. Look, I already told Pinkie Pie. You ponies are just lame! Have been since the start. I don't know what she sees in you-"

"-and I don't know what she sees in *you!*"

Amidst murmurs from the others, Fluttershy stepped forward from the crowd, anger written across her face as she stared directly into the griffon's eyes.

"I've been friends with Rainbow Dash longer than anyone else in this room. But last night she came to me talking about nothing but *you!* 'I never should have turned Gilda away. Gilda was the only one I could really talk to. I'm too scared to look for her now!'"

"Fluttershy..." began Twilight, but the yellow pegasus pony would have none of it.

"I tried to hug her, I tried to tell her everything would be all right, I tried to *be her friend*, but she broke away from me. And when she did... she didn't look at all like the Rainbow Dash I know. *What have you done to her?*"

Gilda blinked, then gaped as she realized something. "Hold up. 'Fluttershy?' *That's* your name?"

"Yes!"

"Seriously? *You're* Fluttershy? *You're* the one Dash *never shuts up about??*" Gilda's laughing soon echoed throughout Ponyville's infirmary.

"What's so funny?" said Fluttershy, her anger finally seeping into her voice.

"Oh! Sorry, the irony's just *killing* me right now."

"Irony?" asked Rarity.

"Buckets of it! You're saying this is all my fault, Fluttershy? You're saying this is because of *me*? I've got news for you, sister, so listen close." She leaned towards Fluttershy with a determined stare of her own. "*You're where this all started.*"

Amidst *more* murmurs from the gathered ponies, Fluttershy shrank back with a shocked squeak.

"I..." she whispered, "...I'm *what?*"

Chapter 3

With an accompanying sound stronger than any thunderclap, a brilliant halo of colors rippled across the horizon.

The Sonic Rainboom could be seen for miles around--possibly even worldwide. It touched the lives of ponykind everywhere, in ways that could be immediately seen, and in ways that wouldn't be known to anypony for years.

Truly, it was one of Equestria's greatest miracles.

But since she was at its point of origin, young Rainbow Dash wasn't aware of any of this. All she knew is that she'd finally showed those bullies what for, and Fluttershy was now safe!

She flew back to the starting point of the race where she'd challenged them, and saw them already there, sulking and licking the bruises they'd gotten from the Rainboom's shockwave.

"That's right, you cowardly colts," Dash taunted in a scratchy, yet spirited, voice. "Who's in charge of the skies now? Rainbow Dash, that's who! And my first order as ruler is that you and your pals never mess with..."

She looked for her friend as she said her name, and came up with... nothing?

"...Fluttershy?"

Where was she?

In the space of thirty seconds, she'd covered the entire flight camp and still not seen her anywhere. Then she remembered--Fluttershy's traction was never that good, and she'd been standing on a pretty small cloud when the race had started!

She returned to the race site, then flew below sky level as fast as she

could. Greenery could be seen everywhere. Grass, trees... honestly, how could finding something yellow amongst them possibly be this tough?

Just as she was about to give up her search, she saw a large group of ground animals clustered around in a meadow.

Fluttershy had always loved things from below. She'd once told Dash she'd envied them--they had firm ground under their legs all the time, and never, ever had to worry about falling...

...yellow! There! She saw it!

She was there in an instant, clearing the land creatures away. "Get outta here! Move, move! You're on top of--aha! Yes!"

There she was. Fluttershy, looking as peaceful as ever. A little too peaceful, actually... eyes and mouth closed, rear limbs twisted in an odd fashion...

...wait.

"Huh?"

She leant close, putting her ear to Fluttershy's mouth.

Fluttershy wasn't breathing.

"Fl-... Fluttershy...? C-... c'mon, this isn't... if this is some lame attempt at a get-back prank..."

Her heart wasn't beating. Her limbs, limp.

"...then it's not... funny... no... no, no...!"

And just like that, everything hit young Rainbow Dash at once.

What had happened... how it had happened... and who was to blame.

"F..."

"...FLUTTERSHY!"

Rainbow Dash awoke in Ponyville's infirmary, tearful, sweaty and breathless. Her heart was racing and no matter how many deep, fast gasps she took, they were never enough. She tried to run, tried to fly, but shooting pains throughout her body quickly put a stop to it.

All her speed, all her power, yet there wasn't anything she could do! *Why not?* She fell back to her bed, defeated, paralyzed by equal parts pain and sadness.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the panic as something clasped her foreleg.

A talon.

"Dash, *Dash!* It's okay, Dash! She's still alive! *She's always been alive!*"

The words managed to reach Rainbow Dash, and she slowly calmed down enough to wonder who'd pulled her from the brink.

The second she saw who it was--Gilda in her own cot, right next to hers--she realized she should have known. They'd both gone through this routine before... right down to the part where, seconds later, she was enveloped reassuringly in Gilda's wingspan.

"Still having that dream, I see," said Gilda as she held the pegasus close. "Geez, Dash, I keep sayin', you've gotta let that go."

"I... I can't," Rainbow Dash said as her breathing finally went back to normal. "You know I can't. It's what makes me me."

"There's a lot of stuff Dash keeps from you ponies. Way more than you deserve, if you ask me," Gilda told Pinkie Pie and the others. "When she has a bad day, week, month, whatever... I get to hear about it, so she doesn't have to bottle it up. It's been like that ever since we met. Sorta just stayed like that when she moved here."

Twilight Sparkle--clearly the nerd of the bunch, Gilda figured--gaspd, being the first to finally get it. "So when you two broke off after the party, and stopped seeing each other..."

Applejack was next. "...she'd been so used to you that she didn't feel like she had any place else to turn! Oh my stars, it all makes sense now! When she told me off, she... looked like she wanted to just talk to me, but..."

"Yeah," said Pinkie Pie. "I just thought she was really, really easygoing! Like, even more than me!"

Gilda nodded. "Don't worry; she never told me anything super-private about you guys behind your backs. And she let me vent whenever I needed to, too." She looked at Rainbow Dash, and as she did, Twilight could see softness in even Gilda's eyes. "Whenever we got angry at life... we rode through the storm together. If there's one thing this episode has taught me, it's that I really need to be careful in order to keep what I've got."

The other ponies nodded in understanding.

"Question from the crowd," said Rarity, raising a hoof.

"You get one, and only one."

Rarity fought the urge to bristle. "What happens when either of you 'gets angry' at your chosen confidant?"

Gilda made sure she'd understood the unicorn's question, then snickered, and gestured around the entire room with her wings. "Sister, welcome to it."

"This is my fault," Gilda said as the two continued to share their embrace.

"What is?" asked Dash.

"Duh. All of this. Had a lot of time to think about it while we were both recovering. I should have just kept my temper in check when..." Gilda sighed, and closed her eyes. "Look, Dash, apologies ain't easy for me. But

you're my best friend, and the only one I've still kind of *got*, so here I go. I acted like a jealous doof the last time I was here. I snapped at your oldest friend, treated Ponyville like my own personal buffet, and then, instead of just pulling you aside and talking things out like we usually do, got mad in front of all of your other friends. You've worked hard to get where you are down here. Me, I was just a guest, and I totally screwed it up. So... I'm sorry."

Rainbow Dash let that sit for a while, before finally shaking her head. "I appreciate it, G, but... no way. Some of this was my fault too. I could have handled things a lot better. I should have paid more attention to how you and Pinkie Pie were acting around each other. I saw everything, but I didn't say anything until it was too late, either. Then I got mad, you got mad..." Rainbow sniffed. "...it all just happened so fast..."

"...and now we've got a million billion bruises each," Gilda finished.

"Y-yeah," said Dash with a rueful chuckle. "But you don't have to swallow all your pride for my sake. You don't have to deny who you are. Who you are is who I became friends with!"

"You might be right... but I don't *care*," said Gilda, firming her grip on Dash just a little more. "It sucks without you around, plain and simple." She smiled, looking straight into Rainbow Dash's eyes, and brushed away the last of her dream-induced tears. "So if it keeps you in my life, I can swallow as much pride as I need. If I mess up, I've got a lot more to lose than you do."

Softness. Emotion. These were sides of Gilda that Rainbow Dash rarely saw. Only in the darkest of times, when they'd been drifters, just the two of them against all of Equestria; and stuck in storms even she couldn't control. She said as much in reply.

"Heh. And I don't normally see *you* calling forth monsoons in rage," said Gilda. "So we're even. Don't worry, we'll all be back to normal and awesome tomorrow. Speaking of which, we've been told we can leave then if we're up to it. We didn't break anything."

"Just a lot of sore spots everywhere." Rainbow Dash groaned, then sighed. "I've got so much apologizing to do tomorrow."

"Yeah. I think I've got a bunch of messes I need to clean up, too."

"Really? Where?"

"Here."

"Oh, gotcha." Rainbow Dash nodded... then realized. "Wait, you mean-"

"If I'm going to keep being your friend, it'll probably be easier if the rest of yours don't hate me. But no promises."

Rainbow Dash smiled up at her friend. "Wouldn't expect any."

Early the next morning, around the time she knew Carousel Boutique was to open for business, Rainbow Dash was the first at the entrance.

"Rarity? Rarity, it's Dash!" she said, knocking on her door. "Got a minute?"

Silence followed for quite some time, the door never being answered. Maybe Rarity wasn't home? She sometimes made house calls. Or maybe she was just still mad? Rainbow Dash would never blame her.

"Oh, *my*, would you look who it is?"

Just as she was about to give up and leave, Rarity opened the door, surprising Rainbow Dash with sheer energy and enthusiasm!

"Rainbow Dash!" she said with a gasp. "I'm so glad you're back! Sorry, was in the middle of the whole personal grooming thing. You know how it gets. Must always set an example for the clients, lest they lose faith!"

"Uh... yeah," Rainbow Dash said, her surprise still obvious. "Look, Rarity, I wanna talk. About last week... well, I wasn't completely right in the head, and I said a lot of stuff that-"

"-say no more, go no further," said Rarity. "I've already pushed that dreadful incident out of sight and out of mind."

Rainbow Dash did a double-take. "What? But... are you sure? I remember really being really out of line, and it just wouldn't be right not to square-

"Oh, pish posh!" Rarity waved a hoof in dismissal. "I will hear absolutely none of it! You want to posture before some other ponies, be my guest--but Carousel Boutique is and always has been a place of forgiveness, be they for fashion crimes or otherwise!"

"...you really mean it?"

"Absolutely! Everypony has their off days, and you're clearly no different. Now run along. I'm sure you have others who are far less easygoing than I am to tend to."

Rainbow Dash could easily feel the weight lifting off of her heart. "Yeah, I guess I do. Thanks, Rarity! You're totally the best!"

Rarity nodded. "Yes, I'm well aware. The usual time next week for your Pegasus Special?"

"Absolutely! I promise not to do anything to spoil what we've got again. See ya!"

With a huge smile on her face, Rainbow Dash flew out of the boutique's window and skyward.

So happy was she that she didn't notice a far more mischievous smile crossing Rarity's lips...

Hours later, after after taking care of her weather duties, lunch, and catching a quick nap, she was ready to go to Applejack's.

At least, that's what she kept telling herself. The truth was that she was far more afraid of how this would go. Rarity may have had indignance down to a fine art, but Applejack had proven more than once that stubbornness and anger were on her side, and she wasn't afraid to use them. And for once, Rainbow Dash knew she deserved both barrels.

She wandered around Sweet Apple Acres, actually a little lost, until she saw a wooden cart in the distance seemingly moving by itself.

Wait a second. Carts didn't do that. It had to be her. She flew closer and indeed was able to make out Applejack, hauling a huge pile of apples towards her house. "Applejack!" she called out.

Upon seeing Rainbow Dash, Applejack let out the smallest of smiles, and waved. "Hiya, sugarcube! Gimme a few, I need to get these inside."

"I hear you! Lemme help you unload 'em, then!"

"Really? That's mighty sweet o' you! Put 'em in the kitchen, if you could?"

"Got it!" Using a saddlebag in her mouth to speedily scoop out bunches of apples at a time, Rainbow Dash was able to unload the wheelbarrow before Applejack even reached the house. Pony and pegasus then met in the kitchen themselves afterwards. Applejack marveled at the pile that had just been in her cart. It was larger than she was used to hauling at once, but she hadn't wanted to take two trips.

"Whoo! Thanks a bunch, girl. Y'all really saved my bacon, there. I was looking forward to about fifteen more minutes of pullin' an' gruntin'."

"Oh, well, glad I could help."

"So what brings y'all here? I see you're lookin' a little better from your hospital trip!"

"Thanks! Wish I could say I felt completely better too. I'm sore all over."

"Heh. I've been there. S'just what happens when you give yourself a *real* workout. You were a demon up there! Even I was kinda jealous. I'm good at keeping the ground doin' what I want, but sometimes I look at you in the sky, and..." Applejack trailed off. "...never mind, I'm gettin' off track. What can I do ya' for?"

"Well..." said Rainbow Dash, "Look. We've been friends a while, right?"

"Hmmm." Applejack made a mock show of giving it some thought. "Well, I'd reckon so! Sometimes friendly rivals, but... yeah. Definitely."

"Well, I want it to stay that way. A little while back, I did and said a lot of stuff I didn't really..." She stopped. Darn it! Why was this so much tougher with Applejack than with anypony else?

"You wanna say 'that you didn't really mean,'" Applejack finished for her.

Wordlessly, Rainbow Dash nodded.

"But y'*did* mean 'em. And that's what you're feelin' all bad about."

Rainbow Dash nodded again, amazed. Applejack had hit the nail on the head far better than she could have herself.

"Well, I've got news for you, Dash. You ain't perfect--and neither am I. We all got those things we bury deep inside ourselves. Heck, I'm sure you've gotten mad at me for better reasons lots o' times! And the same goes for me. All this means is that you're normal."

"Everypony has their off days," Rainbow Dash said, repeating Rarity's surprisingly similar perspective. Odd, that. Applejack tended to agree even less with Rarity's way of thinking than Dash's own.

"Darn tootin'! And ain't no shame in being normal, sugarcube. In fact, right now I think you're *better'n* normal. Cause it takes a mighty big pony to admit when they done wrong. Having the bravery to own up to your mistakes is somethin' I'll always respect. And respect is what I have for all of my friends."

Rainbow Dash merely gaped. "Wow. That's... that's pretty deep."

Applejack smiled. "Been told I can do that at times, yes."

"Well, thanks. I'll take that as apology accepted," Rainbow Dash said... just before adding something she regretted the very second the words left her mouth. "Sure there isn't anything I can do to even things out? I did sort of mess up that cake of yours."

"Oh, I'm so glad you asked that, Dash," Applejack said with an even larger grin.

"...uh oh."

Applejack gestured out the window, towards her family's barn. "Hey, y'all offered! No take-backs. And I'm sure you know the life of a farm hand is full o' hard work an' spitshine! I sure could use somepony to help me clean the barn, scrub the cellar, help me get caught up on my apple pickin', get a storm going over the orchards, give the house a good sweepin', mow the lawn, gather the hay, survey some new land, massage Big Macintosh's hooves after a long day--he can only do so much, y'know--"

"All right, all right, I get it!" Rainbow Dash let out a long sigh. "I guess there was no getting out of this easy. When do I report in, Sergeant Applejack?"

Applejack giggled. "Awww, don't be like that. 'Specially since I was about to say, there *is* somethin' y'all could do in place of all o' that..."

"*What?*" Rainbow Dash asked just a little too speedily. "What is it?"

"Well, I had to postpone the Apple Family Gathering--don't worry, wasn't your fault. Few invitations got lost in the mail, hadta resend. But this time around, I'd love it if you could join us."

"Wait, stop. I was mean to you... so in return you're inviting me to a whole night of free food and fun and ponies?"

And then there was that twinkle in Applejack's eye.

"...in a manner of speakin'."

She held up an outfit. Rainbow Dash held back her lunch.

"*No! Anything but that!*"

Said outfit was full-length, black with white frills... and had an *apron* as its centerpiece.

"I need an extra hoof to help cater. Someone who can handle a giant-sized

hungry Apple Clan with speed n' efficiency! Figure it may as well also be somepony who'd look simply *scrumptious* in this..."

"F-flattery is *not* going to work here, Applejack," Rainbow Dash said, fighting a blush. "Honestly, what sick twisted mare gave you this idea?"

"Fluttershy, actually, when she gave you that apron for your birthday! So a couple days ago, I asked Rarity to make one of these for you. She was plum tickled enough by the idea to do it--busted this out in record time, even! I ain't never seen that gal work so fast! Like she was downright possessed!" She winked. "So, how'd your apologizin' to her go?"

Rainbow Dash backed away, now understanding everything. The softballing Rarity had given her... it'd been because she'd known about this in advance. She and Applejack were in on this *together*. "You knew. You knew I'd be back to apologize!"

"Course we did. Like I said, you're a normal pony like the rest of us--and I know you have a kind heart. It was just a matter of time. Check and mate, as Twilight would say."

Rainbow Dash sighed in defeat, and grabbed the outfit. "I will remember this *so hard*."

"Look on the bright side. It could be so much worse than it is. Plus, do well enough maybe and I'll treat you to dessert when it's all over. No family, no noise... just the two of us, sharin' one big, moist, delicious apple pie..."

"Now you're officially teasing me," said Dash.

"No, I'm *promisin'* you. 'Cause I also want to talk to you then. A *long* talk." She placed her front hooves on Rainbow Dash's sides. "I wanna to make sure you know you've got more'n one friend who you can turn to when things getcha down. You don't have to be afraid of bumming us out. 'Cause we've all been where you were this month. And we all got through it with somepony else. Even when Gilda ain't around, you're hardly outta options. Y'hear me, girl?"

Rainbow Dash turned her gaze to the ground as her face flushed warmly. "Thanks, Applejack."

"Anytime, Rainbow Dash. See you soon."

Taking her new outfit, Rainbow Dash slowly flew off, her mind now less fearful--but far more cluttered--than before.

As sunset made itself known across Equestria, Gilda stood atop a cliff overlooking Ponyville. The small town was as idyllic as ever, but even she had to admit its beauty as it gradually became awash in orange hues.

She wasn't sure how much ground she'd managed to cover as far as reforming herself in the eyes of the townponies; but at least only half of the town had given her slanty eyes as she'd given herself a tour and even bought a few snacks from Sugarcube Corner. Applejack had told her a little while ago that there was a strange striped horse who carried a curse wherever she went, causing the entire town to evacuate itself whenever she came to call.

So... she was at least of higher standing than a *cursed* pony. One step at a time, she supposed.

"We're just in time, girls!"

Gilda instantly turned around when she heard the soft voice. She *knew* that soft voice: Fluttershy. She couldn't see her or anyone else yet, though. They hadn't reached where she was. But they were close:

"As soon we reach this peak, you'll be able to see the best sunset ever!"

Now that was strange. From what Dash had told her, Fluttershy wasn't usually one to seek out heights. She considered simply flying off, but her paws and talons found themselves rooted to the spot out of a strange curiosity.

Curses.

One of the "girls" spoke next. "Fluttershy? How come you're not keeping up?"

"I, um... I like making sure the ground is stable! Yes, yes. It's very slippery up here," Fluttershy said with a nervous laugh.

Now that was more like it. Gilda held back a snicker, and just in time--a small orange filly had reached the peak at that moment, ahead of everypony else. "Come *on*, Fluttershy! We need you with us to--GAH!"

The yell got Fluttershy flying the rest of the way. She and two more fillies were soon at the peak as well.

"Scootaloo, what..." a young white pony began, before she *did* know what it was. "...oh my gosh!"

The orange filly backed away. "It's a griffon, Sweetie Belle! Run!"

"She'll eat us!" said Apple Bloom, the last of the three.

The three turned to run, but Fluttershy stood in their way. "Now, girls, that is *not* how you treat a guest of Ponyville."

The three slowly turned back around, staring at Gilda head-on. "A... a guest?" said Apple Bloom.

Fluttershy nodded. "That's right. Her name is Gilda, and she's--"

"GILDA?"

Scootaloo's outburst echoed across the sky--and finally snapped Gilda into responding. "Um... yeah. That's me. What, you know me or something?"

Scootaloo darted closer, and began running around the griffon, her fear from moments ago having clearly evaporated. "Whoa! I can't believe it! *The* Gilda? You're... you're the 'super-awesome friend' Rainbow Dash talks about!"

Gilda blinked in mild surprise. "She does?"

"Yeah!" said Scootaloo, her smile as wide as Ponyville. "She says when the skies are open and free, you're the only one who can ever beat her in a

race! And you've got wicked air moves! And you don't let anypony get to you! And-"

Gilda put up one talon. "Whoa, stop, stop, please. A blushing griffon is *not* a pretty sight. What's your name, kid?"

"Scootaloo!" she said, still all smiles. "One day, I'm gonna be as fast and awesome as you guys!"

Finally, Gilda allowed herself to return Scootaloo's smile with a small one of her own. "Well, keep up that attitude, and I don't doubt it. Either way, glad to see my reputation isn't completely shot here." She turned to face the others. "What about you guys? Still think you're my dinner?"

"Don't worry, guys!" Scootaloo said. "She's totally okay! She and Dash are like *that!*" She slapped her front hooves together.

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle gingerly stepped forward, then stood alongside Scootaloo and Gilda as they gradually became more comfortable.

Fluttershy was the last to move up... and now, for reasons she couldn't explain, it was Gilda who felt pangs of nervousness.

"I probably owe you an apology." Gilda's words were barely audible. "We sort of got off on the wrong hoof. Twice."

Fluttershy didn't answer, simply stepping to the side of Gilda. Lined up in a row, the ponies and griffon enjoyed the last of the sunset. Only then did Fluttershy speak.

"From one of Rainbow Dash's childhood friends to another: I know she needs you in her life. She needs all the friends she can get. However, the same doesn't go for me and you."

Gilda gritted her teeth, ready to retort. However, before she could...

"But if you're willing to try so hard to be accepted amongst ponies... just for the sake of one of them... then the least I can do is return the gesture."

And, so lightly that Gilda barely felt it, Fluttershy wrapped her forelegs around Gilda's frame.

"Whoa, now, hey," said a surprised Gilda. "Wait a minute-"

The Cutie Mark Crusaders followed suit mere seconds later, huddling around her legs. There was now officially no escape from friendship.

"...tch." Gilda wrapped her wings around them as best she could in supreme embarrassment... and a tiny bit of happiness she refused to acknowledge. "So glad I'm hundreds of miles from home right now."

Finally, in the starry evening, there was one.

Twilight Sparkle floated once again in her balloon, telescope at the ready. She looked through it while using unicorn magic to take silent notes--beamed directly from her mind--using a magically floating pen and paper. Sometimes, studying was way more fun than anypony gave it credit for.

As she scanned the universe around her for new constellations, suddenly, a wild Rainbow Dash flew directly into her telescope's sight.

"Dash!" Twilight looked up happily... for about one second. Then memories reawakened, and she backed away just a bit, nervously. "Um..."

Rainbow Dash sighed. She'd expected as much. "It's okay, Twilight. I'm no longer crazy."

"...you sure?"

"I can prove it. Or at least, try to make up for it?"

With that, she brought her front hooves forth. Held within them was...

"...a rock?" Twilight looked puzzled at first, then peered closer at it. Upon ten seconds of close study, her eyes finally went wide. "Wait... is that what I..."

"Yep. It's a piece of a shooting star." Rainbow Dash beamed proudly as she saw Twilight's face light up, and hear her gasp in delight.

The unicorn levitated the meteorite before her, turning it every which way, examining it from every angle she could, then let it fall onto her hooves so she could touch it, *believe* it. "This... this is really..." she looked up at the sky, exhaled ecstatically, then looked back at Rainbow Dash. "One question: how?"

"I saw one fall last month, so I followed it. Took hours of me giving it all I had, but I finally found where it landed." She blushed sheepishly. "I was saving it for your birthday, but I'd rather keep our friendship long enough for that to roll around--hey!"

She was cut off by Twilight outright tackling her in mid-air.

"Ohmygoshdashthisissogreatiloveitiloveitiloveititsawesomeyoureawesomeilove-"

"T-T-*Twilight!* Careful there, you're rocking your boat!"

"Whoa!" Twilight said as she noticed her balloon's basket indeed tipping over. She got back in, and righted herself. "Thanks. So much. I just... *this is so great* I... I'm just sorry you felt you had to spoil your birthday surprise for this."

"Hey! This is supposed to be *my* apology!" Rainbow Dash joined Twilight in the balloon. "Sorry, Twilight. All of that 'slow' talk from before? Pretend it never even happened. You're totally my speed. Always have been. Even if you are the Princess's Pet," she said with a wink.

Twilight giggled. "Thanks. That means a lot to me. Life here in Ponyville would have been a lot tougher starting out, without you there to give me that extra push."

The two looked out at the stars together. "Believe me, I've been there. So I'll do that as many times as I need to! But, look: if you ever think I need to slow down, just tell me, and I'll do it. I left you hanging once... and I never want to do that again. Okay?"

"You have my word. Thanks... Dash."

The two ponies met eyes, and inwardly, Rainbow Dash sighed in relief.

Once more, they understood each other completely. That was just how Dash liked it.

And that's it, Rainbow Dash thought to herself as she flew away from Twilight's balloon, and crossed the unicorn's name off of her list. That's everyone I snapped at over the last few weeks. Mental note: never do that again, 'cause cleaning up these messes is tiring work! Well, I'd better get back to my place. Gilda's probably waiting for me. I just wish we didn't have to say goodbye so soon...

In a streak of color, she zoomed back to her sky castle.

Meanwhile, some distance away, a yellow pegasus pony followed at a much slower pace...

Epilogue

The sun was just about set, leaving the tiniest sliver of orange hue across the horizon. As the Cutie Mark Crusaders climbed down the hill, Fluttershy and Gilda followed in a slow flight.

Once they were back on the ground, the Crusaders ran home towards Ponyville, and when they were out of earshot...

"Gilda, I need to ask you something very important."

"What is it?"

Fluttershy hesitated, choosing her words and recalling her memories as calmly as she could manage. Some of them still made her shudder from their intensity, but she steeled her nerves and willed herself to go on with her dialogue.

"Yesterday, I was passing by Ponyville Urgent Care, when I thought I heard my name. So I went closer, and looked through the window... and I saw Rainbow Dash crying, and you comforting her." Fluttershy took a deep breath. "And... you said I was 'alive.'"

Gilda cursed in her mind. Fluttershy had actually seen that? Talk about the worst possible pony at the worst possible time..."What? No, no, that wasn't you we were talking about. That was... um..."

"You're as bad at lying as I am, Gilda. Remember when you told me I was 'where this all started?' I think I'm finally ready to know what you meant by that."

Gilda sighed. "Knew I shouldn't've said anything about that. Look, if you're asking me all this, then that means she never told you. And honestly, I'm not sure I should be the one to. It might make things worse."

"I'll take responsibility. You can tell her I held you at animalpoint."

Gilda blinked. "Animalpoint?"

A small smile slowly crept across Fluttershy's face. "A great many animals in the nearby meadows and forests know me. I've even befriended dragons. If I gather enough creatures in one place, they can be very, very persuasive."

Gilda simply stared. Fluttershy's smile persisted.

"That... is CREEPY," Gilda finally said. "Okay, you got me. Remember the Sonic Rainboom? I mean, the first one. The one that she made when you two were fillies."

Fluttershy nodded. "Oh, yes. That was a glorious day!"

"Well... Dash told me how you got your cutie mark."

Fluttershy nodded again. "Okay..."

"Do YOU remember how you got it?"

Fluttershy nodded again, with a happy sigh. "Of course! I was falling towards the ground, when I was suddenly saved by lots of wonderful woodland creatures! There was singing, dancing, love all around..."

"Oh, for-" Gilda hit her forehead with her own wing. "I... I'm trying to be subtle here, and you ain't helping! Okay, different angle. Look, since Dash arrived at Ponyville, has she ever seen somepony falling from a huge height and just completely freaked out?"

"Oh, yes, very! In fact, that's one of the few things that DOES make her... what you said."

"And she's always gone through extra lengths to make sure she saves them in time, right?"

"Absolutely! There's Twilight, Rarity... gosh, she and Rarity don't even get along that well, yet when she was falling, we got another Rainboom, and..."

"Okay. Here's the one for all the gold bits. Who's the only pony in her life,

that the three of us all know of, who she's never managed to save from falling?"

"I... um..." Fluttershy scrunched her face in thought.

"Shouldn't be too hard to figure out," said Gilda, rolling her eyes. "She's really close to you."

"I... it's... well, the only pony I can think of who's ever fit that description would be... oh my gosh!" Fluttershy froze with a shocked and scared gasp. "You mean....?"

Gilda slumped to the ground with an exhausted groan. "Finally."

"Hey, Fluttershy!"

A shout from Pinkie Pie interrupted Fluttershy's reverie. Looking around to see just how that was possible, she spied the pink pony hovering close by in her flying machine.

"Hey, are you on your way to Rainbow Dash's?" asked Pinkie.

Fluttershy nodded. *"Yes, I am."*

Pinkie beamed. *"That's great! 'Cause I am too, and I just added a passenger seat to the Pinkie Flyer 2.5! Wanna lift?"*

"Um..." Fluttershy slowed her flight, looking at the Flyer with pronounced hesitation.

"I promise you'll loooooooooove it!" said Pinkie Pie. "This baby's totally fast! Faster than most... um... things that do the stuff this does?"

Fluttershy giggled in response. *"Thanks, Pinkie, but I'm in no rush. I want to find my way to Rainbow's at my own pace, and under my own power. Besides, when I get there... I need to talk to her alone."*

"Oh! Well, that's totally okay, then! See you later. Wa-hooooooooooooo!" And

in a flash, Pinkie was gone in the distance.

Fluttershy simply smiled, and with a shake of her head, kept along her flight path...

Meanwhile, the owner of Fluttershy's final destination was shaking in her horsehoes.

"All right, Gilda," Rainbow Dash said from behind her changing screen. "I'm going to come out from behind this thing--and when I do, I want you to go easy on me."

Gilda rolled her eyes. This had been the third time in the last ten minutes that Dash had said something to this effect. "Yeah, yeah. I got it. Though I still dunno why you're so worked up about this--"

"Promise me!"

"Geez, all right, all right, I promise!" Gilda yelled. "I won't laugh or judge or anything, okay? Now get out here already, ya scaredy-pony!"

Gingerly, Rainbow Dash did so, revealing a blue rainbow-maned pegasus in a black dress with white frills--resplendent with a pre-sewed-on white apron, and a blush bright enough to overshadow nearly the entire color spectrum which currently adorned her.

For ten full seconds, Gilda simply stared, mute and frozen. Several feelings flushed through her all at once--and from them, she chose to express the one that would make things the least awkward:

"Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-hahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

"Gilda!" said Dash, now steaming. Still lost in laughter, Gilda didn't answer. "You... you said you'd go easy on me!"

"I... *ahahaha...* I *am!* Wow, and here I thought you said your hometown *forgave you!* *That's* what you have to wear next week? Seriously?"

Rainbow Dash sighed and lowered her head. "Yeah. Catering Applejack's party." She flopped on her bed with an annoyed groan, and looked at the ceiling.

Gilda's laughter finally died down. "Ahhh, well, it could be a lot worse."

"That's what Applejack said. I'm beginning to believe her less and less."

"It's true, though. Remind me to show you pictures of me as a chick." Gilda gestured at Dash's outfit. "Just as many fashion crimes; embarassin' as all get out. Parents tried to raise me as the sweetest girl possible. Didn't last long," she said with a toothy grin. "I'm laughing with you more than at you here, Dash. Promise."

Rainbow Dash smiled and sighed. "All right, all right. Not that either of us are in any shape to fight you over it. Speaking of my town, how'd you enjoy yourself in it?"

This time it was Gilda's turn to groan. "I swear, Dash, I can only spend so much time down there. Even when they're *nice* to me, they make me crawl all over," she said with a mock-shiver. "*Ponies.*"

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Aw, c'mon, admit it. We're not so bad."

"I admit nothing," Gilda said. "But hey, at least I didn't eat anypony. That's a good sign, right?"

"Huh?"

"Long story. But yeah, things went... better than expected. I learned what a 'Zecora' was, sampled a few cakes I'm gonna need to swipe the recipes for..." Gilda stopped when she heard--and looked over to see--Rainbow Dash ruffling around inside one of her dresser drawers. "...wait, what're you doing?"

Rainbow Dash stopped digging, and took out a book. "Check what I found in the attic not too long ago."

Gilda did so, reading the title. "'Junior Speedsters Flight Camp Yearb-'"

Gilda gaped. "Oh, Dash. You *didn't*."

The pegasus simply grinned and held the book out to the griffon. "I totally did."

Gilda cocked her head to one side and closed her eyes. "I ain't lookin'."

"C'mon, G! You gotta! And I'll look with you."

"No way! Lotta... lotta stuff in there I don't wanna think about, okay?"

"I know," said Dash, her voice turning from playful to earnest. "Same here. But hey, closure always helps, right? At least, that's what you're always telling me..."

"Aaaaaaaargh.... you *know* I hate when you turn my advice back on me." Gilda sighed. "Okay, okay..."

Rainbow Dash opened the book, the two peered in together, and they instantly saw a picture that made the both of them blush.

"Well, I'll be," said Gilda as she stared at the shot of the two of them, wing-in-wing. "That *is* us. Tiny and crazy."

"I was tiny," Rainbow Dash said. "You were crazy."

"Pfft. As if!" Gilda sighed. "Still, good times. Too bad the next level up didn't go so well. "

Dash flushed warmly. "Yeah. What happened to you after I got kicked out?"

"I didn't last much longer. And I didn't want to, either. In Junior, all you have to worry about is getting picked on for being a griffon. Past that, you gotta start dealing with *politics*. Not my strong suit." Gilda closed her eyes. "I just wanted to fly. They wouldn't even let me do that..."

"Hey, at least we ended up all right for ourselves," Rainbow Dash said.

"Truth."

The room fell silent for a bit.

"So, before you go," Rainbow Dash said, "there was something I wanted to ask you a month ago. Better late than never, I guess."

"What's that?"

Rainbow Dash smiled. "Turn to the back of the book."

Gilda did so, and two small cards fell out. She held them up, scanned them, and almost instantly did a double-take. "...the *Starlight Carnival*? You mean that festival with the killer light shows that most of Equestria only gets to see from a distance?"

Rainbow Dash beamed and nodded. "The very same! Cloudsdale's holding it next month. I want you with me when I go."

"...well, yeah, I..." Gilda's blush ran even deeper at this point. "...*sure*, of course! But... Cloudsdale's total pegasus country. What makes you think I'd be able to set one talon in there?"

"Because," Rainbow Dash replied in a determined tone, "if *anypony* has a problem with you, they get to take it up with *me*. And as fast as I am, you know they won't last long."

And in another of those rare moments, Gilda's face softened, and she blinked to ward off a stray tear. "...you're a class act, Dash," she said.

"Nah," Rainbow Dash said with a wink. "I just get kicked out of 'em."

"I'll second that," said Gilda, and a high-five was shared. "All right, it's gettin' pretty late. Gotta get back to my neck of the sky for now."

Rainbow Dash's face visibly fell. "Awww. Already?"

"Fraid so. Duty calls, and stuff. Don't worry, you'll see me again. And Dash?"

"Yeah?" the pegasus said, seconds before gasping upon receipt of a full-scale wing embrace. "Gilda..."

"I'm glad we're still cool," the griffon said.

Rainbow Dash hugged back. "We never weren't. We just had a fight, that's all. Even best friends do that once in a while." She pulled back with a sheepish grin. "We, uh, probably should wait a while before the next one, though."

"That's a fact. You keep me sane. So as long as you want me to, I'll do the same for you."

"I'm holding you to that," Rainbow Dash said.

"Heh. Be my guest."

The two headed out to the cloud mass surrounding Rainbow Dash's castle--and no sooner had they done so than they heard a noise, faint in the sky so start, but growing louder and closer with time.

"Hey, what's that?" asked Gilda, looking up towards the source of the voice.

Rainbow Dash looked as well, and recognized a pink blur moving--and screaming--at top speed. "Whoa! Pinkie Pie?!"

Sure enough, Pinkie Pie was careening towards them in a tailspin. Knowing just where and how she was about to land, she made sure to reply quickly:

"Whaaaaagetouttathewaysecondseatmessedwiththebalanceofthisthingcan't controlwhaaaaaaaaa-"

Griffon and pegasus flew to the side just in the nick of time, allowing earth-pony to crash-land into a cloud, upside-down in a heap, completely wrecking her aircraft.

"Pinkie!" the two cried out, rushing to her side. "Are you all right?" asked Rainbow Dash. "C'mon, speak to us!"

"Huh," said Pinkie, her eyes twirling. "So this is what it's like to be you. Y'know, it kinda smarts..."

Amidst laughs from Gilda, Rainbow Dash roughly righted Pinkie back on all fours. "It'll pass," she grumbled. "Twilight's spell still not wear off?"

Pinkie nodded with a huge smile. "Pretty much!"

"Heh. Well, I was just heading off. I'll leave you with your magical friends, Dash," Gilda said, before looking straight at the pink pony next to her. "Oh, and just so we're clear: you were lucky this time, Pinkie Pie. Next time, I might not care enough to bail you out, I don't care how long a journey you make."

Pinkie kept smiling. "You just keep telling yourself that."

Gilda silently stared back... and after a few seconds of contest, she blinked and lost. "Tch. Whatever. We'll talk later, Dash!"

"You bet!" said Rainbow Dash, waving at a soaring Gilda.

Once Gilda had disappeared to parts unknown, she looked at her mangled wreck of a flying machine. "Hey, look at that," she said. "I'm stranded here."

Rainbow Dash perked up, looked at Pinkie, and let her smile grow gradually. "Ayyy-yup."

"Heh heh. Uh... don't suppose you could.. um... give me a ride back down?"

Rainbow Dash nodded, turned around, and motioned for Pinkie Pie to mount her. Once Pinkie did so, Dash went airborne. "...eventually," she said.

"Uh-oh."

"Relax," said the pegasus. "I just wanted to say some things first. That being... look, I didn't expect *you* to be the one to set all this off. Grabbing Gilda for me when I was in the middle of my... um..."

"Grumpiness?" suggested Pinkie.

"Yeah, that'll work. Anyway, that was really good thinking." Rainbow Dash closed her eyes, her voice going soft. "You figured it all out and on top of that, if you hadn't, I'd probably still be out one of my best friends. A simple 'thank you' doesn't sound like enough in this case..."

"Don't worry," said Pinkie Pie. "I totally get you. But..." Pinkie's voice went soft as well. "...you wanna know a secret?"

"What's that?"

"I only half did this for you."

"What?" said Rainbow Dash. "Then who was the other half?"

"Me, silly," Pinkie said. "You have no *idea* how bad I felt ever since the first time Gilda came to town. I can't *stand* it when a party I throw goes wrong. Driving friends apart isn't what parties are supposed to be about! They're not what *I'm* supposed to be about. So I wanted to fix things. But..." Pinkie Pie sighed. "When I brought her back, then saw you two fighting *again*..."

"Whoa," Rainbow Dash said. "You must've felt awful!"

"I did! I thought I made everything even worse and that you'd totally hate me along *with* Gilda, and you'd never come back and everyone would know it was my fault and then I'd have to run away again and *nyaahaa!*-"

Rainbow Dash air-bucked to cut her off. "But it all turned out okay in the end. So don't think about how it *could* have gone. 'Cause it didn't. And you're a hero for it. You rock, Pinkie."

Instantly, Pinkie Pie was all boisterous smiles again, and she firmed her grip on Rainbow Dash. "Awwww, thanks! This mean I can take matters into my own hooves again next time you have a problem?"

"Not a chance."

"Awwww. Oh, well. Then can I ask you for one teensy weensy little favor?"

"...I guess."

"Good. This is the first time I've seen you smile in a week--so try keeping it for a while, okay?" Pinkie Pie giggled. "Otherwise, as the mare officially in charge of Ponyville's happiness, that's just more work I've gotta do!"

"I knew it! Look at you taking credit for everything, now!" Without warning, and with several laughs, Rainbow Dash did loops and rolls in the air, chuckling as Pinkie Pie screamed and held on for dear life.

"Whooooooooooooa! All right, all right, I get your point! But seriously--oh gosh now I'm dizzy--we're all here for you, okay? I hope this little adventure of yours taught you that."

"Yeah." Rainbow Dash nodded as they flew over Sugarcube Corner. "Completely drilled."

An hour later, Rainbow Dash was back at her castle, laying in bed, finally alone for the first time in days.

She was half-asleep and completely spent, but with the happy, accomplished smile on her face reflected just how much she'd considered the expended energy to all be worth it. Now it was time for sweet, hopefully-blissful rest...

...or not--for just then, knocking sounded at her door.

She groaned, wondering who it could be at this hour of the night, and as the knocks continued, she briefly considered just not answering it. In the end, however, she decided she still owed Ponyville whatever she could give them after the episodes of the week past. She flew over to the door, and opened it to reveal...

"...Fluttershy?" Dash said, calling out to the yellow pegasus who had given up and turned around to leave.

Fluttershy jumped, squeaked, and returned to the door upon hearing her name. "Oh! Thank goodness. I thought you'd, um, moved?"

"Don't gotta. House does it for me."

"Yes, indeed it does. It took me longer to find it than usual tonight." She smiled. "Hello, Rainbow. You look... um... cute."

"Cute?" Rainbow Dash looked down, and realized that she *still* had her caterer's outfit on. "Aw, *no!* I forgot to... *all this time-*"

Fluttershy giggled. "No, it's okay. I don't get to see you like this often. It's a nice change of pace."

"Hnnngh... *yaah!*" Wearing a huge blush, Rainbow Dash threw the outfit off of herself and onto her bed. "A change of pace you'll never see again if I have anything to say about it!" She sighed. "C'mon in."

"Actually," Fluttershy said, "I was hoping you would fly with me."

"Fly?" Rainbow Dash blinked. "Are you sure...?"

Fluttershy peered closer at her friend. "I *am* a pegasus, Rainbow."

"Well, yeah, I know, I didn't mean anything by--oh, let's just go."

They left Rainbow Dash's home, and flew silently for quite some time before Fluttershy spoke again. In a rare moment, she cut straight to the chase. "Gilda told me about your dreams."

"Dreams?" Rainbow Dash's voice shook a tiny bit. "W-what kind of dreams?"

"About how I almost didn't survive your very first race. She says you you never forgave yourself for back then. Is that true?"

Rainbow Dash slowed down, mentally cringing. "Ahhh. Um..."

"Please, just tell me," said Fluttershy. "I want to hear it straight from the pony's mouth. Is it true?"

"I... I..." Rainbow Dash sighed and hovered, looking at the ground. "Yeah. It is."

"Then you know what question I'm going to ask next."

"Yeah." Rainbow Dash nodded. "Do I gotta?"

"No. I will always respect your feelings. But if you can trust me with them... then I think I can help."

Rainbow Dash stayed silent in thought for half a minute... then relented. "All right. Well, you know I won that race all those years ago--but when I returned to the starting point to grab you, you were nowhere to be found! I looked everywhere too, and nothing! That's when I found out you'd fallen off the cloud, and it hit me..." Rainbow Dash closed her eyes in somber recollection. "I almost killed my best friend because I was focused so much on winning."

"But I came back," Fluttershy said. "With a cutie mark and everything."

"Yeah! Which was great! But I was still scared! Scared about what could have too-easily happened instead. Scared for days... until I promised myself I'd never go all tunnel-vision like that again."

"I see." Fluttershy said. "Didn't you start that race to defend me?"

"Well, yeah."

"So the reason you were so focused about winning... was all for a friend's sake. I would say that's rather noble, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe, but..." Rainbow Dash shook her head. "Look, it's okay to be awesome. I prove that every day. But it's another thing to be awesome at somepony else's expense!" She threw up her hooves. "Yeah, I was racing to help you! But none of that matters if there isn't a *you* left to *help*!" Dash's voice cracked, and she managed to hold back all of her tears except one. "It's been driving me crazy for years! Through all my flight camps, since moving to Ponyville... you know why I crash so much? Because I'm always so busy making sure nopony *else* does while I'm cutting loose!"

"Rainbow..."

"So yeah, I've been paranoid for a while. And I get weird dreams sometimes that remind me exactly why. But I don't care! I don't care about being afraid of what's important--and I don't care what paranoia does to me, as long as nopony else suffers just 'cause I wanted to have my fun!" A second tear ran down her cheek. "Especially you."

Rainbow Dash was forced to catch her breath at the end of her impromptu speech... and at the height of her frustration, she felt Fluttershy warmly drape her forelegs around her.

"Oh, Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said, shaking her head. "I was afraid of this."

Rainbow Dash draped back, shuddering in the embrace. "Afraid of what?"

"Rainbow... what if *I*, the one who almost died then, were to tell you that there is absolutely *nothing* I would change about that day?"

"Wh-what? Are you serious? But... how-"

"All risks aside, that race was the very first time I ever saw Rainbow Dash go all out--and I wouldn't see it again until years later, at the Best Young Flyer's Competition. Only there did I realize how much I missed seeing what I liked best about you."

"What, my speed? The Sonic Rainboom?"

Fluttershy smiled serenely. "Not quite. It's the fact that you never let anything stop you. Not bullies, not the sound barrier, not gravity or anything else. Even when I was a filly, that was what led me to become your friend in the first place. I let lots of things stop me all the time--so I wanted to learn how you avoided it. Then you knocked me off of that cloud... and I learned. My cutie mark soon followed... all because of you."

"I... Fluttershy, I-I..." Rainbow Dash sniffled, and Fluttershy firmed her hug in response.

"Because of all that, Rainbow Dash, whenever I look at you, I don't see the girl who put me in danger. I see the girl who gave me my life's greatest gift. And I also see the girl who can make miracles happen when she puts all of

herself into something."

"You... you mean I've had it wrong all this time?" said Dash. "You don't blame me for-"

"The only thing I blame you for is always being there for me," said Fluttershy, pulling back and giving Rainbow Dash's forehead a kiss. "Please... don't stop being Rainbow Dash. It's the only way Fluttershy will ever learn how to fly alongside her."

"I... I'll try," Dash said.

"Try hard," Fluttershy said with a quick wink and smile. "Or I'll call Gilda back, and we'll *both* make you. Good night, Rainbow Dash."

"G'night, Fluttershy."

And with that Fluttershy flew off, back to her home, leaving Rainbow Dash alone in the star-filled night sky, with a warm feeling in her chest, and a solitary thought running through her mind:

I love you guys. Really... I do.