

Fair Feathered Friend

By BobCat



Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	18
Chapter 3	29
Chapter 4	41
Chapter 5	51

Chapter 1

It was another wonderful Saturday afternoon at Sweet Apple Acres. The pegasi, as was their custom, scheduled no rain for Saturdays and Celestia seemed to specially bless the day with her radiance. So, as always, it was the perfect day for the children of Ponyville to play.

Somepony should have told the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Just like every Saturday, they were in their clubhouse, hard at work figuring out how to discover their special talent.

Scootaloo was holding a clipboard with one hoof, with a pencil sticking out of her mouth like a cigar. "Okay, so we're gonna try milking cows, professional pie eating and stamp collecting. Hm... what else... I know! What about water polo?"

Sweetie Belle was lying on her back by the window, in danger of slipping off to sleep in the warm rays. She yawned, "Do we know the rules to water polo?"

Scootaloo shrugged. "It can't be too different than regular polo."

Apple Bloom said, "Ah guess you can add that to the list. Ah wonder if Twilight Sparkle has a book on it."

Scootaloo quickly added water polo to the itinerary. "Alright, anyone else have any ideas?"

Sweetie Belle was about to speak up when she was interrupted by the sound of a dog barking outside.

Apple Bloom's ears twisted around, zeroing in on the sound. "Hey, that's our dog Winona!"

Scootaloo said, "What's she doing here? I mean, we're practically in Lemonjack's farm out here."

At the name of Applejack's hated rival, Apple Bloom's features hardened. "She must've run off. We gotta get Winona back! Those lemon folk are right ornery about people going on their land."

Sweetie Belle got up and stretched. "Plus, we can get our cutie marks as dog catchers!"

The three raised their hoofs in the air in a three pony high-hoof. In unison, they shouted, "Cutie Mark Crusaders Winona Wranglers!"

They were outside in an instant. None of them had any equipment for catching an unwilling Winona, but what they lacked in preparedness, they made up for in enthusiasm. They didn't have far to run before they found the wayward dog... and she wasn't alone.

Of all ponies, there was Rainbow Dash. The blue pegasus didn't notice the Crusaders. She was too busy... playing catch with Winona. Rainbow Dash would kick the red ball deep into the orchard, Winona would run to get it, barking happily all the way, and the process would repeat itself. Both dog and pony seemed oblivious to their presence. The Crusaders watched this for a few minutes, unsure what to do.

Scootaloo blinked. "Uh, Apple Bloom, what's Rainbow Dash doing?"

"Ah... guess she's playin' with Winona," Apple Bloom said.

Sweetie Belle said, "All by herself? This far from the farm? That's weird."

Apple Bloom nodded. "Yeah, it is."

Scootaloo looked uncomfortable and glanced around. "Well, what do we do?"

"Ah guess we should go say hi," she said with trepidation.

The three young ponies walked up behind Rainbow Dash. Rainbow didn't notice them until Apple Bloom called out, "Well howdy, Rainbow Dash! What brings you all the way out here?"

Rainbow Dash whipped her head around. The big, goofy grin plastered across her face transformed into a look of shock and... terror?

Sweetie Belle said, "Yeah, what..."

With a mighty flap of her wings, Rainbow Dash was airborne and flying back towards town, leaving a rainbow in her wake. The three little ponies coughed in the dust cloud kicked up by the rapid takeoff.

Apple Bloom coughed out, "What's her problem? You'd think we were three cockatrices or something."

Sweetie Belle shuddered at the memory. "Don't mention those things, please."

Meanwhile, Scootaloo... "caught" Winona. This consisted entirely of walking up to the sheepdog, followed by the Winona jumping up and licking her face. "Ha ha, quit it, that tickles!" Scootaloo managed to shove away the overly friendly dog. "Hey guys, did I get my Winona Wrangler cutie mark?"

Apple Bloom said, "No."

Scootaloo sighed. "Well, I guess that's for the best. I wouldn't want my only special talent to be catching Winona."

When Apple Bloom got home later that night (after failed attempts at water polo, stamp collecting, cow milking and pie eating), Applejack was out with her friends dealing with some crisis. Big Macintosh wasn't sure what it was, having gotten his information from Granny Smith, who didn't have the best hearing anymore. Apple Bloom tried to stay up for Applejack, but just couldn't keep her eyes open after ten o'clock.

It wasn't until the next day that Apple Bloom got the chance to mention the strange encounter to her sister. Applejack was taking her to Rarity's house for another Crusader meeting, before taking care of some farm business in Ponyville. Applejack furrowed her brow as Apple Bloom recounted the story. "That's just plain weird. An' you're sure none of you got on Lemonjack's land?"

Applebloom said, "For the last time no! Everyone was on our land the whole time. We know better than to mess with them lemon folk."

Applejack said, "Good. Keep it that way. Now, as fer Rainbow Dash... ah don't rightly know. Ah mean, playin' with Winona's nothin' to hide." Applejack gasped slightly. "Hey, no wonder Winona's been tired lately, if Rainbow Dash has been playin' with her all the way out there. And ah have had trouble findin' her pretty regular. Ah'm gonna have to have a word with that pegasus. Winona's a workin' dog, not a house cat."

Apple Bloom said, "Maybe she thought you'd be mad because she's a workin' dog?"

Applejack snorted at the suggestion. "That filly's one of mah be... she's one of mah friends, but dang if she can't be selfish sometimes. She wouldn't even think of that." Finally, they arrived at Rarity's. "Well, here we are."

Applejack knocked on the door. The two waited for a long time. Finally, they could hear the sound of Rarity walking towards them. Just before the door opened, they could hear Rarity snap, "Scootaloo, you put that down this instant!" When she opened the door, the unicorn was all smiles. "Applejack, how good to see you! Apple Bloom, your friends are waiting in the living room. Could you... encourage them to go to Sweetie Belle's room? Please?"

Apple Bloom said, "Yes'm," and ran inside. There were loud squeals of girlish joy, followed by the clops of little hooves up the stairs.

Applejack smiled. "Heh, good luck with those three."

Applejack turned to leave, but Rarity spoke up. "Would you like to stay for tea? I could really use some adult company right now."

Applejack thought for a moment. "Sure, why not? Mah errands won't take long and ah'm stuck in town 'til Apple Bloom and her friends are done."

The two ponies walked into the kitchen and Rarity put a teakettle on the stove. Applejack said, "Is that a new teakettle? Ah like the pattern."

Rarity sighed. "Yes. Scootaloo happened to the last one. They were, how did they put it, 'Cutie Mark Crusader Teetotalers.'"

Applejack blinked. "That ain't what a Teetotaler is."

Rarity sighed, telekinetically put a few cookies on a plate from a jar. "It really isn't worth disagreeing with them when they get an idea like that in their heads. Were we ever like that?"

Applejack said, "Ah'm pretty sure not, though Granny Smith says otherwise." The two laughed at that. They carried on that way for a while, catching up on each others' lives, when there was a knock at the door.

Rarity said, "Who could that be? I'm closed on Sundays."

Applejack shrugged. "Ah guess you run that risk running a business out of your house." Rarity checked herself in her kitchen mirror (*Who has a kitchen mirror?*) and, satisfied, went back to the living room and answered the door. Applejack followed.

Rarity smiled, though it was slightly forced. "Hello, I'm terribly sorry, but the Carousel Boutique is not open right now."

The rest of Rarity's prefabricated speech was abandoned when she saw the look of panic on Bon Bon's face. With a speed that would have impressed Pinkie Pie, the cream colored pony said, "I'm sorry to bother you, and I know you're closed, but have you seen my puppy, Buttons?"

A look of mild surprise crossed Rarity's face. "You have a puppy?"

Bon Bon rolled her eyes. "Yes, I have a puppy. I wouldn't be here asking about a nonexistent puppy."

Rarity said, "How long have you had him?"

Bon Bon seemed to relax and said, "Oh, about six months. He's such a little sweetie. Wanna see pictures?" Before Rarity could agree or disagree, Bon Bon had produced a wallet-full of photos from her purse.

As she admired a picture of Bon Bon hugging Buttons, Rarity put a hoof to her chin and said, "Six months? Hm, I suppose it has been too long since we've had a chat. I've been so frightfully busy with making dresses and fighting monsters, I'm sure you can understand. We need to catch up. How would you like to come over tomorrow for coffee at, say, 3-ish?"

Bon Bon got out a personal planner and started writing in it. "Sure, that'd be great! Can Lyra come too?"

Rarity smiled more sincerely than before. "I don't see why not. The more the merrier!"

Applejack coughed into her hoof. "Uh, ladies? Missin' dog?"

Bon Bon's eyes widened and she grabbed the photo back from Rarity's telekinetic grasp. She shifted from "proud pet owner" mode to "panicked pet owner" so rapidly that Applejack got mood whiplash. Bon Bon hugged Applejack and started wailing. "Oh, my poor little Buttons! I went to the market and when I got back, he'd dug out of the yard! I've been looking for hours and he's just nowhere to be found!"

Applejack became nauseated at all of this sentiment and gently pushed Bon Bon off. "It'll be fine, Bon Bon. We'll find yer Buttons. Now, what does he look like?" In an instant, Applejack was face to face with a photo of a fine looking golden retriever. Applejack gently pushed it away. "Alright, ah'll take charge of this puppy wranglin' operation. Rarity, you..."

"Now hold on a moment, Applejack," Rarity said in her most regal voice. "Why do you assume you're in charge?"

Applejack said, "Because ah'm the one with the most experience wranglin' animals, that's why!"

In a sing song voice, Rarity said, "I seem to recall a bunny stampede..."

Applejack fixed Rarity with a glare. "Ah thought we agreed not to talk about that whole sleep deprivation thing again. 'Sides, do you really wanna be in charge of a dog hunt?"

Rarity thought for a moment. "No, I suppose not."

Applejack said, "Alright, Bon Bon, you an' Rarity split up an' get anyone else who's free to help. Ah'll get Rainbow Dash so we can get ourselves some air support. Don't you worry none, Bon Bon, ah'll find yer dog."

"Puppy."

"Whatever." With a flash of orange and "yee-hah," Applejack galloped for Rainbow Dash's cloud house at the edge of town as fast as her legs would carry her. She just hoped Rainbow Dash was home. Knowing that pony, she could be napping anywhere, at any altitude, in a twenty mile radius.

She needn't have worried, though Applejack's worry turned to anger as she took in what she saw. There was Rainbow Dash, in the shadow of her house, rolling around with Buttons. Both dog and pony were in their own little world of petting and licking (the pony doing the former, the dog the latter).

Applejack's anger softened when she heard Rainbow Dash refer to the dog as "snoogie-woogums," though only slightly. She didn't think those "words" were in the tough pegasus' vocabulary. "Rainbow Miriam Dash! Just what the hay do you think you're doing?"

Rainbow Dash froze again. She considered fleeing like yesterday... but when Applejack started breaking out middle names, fun and games were over. "Um, what's up, Applejack?"

Applejack was in her face in an instant. "Don't you 'what's up' me! Care to explain all these dog-nappin's you been committin' lately?"

Rainbow Dash blinked with honest confusion. "What dog-nappings?"

Applejack sputtered, "What dog-na... Winona and Buttons, fer two! Though, as far as I know, yer criminal enterprise goes deeper'n that!"

Rainbow Dash said, "I didn't dog-nap Buttons!" Her tone was less combative than it might have been otherwise; Applejack was just plain scary when she was mad.

"Aha!" Applejack started poking Rainbow Dash's chest with her hoof. "But you did dog-nap Winona, is that what yer sayin'?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "Nuh-uh, I didn't dog-nap anyone! Sure, I've been playing with Winona, but I never took her off your farm! And I found Buttons just wandering around!"

Applejack did something that Rainbow Dash hated. She leaned in so close that they were almost touching and met Rainbow Dash's gaze. It was

almost hypnotic, like a cobra staring down a bird. Fluttershy had "the stare," but Applejack had the eye of an experienced parent. It felt like Applejack was staring into her soul, looking for any hint of dishonesty.

At last, Applejack's eyes softened. "Alright, ah believe yah. Let's get Buttons back to Bon Bon, before she gets even more worried." Applejack whistled for Buttons. "Git along, little doggie!" With a happy bark, Buttons followed the two back to town.

They trotted in silence for a bit, neither sure what to say, if anything. Finally, Applejack got things rolling. "So, uh, ah never knew you liked dogs."

Rainbow Dash said, almost morosely, "Yeah, I love 'em. We had a bunch of 'em growing up."

Applejack said, "So, why're you playin with mah dog in secret?"

"I get lonely sometimes, and your farm's so big, I never thought I'd get found out."

Applejack said, "Uh, that ain't exactly what I asked. Ah mean why didn't ya just ask me?"

Rainbow Dash sighed, as it became obvious she wouldn't be able to avoid this line of questioning. "Oh yeah, how awkward would that be?" Her eyes brightened up as she started a glib pantomime to go with her words. "Oh hi, Applejack! I'm not here to see you, but can your dog come out to play?" She settled back down into her funk. "I'm not that tactless."

Applejack snorted. "Ain't more tactless than stealin mah dog fer hours on end. Ah do need her sometimes, and she does work fer a living. So seriously, next time you wanna borrow mah dog, just ask."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "OK." After a moment of Applejack's expectant stare, she added, "I'm sorry. And stuff."

Applejack smiled and said, "Apology accepted. What I can't figure out is why, if ya love dogs so much, you don't just get one of yer own?"

Rainbow Dash gave Applejack a fine selection from her many flavors of sarcastic expressions. "Uh, hello? Dogs can't exactly walk on clouds. Plus, even if they could, what if he fell off? I live 50 feet up."

Applejack blushed. "Oh... right. Ah guess ah didn't think it through."

Rainbow Dash pouted, "Well I have. And it all sucks."

They travelled in silence again and were soon at the outskirts of town.

Applejack said, "Alright, go find Bon Bon and let her an' everypony else in the search party know that we got Buttons."

Rainbow Dash, now that she was in public again, put up her "armor" again. Gone was the repentant pegasus Applejack had been trotting with for the last mile, replaced by the normal, confident Rainbow Dash. "Right! I could use a good flight after all that... awkward stuff." Rainbow Dash got into the air, but paused, hovering over her companions. "Hey Applejack, before I go, can I come over and play with Winona tomorrow?"

Applejack shook her head. "Sorry, Dash, but Winona's gonna be busy all week. I'm hiring her out to Wooljack for the shearing season."

Rainbow Dash sputtered, "But, but you said..."

"Ah never said the answer was always gonna be yes. Hit me up next week and ah'm sure it'll be fine."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Fine."

Rainbow Dash got up late the next morning. On Mondays, she didn't have much to do, aside from work on any stunts she might think up. That was one advantage of being a part-time weather pegasus: the pay wasn't the best, but the hours were flexible.

However, this particular Monday, she wasn't in the mood for stunts. As she got out of her cloud bed and walked (in specially made cloud-compliant slippers) to her cloud living room, she realized how much of her spare time Winona had been eating up lately. That alone was depressing. She shouldn't have been spending that much time tossing balls with dogs if she

wanted to get into the Wonderbolts. Her training regimen had slackened a bit since she had been literally crowned the best young flyer in Equestria.

"But that isn't the only reason, is it," she said to nopony in particular. Her voice echoed slightly in the empty house. She made herself some breakfast and tried to think of something other than being alone. She turned on the radio.

"This is KPNY, brought to you by the Fillydelphia Dog Treat company, reminding you to treat your best friend to the be-"

With much more force, she changed the station. "I'm not in the mood for classic rock anyway. Maybe some speed metal?"

"-KHRS, bringing you the best metal from Ponydanavia! Up first, Lars Hüff with 'Dog on a Chain.'"

The station was changed again with even more force. "Maybe something upbeat? I know, that lame-o station Fluttershy listens to whenever she comes over!"

"How much is that doggy in the window?
The one with the-"

The song was cut off as Rainbow Dash grabbed her radio and chucked it out the window. It was oddly satisfying. "Music's dumb anyway." Rainbow Dash's funk was interrupted when she heard a surprised shriek from the ground below. "... oh crap." "Oh crap" was her speedily repeated mantra as she raced the ground, praying to Celestia that she hadn't hit anyone.

Waiting for her was a thoroughly startled Pinkie Pie standing a few feet from the now thoroughly wrecked radio. Pinkie Pie went from startled to cheerful in three seconds flat. "Oh, hi Rainbow Dash!"

Rainbow Dash glanced from the radio to Pinkie Pie worriedly. "Oh man, Pinkie Pie, are you okay? I didn't think anyone would be down here!"

Pinkie Pie waved away her concerns. "It's okay. It's a good thing, actually, 'cause I had a twitchy tail all morning and no idea what it was about! Now I can relax!"

Rainbow Dash breathed a sigh of relief. "So, what are you here for, Pinkie?"

Pinkie Pie put an arm around Rainbow Dash's shoulder. "Well, a little bird told me you were feeling blue 'cause you couldn't have a dog, so I decided that this was a job for your Auntie Pinkie Pie! So, pranks and parties! All day and all night, if we have to, until you're feeling better!" She started rooting through the bag around her shoulder. "Let's see, where's that smoke bomb..."

Rainbow Dash slipped out from under Pinkie Pie's grip. "Whoa whoa whoa. Somepony told you?"

Pinkie Pie nodded and frowned. "Yeah, it made me so sad! I don't know what I'd do without my precious little Gummy-Gator, so I can't imagine how bad you must feel!" She perked up again as she went back to work with her pack. "So, do you want to put the smoke bomb in the Mayor's mail box or in Spike's bed? He always takes a mid-morning *siesta*, so we can still catch him if we hurry!"

Rainbow Dash glared at nopony in particular, in the general direction of Sweet Apple Acres. "Did the little bird who told you I was unhappy have a cowboy hat and freckles?"

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "Uh uh, that's a secret, and friends always keep secrets." Her features darkened. "Forever!" She smiled innocently again. "So, Spike or the Mayor?"

Knowing how far away Sweet Apple Acres was, and how suspicious Pinkie Pie would be if she immediately targeted Applejack, Rainbow Dash decided it was best to save her revenge on Applejack for later. However, she could work off some steam in the meantime...

Pinkie Pie laughed as Spike rubbed his eyes. "Hah! Smoke bomb under the pillow! A classic!"

Spike, between coughs, laughed along with her. "Yup, you got me good! Better get ready for some payback, Pinkie! I owe you three pranks now."

Rainbow Dash sighed, bored at the whole spectacle. Spike and Pinkie Pie noticed the lack of mirth and stopped their own laughter. Spike, between coughs, said, "Uh, is something wrong, Rainbow Dash?"

The blue pegasus sighed again and leaned against the wall. "I guess I'm not in the mood for pranks after all. This good-natured stuff isn't doing it for me."

Pinkie Pie said, "Well, what do you want?"

Rainbow Dash shrugged and in a casual tone, said, "I guess I just want to crush my enemies, see them driven before me and hear the lamentation of their fillies. That'd be best."

Pinkie Pie somehow got a black and white referee's uniform and a whistle. Where she got these was a mystery, but Rainbow Dash and Spike had long since learned to stop asking. Pinkie Pie blew her whistle in Rainbow Dash's face. "Whoa there, that's a Pinkie Pie Prankster's Protocol Penalty! You never prank when you're mad! You prank to spread cheer based on humiliating other ponies, knowing that they can do it to you too in good fun!"

Spike coughed, "Yeah, I mean, if it isn't in good fun, pranks are just random acts of cruelty."

Rainbow Dash sighed. She was getting a lot of practice at it today. "Yeah, sorry guys. My heart's just not in it today. I'm too mad and stuff to do anything in good fun." Rainbow Dash started to fly off. "I'll catch you some other time. I need to work off some of this angry energy."

Pinkie Pie shouted behind her, "Wait! What about this cake I made for you?"

Rainbow Dash called over her shoulder, "Let Spike have it! I'm not hungry anyway!"

Spike licked his lips and rubbed his hands together. "Don't mind if I..." Some errant smoke from the bomb found its way up his nose and he sneezed, making the cake disappear in a puff of green smoke.

It was Pinkie Pie's turn to sigh. "I'm a terrible Auntie! I ought to have my Auntie license revoked! Oh well. I hope Princess Celestia likes white cake with lemon frosting."

As it turned out, it was Celestia and Luna's favorite. However, that's another story.

Pinkie Pie had said not to prank while angry, and all of Rainbow Dash's teachers had always told her never to fly angry. As she zoomed over the countryside around Ponyville, Rainbow Dash ignored the latter's advice. After all, flying defined her. If she was angry, she was going to fly angry, and nopony was going to tell her otherwise.

As she zipped over trees and barns, she... well, she wasn't really thinking. With the mood she was in, she was a long way from anything so concrete. Instead, she had a feeling that this was why she loved flying. While she was flying, she was alone, but it was okay. It wasn't an empty house with nopony to share it with. It was her, the sky, the wind and, as a backdrop, the ground. The only real things in the world were whatever she had to avoid in front of her. She even felt good about not being able to have a dog as playful as Winona or as sweet as Buttons. After all, no dog would be able to keep up with her in the sky, so why bother with them? Why bother with friends who accused her of stealing and then blabbed her problems to Pinkie Pie, of all ponies?

After several hours of this, Rainbow Dash landed on top of a tree near the edge of the Everfree Forest. Her wings burned with the exertion and her skin was raw from being buffeted by wind, but she felt great. It was a good sore. She hadn't flown that hard in weeks. She was even starting to soften towards Applejack. She hadn't forgiven her yet, but she didn't want to shove a smoke bomb down her throat anymore.

Rainbow Dash stretched out and was about to take off for a cool down flight. "Don't wanna seize up tomorrow," she said to herself. Just as she was about to lift off, though, there was a loud thump and a bestial screech below her. She hesitated. This close to the Everfree Forest, it could be just about anything, and she was alone and tired. Just about anypony else would have listened to their common sense and run off.

Rainbow Dash wasn't anypony. Her hesitation ended almost as soon as it began and she swooped down to ground level. What she saw was the prone form of a brown falcon lying at the base of the tree. She'd often seen the birds while flying, but she'd certainly never been this close to one before. It looked so... small, when it wasn't soaring. It was a beautiful animal. It was a shame that the only way she got to see it up close and personal was when it was dead.

"No wait... is it breathing?" She was about to get face to face with it when she remembered something Fluttershy told her once.

"Rainbow Dash, if you find an injured wild animal, don't touch it with anything you can't afford to lose."

So, instead, she searched around until she found a fallen stick that still had some leaves on it. Maneuvering it in her mouth, she managed to get the leaves over the downed bird's face. She was completely still. She held her breath, as though afraid she would ruin the test. And then... the leaves moved.

She dropped her branch and jumped back ten feet with a yelp... not that she was afraid. Nope. Rainbow Dash feared no living thing! She jumped because she thought it might be a zombie falcon, which meant it wasn't alive, which meant it was okay to be afraid. Yeah, that was it. She slapped her face. "Get it together. It isn't a zombie, it's just knocked out. So... what now?" She sat there watching the unconscious falcon for a minute as her mind came up with nothing. "What would a smart pony like Twilight Sparkle do... investigate!"

Ignoring Fluttershy's advice, she got several parts of her anatomy that she didn't want to part with very close to the bird. She inspected its wings. Those were in order; after years of flight school and flight camp, Rainbow Dash knew a busted wing when she saw it. In fact, if she could apply pegasus anatomy to falcons (could she? She wished she'd paid more attention in biology...), this thing was completely healthy, aside from a bad knock to the head.

"Hm. I guess he's alright." She paused. "Now what? I can't just leave him here."

And then... inspiration hit. "Falcons fly! Flying animals can live on clouds. I can do better than a pet dog! 20% better! That'll show Applejack and Pinkie Pie... no wait, Pinkie Pie tried to make me feel better. I won't rub HER nose in it. But still! Falcon, you're coming home with me!"

The falcon, predictably, said nothing as Rainbow Dash gently scooped him up and took off.

Chapter 2

The Ponyville Library! Bastion of culture and learning for a whole community! Gateway to a limitless land of imagination!

Twilight Sparkle said, "Spike, leave!"

And, occasionally, the site of domestic quarrels between a baby dragon and a unicorn. To be fair to Twilight...

"B-but Twilight, you need me to," Spike paused for a moment to cough, sending volume XVI of the *Encyclopedia Equestria* straight to Celestia's study. "I... oops."

... she had her reasons for wanting her constant companion gone. Twilight Sparkle facehoofed. She telekinetically gave Spike a coin bag. "Go buy some cough drops or cough syrup or whatever it is you need to stop making things disappear!"

Spike blushed and said, "S-sorry Twilight. Should I get anything else while I'm out?"

Twilight stroked her chin. "I think we're good, as long as you get your throat back under control." She gave him a gentle telekinetic prod out the door. "And if you see Pinky Pie, tell her to stop doing pranks that make you cough, sneeze, hiccup, belch or vomit!" She shut the door behind him, cutting off any chance for him to open his mouth. After the door didn't disappear, the purple pony let out a sigh of relief. "I guess I need to assess the damage." She hated when this happened. Spike could send books just fine, but his throat wasn't exactly large enough to send them back. It was such a waste of time and money to have the Princess mail the books back, especially when it was 8 volumes of the *Encyclopedia Equestria*. Some poor Pegasus was going to have a bad wing ache in a few days.

There came a knock at the door. Twilight called out, "Spike, get the... oh right." She trotted over and opened the door. "Rainbow Dash? What are you doing here? Did that Sand Worm we fought Saturday come back?"

Rainbow Dash walked in. "Nope. I'm here for some books."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Really? You?"

Rainbow Dash raised her chin with a huff. "What? You think I don't read?"

Twilight said, flipping through her records to double check, "Well, everypony else checks out books occasionally, but you don't even have a library card."

Rainbow Dash said, "Well, hook me up! Chop chop! I need some books and fast!"

Twilight started filling out the paperwork. "Fast? What are you up to?"

Rainbow Dash waved her away and trotted over to the shelf. "I'm not up to anything. You need to learn to trust ponies, Twilight." As she walked along the wall, scanning titles, she said, "In fact, I'll write your next letter to the princess for you." She coughed, and began a passable imitation of Twilight Sparkle's voice. "Dear Princess Celestia, today I learned that Rainbow Dash is awesome and is the best friend ever. I shouldn't go accusing her of things. Signed, your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight had to laugh at that. "Okay, fine." With a final flourish, she finished writing up Rainbow Dash's library card. "Aaaaaand done. Congratulations, Rainbow Dash, you're a Biblioteer!"

Rainbow Dash stopped her search. "Biblio-what?"

Twilight Sparkle started digging through her desk. "Biblioteer! It's a new program I made up. Everypony who gets a new library card gets one of these! You're the first pony to get a new library card since I started doing this. I thought I'd never get to try it!" She pulled out a baseball cap with the word 'Proud Biblioteer' written across the front in a cursive, old timey font. She levitated it over to the confused pegasus.

Rainbow Dash said, "No seriously. What's a Biblioteer?"

"Well, Biblio means 'book,' and teer is like the word musketeer!" She put on her own Biblioteer hat (modified, of course, for her horn). "See, now we're hat sisters!"

Rainbow Dash was about to turn her down... until she saw just how happy Twilight Sparkle was. She put the hat on. "Fine."

Twilight Sparkle clapped happily. "Yay! *Small Businesses for Eggheads* said that promotional giveaways were fun for everypony, and they were right!"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. It was weird how the normally serious unicorn got caught up in doing things by the book. Then she remembered why she came in the first place. "So, Twilight. I need a book on falcons."

Twilight Sparkle walked further down the shelf. "Let's see, that would be under O, for Ornithology."

Rainbow Dash said, "Why didn't you just put it under B, for Bird Stuff?"

"That's what Ornithology means," Twilight said matter-of-factly. She telekinetically pulled one off the top shelf. "Here we go, *Raptors of Equestria: A Beginner's Guide!*"

Rainbow Dash frowned. "I didn't ask for a book on dinosaurs, I asked for a book on falcons."

"Raptor means bird of prey. What else can I get for you?"

Rainbow Dash rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "I guess I could use one on taking care of sick animals. I'm guessing it wouldn't be under D, for Doctor Stuff?"

Twilight Sparkle said, "Nope, it's V for Veterinary Medicine."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes again. "Why do you book-ponies have to make up complicated words for everything?"

Twilight Sparkle shrugged. "I don't know. We just do. Plus, you're a book-pony now, fellow Biblioteer!" She lifted down another book. "Are you sure you aren't up to anything? These are sort of strange for pleasure reading."

Rainbow Dash realized that she'd been too transparent about her interests. She glanced across the shelves and picked the first book she saw. "Oh hey, give me that one about... *The Critique of Pure Reason.*"

Twilight Sparkle shrugged. Apparently there wasn't a pattern after all.
"Emanuel Kanter might be a little advanced for you, but you're the boss."

Rainbow Dash straightened up and smugly said, "Yes. Yes I am." *Heh heh. The perfect crime.* "And can I get a bag for those? I have a couple more stops I need to make."

"Ugh, why did everypony pick today to be so chatty?" As she made her way home, laden with books and supplies from the pet store, she worried about how much time had passed. What if the falcon had woken up while she was out? Sure, most of the things she owned were made of cloud, so he couldn't hurt it much, but she was worried that he might hurt himself. Also worst of all, she realized that she'd forgotten to take off the stupid hat. No wonder everypony was giving her funny looks! "I hope you like the closet, hat, because that's where I'm banishing you."

When she got back, the falcon was awake, but dazed. He was still sitting on the cloud-pillow Rainbow Dash had fashioned out of the now useless radio cabinet. He didn't seem to worry much when he saw Rainbow Dash. He watched her as she unpacked her things, but otherwise, he seemed too loopy to care about being in a strange place.

"I hope you didn't hit your head too hard, falcon. I wouldn't want you to wind up like Derpy." She then got out her book on raptors and started flipping through it. The woozy falcon closed its eyes and nodded off. Taking a chance, Rainbow dash rolled it on its back to get a good look the coloring of its stomach. He didn't respond. "Let's see... brown wings, tan stomach, black and white around the eyes..." After a minute of comparing pictures, she said, "Huh. According to this, you're a brown falcon." She paused. "Brown falcon? That's your species? What a boring name. Anypony could have called a brown falcon a brown falcon!"

She spent some more time reading through the section on brown falcons. "It says here you eat mice, rabbits, birds, lizards, snakes and invertebrates. What the hay is an invertebrate?" Now she really wished she'd paid more attention in biology. "Hm... how am I gonna catch you a mouse..." The second she thought of that, the image of a weeping Fluttershy appeared before her mind's eye. "Never mind. I guess I need to go fishing, falcon."

The falcon opened an eye, but made no move.

"You're right, falcon!" Rainbow Dash gently stroked its head. It instinctively twisted around to try and nip at her hoof, but she was already trotting to her closet. "You're going to need a name. I can't just keep calling you falcon... wait, can I?" She paused for a moment and weighed the question in her head. "No. No I can't. If I'm gonna call the eggheads dumb for calling you a brown falcon, I need to do a little better than that." As she put on her goggles, inspiration struck. Again. "I've got it! From now on, I'm gonna call you Baron Awesome!"

Baron Awesome was now looking straight at his new owner with an unblinking stare, his eyes drawn by her movement. Rainbow Dash decided this meant that the bird liked his new name.

By the time Rainbow Dash got to the nearest lake, the sun was beginning to set. Her stomach grumbled. "Maybe I should have had some of that cake after all." She shook her head. "If you're hungry, Baron Awesome must feel worse! You're a pet owner again, you don't eat until he eats!" She couldn't see the smile that crossed her face when she said "pet owner." She lowered her goggles and took off.

Rainbow Dash, like most pegasi, had fished frequently during flight school. It was a great challenge for a flier, since it combined low altitude flight practice with a hard to spot moving target. The problem was that Celestia had not equipped ponies for fishing. They had no sharp claws or teeth, no opposable thumbs to work fishing rods and no ability to see underwater easily. A less determined pony might have waited for the morning, when the fish would actually be out to feed... but Rainbow Miriam Dash was nothing if not determined!

At a height of about twenty feet, Rainbow Dash made a few loops around the lake. She intentionally went slowly and made sure that her shadow lay outside the water when she could. She didn't dare let her quarry spot her. She had one chance at this, if that. Finally, there was a flash of silver out of the corner of her eye. With practiced grace, she angled her wing down, swooped over the lake, bit the wriggling fish tail first and flung it onto the bank.

She landed next to her still flopping quarry, sputtering. "Bleah!" She wiped her mouth. "Ugh, that taste! The Baron better appreciate this!"

"Alright Baron Awesome, dinner is served!" Rainbow Dash put the still flopping fish on a plate, and placed it before the Baron. It was a rather ridiculous scene; the bird, sitting upon a raised pillow of clouds like an eastern potentate, being served by his new "master."

Baron Awesome, his legs still shaky, glanced warily from Rainbow Dash, then to the fish, then back. He wasn't sure what to make of the whole situation. Nobody had fed him since he had left his nest. That part of his life was over... wasn't it? Was he somehow being allowed to return to the nest? But his mother hadn't been this weird... blue... thing. Also, his nest hadn't been made of clouds. Furthermore, as a dedicated hunter of small critters of the earth and sky, this... grey thing was confusing. However, his stomach was empty and this thing did appear to be made out of meat...

Anypony else would have been grossed out as Baron Awesome shrieked and started messily wolfing down his prey. As started greedily devouring his dinner, however, Rainbow Dash was awestruck. "Wow, you're a hardcore little guy, ain'tcha?" She reached over to give him a friendly pet on the head. Baron Awesome took that as an attempt to steal his catch and responded in kind. Dash barely managed to withdraw her hoof in time to avoid a snap from his curved beak. "... okay, so I won't bug you while you're eating."

Now it was finally time for her own dinner. Since she hadn't been able to get to the market that day with everything that had happened, it was all rather makeshift. It was a bowl of dry Puffed Hay cereal with some strawberries, a spoonful of peanut butter (for protein) and a glass of orange juice of questionable freshness (green spots in orange juice were okay if you spooned them out first, right?).

Rainbow Dash finished with a mighty, echoing belch. "Whew. Glad Rarity isn't here. I wouldn't want her nitpicking away a work of art like that." She saw that Baron Awesome had finished and gone back to sleep. She stood nearby for a while, just watching him breathe. It was so strange to have another living thing in the house. The last time she'd had real company was when Fluttershy had helped her practice for the Young Flyers competition.

After she was certain Baron Awesome was in a deep sleep, she reached over and gently stroked him. He slept on and gave no sign of enjoying it, but it made Dash feel oddly serene. This was really happening.

After a while of enjoying the Baron's company, Rainbow Dash saw the time. "Crud, I have work tomorrow afternoon... I better get up early if I wanna get in any playtime with the Baron." She set her alarm stretched and said, "Good night, buddy." The Baron gave no sign that he heard.

Maybe it was the emotional rollercoaster of a day. Maybe it was the green spots in the orange juice. Regardless, Rainbow Dash's dreams that night were unusually vivid.

Ponyville! City of the not too distant future! However, she does not lack the criminal element. The police are helpless before the might of such fiends of The Giggler and The Great and Powerful Trixie. In their darkest hour, their only hope is... The Rainbow Dash, and her sidekick, Baron Awesome the wonder falcon!

It was a night like any other at stately Dash Manor, at the edge of Ponyville. Rainbow M. Dash, heiress of Thomas and Martha Dash, was in her study reading the finest literature available.

Rainbow Dash held the Hidden Picture book up for her loyal sidekick. "And so, Baron Awesome, if you look at the picture juuuust right, you can see a sailing ship."

Baron Awesome said, "Caw!"

"No fear, old chum. Not everypony can see it. Well, I can, and I didn't just pretend the other day so I wouldn't look stupid after everypony else saw it. But some poor ponies just don't get it."

Baron Awesome nodded, and his eyes wandered. He pointed out the window.

Rainbow Dash turned and gasped. "You're right, Baron Awesome! It's the Dash Signal!" In the distance, a great spotlight projected an enormous silhouette of Rainbow Dash's cutie mark. "Quickly, to the Dash Cave!"

Rainbow Dash pushed a button on her desk. The nearby wall slid away, revealing a pair of fire poles. The pair leapt onto them and slid down.

When they arrived in the Dash Cave, they were fully clothed. Rainbow Dash was wearing the Rainbow Armor Rarity had made for her, and Baron Awesome was wearing a pointed German style helmet and a monocle. Waiting for them in the cave below was Rainbow Dash's loyal Ponyservant, Rarity.

Rarity said, "Mistress Rainbow Dash, the mayor is on the Dash-phone for you. And might I say, that Rainbow Armor is 20% cooler than anything else I have ever designed, and I was silly for feeling humiliated by it."

Rainbow Dash patted Rarity on the shoulder. "There there, Rarity. No time for apologies now. There's a crisis!" Rainbow Dash trotted over to the Dash-phone and picked up the line. She lowered her voice to a thin rasp, as though she had smoked a lifetime's worth of cigarettes in the last minute. "This is Rainbow Dash. What can I do for you, Mayor?"

The older mare on the other end was in hysterics. "Rainbow Dash, you must hurry! The Giggler has kidnapped Applejack and is demanding that you come and face her! They're at the library!"

"We're on our way, mayor!" Rainbow Dash hung up the phone and returned her voice to normal. "The Giggler again! I thought we had seen the last of her after the Bad Bit caper," Rainbow Dash said, pointing to the 50 foot tall coin that was the centerpiece of her crime trophies.

Rarity asked, in a sophisticated deadpan, "Shall I prepare the Dashmobile, mistress Dash?"

Rainbow Dash said, "No need for that! We can fly, and that makes us just plain better than anything that doesn't!"

Rarity nodded. "Oh, I agree whole heartedly. You're the best, Rainbow Dash."

"Come, Baron Awesome, there's crime afoot!"

Baron Awesome said, "Caw!"

With that, the two took off at high speed. No earth pony could have hoped to keep up with them, or equal their coolness. They were there in a heartbeat and dramatically (and awesomely) crashed through the front window. Waiting for her was the Giggler and a gang of henchmen. A moment's inspection revealed to Rainbow Dash that the three goons were in fact Score, Billy and Hoops, the jocks who had tormented her in flight school.

Billy laughed. "Good to see you again, Rainbow Crash!"

Pointing dramatically, Rainbow Dash said, in her most intimidating rasp, "Where's Applejack, Giggler?"

The Giggler, a pink earth pony dressed in a purple suit, well, giggled. "Oh Rainbow Dash, is that any way to talk to your bestest best friends?"

Rainbow Dash glared. "You took the pranks too far, Pinkie Pie. When pranks aren't in good fun, they're just random acts of cruelty."

The Giggler continued to live up to her name. "Well, since you're going to be a super duper party pooper, I might as well tell you that Applejack is quite safe, though soon her fate shall be a bit... fishier!" The Giggler whipped out a remote control and pressed a large red button, and the whole wall of the library opened up to reveal Applejack tied upside down over a vat of fish.

Applejack called out, "Help! Oh, won't somepony save me, save me! Ah'm all helpless and scared!"

Rainbow Dash glowered. "Fish? Giggler, you are so random!"

Baron Awesome said, "Caw!"

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "This is no time to think about dinner, old chum. We have to save that hick!"

The Giggler pointed at the caped crusaders. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Rainbow Dash! Get 'em, boys! Don't be afraid to use your hooves!"

As the four pegasi and one falcon went to hoof-ticuffs, the Giggler began to sing.

*"Oh evil is the bestest thing,
Chaos is what I live to bring,
When you're wicked every day is spring
But then you come in on your wing!"*

*You always spoil all my fun,
You never laugh at any puns,
But the war on good has just begun
The Giggler, she has surely won!*

*A fishy fate for your farmer friend,
I am afraid this is the end,
Our trust and friendship we can't mend
'Cause you drove me 'round the bend!"*

Just as the Giggler finished singing, Rainbow Dash and Baron Awesome finished kicking the stuffing out of the goons with a final POW! The Giggler tsked. "You just can't get good minions these days."

Rainbow Dash pointed at the Giggler. "Give it up, Giggler! You can't win against both of us!"

The Giggler, predictably, giggled. "Why of course I can, Silly-Willy!" She pushed another button on the remote control and Applejack began to be lowered face first into the vat of fish. "You can save the dumb farmy farmerpants, or you can catch me!" Without waiting to see what Rainbow Dash's response was, she started hopping away, humming happily as she did. "That was fun. I think I'll go see what Fluttershy's dreaming about!"

Baron Awesome started flying after her, but Rainbow Dash stopped him. "The lives of civilians come first, Baron Awesome!"

Applejack was openly crying at this point. "Oh won't somepony help me! Help! Help!"

Rainbow Dash found a nearby control panel and started trying to arrest her friend's descent. It was to no avail. In fact, she was pretty sure that Pinkie Pie had set up the console just for looks. "It looks hopeless, Baron Awesome!"

Baron Awesome said, "Caw!"

Rainbow Dash brightened up. "Of course! Your heat vision! Do it, Baron Awesome!"

Baron Awesome's eyes glowed a bright red, and twin beams of pure heat energy shot out and melted a huge hole in the side of the tank. Oddly enough, his monocle was unharmed. Fish poured out, and soon the tank was empty. "Good work, Baron Awesome!" Rainbow Dash flew up and cut the cord holding Applejack with a knife from her Utility Saddle. She caught the pony and flew her down to safety.

Applejack said, "Oh thanks, Rainbow Dash. Ah'm sorry I was mean earlier an' yelled at you for wantin' to play with mah dog! Ah realize now that ah'm a terrible friend! And ah'm stupid! And ah can't math! Did ah mention ah'm a terrible friend? Ah'm not even 63.7% as cool as you, Rainbow Dash!"

Rainbow Dash said, in a fine rasp, "It's okay, Applejack. I don't need Winona anymore, because I have the most awesome pet ever! Three cheers for Baron Awesome! Hip hip!"

Baron Awesome puffed up his feathers proudly and said, "MEEP MEEP MEEP MEEP MEEP..."

... MEEP MEEP MEEP, went Rainbow Dash's alarm. After a few failed attempts to find the button, she groggily turned off the loud buzzing. "Ugh, what a dream... I'm never eating any expired food ever again..."

And then, Baron Awesome, agitated by the alarm, shrieked and attacked Rainbow Dash.

All in all, it wasn't the way she liked to get started in the morning.

Chapter 3

It was a slow Tuesday morning at the Carousel Boutique, mostly because of the large sign on the door reading, "closed, sorry for the inconvenience." Inside, Rarity was trotting up the stairs, a tray of tea and plain white toast floating in front of her. She had a mixed look of annoyance and worry. "Really, that girl! It's not like I can take a day off whenever I like! This is going to put me so far behind!" She managed to put on a poker face before she opened the door to Sweetie Belle's guest room, replacing it with a smile. "Hello, Sweetie Belle! Are you feeling any better?"

Sweetie Belle moaned an inarticulate response from under her pillow. That was a step in the right direction; Rarity hadn't been able to rouse her an hour before.

Rarity put the tray down on Sweetie Belle's dresser and poured her a cup of tea. "Not to kick you when you're down, but... really? Cutie Mark Crusader Sushi Chefs?"

Sweetie Belle muttered, "Scootaloo's... idea..."

Rarity reached out and patted her little sister's back. "And now you've learned an important lesson about listening to Scootaloo, along with a lesson about properly handling raw eggs." Sweetie Belle let out another moan of protest. "Still, it's time for you to get some breakfast. I'm going to sit you up. You ready?" There was another moan. "Close enough." Rarity used her telekinesis again, bringing Sweetie Belle into a sitting position. "Open up. I made your favorite tea."

Sweetie Belle managed a "thank you," before Rarity started feeding her. Rarity smiled. As much as her little sister could infuriate her, it was hard to hold her record of thievery and mischief against her when she looked so pathetic. It wasn't much easier to blame their parents for being out of town when this happened, thus dropping the whole problem in her lap. As she finished, there came a knock at the front door to the boutique.

Sweetie Belle said, weakly, "Are you going to get that?"

Rarity shook her head. "No, I put out a sign. Everypony knows I'm closed for business today." After a moment, the knocking became more insistent. "Hmph. There's no manners in this town anymore. I suppose I'll go deal with it. Will you be okay while I go check on it?" Sweetie Belle nodded weakly.

Rainbow Dash glared at the door as she kept knocking. "C'mon, c'mon, I don't have all day." Rainbow Dash was looking worse for wear, between a bad night's sleep and the attack by Baron Awesome.

Rarity opened the door and blinked in surprise. Rainbow Dash had expected that reaction. The last time she'd shown up at the boutique was via a crash landing. Rarity said, "Rainbow Dash? What are you doing here? Are those disgusting sand worms back?" The unicorn was trembling slightly at the thought.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Why does everypony ask me that lately? I just want to buy something."

As she visibly relaxed, Rarity shot the pegasus a glare. "Rainbow Dash! I am closed right now! Didn't you see the sign?"

"Yeah, but I assumed it didn't apply to me." This was said in the same tone that Rainbow Dash would use to say that the sky was blue.

Rarity facehoofed. "Of course you didn't."

Rainbow Dash said, in an annoyed tone, "Why are you closed, anyway? I remember you talking about how behind you were in your work during the sand worm thing. In fact, that's all you talking about the whole time!"

Rarity winced as Rainbow Dash reminded her of her problems. She raised her nose with a huff. "This isn't a personal day or the like. I'll have you know that I'm closed on account of illness."

Rainbow Dash squinted and gave Rarity a look over. "You don't look sick." Rarity said, "Sweetie Belle's sick today, and I should really get back to her. So if you'll excuse me..."

Rainbow Dash stuck her foot in the door as Rarity tried to close it. "Look Rarity, I wouldn't bug you unless it was important." Rarity gave her a half lidded, skeptical look. "Okay, fine, I might bug you if it wasn't important. But that doesn't make this unimportant! You're the only pony I can turn to."

Rarity seemed conflicted. Finally, she sighed. "Very well. What can I do for you?" She closed the door behind Rainbow Dash as quickly as possible so nopony saw that she was making exceptions.

Rainbow Dash laughed in her head. Good, predictable Rarity. "Well, I need a thick, knee high leather boot. Nothing too fancy, it just needs to be sturdy."

Rarity asked, "Front or back leg?"

Rainbow Dash thought for a moment. She stuck her front leg and held it there for a moment, earning an odd look from Rarity. "Right foreleg."

Rarity paused. "Wait, you just want one boot?" Rainbow Dash nodded. Rarity went over to a horsequin and started loosening the bootstraps. "This should work, but I can't sell just one. After all, there isn't too much of a market for unmated boots, I'm sure you understand."

Rainbow Dash sighed. Rainbow Dash hated being told no, especially when it was reasonable. "So much for getting it half price..."

Rarity walked over and gestured for Rainbow Dash to raise her leg so she could slip it on. The boot fit almost perfectly. As she telekinetically put on the other boot, Rarity asked, "If you don't mind me asking, what do you need these for?"

Rainbow Dash froze in place. She didn't want anypony knowing about Baron Awesome until he'd gotten over his "random attack" habit, but as tired as she was, she hadn't even considered the need for a lie. Before she could stop it, her mouth went places her brain didn't want to go. "I want to look nice for my date tonight!" She kicked herself internally as Rarity's eyes lit up. She'd just promised one of Ponyville's leading gossips a rare treat.

"A date? Really? Who is he?" Rarity had an almost predatory look on her face as she tried to dislodge Rainbow Dash's secrets.

Rainbow Dash's eyes glanced around as she looked, in vain, for clues. She finally saw the dress Rarity had worn in the Young Flyer's competition on another horsequin. "Uh, you don't know him. He's... an... old friend from Cloudsdale and he's in town just for today."

Rarity gave Rainbow Dash a once over and grew visibly disgusted. "Oh no no no, this won't do! I don't mean any offense, Dash, but you're a wreck. This is going to require my full skills as a makeover artist! Nothing will stop me from my task of making you gorgeous."

Rainbow Dash started sweating bullets and prayed for some sort of intervention.

From upstairs, there was the sound of groans and something splattering as it hit the floor. This was followed by a weak voice saying, "Rarity? I went sick on the floor..."

In that moment, Rainbow Dash became a fervent believer in miracles. She'd have to thank Celestia the next time she saw her.

Rarity said... nah, Rainbow Dash must have misheard her. Rarity wasn't the sort of pony to use that word. She called up the stairs, "I'm coming, Sweetie, don't worry!" She turned to Dash. "I'm sorry, Dash, but I need to get back to helping Sweetie Belle. You can pay me for the boots later."

"Can I ask how much?" Dash had been dreading this. With her recent pet store related expenses, it was going to be a lean month as it was.

Rarity quoted a price. Rainbow Dash's knees went wobbly. "THAT much for boots?"

Rarity was busy getting a mop and bucket from her supply closet. "That's with a friendship discount. You won't get a better price in town, since that's pretty much selling them at cost."

Rainbow Dash swallowed nervously. Her voice cracked. "Can I get them on layaway?"

Rarity nodded. "Certainly, you can give me 20 bits weekly..." As the word "weekly" crossed her lips, she paused and almost dropped her telekinetically lifted bucket. Her expression grew even more worried. "Oh

no, I completely forgot! It's my spa day with Fluttershy. I completely forgot to have somepony tell her, and it starts in... ten minutes! She's probably there already! She'll be so disappointed if I miss it... and those dresses! And Sweetie Belle! And your makeover!" Rarity lifted up a paper bag and started hyperventilating into it.

Rainbow Dash, as oblivious as she could be, was starting to worry that her friend was about to have a heart attack. "Um, you okay, Rarity?"

Rarity spun around and looked at Rainbow Dash with an uncomfortably intense expression. "Of course! I can kill two of those birds with one stone!" She started writing on a note card. "I need you to go to the spa in my place and tell Fluttershy what happened." She magically lifted over the card. "Show them this and tell them to give you my usual. When they're done with you, your friend will be eating out of your hoof!"

Rainbow Dash was about to protest... when she realized she was trapped in the cage of her lies. She'd been willing to spend a small fortune (to her at least) on boots to impress this hypothetical guy. If she turned down a free makeover and wasn't willing to help Fluttershy, that would just raise more questions and would expose her whole secret. Plus, if she didn't remove at least a little stress from Rarity's life, she'd lose more time flying the unicorn to the nurse's office. "... fine."

In the Ponyville Spa's waiting room, Fluttershy was reading the new copy of Young Bridle magazine. As she finished skimming all of the ads, she let out a sigh of relief. It was the first time since Photo Finish had tried to turn her into a star that none of the ads had featured her. "Oh thank goodness. Now I can go back to normal." The money had been nice, but it definitely wasn't worth the extra attention. Though, since there wouldn't be any residuals this month... Angel Bunny was not going to be happy about going back to normal carrots.

Just as Fluttershy was about to check the clock again (she wasn't worried, since Rarity was often a little late), Rainbow Dash walked in through the door. Fluttershy blinked in surprise. "Oh, hello Rainbow Dash. What..."

Rainbow Dash interrupted her. "Look, before you ask, the sand worms aren't back! Why does everypony assume that I only go places when things go wrong?" Rainbow Dash was annoyed and she didn't care who knew.

Fluttershy said, "Oh, that's too bad. The sand worms weren't too bad once you got to know them." She put down her magazine. "Then what are you here for?"

Rainbow Dash said, slightly dejectedly, "Rarity said she couldn't make it today, and because of a bunch of stuff I don't really want to get into, I'm taking her place as your spa buddy."

Fluttershy smiled in her cherubic little way. "Oh, how lovely. It's too bad about Rarity, but it will be nice for the two of us to get some time to ourselves."

In the same day, Rainbow Dash had come to believe in miracles and was now experiencing a taste of hell. The fact that Rarity put up with strangers poking her, prodding her, covering her in seaweed, putting curlers in her hair, shoving her in thick pools of boiling mud, putting green gunk on her face and putting weird gunk in her hair (and claimed to ENJOY it) just proved to her that Rarity had no taste. Clearly Fluttershy had the right idea. Aloe and Lotus, the owners of the spa, barely touched the pink haired pegasus.

Rainbow Dash sighed contentedly as Aloe spooned another ladleful of water onto the heated rock in the steam room. She could understand a good steam.

For once, Fluttershy was doing most of the talking. "And then Angel Bunny just did the cutest little... am I boring you?"

Rainbow Dash, thinking about how much she just wanted to go home, said, "Nope, keep telling me about the ferrets."

Fluttershy looked down and blushed. "Um, I finished talking about them during the seaweed wrap." Her voice trailed off towards the end.

Rainbow Dash wanted to kick herself as she saw the poor yellow Pegasus' face fall. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. My brain's just miles away right now." Fluttershy squeaked something that Rainbow Dash couldn't hear. Rainbow Dash really wished that somepony who was good at this whole "personal interaction" thing was here to mediate. Dash locked eyes with Aloe and

gestured for her to leave. Shrugging, the pink earth pony trotted out of the room.

Fluttershy seemed to open up slightly at that. She muttered something that Rainbow Dash couldn't catch. Seeing that Rainbow Dash couldn't hear her, she mustered up some assertiveness and said, "I'm sorry, I really didn't want to bore you. I heard about your pet problem and I thought you'd enjoy hearing about my animal friends and I guess I was just boring and I didn't want to make it worse and..."

Rainbow Dash made a "time out" motion. "Okay, just how many ponies did Applejack tell?"

Fluttershy said, "Well, Applejack told Pinkie Pie, and then Pinkie Pie told me, but she made me promise not to tell anypony but you and Rarity and Twilight Sparkle, because friends keep secrets."

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. "Pinkie Pie? Keeping a secret?" Rainbow Dash couldn't imagine that blabbermouth keeping anything to herself ever.

Fluttershy squeaked in terror. Rainbow Dash just got confused. Finally, Fluttershy said, "Well, um, I do want to help you out. I can't imagine living without animals when you really want them. After this, do you want to come over and play for a while?"

Rainbow Dash was simultaneously touched and severely irritated. After all, Fluttershy obviously really wanted to help her, as much of a jerk as she'd been today. On the other hand, she needed to be at work in a few hours and every second here was a second away from Baron Awesome, the real solution to her problem. "Um, I'm sorry, Fluttershy, it sounds like fun, but I have to go to work soon, and I need to take care of some stuff." Fluttershy's frown deepened and Rainbow Dash could practically hear the yellow pegasus beating herself up on the inside. "We'll do it some other time, okay?"

Fluttershy smiled wanly. "Okay, Rainbow Dash."

There was silence for a long moment. How long, neither was sure, but it certainly seemed like a small eternity. Finally, Rainbow Dash said, "So, Pinkie's good at keeping secrets? Really?"

Fluttershy said, "Oh, yes. I can show you, but don't get too scared by what happens next." Fluttershy walked over to the door, opened it and called out, "Oh, Aloe? Could you come here? I need to tell you something."

Pinkie Pie giggled excitedly as they left the spa. "Wow, that was great! I should come along more often! I wish I'd been there for more than the last massage and that thing with the pool. Why were there little fishes in there again?" She was apparently unaware of the thousand yard stare Rainbow Dash was giving the world.

"Well," replied Fluttershy, "the fishies eat the dead skin off our hooves. It makes them softer. Also, the litte dears get lunch at the same time."

Pinkie Pie nodded vigorously. "Ohhhhh. That's smart!"

Rainbow Dash finally burst. "Where the hay did you come from? One second Fluttershy was talking to Aloe about my problems and then... you... where?"

Pinkie Pie grinned mischievously. "Now that... is a secret."

Rainbow Dash's brain was stuck in the same circular rut it got into whenever Pinkie Pie challenged her view of reality in a new way. Pinkie's goofing around wasn't helping it. Finally, she shook her head and took off. "Alright, anyway, I gotta get going. Later, guys." She was winging away at top speed before either could reply.

"Do you think she knows what she looks like?"

Fluttershy put a hoof to her chin. "Oh my, no, I don't think so."

Pinkie Pie sighed. "Now I really really really really wish I was on the weather patrol. Just wait 'til they get a load of her!"

"Baron Awesome, I'm home!" Rainbow Dash found the Baron standing atop the perch she'd set up for him that morning. "Glad you like that thing I got ya. Cloud safe pet supplies are not cheap, let me tell you..."

Baron Awesome, fed up with being cooped up all day, took off and charged directly at his captor. He gave a loud shriek and went in with talons first.

Fortunately, his talons slid off of Rainbow Dash's new boot, instead of stabbing Rainbow Dash's foreleg. With her own cry of surprise, she managed to wrestle him off. She reared up on her hind legs and shielded her face. "What the hay is wrong with you, Baron Awesome? I was just gone three hours!"

Baron Awesome puffed up his feathers and started his threat display. He gave up on it when he realized that the blue thing was still bigger than him. Moreover, it looked like she had brought another fishy offering. All was forgiven. He grabbed the dropped rainbow trout, flew back to his pillow nest and started to devour it.

Rainbow Dash let out a sigh of relief. Knowing better than to be friendly while the Baron was eating, Dash ate her own lunch. Fortunately, this time it was some takeout from Sakura's Far East Grill, so it was free of little green spots.

"Maybe this isn't as awesome an idea as I thought it was." For the first time, she felt doubt settle in the pit of her stomach. Maybe it was time to swallow her pride and get some help from somepony who knew what they were doing, like Fluttershy? "Yeah, I mean, what's the worst that could happen?"

At the center of town, Fluttershy blushed demurely as everypony in Ponyville milled around. She didn't like the attention, but she put up with it. After all, it wasn't every day that the Mayor herself gave you the Most Awesome Pegasus Ever award!

The Mayor walked up on stage and everypony went silent. Speaking into the microphones, she declared, "Fillies and gentlecolts, we all know why we're here today. Today, we honor Ponyville's favorite daughter, Fluttershy, with the Most Awesome Pegasus Ever award!" Everything after the word "Fluttershy" was drowned out as the crowd stomped and shouted. One could almost see the waves of love and adoration flow over the stage.

The Mayor, once there was silence again, continued her speech. "We have been looking for the most awesome pegasus for years. At one point, we considered Rainbow Dash. However, after she asked Fluttershy for help

doing something as simple as taking care of one pet, we realized she was hopeless. Besides, Fluttershy is definitely more awesome than anypony else around. I mean, look at how good a job she did with Baron Cuddles!"

Baron Cuddles, a very familiar brown falcon wearing pink bows, swooped down from above and landed on Fluttershy's outstretched hoof. She didn't even need a falconer's glove, he was so well trained.

The Mayor continued. "After all, who can forget how much better life is with Baron Cuddles around? The babies saved from burning buildings, the hours of community service with the blind and, of course, the new youth center!"

Over the general applause, one could hear Scootaloo shout out, "Yeah, to think I used to look up to Rainbow Dash!"

The Mayor said, "So, in honor of this award, Fluttershy will be inducted into the Wonderbolts, get a huge state pension and be promoted to Princess!" The applause was deafening.

Several ponies, of both genders, called out, "Marry me, Fluttershy!"

Meanwhile, in her cloud house, a very wall eyed blue pegasus wearing a dunce cap was coloring quietly with a friend. Rainbow Dash said, "Aw, coloring in the lines is hard."

Derpy rolled her eyes (oddly focused for a change). "You're so lame, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash started to cry. "Sorry, I can't brain today. I have the dumb."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "Okay, it probably wouldn't be that bad." She thought for a moment. "Probably. But why do it if I don't have to?" Noticing that Baron Awesome had finished his fish, she slowly made her way over. "Hey Baron, don't mind me. We're bros, right? Yeah. You're all comfy womfy and happy, aren't you?"

The Baron eyed her suspiciously as she came closer. The blue thing was so confusing. Sometimes it attacked him and tried to grab him so that she could eat him. Then, sometimes, she'd bring him food. And he still had no

idea how he went from flying into a tree to being in this weird... white... fluffy place. He also had no idea why he wasn't allowed to leave. The blue thing knew how to open the door, but he couldn't. There were gaps in the wall, but they were covered by some sort of invisible barrier that prevented his passing. He was trapped but good.

Rainbow Dash tentatively stretched out a hoof. This was it. The acid test. If she couldn't touch him when he was at his happiest, she was flying straight to Fluttershy's to beg for help, pride be hanged. "Hey boy, I'm not gonna hurt you. You're my bro. I just wanna pet you. Is that so wrong? I mean, you're a pet, so the idea is to pet you. If I can't pet you, I might as well get some lame-o fish. So I'm just gonna reach out... and..."

Baron Awesome looked at her freshly pedicured hoof, then into her eyes, and then back. He was feeling full and lazy. From his current position, he wouldn't be able to take off in time to get away. His only option was to bite her for all he was worth. He puffed himself up...

And he looked in her eyes again. Every set of eyes he had ever seen had the angry intensity of a bird of prey. His mother, other males he had fought for territory, the mate he'd raised a pair of chicks with, they all had their eyes set in one way. Those eyes all promised bloody revenge if he stepped out of line. The eyes of this blue thing did not. Her eyes were soft. Her body language was slow and careful. He was helpless. Yesterday, he'd been more helpless. He was still alive, and she kept giving him food. She wasn't his mother... was she trying to be his mother?

Both falcon and pegasus wrestled with instinct; the first to lash out, the second to withdraw her hoof. As hoof touched feather, both flinched, each expecting the worst from the other. Both had their worst fears dashed. Both let out breath they hadn't realized they were holding.

And so, for the next hour, pegasus stroked falcon, and the two enjoyed each other's company.

Rainbow Dash was walking on cloud nine. This was because the local weather patrol office was located there. She was also deliriously happy. "Lah lah lah, I got a pet and it's better than a dog so take that Applejack and also you too self doubt, lah lah lah, cause I didn't need help," she sang to herself as she trotted in to work.

She walked over to her locker and got out her work helmet. Today was scheduled for hail, so everypony had to have their safety gear. As she started sliding on her bright orange work vest, there came a voice from behind. It was a tan pegasus mare wearing the same gear as Rainbow Dash. "Uh, ma'am, I'm afraid the locker room is for employees only."

Rainbow Dash turned around. "What are you talking about, Lightning Bolt?"

Lightning Bolt blinked. "Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash narrowed her eyes. "Yeah, of course it's me! What, you got gunk in your eyes?"

Lightning Bolt pointed at a mirror. "Um, did you lose a bet or something?"

The blue pegasus snorted and walked over to the mirror. "I did not lose... a..." Rainbow Dash fell silent as she took in exactly what Aloe and Lotus had done to her. Her mane and tail were perfectly straight and styled into a trendy haircut she'd occasionally mocked. Her face was accented by a tasteful amount of makeup. Her fur was radiant, and her hooves, normally chipped, were... perfect. In fact, perfect summed up everything she was seeing. Rainbow Dash had no idea she could look that good. She wished she actually had a date that night.

Lightning Bolt asked, "So, uh, what did happen then?"

Rainbow Dash, admiring herself (no wonder Rarity was always doing that, it was fun when you had this sort of reflection to look at!), said, "Um, actually, yeah. I lost a bet. That's it. Silly me."

Lightning Bolt laughed. "It must've been a doozy, 'cause you look really girly." Lightning Bolt checked the clock on the wall. "You're gonna have to tell me about that later. We'll be late if we don't hurry up." Lightning Bolt started trotting away. She paused when she saw that Rainbow Dash still hadn't moved from the mirror. "Uh, Dash, you coming?"

"Me and the mirror are gonna need some time alone. Go on without me."

Chapter 4

Derpy Hooves hummed a happy little tune as she went about her rounds. For most ponies, Wednesday was the dreaded "hump day," the longest time between weekends, but she had a song in her heart and a spring in her step.

The wall eyed mailpony had many reasons to be happy. Last week, through the arcane pay schedule of the Equestria Postal Service, she'd somehow earned a raise (apparently some bureaucrat found special significance in serving for 6 years and 3 months). Yesterday had been report card day at school and her daughter, Dinky, had gotten all A's and B's. This meant that Derpy could afford to get Dinky that Mareibu Stacy doll she'd been asking for, and she had a good excuse to get it for her. They'd played dolls for hours the night before, and Derpy had loved every minute of it.

Today was also orange cranberry muffin day at the bakery, her absolute favorite forever. Even better, she was about to finish her morning route ahead of schedule. She'd be able to take a long lunch today, and maybe visit her friend, the Doctor. He always had such interesting stories to tell, even if half of them sounded like bad science fiction. Yup, everything was coming up Derpy.

Rainbow Dash looked through the window of her house as Derpy began her approach. "Alright Baron, this is it. Remember: when I say fetch and point at the mail, you grab the mail in your claws and bring it back, okay?"

Baron Awesome responded by preening his wing. After a whole morning of fetching rubber balls, he was starting to get sick of the game. At least if it let him vent his need to catch small things.

Rainbow Dash slipped on her slippers, put on her reading glasses, got out a newspaper and sat down in her easy chair. She wasn't actually reading it closely (aside from the headline, "Sushi Salmonella Scare Strikes Ponyville

Elementary"). It was a ritual she'd often seen her dad do with his dogs, and she'd always wanted to try it.

The pair didn't have to wait long, as a knock came at the door. "Uh, where's your mail slot? It was here yesterday... right?" Derpy's oddly melodic voice (oddly, given the scuttlebutt about her supposed stupidity) was only slightly muffled by the cloud door.

Rainbow Dash smirked. It was time for somepony to see the fruits of her labors, and thanks to some quick cloud-shaping, it was going to be Derpy. "It's unlocked."

Derpy opened the door, a small stack of letters in her mouth. She said (surprisingly clearly for how full her mouth was), "Good morning, Rainbow Dash. How are... what's that bird doing in here?"

Rainbow Dash pointed at Derpy. "Baron Awesome, fetch!"

Baron Awesome was beginning his threat display when he heard the order. He realized why the blue thing had been making him play "kill the ball" all morning. She wanted him to be ready to drive off intruders! With a shriek, he flew at the grey thing, claws first.

"Guitar sparklers!" When Derpy has agitated, all of those years of speech therapy went out the window... and few would fault her for being freaked out by a sudden falcon attack. She dropped the letters and spun around quickly, trying in vain to flee. In an instant, pegasus and falcon were caught in a whirlwind of claws, feathers, and mail.

Rainbow Dash was on them in an instant, pulling Baron Awesome off of Derpy. The falcon went limp in her grasp. At least part of his training was sticking. "Oh my gosh, Derpy, are you alright?" At least Derpy wasn't bleeding, thank Celestia.

Derpy panted, "Watermelon trombone." Derpy took a deep breath and closed her eyes and counted to ten in her head as she tried to get control of her rebellious tongue. When she opened them again, her world was white and black, as a partially shredded letter had fallen over her eyes. She sat up. "Huh. Rainbow Dash, did you know that you might have already won a million bits?"

Rainbow Dash closed the door, trapping Baron Awesome in the house. She was at Derpy's side again in two shakes of a mare's tail. She looked unhurt, fortunately. "Um... that's nice?" She was surprised that Derpy was so blasé about the assault.

Derpy blinked. One eye was on Rainbow Dash, the other on the letter. "Oh, you have to mail in 50 bits to get it, and you only have a one in three billion chance of winning. Sorry to bring you junk again. Our spam filter, Big McAfee, is out with food poisoning. He had some of that bad sushi."

A thoroughly embarrassed Rainbow Dash helped the blonde pegasus to her hooves. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Derpy laughed, reared on her hind legs and dusted herself off. "Oh, it's fine. When you've been a mailpony as long as me, you get used to it. I've been attacked by pets so many times, especially that," Derpy paused to look to make sure that nopony was there to listen to them (despite the fact that they were 50 feet above the ground at the edge of town) before continuing, "obnoxious dog of Bon Bon's." The last part was whispered.

Rainbow Dash blinked. "Really? I thought Buttons was nice."

Derpy briefly focused both eyes on Dash, before the right drifted on its own path. "You're kidding, right? He's always breaking out and then he just makes a beeline for me. I know dogs hate mailponies, but most at least wait until I deliver mail to them! I keep telling Bon Bon to take it to obedience training, but she says he only does it to me and it's because my eyes scare him and..." Derpy visibly deflated as her voice trailed off. "Aw, I made myself sad."

The two stood awkwardly for a moment. Rainbow Dash rubbed the back of her head and averted her gaze. "I have no idea what to say about that."

Derpy sighed. "Well, I guess I'll see you later, Dash. Enjoy your mail... and stuff." The once happy pegasus now looked to be on the verge of tears.

She turned around and was about to take off, when Dash had a stroke of inspiration. "Wait, Derpy. I have something that might cheer you up."

As a much happier Derpy Hooves winged away, Rainbow Dash went back inside to see Baron Awesome on his perch. A dog would have a, "who me?" look at this point, but the Baron didn't even have the common courtesy to look at her. "I hope you're happy, Baron. Cranberry orange muffin day is only once a month and I just had to give her mine because of you!"

She may as well have been talking to the perch for all the attention he paid her.

Dash sighed. "You're right, I shouldn't have yelled." She gave the falcon a rub on the back of the head. This time he responded, leaning into it and closing his eyes appreciatively. "Yeah, you're a good falcon. You just made a bad choice." He squawked happily. "Hm, I bet I know what the problem is. I've had you cooped up in here for a few days now. How about you and me go flying and burn off some of that energy?"

So, Dash put on her new falconry boots, packed a picnic lunch (various greens, drinks and nuts for her, iced fish for him) and the two took off. Rainbow Dash knew the perfect spot for some obedience training. After all, she had it on the authority of Rarity and the town newspaper that the area around a certain cutie mark clubhouse in a certain apple orchard was deserted due to an outbreak of salmonella...

Some time later at the outskirts of Sweet Apple Acres, Rainbow Dash watched Baron Awesome carefully as he flew lazy loops overhead. Rainbow Dash repeated words burned into her mind by constant repetition (it was part of a larger speech about pet training and responsibility that her dad had made her memorize). "The main element of good training is consistency. Never give an order and let it be disobeyed. Use rewards at first, but eventually take them away and let the fact that he's pleased you be the reward."

Rainbow Dash, her voice confident, said, "Come, Baron Awesome!" The Baron dropped from his perch on a nearby apple tree and casually glided down, landing on her arm. He was getting a little bored with the game, but the chunk of trout he got in exchange made it worthwhile. He didn't even notice that she was stroking him as he ate, something that would have seemed impossible yesterday. "Good boy," she said, dropping the "d" as

she went into full baby talk mode. "That's enough practice for now. Don't want you to get bored, after all." She was nowhere near where she could stop giving him a treat every time. That wouldn't happen for a while, assuming her experience with Rex and the rest of the old pack held true.

As Dash started packing up the remains of lunch, she heard a buzzing sound in the distance. It almost sounded like... nah, couldn't be.

And then, the Baron tensed up, glanced over her shoulder, and shrieked. He tried to take off, but Dash, reacting quickly, grabbed on and held him tight. He went limp again, realizing that the blue thing was unhappy with him for trying to do what she'd spent all morning making him practice. He would really appreciate some consistency.

Rainbow Dash turned around, being careful to hold Baron Awesome gently, and saw that she'd been right about the source of the noise after all. Scootaloo zipping along on her scooter, her wings buzzing like an outboard motor. She turned it sideways and came to a halt in front of her idol. "Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash sputtered, "Scootaloo? What are you doing here? I thought you had food poisoning!"

Scootaloo blinked. "Why would I have food poisoning?"

Rainbow Dash, without releasing Baron Awesome, pointed her right hoof at the newspaper. It was now covered in icy fish parts, but the headline about the school was still visible. "That paper said all you kids got sick eating bad sushi!"

Scootaloo waved dismissively. "*The Ponyville Gazette*? Dad says not to read that rag because Yellow Press always exaggerates. Only like ten kids and a few grownups got sick." The fact that she had caused a newsworthy health scandal didn't seem to bug her. "I didn't eat any myself. I don't like sushi. I just thought we'd be good at making it." Whatever she was about to say died on her lips. Her face was split by a huge smile as she took off her helmet. "Whoa, is that falcon real?"

Rainbow Dash tried to come up with a good sounding cover story... but Scootaloo had kind of already seen Baron Awesome. The falcon was out of the bag. "Uh, yeah. His name's Baron Awesome."

Scootaloo was in full fangirl mode. She squealed happily as she got closer to them. "Oh my gosh, a falcon! And you named him Baron Awesome? That's.. just... whoa! Just when I thought you couldn't get cooler, you had to raise the bar!" She reared up on her hind legs and started jumping from hoof to hoof. "Oh man oh man oh man, can I touch him?"

Rainbow Dash loved compliments and ponies paying attention to her. Heck, all of her goals and aspirations were based on making sure that as many ponies as possible paid attention to her all the time. But... Scootaloo was starting to weird her out. "Um, I guess? Just calm down first. You're making him nervous."

Nervous was putting it mildly. This loud orange thing that was reaching out at him was terrifying! He struggled to wriggle out of Dash's grip, but she held firm. The only thing that kept him from deploying his claws was the fact that he had them wrapped around her armored arm as he tried to get enough leverage to escape.

Rainbow Dash died a thousand deaths in the time it took Scootaloo to touch him. What was she doing? After he attacked Derpy, why the heck was she agreeing to this? She really needed to work on getting her mouth under control when she was nervous.

Scootaloo seemed oblivious to the danger as she reached out and started stroking the back of his head. "Wow, a falcon! That is so hardcore!"

The Baron's struggles stopped instantly. What in the hay? The orange thing was friendly too? Was... was that allowed? It was weird enough that the blue thing took care of him and did his hunting for him. Now there were two weird things that just wanted to touch him so he would feel good? What could they possibly be getting out of it? It was certainly suspicious.

Rainbow Dash said, "Good boy, Baron."

Scootaloo giggled. "He's so soft!"

"I know, right? It took a lot of work, but I civilized him." She was beaming with pride. Not that she forgot her terror and doubt from a moment ago, but clearly she needed to stop underestimating herself.

Baron Awesome was getting more and more confused. This situation was absurd! Wait... what if that was why the blue thing was so unhappy when he attacked the grey thing earlier? Hm. The blue thing, the grey thing and the orange thing all looked like the same sort of thing. They all had hooves and wings and long tails. Maybe all of the hoofed things were actually friendly? Was that possible? An entire type of thing that didn't want to eat him, drive him away, or run away from him? But that ran counter to everything he had ever seen or experienced.

When a relieved Rainbow Dash let him go, he flew up and landed on the bough of a nearby apple tree. He needed to think about this.

Scootaloo finally got back on all four hooves and started breathing normally. Her eyes widened as she realized that she'd been dorking out right in front of her hero. Putting up her best poker face to cover up her embarrassment, she said, "S-so, when did you get him?"

Rainbow Dash said, matter-of-factly, "Oh, a few days ago. I found him in the woods. I'm still taming him."

"A wild falcon?" From his perch, Baron Awesome cringed as Scootaloo did a high pitched fangirl squeal again. "That's so hardcore!" She paused, collected herself, coughed into her hoof and managed, "S-so why are you out here?"

"It seemed like a good spot for a picnic and some falconry." Well, more like modified dog training, since Twilight Sparkle's book didn't talk about real falconry much, but having the official word made it sound cooler. "Huh," she muttered to herself, "I guess that's why book ponies make up big words for everything."

Scootaloo gave an appreciative, "Oooooooh." She paused for a moment, and realized what she really wanted to say. As she spoke her throat seized up and she barely managed to get out, "C-can I hang out with you two?" She seemed to find her voice as she started to verbally backpedal. "It's cool if you say no, I know you're really busy and everything."

Her tone of voice told Rainbow Dash that the little filly was expecting a no. The blue pegasus shrugged. "Sure, why not?" She gestured towards the picnic basket and blanket. "Want some lemonade? It's home made. Just don't tell Applejack who sold me the lemons."

The young orange pegasus pumped her arm excitedly. "Best. Day. Ever!"

"So there I was!" Rainbow Dash was hovering in the air, reenacting her story as Scootaloo hung on her every word. "It was the bottom of the second quarter with two minutes to go. Hoops got tackled and lost the ball, but I caught it before it hit the ground, beating their fastest flyers! I used the momentum from the dive to do an awesome loop up towards the goal. But then their biggest blockers were coming at me from all sides!"

Rainbow Dash wondered if it hurt Scootaloo to smile that hard. The orange pegasus asked, "What'd you do? What'd you do?"

Rainbow Dash crossed her arms and flashed the little filly her smuggest grin. "Well, most ponies would have tried to go around and risk getting tackled, but I went for the brass ring! I was still going at top speed from my swoop, see. So, I used my speed and all that time I spend playing pinball to good use. I hit the first one juuuust right so I bounced off into his buddy, then I bounced again into the other buddy and zoom! Right into the endzone for the winning goal!" She threw her arms up and started doing a victory dance, a reenactment of the one she'd done oh so many years ago. "And the announcer was all, 'The Mongooses win! The Mongooses win! For the first time in 30 years, the Mongooses beat the Tigers for the Junior Aerial Rugby championship!"

Scootaloo, forgetting herself again, started hopping up and down. "Woo! Mongooses win! Yeah!" Unfortunately, she kicked over the lemonade pitcher in the process. "Oh crud! I'm sorry Rainbow Dash! I'll try to save it!" She got a napkin from the picnic basket and started desperately trying to blot up the lemonade from the ground.

Hiding a look of disgust as Scootaloo started frantically squeezing the napkin's brown contents back into the pitcher, Rainbow Dash reached over and mussed up Scootaloo's hair. "Nah, it's fine, we were done with it anyway." Well, now they were, anyway. Dash considered telling her to calm down... but who was she to stand in the way of worship of the greatest flyer to ever come out of Cloudsdale?

Scootaloo's eyes were full of love and adoration. "You're so awesome! And... and..." Her face fell as she saw that the sky was turning orange. "Oh

crap oh crap oh crap!" She grabbed her helmet and ran up the ramp into the Crusaders' clubhouse.

Rainbow Dash blinked in confusion. In an instant, Scootaloo was back with her helmet on and her saddlebags full of books. Without pausing to take any breaths, she said, "Sorry Dash, I remembered why I came out here! Sweetie Belle forgot her schoolbooks in the clubhouse and she said she was feeling good enough to do her homework and I forgot the time and she's gonna kill me but it was great hanging out and I think you're the coolest also your bird is nice see you later!" Without waiting to get a reaction from Dash, Scootaloo buzzed away as fast as her little wings would carry her.

Rainbow Dash shook her head and chuckled. "She's just like me at that age. It's kinda spooky." She started cleaning up their picnic lunch. "Still, she's a cool little kid. She's gonna go places." She called out, "Baron Awesome, come!"

The Baron had fallen asleep on his perch in the apple tree. Upon hearing his name, he swooped down and landed near Dash and opened his mouth expectantly.

Dash flipped him the last chunk of fish. "There you go, buddy. Good boy for not flying off while I told Scoots my awesome story." She took a moment to give him a scratch before finishing up her packing. "Also good boy for not disemboweling her and getting me in trouble. That's also important." She realized that she'd just used the word "disemboweling." "Maybe I should lay off the heavy reading. It's starting to do funny things to my words."

Despite her reservations about her growing vocabulary, that night found Rainbow Dash flipping through the books she'd checked out, waiting to get sleepy. Fortunately, the technical details in the book on veterinary medicine were proving to be better than sleeping pills. She gave a loud yawn and closed it halfway through the section on roundworm. "Ugh, nature's gross. Glad I don't live there."

Baron Awesome was already asleep on his perch. Dash gave him a quick pet and said, "Rest up, Baron Awesome. Tomorrow's the big day. You're gonna meet all my friends! We already have two ponies around who know

about you, so if I'm gonna get to be the one to tell them, it's gotta be soon. Sweet dreams, buddy."

The Baron continued to snooze peacefully. Soon, Rainbow Dash had joined him in dreamland.

Pinkie Pie was once again exploring the dreamscapes of her friends. They were being boring tonight, though. Twilight kept dreaming about showing up to school in her underwear (a nightmare she often replayed, but one that Pinkie had never understood), Rarity was reenacting some trashy romance novel (with herself as the lead, of course) and Applejack was reliving the terror of giving some sort of speech to Apple Bloom's class. Why were all of her friends being all scared and boring tonight?

"I know," Pinkie said. "I'll see what Dash is up to! She's always having some sort of awesome dream!" With a flex of her imagination, she was dressed like a pirate. She pierced the realm between dreams. "Arr and avast, Rainbow Dash! I'm here to..."

Her piratical speech died on her lips as she saw exactly what Dash was already dreaming about. She and Baron Awesome were flying through the clouds. Pinkie Pie couldn't remember the last time she'd heard Dash laugh that much. After a few loops, tricks and midair hugs, the two flew out of sight, leaving the sounds of laughter and the trail of a rainbow in their wake.

"Aw, she's so happy. I guess I won't mess with her dream tonight." She kicked a dream rock. "Fiddlesticks. I wanted to be the Dread Pirate Pinkie so much. Maybe Apple Bloom's up for an adventure?" She proceeded to hop across the landscape of Rainbow Dash's dream... and then it was if she had never been there at all.

Chapter 5

Caramel sighed contentedly. The sun was out, the cider was crisp and he was with his best friends. Was there anything better in life? As he stood in front of a fence at Sweet Apple Acres swigging Big Macintosh's private reserve, he felt a feeling of complete rightness in the universe. It was this inexpressible... something. The stallion felt, as he often did, that feeling bubble up, searching for release. Finally, the tan pony could hold it in no longer. "Yup."

Next was Cherry Coke. "Yup."

Then Carrot Top, the only mare present. "Yup."

But as always, it ended with Big Macintosh's, "Eeyup."

Caramel loved these moments.

After a long moment of savoring the silence, Caramel decided to spoil it. "So Cherry Coke, how'd things go with Candy Mane?"

Cherry Coke paused, took another swig of cider and smirked. "Well, Candy Mane is a lady of good standing in the community, so I don't want to go into it too much..."

Carrot Top rolled her green eyes. "Quit the buildup, Coke. You always gotta pretty everything up, even when it doesn't make sense."

Cherry Coke scoffed and raised his nose haughtily. "Storytelling is a fine craft and I won't have you stifling me."

Big Macintosh said, "Yup, storytelling's a fine craft... for those ponies who do it right. Ah don't see no storyteller cutie mark on yer rear, though."

That earned a laugh from everypony present, Cherry Coke excluded. Coke sighed. "Fine. We had a good time at the carnival, and when I got her back home we... you know." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Caramel spat out some of the cider at that, earning him a subtle but stern look from Big Macintosh. "Sorry, Mac. But really, Coke? Are you saying she..."

Cherry Coke smirked. "Eeyup." Caramel noticed Big Macintosh's expression harden slightly at the theft of his catchphrase. Of course, he didn't say anything.

Carrot Top had a shocked look on her face. "Really? I didn't think she was that kind of mare."

Cherry Coke chuckled. "Yup, on the first date no less. Went all the way."

Carrot Top gave him a reproachful look. "Well, you better treat her right if you got a kiss on the lips on the first date. I don't want to hear she was a one night stand."

Cherry Coke said, "Pinkie Pie swear, I think she's the one. Cross my heart and hope to fly, etc etc." He started going through the motions, but gave up halfway through.

Carrot Top chuckled, dropping her grim expression. "You sly dog." The two exchanged a brohoof.

Big Macintosh's gaze wandered upwards. "Hm. We got company." Cherry Coke quickly checked out his expression in a nearby watering trough and straightened up his mane. Caramel rolled his eyes at his friend's vanity.

As Cherry Coke finished his ritual, Rainbow Dash landed in front of them and stretched out a booted hoof for Baron Awesome to land on. "Hey guys."

Big Macintosh nodded. "Mornin' Dash. What brings you out here?"

Dash said, "Well actually, I'm looking for Applejack. I wanna show her my awesome new falcon! His name's Baron Awesome." She puffed up with obvious pride. "You can touch him if you wanna."

Caramel went in closer to investigate. "Huh, I don't think I've ever seen one this close be..." He was cut off as Baron Awesome flared out his wings, shrieked and retreated to a nearby apple tree. Later, Caramel would refuse

that he had screamed like a little girl. Clearly that sound was a previously unknown atmospheric phenomenon. And his friends all snickered for completely unrelated reasons.

Rainbow Dash looked at Caramel apologetically. "Um, sorry about that. I guess he isn't used to big groups of ponies. He's fine one on one or two on one."

Before Caramel could stop his breathing (he was learning yoga. Yup. Yoga. He wasn't catching his breath after a loud scream), Big Macintosh nodded laconically. As he shifted his piece of wheat to the other side of his mouth, he said, "Gotcha. Still a handsome critter." He pointed to the east. "Anyhow, if you're lookin' for mah sister, she's probably over feedin' the pigs 'bout now."

Rainbow Dash nodded and flashed him a smile. "Thanks, Big Mac! Anyway, I gotta fly. I have a bunch of places to show off the Baron today!" With a bit more authority in her voice, she said, "Baron Awesome, come!" The Baron, wary of the group, waited to obey until Dash was a healthy distance from them.

Cherry Coke rubbed his chin as she disappeared from sight. "Anypony else think she was lookin' better than normal? And smellin' better?" A slightly wolfish grin crossed his face.

Carrot Top shot Cherry an angry glare. "Cross your heart, huh?"

"I'm allowed to look, aren't I?" Cherry's eyes were pleading.

Caramel shook his head. "Nope."

Carrot Top never stopped her glare. "Nope."

Big Macintosh's eyes were flat and emotionless. "Eenoepo."

"Sooie! Here pig pig pig!" Applejack unhitched herself from a wagon loaded down with gear for a day's chores. She picked up a bucket of slops in her mouth and dumped it into a trough, and the waiting pigs squealed with joy. She spat to get rid of the taste of rust. "Ugh, some days ah'd kill to be a

unicorn. Ah well. Time to go see about fixin' that fence." She began to wiggle back into the harness.

"Hey AJ!"

Applejack didn't look back immediately, being in mid hitch. "Oh, hey Dash. What's up?"

Rainbow Dash glowered and crossed her arms angrily. "I didn't even mention the sand worms!"

Applejack stopped cinching herself up and looked over her shoulder. "Who said anything about sand worms?"

Dash rubbed the back of her head and looked embarrassed. "Uh, never mind." Dash stopped hovering and came in for a landing in front of her. "What're you up to?"

Applejack said, "Work," in a flat tone. "Ah've got to go over to the outskirts an' see about fixin' the fence. Them Lemon folk keep lettin' their side of it go to pot, and ah know it's so they can wait until it's completely rotted and rebuild it further into mah land. So, ah figured ah'd do the job before they get the chance."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "Wow, being a farmer's a lot more political than I thought."

Applejack sighed. "Tell me about it." She rubbed her chin. "Anywho, ah don't think you ever said what you were here about."

Rainbow Dash smacked her forehead. "Duh, how could I forget? Get ready to see something amazing. Baron Awesome, come!"

Applejack instinctively jerked back when, with a loud squawk, a falcon flew from its hiding spot in a nearby apple tree right at them. Unfortunately, she jerked a little too hard and knocked herself and the wagon over. The sounds of rattling metal and wood confirmed that she'd managed to completely empty the cart.

At least Rainbow Dash wasn't laughing too hard. "Oh man, AJ, you should have seen the look on your face! I mean, you make silly faces all the time anyway, but this was one for the scrapbook!"

Applejack struggled to get up, but found that the angle of the harness prevented it. "Hardy har har." She thrashed about for another moment before giving up. She sighed deeply. She hated asking for help. "You wanna help me get up?"

Rainbow Dash trotted over as her giggle fit faded away. "Sure." She placed the Baron on the fence of the pig pen and hovered next to the overturned cart. "On three?"

Applejack nodded. "On three. One... two... three!" Applejack struggled as well as she could from her awkward angle, while Dash pumped her wings and shoved the top side of the cart. After a minute's work, Applejack and the cart were both upright. She looked over her shoulder to try and see how bad it was. The cart was almost empty. "Aw horseapples." She shot Dash a glare. "Dagnabbit Dash, this is gonna cost me ten minutes!" She bent down to undo the hitch.

Dash said, "No sweat. You just relax. I'll take care of it." She started picking up the planks, humming a happy tune.

Applejack blinked. "Awfully helpful of you." Her eyes narrowed. "Too helpful. What's yer angle?" Applejack's suspicion melted away as she turned around enough to see Dash smile, even as she started putting scattered nails into a bucket. That was too real to be guile.

Dash was almost smug as she pointed at the Baron, who was busy preening. "I guess when you have the most incredible pet ever, good moods just happen."

Applejack blinked. "Pet? Is this about Winona?"

Dash laughed smugly (no almost about it). "Oh Applejack. Who's a silly pony? You are! I don't need Winona anymore. I've got Baron Awesome!"

Applejack gave Dash a thoroughly confused look. "You named the bird... Baron Awesome."

Dash somehow managed to show her pride in the act of hauling a plank onto the cart. "Yup!"

"... Baron Awesome."

Dash's face fell slightly. "Yeah?"

Applejack giggled. "Woeee! That's a humdinger of a name."

Dash's brows furrowed. "That's cowpony for tubular, right?"

Applejack blinked. "Huh?"

Dash playfully stuck her tongue out. "If you can use made up words, so can I."

Applejack rolled her eyes just as playfully. As she did so, Dash finished loading up the cart. "Thank ya kindly. Nice ta see you're gettin' in the habit of cleaning up your messes."

Dash said, "Oh hah hah. Just for that, you don't get to pet Baron Awesome."

Applejack shrugged. "If that's the way ya want it." With a grunt of effort, she got the cart moving and starting trotting away. She could hear Dash sputtering in the background. It was hard to hide the goofy grin on her face. *Three... two...*

Applejack heard a resigned sigh from behind her. "Okay okay, stop, fine."

Sweet, predictable Dash. Applejack came to a halt. "You're gonna have to bring him closer. Ah can't exactly maneuver too good right now." Dash gestured for the Baron to hop onto her arm, and he did so. Soon, cowpony and falcon were face to face. "Are you sure it's alright if ah touch him? He's kinda givin' me the stinkeye."

Baron Awesome gave the big orange thing the stinkeye. For some reason, that brown thing on its head made him nervous. Plus, it didn't have wings. Things that were wingless were food or predators.

Dash nodded happily. "Sure! He loves being petted." Despite this vote of confidence, Applejack noticed that Dash held her breath as she touched the Baron. Dash relaxed when the Baron leaned into Applejack's hoof, presented his throat for more stroking.

Baron Awesome sighed contentedly. Okay, so hoofed things in general were nice. Good to know.

"So, where'd you get him? Ah didn't think that Pets and Coffee Mugs sold falcons."

Dash puffed up proudly. "I found him in the woods. He hit his head, so I took him home and tamed him in three days flat."

Applejack said, "Huh. Where'd you learn to tame falcons?"

Rainbow Dash looked like the cat that ate the canary. "I didn't. It's all instinct and natural skill."

Applejack frowned. "Ah don't think it works like that." Baron Awesome made a low caw that almost sounded like a purr and presented his throat for more scratching. Applejack's heart melted. "Then again, it looks like you did a good job, 'cause he's such a good widdle guy, yes he is!" Baron Awesome apparently had an aversion to baby talk, because he shot Applejack a glare and went back to his fencepost. "Can he do any tricks?"

Dash pointed to a nearby apple tree. "Just you watch! Baron Awesome, fetch!"

The Baron flew into action. He wasn't quite sure what the blue thing wanted, but there must be something up there to kill if she was being so insistent... aha, the red things! Like the bouncing red thing she made him practice on! He grabbed one in his talons and looped around. He saw the blue thing holding out its blunt secondary not-wing out, so he supposed he wouldn't be allowed to keep it. Ah well. It smelled like tree-junk anyway.

The Baron dropped the apple on Dash's waiting hoof and went back to his post. He opened his mouth expectantly, and Dash rewarded him by tossing him a chunk of soy jerky from her saddlebag. He gobbled it down greedily as Dash gave Applejack the Red Delicious apple, which had been perfectly sliced into several pieces.

Dash had a surprised look on her face, which Applejack caught before she suppressed it. She said, "See? He can fetch fruit and slice it for you! That's two tricks all rolled up into one awesome package. Just you wait until I've had more than three days!"

Applejack nodded. She sniffed the apple slices and resisted the urge to scrunch up her face at the overwhelming fishy smell the Baron's claws left behind. As soon as Dash was gone, the pigs would get some dessert. "Well, ah'm happy for ya, but it's time for me to get back to work."

Rainbow Dash took off, put her hoof in her mouth and whistled. Baron Awesome winced at the shrill noise, but grudgingly launched into the air as well. "Alright. I hope you don't take too long, 'cause tonight Pinkie Pie's holding me a 'Baron Awesome is Awesome Party!'"

Applejack asked, "Is it after the 'redundant words are redundant' party?"

Rainbow Dash shot her a glare. "Hah hah, AJ. You're a real comedian."

Applejack smirked. "Ah like to think ah have my moments." She frowned. "Wait, you ain't springin' this on Pinkie at the last minute, are you?"

Rainbow Dash folded her forelegs petulantly. "No! Well, a little. But it's Pinkie. She's probably celebrating Thursday or something."

The Ponyville library! Now with book readings for the little fillies and colts on Sundays! Ask the librarian about the Biblioteer rewards program!

"No, Pinkie, you can't hold your 'Today Ends in Y' party at the library." Twilight was buried in her book (*Sunny Skies All Day Long: Celestia In Her Own Words*)... or at least as buried as she could be while Pinkie Pie was around.

Pinkie Pie pouted. Twilight hated it when Pinkie pouted. How she could go from bubbly to devastated instantaneously was a mystery. "Aw, why not?"

Twilight Sparkle gave up trying to focus on the book and shut it with a deep sigh. "Well, for one thing, the fact that the day ends in 'y' isn't worth celebrating."

Pinkie's face became stern. Twilight had no way of knowing this, but it was in imitation of a rock farming patriarch. "*Nicht wenn Sie Deutsch sprechen! Heute ist Donnerstag, und es hat kein y!*"

Twilight blinked. "I... what?"

"Exactly, Twilight! We have to take advantage of our linguistic bounty! In some countries, they don't even have the letter y! Don't let those poor y-less fillies' sacrifice be in vain!" By the end of her impassioned plea, she had Twilight by the shoulders and was shaking her vigorously.

Twilight managed to wrestle Pinkie off. It took her a moment to stop vibrating. "If I let you have the party here, do you promise to start making sense?"

Pinkie blinked. "When do I ever not make sense?"

Twilight sighed and facehoofed. "Never mind. I don't see why you don't just hold it at Sugar Cube Corner."

Pinkie was about to explain when Spike ran in, acting like a cat about to hock up a hairball. From the puffs of green flame wafting past his gums, it was obvious that Celestia had sent a scroll, but for some reason, Spike was doing his best not to let it pass. Finally, he couldn't hold out any longer and a gout of green flame coalesced into a scroll. This was business as usual at the library. The loud clank the oddly shaped scroll made when it hit the ground wasn't.

Twilight's face was split by a goofy grin. She hadn't heard from Celestia in days! Then she realized what she'd heard. "Wait... clank?" She opened up the scroll and found that it contained a small bottle. "Cough syrup?" Spike was chewing his claws nervously as Twilight read the letter. She didn't notice that little detail until she was almost done.

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I apologize for taking so long to get back to you, but I have been absolutely swamped all week, as I had to take care of both sun and moon (not that I haven't ever done it before, but I was finally getting used to having the nights off). While your gift of the white cake with lemon frosting was appreciated, Luna had too much and was ill for the last few days. I'm also

not sure who told you that Luna was unwell, but they must have had faulty information. While we are grateful for this bottle of cough syrup, it will not be much good for a sore stomach, especially as she's already recovered. As such, I have returned it to you.

With love,

Princess Celestia

As she finished the royal missive, Twilight felt righteous fury burn in her heart. She spun around and glared daggers at an already cowering Spike. "Spike! 'They doubled the price of cough syrup,' huh? Care to explain this?" She telekinetically shoved the bottle in his face.

Spike stammered, "W-well, I had a coughing fit after I bought the first one and made it go poof, and I didn't want you to get mad..."

Twilight walked over to a bulletin board with a series of photos of Spike. "Spike, I am very disappointed. I don't mind losing ten bits on extra cough syrup, but I do mind being lied to. I'm afraid I have no choice but to make Owlowicious employee of the month." She punctuated this by pinning a photo of the owl to the board. She did it a little harder than she'd meant to, but it did make her point perfectly. It occurred to her that the owl, who was napping upstairs, would need a different bonus than Spike's normal bowl of jewels. She quickly wrote a note to herself to look into that.

The little dragon melodramatically threw his head back, shouting to the heavens, "!"

Pinkie Pie patted the despondent Spike on the shoulder. "There there. It'll be okay. Now you have something to shoot for next month!" She perked up. "I know, my Y-Day party can be a celebration party for Owlowicious!"

Before Spike could object, Rainbow Dash and Baron Awesome entered the library with a flourish of off key singing by Rainbow Dash. As near as Twilight could tell, it was Dash's attempt to sing a Sousa fanfare. Maybe she should suggest a book on pitch and harmonics to Dash after she was done with her recent checkouts? Or maybe she could find out if Lyra was taking students? Dash really could use the help and...

Pinkie Pie and Spike were at Dash's side in a moment. Spike said, "Whoa, cool bird!"

Oh. Right. Rainbow Dash did have a healthy looking example of *Falco berigora* with her, didn't she? That warranted explanation. Twilight trotted over. "Wow, I've never been this close to one before. He has such beautiful plumage!"

Rainbow Dash was clearly enjoying every second of it. "I know, right? His name's Baron Awesome. I tamed him myself. Did it in three days flat."

Pinkie Pie immediately started rubbing him with both hooves. It was a bit rougher than the Baron was used to, but he didn't struggle. "Ooooh, so that's why you kept dreaming about this little guy. He's so cute!"

Rainbow Dash blinked and silently mouthed the words, "dreaming?" She shook her head and said, "Pinkie Pie, you're so random." Twilight gave Dash a knowing look. Dash nodded. It was better not to ask.

Spike fumed as he realized that Dash wasn't going to bend down lower so he could join in. She barely even seemed to notice him, as she basked in the reflected adoration of Baron Awesome. Twilight Sparkle thought that he was about to complain... but seemed to think better of it when his eye caught the Employee of the Month board. Twilight heard him mutter something about stupid birds as he went elsewhere to take care of some chores.

Twilight, a little hesitantly, reached in for her own pet. The Baron flinched from her touch, took off and landed on a nearby bookshelf. The purple unicorn frowned. "He's a little skittish."

Dash laughed nervously. "Uh, yeah. He's not used to more than one other pony at a time."

Twilight Sparkle wasn't the best at reading her friends' emotions, but she could tell that Dash was being evasive. Then, in the back of her mind, something clicked. "So those books weren't random pleasure reading after all. It all fits together like a neat little puzzle! The book on raptors, the book on veterinary medicine, the book on... no wait, *The Critique of Pure Reason* doesn't fit at all. Why'd you get that?"

"It was a categorical imperative."

Twilight blinked. "Huh? What does that have to do with anything?"

Dash shrugged. "I was hoping you could tell me. I tried to read it but... words... so many words..." Dash shuddered at the memory.

Twilight didn't understand why something as simple as metaphysics got so many ponies out of sorts, but she decided not to push it. "If you think that's hard, you should try reading Gelding Hegel or Cutie Marx. And don't even get me started on Neighzsche." Twilight finally noticed that Pinkie Pie had commandeered one of the library's ladders to get up with Baron Awesome again. The falcon was hopping away from the overly enthusiastic Pinkie. Twilight figured that if he wasn't flying away, he must not be too anxious. Twilight let her magic flow, bringing a book from the shelf to hover in front of Rainbow Dash. "Well, if you want to teach him to be more comfortable with groups, you might consider this."

Dash squinted slightly. "*A Beginner's Guide to Falconry?*" She looked like she was about to refuse it, but then apparently thought better of it. "Sure, why not? That bird stuff book was helpful."

The retort, "No, it's ornithology, not bird stuff," wanted so badly to escape Twilight's lips. But, she remembered that constantly correcting her friends on relatively unimportant matters just lead to hurt feelings. It still took a lot of effort not to say anything.

Dash had moved on anyway. "Hey! Pinkie!"

Pinkie stopped halfway up the ladder, as she continued her efforts to play with the Baron. "Yeah Dashie?"

Dash said, "You up for hosting a Baron Awesome is Awesome Party?"

Pinkie Pie immediately stopped harassing the falcon and almost seemed to teleport right in front of Rainbow Dash. Twilight's eyes were fooling her again. She said that to herself a lot when it came to Pinkie Pie. Sometimes she even believed it.

Pinkie Pie, as always, seemed unaware of her casual dismissal of the laws of physics. She was bouncing excitedly. "Ooh ooh! It can be for Baron

Awesome and Owlowicious! It'll be the most birdtastic bird party in ever! Be here at 7!"

"Righto! I'll go make sure everypony else knows." Rainbow Dash saluted smartly. The Baron swooped down on her bent arm, which seemed to catch Dash off guard. She quickly hid that surprise and, with a quick goodbye, was out the door.

Pinkie Pie scratched her chin thoughtfully. "What do birds like for parties?"

Twilight shrugged. "That's a good question. Maybe party hats with feathers?"

Pinkie Pie let out a horrified gasp. "Twilight, no! Just no. Or maybe the next time I throw Rarity a party, I should use her mane for decorations?"

Twilight sighed. "Then I don't have any ideas." She hated it when she said the wrong thing. It happened way more than she would have liked. "Just do what you think is best. I think I'm just going to go read for awhile."

Pinkie perked up immediately. "Okie dokie lokie! Well, I have a party to plan! Later!" And with that, Pinkie Pie was gone. Just... gone. Twilight was alone again. Oh well. At least nopony would shake her faith in the laws of nature for the next few hours.

Wait, if the party was at the library...

"Spike! We have cleaning to do!"

The dragon groaned from the next room so loudly that it was obvious that he was putting on a show for Twilight.

Twilight barked, "Little dragons who want to be employee of the month again don't complain!"