

With a Little Help From My Friends

Chapter 1: Welcome to Hoofston

The sun was just beginning to come up over the town of Hoofston (which was, for reasons nopony was quite sure of, pronounced “hyoofston”) – it was mostly silent, save for a few pegasi at work arranging the clouds – there was supposed to be a rain today. Such news, however, had not reached one black earth pony who was just wandering down the streets. It was a black colt, with a black mane, blue eyes, and a white treble clef for a cutie mark. As he walked, he looked around, curiously, as though he had absolutely no idea where he was.

Of course, such a method of walking sometimes results in a pony not knowing where he or she is going, and as it happens, the young colt blundered right into a Pegasus.

“Hey!” the pegasus shouted, irritated. “Watch where you’re going!”

The colt backed up. “I’m... um...” he seemed extraordinarily befuddled, and his demeanor conveyed an impression of stupidity. “I’m sorry.”

“Why don’t you pay attention?” the pegasus muttered. “Retard.” And with that, he flew back up to the sky, where he’d certainly avoid any clueless earth ponies.

The black colt stood there for a while, and then continued walking, his head hung a little lower than before.

The rain came, and as a result, most ponies stayed inside their homes, to wait out the rain. This came as a slight disappointment to Gold Standard.

Gold Standard (or “Goldie,” as some friends called her) was a gold-colored unicorn with gold bars on her flank, who owned a shop. It was a nice shop, very tidy and well-organized, and with a rather eclectic collection of wares – if she thought somepony would buy it, she would stock it.

She was a capitalist, and the rain meant that the usual steady flow of customers had slowed down. That meant less sales, and consequently, less money. Being a proprietor, this could be a disappointment. The store wasn’t completely empty, however – there was a shoplifter. A blank-flank young pegasus who attempted to run off with a bag of sugar lumps. The rapstallion didn’t get far, though, because he right into somepony else who had just walked into the store – Constable Brownie (who, obviously, was brown, and had a brownie for a cutie mark. Despite appearances, she only baked in her spare time).

“Now, just where do you think you’re going with that?” she asked.

“Home?” The pegasus asked guiltily.

“Not unless you pay for it.” She said. “If you’re not going to pay for it, you have to put it back.”

“Okay...” the pegasus said, slinking back to where he’d taken the bag from and putting it back.

“Goldie, I swear, this is the third time this week I’ve caught a shoplifter just by walking through the door.” Brownie said, approaching the desk.

“Wreaks havoc with the paperwork – merchandise not there, but no money to indicate sales.”

“What I’m trying to say is that you need to do something about it.” Brownie said.

“Well, what can I do?” Goldie asked. “I’m only one pony, and I’m behind the counter most of the time. I could put in an alarm...”

“Hire an employee or two – that way you can have someone to be on the lookout while you’re managing the counter.” Brownie said.

Gold Standard thought about it. Employees meant a payroll. That meant less income. On the other hand, Brownie was right, and it’d probably result in less shoplifting, which meant less lost money. Having an employee might also mean that someone else is getting money, which can then be spent, and spending is good for an economy.

“That actually might be a good idea,” she conceded.

“Glad you think so.” Said the constable. “Good day.” She turned around to exit when the sound of thunder indicated that it was still raining. “Lovely day for Raincloud to be on weather duty.”

Raincloud was a grey pegasus known for her somewhat gloomy disposition and the fact that whenever she was on rain duty, it tended to last a bit longer than most ponies would appreciate. Not that she wasn’t good at her job, but the rain lasted longer than most ponies would like. But we’ll actually meet her later.

The bell ring, indicating that door had opened. It was the black earth pony with the treble clef cutie mark.

“Good afternoon.” Gold Standard said, trying to entice the potential new customer. “Anything we can do for you today?”

“Well, um, it’s just that it was raining and this was the only door that I figured I wouldn’t get in trouble for walking through.” The pony said.

Well, how do you respond to a statement like that?

“Well, that’s perfectly alright.” She said. “You can stay here until the rain’s gone.”

“Thank you.” He said.

“I don’t think I recognize you...” Constable Brownie said. They certainly didn’t get a lot of strange ponies around here.

“Me neither.” The black pony said. “Wait, that doesn’t sound right, I mean... um...”

“Are you going to buy anything?” Goldie asked, ready to open the cash register.

“Um...” the black pony paused. “I don’t think I can... I don’t have any money.”

“...No money?” Gold Standard asked slowly. Someone with no money? That was a horribly depressing thought for her.

She looked down at the counter. She had some fliers with discount coupons. “Say...” she said. “Here’s an idea. How about if you take these.” She used her magic to hold up the fliers “and hand them out to people around town? I’ll pay you for the job, and then I’ll give you some additional money for everypony who comes in here with a coupon.”

The thunder crashed again.

“That is, once the rain’s cleared up a bit. What’s your name?”

The black colt stood there for a good five seconds before speaking. “Ritardando.” He said quietly.

Gold Standard and Brownie paused. That was an unusual name.

“Italian?” Brownie asked.

“Maybe...” Ritardando said. “I’m not very good at places.”

It was starting to become clear to the other two that this pony was not particularly bright. His head lifted up and he saw something off in the corner.

“Is that a piano?” he asked.

“Oh, that?” Gold Standard said, looking over where Ritardando was looking. “Oh, yes. Got it a few years ago, thinking it’d spruce the place up. Nobody ever plays it...” he saw his cutie mark. “You’re a musician?” she asked.

“I think so...” Ritardando said, walking over to the piano and plunking out a few scales. All three ponies cringed – Gold Standard was right, that thing was in desperate need of tuning.

“I suggest you dry off.” Gold Standard said, seeing that he was still dripping wet. “There’s some in the bathroom upstairs.”

“Oh.” Ritardando said, backing up, seeing he got water on the piano. “Sorry. Thank you.” He awkwardly apologized as he made his way up the stairs.

“I wonder if that piano was a very good investment.” Gold Standard said. “I mean, it looks nice, but nobody ever uses it, and even if they did...” she shook her head.

“Uhh, Goldie, I know I said it’d be a good idea to hire someone and all, but I didn’t mean *invite a vagabond into your home.*”

“He’s dripping wet, and the rain might not let up until tomorrow morning.” She said simply. “What else should I have him do, wait outside?”

“Your risk.” Brownie said, heading for the door. “I’ll check back in the morning to see if all your worldly possessions haven’t been robbed.”

“You do that.” Goldie said, laughing. “Sure you don’t want an umbrella?”

“I don’t become a constable by being put off by a bit of rain.” She said, leaving.

That left Gold Standard alone in her shop, with Ritardando upstairs trying to dry off with a towel. She walked through her shop, inspecting and organizing the shelves. She always liked to have things nice and tidy at the start of the next day.

Then a shout came down the stairs. “Uhh, the towel’s wet now. What do I do?”

Gold Standard was quickly given the impression that she’d made a mistake.