

Chaos and Laughter

By Charcoal Quill

Part 3

Applejack hesitantly mounted the stage and looked out at the crowd that had gathered in front of it. The crowd was huge. Heck, even some of the buffalo had shown up... Had there been so many ponies in Appleoosa when she'd last been there? This gathering looked larger, but maybe that was just nervousness talking.

The farmpony looked back at the pair of royal guards that had been assigned to accompany her. One of them nodded reassuringly.

Tentatively, Applejack looked back at the crowd, tapped on the microphone, and then began her speech.

"Friends, Appleosans, countryponies, lend me your ears," she began. "Ah come to..." She paused. "Oh, forget it. Listen, Ah'm not gonna muddy the issue with fancy talk or inspirin' speeches that really don't mean a thing. Truth of the matter is, there's another threat to Equestria. Perhaps y'all have seen some of its effects already. It's not Discord – everypony remember him? – but it's someone like him, and this time, it could be a lot worse... 'cause we can't stop her like we normally would."

Applejack took a deep breath before continuing. "So we got a plan B. Ah'm not gonna lie. In my opinion, it's not a very good one. If we all go along with it, many of us will die. Perhaps even *all* of us. But it's our only option, and if we don't go through with it, things could be a lot worse for everypony than just dyin'." She shuddered. "Take it from me, Ah know from experience. So *Ah*, for one, will fight. And if y' wanna come with me, and stand with me and my friends against Eris, then feel free. But if y' wanna stay home instead..."

She took her hat off of her head and held it in front of her chest. "...Well, Ah for one don't blame you." Applejack stood silent for a moment before continuing, a reckless grin on her face. "So, who amongst you is ready to ride off into the sunset one last time?"

The crowd erupted into resounding cheers.

One of the guards stepped forward. "Well done, Miss," he murmured to Applejack. "First Ponyville, and now Appleoosa. I have a feeling that they'll follow you to the ends of Equestria itself, if you asked them to."

Applejack averted her gaze. "Ah just wish it didn't have to come to that."

“Well, Pinks, let’s start with the basics,” Gilda said, pacing in front of her new pupil. “We’re going to try some simple meditation. Close your eyes.”

Meditation... Could be fun. Obediently, Pinkie did so.

Gilda’s voice came reassuringly to her. “I want you to picture your happy place. Sounds corny, I know, but it works if you do it correctly.”

“Works to do what?” Pinkie wondered aloud.

“To calm one down and quiet excess emotion,” answered Gilda. “Like anger or disgustingly saccharine peppiness.” There was a short pause. “Forget that last part.”

“Okie Dokie Lokie.”

“Actually... Now that I think about it, *your* ‘happy place’ wouldn’t exactly be productive after all. We don’t need a party right now. Let’s try... going to your *tranquil* place.”

Pinkie opened her mouth.

“*Calm and quiet*, Pinks. It means calm and quiet.”

Pinkie frowned. “I already knew that.”

“Sure you did. Anyway, breathe in, and out. Slow, and deep.”

Pinkie complied, and she could feel herself growing calmer already. It was – to be honest – a little dull.

“Alright. Now picture yourself in a large, green field. Grass as far as the eye can see, gently rolling hills, puffy white clouds in a big blue sky, the whole shebang.”

Pinkie focused, and concentrated on the image. A small part of her, which was growing increasingly louder, proclaimed that it was *bored*.

“Good. Now just let yourself relax. Empty your mind as you softly gaze at your surroundings, and...” Suddenly, Gilda stopped talking.

“And? And what?” Pinkie asked. Tentatively, she opened her eyes.

She found herself sitting in a big, grassy field. Gently rolling hills stretched out to the horizons, and fluffy cumulus clouds drifted across the sky.

Pinkie blinked, and then looked around. Gilda was nowhere to be seen. “Oops.”

After a moment, Pinkie sighed. Suddenly she felt thankful that Twilight had taught her, for some reason she couldn’t quite recall, how to navigate via the stars. Then again, now she’d

have to wait for night...

*...Or, on the other hoof, there's that signpost over there. What's it say? Pinkie squinted at it. Ponyville, fifty miles. Well, it's a start. She frowned thoughtfully. Let's see, did I turn more east-ish or **southeast-ish** when I entered the Everfree...?*

Spike looked down at the map that he grasped in his claws, and then up at the yawning mouth of the cave. A massive plume of grey-white steam issued from the entrance, which coalesced into dark storm clouds at the mountain's summit. "This looks like the first place," he said.

Fluttershy peered at the deepening shadows inside, and then up at the lightning-laden clouds above. Something about them worried her. "Are you s-sure?" she asked. She was maybe a little less scared of full-grown dragons now, having met one face-to-face. But still, there was no denying that an ill-tempered wyrm could make a mouthful of the both of them.

...Of all four of them, actually. Fluttershy glanced back at the stern-looking but stolid royal guards that had accompanied her, and wished that they hadn't come along. They probably had families waiting for them back home, ponies who would miss them dearly if they were eaten.

"Yeah, this is it," Spike replied, rolling up the map. "We'd better get going if we want to hit any other places before sundown."

Fluttershy turned away, staring back towards the direction that she had come. Already, the spreading chaos approached the foothills of the mountains. "It *would* be best to hurry," she said hesitantly.

"Alright, then," Spike said. "Let's go."

Fluttershy took a deep breath, and then took a tiny step towards the cave. The guards moved to follow her. "Please wait here, sirs, if you wouldn't mind," she pleaded, looking over her shoulder at them.

"Are you sure, ma'am?" asked one of the guards.

A thunderous snore echoed from the cave.

Fluttershy swallowed. "Yes. Very sure," she whimpered.

Impassively, the guards complied.

When Fluttershy looked back towards the cave, Spike had already walked through the entrance. Fluttershy hurried to catch up with him.

With the timid pegasus in tow, Spike walked past massive piles of gleaming golden coins and sparkling gemstones, paying no attention to the former and gazing longingly at the latter. Eventually, he and Fluttershy reached the cave's inhabitant, a veritable mountain of scales and flesh.

Spike swallowed nervously at the sight of the colossal wyrm that lay in front of them, coiled and slumbering. "You wanna do the honors, or shall I?" he asked Fluttershy, glancing back at her.

"Go ahead," Fluttershy said. She wasn't eager to wake the sleeping dragon, either.

Spike took a deep breath, and then grinned – somewhat nervously, Fluttershy thought. "Okay," Spike muttered to himself. "You can do this. Think *happy* thoughts." He stepped forward, and then tapped on the dragon's eyelid. "Hey, bro? Could you wake up for a sec? We need to talk to you."

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, the dragon stirred.

The sound of scale on scale rasped loudly in the cavern as the dragon uncoiled and stretched its jet-black body, fully twice as long as any dragon that Fluttershy had seen before. The great wyrm yawned widely, revealing razor-sharp fangs that crackled with electricity, before focusing on Spike with blue-green eyes.

"Thou hast awakened me from my slumber," the dragon thundered. **"State thy business, little wyrmling, before I tire of this and make a meal of thee."**

Fluttershy stared up at the beast in mounting horror. "Oh no," she whispered to Spike. "We've awakened a Storm Dragon!"

"That's bad, huh?" Spike whispered back.

Fluttershy nodded fervently: Storm Dragons were among the most ancient, most enormous, most dangerous, and above all *least* friendly of the various types of dragons known to the ponies of Equestria.

At the sound of the pegasus's voice, the Storm Dragon turned its head to face Fluttershy. **"What is this?"** it rumbled. **"What is a mere pony such as thyself doing..."** Its voice trailed off as its pupils shrank to tiny slits. For a long moment, it was deathly still. Then it shrank back. **"Sharl'dahk!"** it hissed.

Fluttershy blinked. "What?" she said, glancing at Spike.

Spike, however, had a fierce grin on his face. "Gee, when Luna said that you earned a reputation among dragons, she wasn't kidding!"

“...What?” Fluttershy repeated.

“*Sharl’dahk* is a title from the Draconic language,” Spike explained quickly. “Roughly translated, it means ‘She Who Must Be Avoided’. You, a...” He paused. “...well, a ‘mere pony’, have single-hoofedly challenged a mighty dragon - and *won!* Sure, it was just a battle of wills, but...”

Fluttershy’s brow furrowed. “Um... W-when was this?”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “You know, that time when that one dragon tried to take a nap near Ponyville? You yelled at it after it tried to hurt our friends...”

“Oh.” Fluttershy looked away. “Right...”

“Well, the point is that you defeated him, and that’s earned you the title of *Sharl’dahk*,” Spike continued. “*That* sort of thing happens only once every few hundred years! But now, by ancient draconic law, any dragons that you call upon must either serve you or forfeit their life.”

Fluttershy frowned. She looked up at the Storm Dragon, who was watching the exchange anxiously. Despite its size, it looked like a small, fuzzy creature in the path of an oncoming train.

Noticing her gaze, the Storm Dragon shrank back further, flattening its massive bulk against the back of the cave. “**I-is there anything at all I can do f-for you, Mistress?**” it stammered.

Fluttershy’s mouth fell open. This was all too much. The Storm Dragon was had the living daylight scared out of it by *her*? She had no idea how to react.

Luckily, Spike was quicker to respond. “Well, I know *I* for one am hungry.” He peered over at a nearby heap of gemstones. “Hey, are those *watermelon* tourmalines?”

The Storm Dragon hurriedly shoved the pile towards Spike. “**Please, take whatever thou wishest,**” it urged.

As Spike happily dove into the pile, Fluttershy swallowed nervously. “Actually, sir...” she began. “Sorry to trouble you, but we’re here because we need some help. If you would be so kind as to possibly consider lending a hoof – um, sorry, I meant claw...”

“**Whatever thou sayest,**” the Storm Dragon said hurriedly. “**I shall help thee. Happy to help.**” It let out a nervous giggle, which in the dragon’s deep, resonant voice sounded like a peal of thunder.

Fluttershy frowned. This was easy... maybe *too* easy. “A-are you sure? It’ll be awfully dangerous...”

“No! Please, allow me,” the dragon rumbled.

Fluttershy shrugged. “Okay... We’d better get going, then... if that’s okay with you.”

“Yes, Mistress,” the Storm Dragon said promptly.

“Y’know, Pinks,” Gilda said, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Really?” Pinkie replied.

Gilda glared at her. “No, I’m physically incapable of thinking, and in fact cannot even comprehend any thought or emotion beyond irritation or incoherent rage.”

“Oh. That explains a lo—”

“*That was sarcasm.* Look, do you want to hear about this or not?”

Pinkie nodded.

“Anyway, it occurs to me that we might have to look at this at a different angle,” Gilda said. “Maybe these issues you’re having are tied to some issues you *already* had.”

Pinkie’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Gilda said, “in pretty much every story I’ve read where a character finds themselves in an unfamiliar body, the problem doesn’t get reversed until some pretty extensive personal growth has gone on. Said growth is usually tied to a personality-related issue that the character was facing immediately before the unexpected transformation.”

Pinkie’s face lit up. “I see! So we’re gonna go through a zany adventure that will make me have that personal growth?”

Gilda shook her head. “No, that’s the *stupid* way to do it. If your transformation really *is* tied to a personal problem, then it can just as easily be solved by calmly sitting down, determining the issue, and then solving it. Pinks, you don’t need a zany adventure, you need a *therapist*.”

Pinkie’s enthusiasm diminished somewhat. “Oh. Okay, then,” she said.

“Of course, I doubt we could *find* a therapist in the middle of the Everfree, so let’s see what *I* can do,” Gilda said. “I’m not exactly a trained professional, but I think I know enough to figure you out. So, shall we begin?”

“Okie Dokie Lokie!” Pinkie said. She snapped her fingers, and a large couch appeared with a *pop*. Pinkie lay down on it.

Gilda produced a clipboard and a pen. "Alright then. Let's take a look at that brain of yours, shall we?"

Pinkie stood up. "Okay!" Immediately, she shrunk down and walked into her own ear. After a moment, she walked back out and returned to normal size. "It's all wrinkly and sort of pinkish. Does that help?"

Gilda stared at Pinkie, visibly shaken. "Buh... But you – how is that even..." Her beak opened and closed wordlessly a few times.

Pinkie's brow furrowed. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Wrong?" Gilda echoed weakly. "No, all you did was coolly and casually break *physics itself*. I mean, that's par for the course when it comes to draconequuses... uh, draconequiii... whatever. But *that*? Ugh." She shuddered, then tossed the clipboard aside. "You know what? Forget it. I'd probably go bonkers before I could figure *you* out, anyway."

Twilight looked ahead at the growing throng of ponies, who gathered a few blocks away at Manehattan's Central Park. "Well, that's probably where Trixie is," she said. "If there's one thing Trixie knows how to do, it's capture an audience."

"Shall we come with you, Miss?" asked one of the guards that was currently with her.

Twilight frowned thoughtfully, but then shook her head. "...No," she decided. "In the worst case scenario, I don't think Trixie would be any trouble if it comes to a fight, but if she sees me show up with the pair of you, she may panic and run."

"As you wish," said the other guard.

Twilight walked towards the crowd, leaving her traveling companions behind. As she approached the congregation, she could make out the familiar voice of a certain showpony.

"...As the Ursa lumbered towards the Great and Powerful Trixie, smashing carts and houses that got in its way, she trembled fearfully," the voice was saying. "While on any *other* day she might have bested even a Major, the, uh... *virus* that was ailing Trixie prevented her from doing even the slightest bit of harm against the Minor, although it was not for lack of trying."

Twilight paused. *Is she telling the story of...?*

"Trixie animated ropes to bind the beast, and summoned thunderclouds to smite it, but to *no avail!* Trixie's cold turned her most impressive displays into pitiful shades of their normal splendor, and the beast didn't even slow. The Ursa lumbered ever closer, growing angrier by the second... and then..."

Twilight pushed her way through the crowd. She could already see the Trixie on the

stage, who told her story with even greater gusto than her performance in Ponyville.

Trixie looked far better than the last time Twilight had seen her. Her coat gleamed, her mane shone, and her eyes sparkled. The unicorn had replaced her old cap and cape with a voluminous, deep purple cloak and matching hat, both embroidered with silvery, arcane sigils. Even her wagon had been replaced with another that was easily twice as large. Everything about Trixie was even larger-than-life than before, and she obviously enjoyed it.

While Twilight looked on, Trixie continued her tale. “Then the purple unicorn, the one who had previously so vehemently denied being special, appeared. Upon seeing the Ursa, she paled, but gritted her teeth and focused all her might into her horn.” Here, Trixie began to mime the actions of Twilight, and she used her magic to enhance the tale. “Strong but subtle winds blew through the reeds, conjuring beautiful, unearthly music that calmed the angry bear! A massive vessel, filled with milk, floated into the waiting paws of the Ursa and lulled it into a peaceful slumber! And finally, the very beast itself was floated back into the cave from whence it came!”

Twilight’s eyes widened. She’d been expecting Trixie to put a twist on the tale, and to be fair, she had – by, more or less, sticking to the *truth*.

As the crowd cheered, Trixie paused for a moment, panting as if she had actually been carrying out the acts she had been describing. As the crowd fell silent, she spoke up again. “After *easily* besting the Ursa Minor, the purple unicorn revealed to Trixie that she was Twilight Sparkle – tutored by the *Princess of the Sun* herself!”

At that, few members of the audience gasped. Trixie grinned. “Yes, Trixie was rather shocked, too,” she said. “Anyway, the reason that Twilight had hidden her powers from the ponies of her town was because she was fearful of losing her friends.” Trixie chuckled. “Little had Twilight realized that it was the *boasting* of Trixie – not Trixie’s *magic* – that had caused such a negative reaction amongst her friends, who still welcomed Twilight with open arms. And with good reason - had it not been for Twilight’s actions, the town would have been destroyed. She had saved the day...”

Trixie’s voice trailed off suddenly. After a moment, Twilight realized that Trixie was staring directly at her. Trixie looked shocked.

“...And now, she graces us with her presence on *this* day!” Trixie lunged forward and tore Twilight from her spot in the crowd.

Twilight found herself being dragged onto the stage. She stood there, startled and bewildered. “Wuh?” she articulated.

With a flourish, Trixie presented the purple unicorn. “Ponies of Manehattan, I give you... the Wise and Wonderful Twilight Sparkle!” There was a brilliant flash as a volley of fireworks erupted, accompanied by Trixie’s signature fanfare. The crowd cheered and stomped their

hooves.

Fifteen minutes later, the show was over, Trixie had greeted her various admirers and given out signatures (as did Twilight, at Trixie's behest,) and the showpony had tugged her impromptu guest appearance into the wagon. Finally, Twilight found her voice. "...What just *happened*?" she asked.

"Oh, just a little trick that Trixie learned on the road," replied Trixie, sounding somewhat self-satisfied. "If one is to succeed in show business, one must learn to give the audience what it wants. And, thanks to *you*," she continued, "what Trixie has learned that it wants is not a boring, invincible hero, but somepony who *barely* succeeds against *insane* odds... and who occasionally needed to be rescued herself."

"Is that so?" Twilight replied weakly, still reeling from her sudden experience on stage.

Trixie flashed a brilliant smile. "Of course! It adds dramatic tension to the story, and an audience relates better to a flawed protagonist anyway." She chuckled. "Ironically, the fiasco in Ponyville sparked Trixie's career – now whenever Trixie tells the story of her amazing, improbable, and *extremely* lucky victory over the Ursa Major, she adds the tale of how Twilight Sparkle saved *her* from the Ursa Minor... allowing, of course, for the fact that Trixie could have *probably* bested the beast had an ill-timed illness not crippled her abilities."

"And that works?" Twilight said incredulously.

"The audience simply *adores* it!" Trixie exclaimed. "As such, Trixie has made all the stories of her easy victories against mighty foes into stories of only *barely* defeating them – through a mixture of guile, gumption, and luck." She paused for a moment, idly examining a hoof. "Funny how all the Great and Powerful Trixie had to do to win the hearts of her watchers was to *underplay* her abilities."

Twilight rolled her eyes. *That* was the Trixie she knew. "Even so," she said, "did you have to drag *me* into that?"

"Ever since I started telling the tale, you've become nearly as popular as I have," Trixie replied, smirking. "I just *had* to repay you for the lesson you taught me, and since you showed up at the most dramatically appropriate time, I thought that it would only be fitting." She laughed somewhat wickedly. "You *do* have to admit that the crowd loved it."

Twilight sighed. The audience *had* loved it, but she wasn't about to give Trixie the satisfaction of hearing *her* say it.

"But enough about me," Trixie decided. "It's good to see you again, Sparkle. How *have* things been in that backwater little town of yours? Are the yokels still treating you pleasantly enough?"

With a glare, Twilight opened her mouth.

Before she could say anything, Trixie cut her off. "Wait a minute..." she pondered, tapping her chin thoughtfully, "What *are* you doing here in Manehattan, anyway? Looking for Trixie, perhaps?" She held up a hoof. "No, of course you are, don't bother denying it. Trixie may work with magic, but she does not easily believe in *coincidences*."

"Actually, you're right," Twilight said. "I've specifically been sent to find you... by the Princesses themselves."

Trixie paled. "Whatever it was, I didn't do it!" she said a bit too hastily.

"Relax, you're not in trouble," Twilight said, rolling her eyes. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

"Oh?" Trixie said, eyes gleaming. "Are the Princesses finally recognizing the Great and Powerful Trixie's magical might?"

"You could say that," Twilight said flatly. "You know how all this chaos has been spreading?"

"Trixie found it beneath herself to notice such things," Trixie sniffed. "Doing so would get in the way of the Show."

Twilight's face became serious. "Well, you won't get the option of ignoring it much longer. Perhaps you didn't notice, but when I arrived, the chaos was just under a mile from the city limits. It won't take long for it to cover all of Equestria."

"And I think you know why," Trixie replied coolly. "Are you actually going to *tell* me the reason, or just keep side-stepping around any context?"

"Fine," Twilight said. "A new draconequus has appeared, and it seems dead-set on plunging Equestria into chaos – just like Discord did. Not only that, but we can't use the Elem—"

"*Another Discord?!*" Trixie interrupted, jaw dropping. "What do you want *me* to do about it? *You* of all ponies should know that I can hardly stand up to an Ursa *Minor*, let alone a bucking *draconequus!*"

"Oh?" Twilight deadpanned, raising an eyebrow. "And here I thought that the Great and Powerful Trixie had been *underplaying* her abilities the whole time."

Trixie reeled, stumbling back a step. "You – You know what I mean!" she snapped. "If I, or anypony for that matter, faced this 'Eris' in open combat, I'd be a greasy smear in the dust in ten seconds flat!"

"Probably less," Twilight admitted, "But the Princesses don't actually want you to fight Eris alone – or at all, for that matter. You'll simply be the distraction."

“Th-the distraction?” Trixie stammered.

“Yes,” Twilight said. “All you have to do is summon up some illusions so that Eris is too busy to strike at the real threat.” She rolled her eyes. “Heck, you probably wouldn’t even have to get too close to her.”

Trixie sighed. “Oh. Be as that may, I... that is, the Great and Powerful Trixie – can’t quite muster up *that* much power.”

“We know,” Twilight said. “That’s why I brought you *this*.” At that, she tossed Luna’s clasp to Trixie.

The showpony swiftly caught it with her magic and examined it carefully, turning it this way and that while she listened to it quietly hum. After a minute, her eyes slowly widened. “Oh... oh *my*. You are giving something like *this* to *me*? I’m flattered.” Her eyes gleamed. “The things Trixie could do with *this*...!”

“Luna said that it was a ‘gift’,” explained Twilight, “but one that she will take back – with interest – if you abuse it.”

“...Ah. Of course,” Trixie said, grimacing.

For a minute or two, Trixie’s eyes darted from the clasp to the direction of the city limits and back again. She looked at the former with longing in her eyes, but appeared to regard the latter with trepidation.

Finally, she spoke up again. “Even so, I am *still* unsure of how to deal with... *all* of this,” she said hesitantly. She gestured to the pendant, and to Twilight, then slumped down with a sigh. “Trixie m-may... well, I might very well *decline* your offer...”

This isn’t going well... Alright, one last try, Twilight thought. *Time to fight fire with fire.*

Twilight sighed theatrically. “I understand,” she said. “After all, I can see that you’re busy here. Yes, you’re *much* too busy to help to save Equestria from evil. Even when the Princesses themselves not only give you a powerful gift, but *plead* for your aid!” She shook her head sadly. “What a story it *could have* been! What a chance to prove your power to the world! But no, I could beg on bent knee, but I can see that you would still refuse.” She headed towards the exit, but paused in the doorway, striking what she hoped was an appropriately dramatic pose. “Goodbye, *Great and Powerful* Trixie. Even if I live through this, you shall *never*. See me. Again.”

Trixie immediately looked up, eyes wide. “N-never?”

Instead of answering, Twilight left the wagon. She began to walk away, keeping her head down as she smirked. *Three... Two... One...*

“Okay!” shouted Trixie, bursting out of her home to pursue Twilight. “I’ll help!” She

skidded past Twilight, and then turned to affix her with a mild glare. “You just *had* to hit below the belt, didn't you, Sparkle? Well, you win. As you ask, I shall lend my horn to your cause... Well, what are you waiting for? Let us move on from this backwater little town—”

“We're in Manehattan,” Twilight reminded her.

“—and meet our destiny!” Trixie continued, unfazed. “We should tarry no longer, for Trixie shall shape this encounter into a marvelous story to be told for ages to come!”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “I have no doubt.”

Gilda looked her checklist over once more. “Well, it looks like every mental *and* physical discipline technique that I know has been a bust,” she said grudgingly. “Guess we'll have to move on to *magical* theory...”

“Wait!” Pinkie looked up from her breakfast of cotton candy, strawberry-flavored licorice, and licorice-flavored strawberries to stare at Gilda in confusion. “What ‘physical discipline techniques’?”

“*What do I* – Pinks, we've been working through various exercises for almost *two weeks* now!” Gilda sputtered. “What did you *think* we were doing this whole time?!”

Now that she thought about it, Pinkie recalled *something* along those lines. “...*Oh*. So you mean that thing with the poses was training?”

“Yes,” Gilda said flatly. “The yoga was part of the training.”

“And the karate?” Pinkie asked.

Gilda nodded stiffly, her expression strained. “That too.”

A suspicion started to form in Pinkie's mind. “What about that part where you made me set fire to part of the forest?”

“Hey, *I* didn't know you'd react so poorly to hypnosis!” Gilda said defensively. “Besides, we put out all those fires, didn't we?”

“Yup!” Pinkie replied.

“Well, if you didn't realize that was all training, then what did you *think* it was?” Gilda said.

Pinkie stared at her blankly. “...Fun.”

For a long moment, Gilda stared back. Finally, the gryphon shrugged. “Eh. Fair enough, I

suppose,” she said grudgingly.

“So should we try all that stuff again?” Pinkie asked.

“Nah. None of it was really going anywhere, anyway,” Gilda replied. “We probably should have been focusing on magical theory in the *first* place. Now let’s get on with it.” She grabbed a stick and started drawing a complex, roughly circular pattern in the dirt. “Now, I believe the best option, as far as we are concerned, is probably a dampening rune. I’ve seen a few in a book once.”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “Just once? And you remember them?”

Gilda cleared her throat. “Well, okay, I reread that *particular* book a few times.” She turned her attention back to the rune. “Anyway, this design is quite simple, and it should help repress most of your power – a temporary fix, but hopefully that’s all we’ll need.”

Pinkie stared at the pattern. “Gee, Gilda, your brain must be like a library if you can remember all this stuff so well!” She peered quizzically at the gryphon’s head. “Is there a teeny tiny little Twilight in there, too?”

Gilda glared at her. “No, and I’d rather it *stay* that way. *Please* try to curb your imagination.” She sighed. “As for the memory, it’s just that... well, the past year has given me plenty of time to review my memories. But can we get back to helping *you*?”

Pinkie nodded.

Satisfied, Gilda tapped her now-completed rune. “See this here? Now, I can draw it, but I can’t actually *put* any magic in it. That’s where you come in. Take a good look, and then form a mental image of it.”

“Okay!” Pinkie closed her eyes and pictured the rune. There it sat in her mind, glowing faintly.

“Got it?” Gilda asked.

Pinkie nodded slowly. “Uh-huh.”

“Good,” Gilda said. “Now see if you can locate the source of your power... Clear your mind, like in the meditation from earlier. Well, except without teleporting away this time.”

Pinkie breathed in deeply, dismissing any lingering, distracting thoughts. Now that she was properly focused, she found that she could feel a gentle humming throughout her entire body... A little more observation led to the conclusion that the feeling was strongest in her fingertips... *no, hold on*... in her chest. The feeling seemed to originate in the heart, flowing into all parts of the body but mostly gathering in the hands.

“Got it,” Pinkie said.

“Excellent. Now move the rune directly to the source of your magic. Picture the flow redirecting itself into the rune, circulating in a counterclockwise motion.”

Pinkie placed the mental rune directly on top of her heart, and then willed the flow of her magic into it. Right as the first sliver of magic touched the rune –

Time slowed to a crawl.

Tingle. Twitch.

"Wh-"

Flash.

PAIN

Pinkie fell to the ground, clutching her head. White-hot agony, brighter than a thousand suns, lanced her skull for the slightest instant, leaving a lingering ache so intense that she could not even scream.

Through a painful haze, Pinkie felt her power erupt from her. She heard a series of unpleasant, greasy pops, the sound of ghostly laughter, and a bubbling hiss.

Pinkie could make out Gilda sighing in disgust. “Geez, Pinks, now look what you’ve done!”

A short pause.

“Uh... Pinks, you okay?” Gilda suddenly sounded concerned. A moment later, Pinkie felt herself being propped up on something warm and soft. “C’mon, Pinks, say something...”

Pinkie choked out a sob. “Ow...” she mumbled.

“Shhh, it’s okay...” Gilda murmured. Pinkie became aware of the sensation of her mane being stroked. “I’m sor- ...sor-” The gryphon seemed to gag on the word. She gritted her teeth. “...I-I’m sssorry. I didn’t know... *that* would happen.”

“M’kay,” Pinkie replied. After a moment, she spoke up again. “Gilda?”

“Yes?”

“Can we please stop trying *this* type of training?”

After a pause, Gilda answered. “Okay.”

“ ‘nk you,” Pinkie mumbled, and then snuggled in closer to Gilda’s downy feathers.

The room was huge, spacious, and very, *very*, clean. A single skylight provided illumination, and as the gentle sunlight streamed into the room, it fell upon many a work of art – a delicate vase, an exquisite painting, an intricately-sculpted statuette, all spaced *just so* in order to best please the eye. Every piece was precious, and nearly all of them were unique.

Indeed, the old teak table that dominated the center of the room was one-of-a-kind, and the antique porcelain tea set that rested upon it would have been the pride of many a museum. But in many a pony's eyes, the most priceless works of art in the room would have been the two unicorn mares seated at the table, sipping daintily from their teacups.

The two were, in a manner of speaking, a matching set. There were, of course, some superficial differences – one's coat was a glossy ebony, the other a gleaming alabaster; one's mane a deep topaz, the other's a rich amethyst – but how they carried themselves with poise and grace; the way their elegantly coiffured manes formed luxurious curls; the surprisingly calculating gleam in their gem-like eyes... One would be hard-pressed to find a pair that complemented each other so perfectly.

For a long while, the only sounds in the room were the clink of antique porcelain and the gentle sloshing of very expensive tea. The two unicorns stared at each other appraisingly, waiting for the other to speak.

The white-coated mare was the first to oblige. "Once again, Sable Lace, I must thank you for your hospitality."

"Oh, not at all, Rarity," the other replied, the edge of her mouth quirking upwards. "It's always a pleasure whenever you visit. We see so little of each other nowadays, don't we?"

Rarity conceded the point with a gentle nod. "I *do* miss the conversations we used to have. It's not that I'm ever at a loss for clever repartee in Ponyville, but..."

"...there are some things that one simply does *not* discuss with most ponies," Sable finished.

"Exactly," Rarity said. "Which, regrettably, brings us to the matter at hoof."

Sable sighed. "Oh Rarity, my dear, must we bring that up so *soon*? I'm all for business before pleasure, but it's been *such* a long time..."

"I fear we may not *have* much more time," Rarity replied. "I promise that when this is all over, we'll have a chance to talk idly, but this is a matter of utmost importance."

Sable frowned, but nodded. "Very well." She paused for a moment, then continued in a carefully measured voice. "How *is* the situation at your boutique, darling?"

"Quite well, but a rather daunting order has just been placed," Rarity said. "I may have to

hire some help.”

“I see. And what are you in the market for? A seamstress, maybe? Perhaps a quilter? Even a gem hunter...”

“I’m afraid I’m not after any of those things.” Rarity paused. “A *cloth-cutter*, however...”

“Ah.” Sable’s expression remained decidedly neutral as she sipped at her tea. “So a *particular* bolt of cloth has been giving you trouble. May I inquire as to the type of fabric?”

Rarity took a deep breath before answering. “Industrial-grade titanium.”

Sable’s eyebrow moved ever so slightly upwards. Coming from her, it was tantamount to spewing a mouthful of tea across the room. “Perhaps I misheard you,” she replied, her tone even more subdued.

Rarity gave her head a slight shake. “I’m afraid not.”

For a long moment, Sable sat speechless. Eventually, she found her voice. “So... you’re after the Mad Hatter.”

“Not exactly.” Rarity smiled apologetically. “It is a Mad Hatter, but not *the* Mad Hatter.”

Sable’s brow furrowed. “I had no idea there was more than one Hatter.”

“She took us *all* by surprise,” Rarity said.

“I can imagine,” Sable said. “Well, if the *Hatter’s* on the catwalk, then you’ll need the best. I shall send some cloth-cutters immediately.” She paused. “Darling, do you think you would look better in Silk or Satin?”

Rarity stared into her teacup. “I’m rather partial to both, but the market value for *either* of them is far greater than I can afford at the moment...”

Sable idly waved a hoof. “Don’t worry about *that*. I have a feeling that if this order of yours was completed, it would benefit us all. I shall cover the expenses.”

“I suppose in that case, it wouldn’t hurt to have both Silk *and* Satin on hand,” Rarity said.

Sable sipped at her tea. “Good thinking.”

“Got any ideas?” Pinkie asked.

Gilda glared down at the little rows of boxes on her checklist. Not a single box lacked a check mark. “No. No, I *haven’t* come up with anything since five minutes ago, thanks for asking.”

Pinkie frowned. Was that sarcasm? It sounded like sarcasm.

"Y'know what? I'm not even sure this is possible," Gilda growled, chucking her checklist over her shoulder. "We've tried everything I can remember about both mental discipline and magical theory, but nothing's working!" She sighed. "Heck, I'm not even sure this is really the same thing as pony magic at all."

"What do you mean by that?" Pinkie asked.

Gilda cleared her throat. "Certain scholars have theorized that the very nature of magic is Order-based, albeit so complex and draconian that it can seem to be the opposite. However, whatever freaky stuff *you're* using," she said, "seems to flaunt every single rule that I can recall! And since my retooled mental discipline strategies have been equally useless, these past few weeks have been a *complete* waste of time!" She slammed her head repeatedly against a nearby tree. "*A useless! Annoying! Waste of time!*"

Pinkie blinked. "Sorry," she asked, "did you... did you already have plans or something?"

The gryphon glared at Pinkie for a long time. Slowly, Gilda's claws began to ball up into fists, but then she stopped, stared at them, and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. "The things I do for you, Dash," Gilda muttered to herself, then opened her eyes again.

"Don't worry, Gilda!" Pinkie said. "I'm sure we'll figure this out soon."

Gilda rolled her eyes. "Oh, you are, huh? Well, that makes me feel so much better."

"Okay, that *is* sarcasm," Pinkie grumbled.

"What's *that*?" Gilda raised her head sharply. "Oh, Is the Queen of Saccharine finally starting to get a little crabby?"

Pinkie turned away from Gilda, pouting defiantly. "Well, maybe if *you* weren't always such a Grumpy McGrumperson..."

"Hey, you can't afford to be critical of my attitude! *You're* the needy one, not me," Gilda snapped. "I could walk away from you *and* your stupid problem if I wanted to!"

"What about Dashie?" Pinkie said.

"What *about* her?!" Gilda snarled. "I bet I could do a better job reconciling with her *without* you, you bumbling dweeb!"

"Oh, yeah?" replied Pinkie, temper rising. "Well, you're so mean, I think you'd do a really, *really* bad job without me!"

"Is that so?" The gryphon rolled her eyes. "Well, what're you gonna do, just snap your fingers and make it all better?"

Pinkie's eyes widened as a realization hit her. "Wait a minute – Snap... fingers?"

Gilda paused. "Yeah, that's... what I said," she answered warily. "Why, what's it to you?"

"That's what Discord always did when he used *his* powers," Pinkie said.

Gilda's eyes widened too. "...So... that means..." Suddenly, the gryphon became a lot more animated. "That's *it!* *That's* what we've been missing! I've been going about this the completely wrong way!" She hugged Pinkie in her excitement. "Pinkie Pie, you're a *genius!*"

Pinkie stared down at Gilda, shocked. Urgently, she racked her brain for the answer to whether or not the gryphon's action constituted a violation of the Second Rule.

"...Um. Heh." Gilda let go of Pinkie, blushing furiously. "I... I guess I got a bit carried away."

Pinkie smiled. "That's okay!" she said. "I do that all the time. So, you think all I have to do to control my powers is snap my fingers?"

"Well, there's more to it than *that*," Gilda said. "I guess in regards to the finger-snapping, you have to think about achieving the desired effect when, *and only when*, snapping your fingers."

"Oh," Pinkie said. "Is that all? Are you sure?"

"Well, it's a start. But I think that this whole finger business is just the beginning!" Gilda's eyes gleamed. "Why, if we consider Discord's way of going about things, then that answers a whole lot a questions!"

Pinkie tilted her head inquisitively. "Like what?"

"For starters, magic thrives on harmony... so naturally, *Discord*, by his very nature, *can't* use it! But he still uses *some* sort of supernatural power, so that means pony magic – Order-based magic – is only *one* kind! Discord, and now *you*, must use some sort of Chaos-based magic... No wonder you reacted so poorly when we tried the dampening rune, it was completely incompatible..."

Pinkie frowned. Somehow, that explanation of the incident with the rune didn't seem *quite* right to her...

As Gilda continued, her grin slowly widened. "It takes a disciplined mind and logical thinking to control Order Magic, while if what I'm thinking is correct, Chaos Magic requires force of personality and nonlinear thinking. That's probably why you're finding it *too* easy to use... Additionally, if this theory of Order and Chaos magic holds true, then that opens up so many possibilities! Think about it. For starters, a dragon's magic is probably Chaotic, if its greed-based growth spurts are anything to go by, and – Um." The gryphon blushed again. "Another geek-out.

Sorry.”

Pinkie beamed. “No, don’t be sorry. It’s super-duper great that you’re such a super-smart smarty-pants! So should we test it out, then?”

Gilda chuckled. “Gee, Pinks, I’m glad you’re eager, but where would we find a dragon at *this* hour?” She paused. “...Oh! Right! *Your* chaos magic, my bad. Yeah, we should get started on that right away.”

“Got any ideas?” Pinkie asked.

Gilda’s eyes sparkled. “That I do, Pinks. That I do.”

Rainbow Dash trotted into the Farrington Library. She looked around at the stone walls of the establishment, the long rows of towering bookshelves, and the plush chairs. “Weird,” she observed.

“Can I help you?” asked a voice.

Dash looked up to see a goldenrod pegasus with a sky-blue mane hovering nearby. She wore a pair of wire-framed, half-moon spectacles and a mischievous smile.

“Oh,” Rainbow said, slightly off-guard. “Didn’t see you there. You’re, uh, the librarian here?”

“Yeah, that’s, ‘uh’, me,” the pegasus said, mimicking Dash. “My name’s Breezy Pinions, but I never really liked the name... You can call me Breeze. No doubt you were expecting a unicorn for a librarian?”

“Hadn’t really thought about it,” Dash admitted. “But my friend Twilight runs the Ponyville library, and to be honest, I guess I sorta expected something pretty close.”

“Oh?” Breeze said. “To the library or the librarian?”

“Both.” Rainbow glanced around again. “It’s kinda weird seeing all these books in one place that’s not a giant hollow tree.”

“Yeah, all the ‘giant hollow trees’ around here are purely residential,” Breeze snarked, softly landing in front of Rainbow. “So are you here for a book, or just to discuss botanical architecture?”

“Neither, actually,” Dash replied. “I’m here about a gryphon by the name of Gilda. I was told that she used to come in here a lot?”

Breeze’s eyes widened. “Oh, you’re *her*, aren’t you?” she asked. “You’re Rainbow

Dash?”

“You’ve heard of me?” Rainbow said, pleased.

“Yeah, I certainly *have*,” Breeze said. “Now you have to come and look for Gilda! Where were you *before* everything happened?!”

“Hey, I—” Dash began sharply, but she paused. “Wait, whaddaya mean, ‘everything’? Is she in trouble?”

Breeze sighed. “You tell me. She’s disappeared.”

“Right, I *know* that,” Dash said. “Luna already told me. That’s why I’m trying to *find* her.”

“Wait, what?” Breeze blinked. “*Princess Luna* is looking for Gilda?”

“Yeah. Listen, are you going to tell me anything or not?”

Breeze took off her glasses and cleaned them carefully with one wing, her expression unreadable. As she returned them to her face, her eyes narrowed slightly. “...*Fine*. It’s not like I can argue, what with a Princess backing you up. Even so, know that I’m only doing this for Gilda’s benefit.” She looked Rainbow sharply in the eye. “It *is* for her benefit, *right?*”

“I... I guess,” Dash said.

“You ‘*guess*’?” Breeze echoed. Then she sighed. “Never mind. It’ll simply have to do.” She motioned to one of the chairs. “This could take a while, so feel free to sit down.”

As Rainbow complied, Breeze followed suit. “So,” Dash said, “what can you tell me about Gilda?”

“Well...” Breeze started. “When I first met Gilda, she didn’t say much of anything at all. She just swept into the library one day, read a few books, and then stormed out again. She seemed... angry. And a little sad.”

“Angry, huh?” Dash interrupted. “Yeah, that’s the Gilda I know.”

“That’s the Gilda you *knew*,” Breeze retorted. “She’s changed.”

Dash rolled her eyes. “Yeah, she did. She was my best friend, and then she became a nasty, friend-hating deserter.”

Breeze glared at Rainbow. “‘Deserter’? You’re supposed to be the Bearer of the Element of Loyalty, from what I hear.” She arched a brow. “Lose any sleep over letting Gilda go?”

“Well... uh...” As Rainbow thought about it, she looked away. “No, I guess not. But *she* made her choice, not me!”

“True,” Breeze conceded, “but Gilda was tricked into losing her temper, then pretty much forced into a public apology. Do your friends ever do anything like that to *you*?”

Dash rolled her eyes. “Sort of. They dressed up like superheroes and humiliated me... well, not *exactly*, but sort of,” she said. “But it was for my own good! I can stand a little humility sometimes, and I thought Gilda could too.”

Breeze looked like she was about to say something, but after a moment, she nodded grudgingly. “Touché. But do you want to hear about this or not?”

“Sorry,” Rainbow said.

Breeze continued. “*Anyway*, Gilda came in here every day, never said a word, but just read some more and left at closing time. She seemed to be practically boiling over with rage – every time I tried to talk to her, she snapped at me, then went back to reading. After a couple of weeks, however, I could see the anger fade... but not the sadness.

“So, that went on for a long time, until one day, when *she* decided to speak to *me*...

“*Hey. Librarian lady.*”

*I look up from my work to see the gryphon staring at me with a scowl. “May I help you?” I asked, my tone carefully neutral. I don’t much like being called “librarian lady”, but the gryphon was the only person to visit in a **very** long time, and I don’t want to scare her away. Besides, one learns to tolerate such things in my line of work.*

“*Yeah,*” the gryphon replies, glancing around at the shelves. “*You got any more books around here?*”

I blink, caught somewhat off-guard by the question. “...Any... more books?” I cough delicately before continuing. “Well, are you after anything in particular?”

“*No. Just get me a book,*” The gryphon says, irritated.

“*Hmm...*” *I flutter out from behind my desk and hover at the top of the nearest bookshelf. “Well, what have you already read?” I ask, letting my gaze travel over the titles of each book.*

“*All of them,*” the gryphon replies flatly.

*I drop back down to the ground. “...**All** of them?” I repeat.*

*She rolls her eyes. “Yes, **all** of them. Is that so hard to believe?”*

“*Well...*” *I say. “I suppose you have been coming in here a lot, Miss... uh...”*

“Gilda,” the gryphon says. “Just Gilda.”

*I nod. “...Gilda... but we have **thousands** of books here! How could you possibly have read **all** of them?”*

*Gilda chuckles darkly. “I **have** been coming in here for nearly a year now! I read from opening to closing time, you know. What, are you surprised that I can make proper use of my free time?”*

*I continue to stare at her, dumbfounded. “But... surely when you say **every** book...”*

*“Look, lady,” Gilda says, voice rising, “When I say every book, I mean every single one! Magical theory, information and general works; philosophy and psychology; religion; social sciences; language; science; technology; arts and recreation; literature; **and** history and geography! I’ve practically memorized entire shelves! I even forced myself to read through every. Single. **Awful**. ‘Young mare’ romance series!” Here, she leans in close to me, eyes burning. “Don’t even get me **started** on the one about the changelings! Look, lady, I’ve read and re-read every single piece of paper on those shelves,” she growls, “and all I have left are whatever books that aren’t already **out** there. Do. You. Have. Any. More. Books?”*

I shake my head fervently. “No!” I answer, trying not to squeak.

The gryphon’s face falls. “No? ...Not even anything in the return slot, perhaps?”

I give her a cold look. “You’ve been coming in here for ‘almost a year now’. Have you ever seen anypony here besides you or I?”

Gilda frowns for a moment, brow furrowing. “Wasn’t there one pony about a month or two ago who stopped by?”

*“He was looking for the local bookstore,” I say flatly. Silently, I curse the name of Page Turner’s Reading Emporium – not for the first time. Apparently, the ponies of Farrington would rather **pay** for books than worry about returning them. It’s a wonder why the library’s still in business. “**Besides** him, can you think of anyone else?” I ask.*

“No,” Gilda admits. “...But I was busy reading.”

*“Yes, it seems you were. Good for you,” I reply coolly. “Yes, those are **all** the books. What you see is what you get.”*

“Are you sure?” she asks.

*I sigh in irritation. “**Yes**. I’m sure. Geez, why do you **care** so much?”*

*Gilda stares at her feet. Her reply comes quietly, falteringly. “They... they help me forget. I’ve tried... flying, lifting weights, that sort of thing, b-but it doesn’t keep my **mind** occupied like **books** do... When I’m reading, I don’t have to remember what I’ve done.” She sighed. “I care so*

*much about those freaking books because I don't have anything **else** to care about."*

*"Er..." I look away awkwardly. "No friends, then?" I ask. Admittedly not the best response, I know, but when faced with something like **that**, it's hard to think.*

*Gilda lets out a bitter laugh. "I **used** to have a friend. Rainbow Dash. Real cool, for a pony."*

I huff at the last remark, but decide to let it slide. "'Used to?' What happened to her?" I pale. "She's not... dead, is she?"

*"I doubt it. But I know that **I'm** dead to **her**." Gilda chuckles darkly. "Gee, I'd spent **years** without seeing her, but one visit later - what a disaster - and now all I can think of is her... and what I'd done to her."*

*"What **did** you do?"*

She pauses reluctantly. "...Ah, why the heck not?" she eventually decides. "It all began when I decided to pay Dash a visit..."

Then she tells me about Ponyville. The monologue doesn't take very long, and soon Gilda falls silent. She slumps down, sighing mournfully.

*After a long moment, I try to cheer her up. "Come now," I say, "that... well, okay, it wasn't very nice, but you didn't do anything **too** bad, right?"*

*"Too bad?" Gilda rolls her eyes. "I insulted an entire town, verbally abused the friends of my friend, and finally, when offered a choice between keeping either my friendship or my pride... well, I practically **spat** in my friend's eye!" She shakes, although whether from sadness or rage I can't tell. "I'm... I'm the one in the wrong, and it's too late to fix anything..." She lets out a strangled gasp... It suspiciously like a sob, but I'm not about to call her out on it.*

*After a moment, I shake my head. "It's **never** too late," I say firmly. "All you have to do is go back to Ponyville and apologize to everypony."*

*Gilda sighs. "I don't give a flying- uh, I mean, I don't care about anypony but Dash, and we're both too hard-headed for stuff like apologies. Besides, if I ran into that simpering dweeb Pinkie Pie again, chances are I'd rough her up, and who **knows** the trouble **that** would cause..."*

*The thought of a **gryphon's** idea of "roughing someone up" gives me chills, but I press on. "You can still try," I say.*

*"You only get so many second chances, you know!" Gilda replies, her tone mockingly cheerful. "I doubt I have more than one left, and let's face it - I'm mean, nasty, cruel... whatever you want to call it, I'm just not **good!**" She hangs her head morosely. "Not enough for Dash, anyway..."*

I stare at her for a while. Eventually, I speak up. "Want to work on that?"

Gilda looks up. "Huh?"

"You aren't going to get any nicer if you don't work on it," I explain. "So are you going to or not?"

Gilda blinks in surprise. "What? How?"

*"You said you've read **every** book here. What's on **that** shelf?" I nod my head at the shelf in question.*

Gilda barely glances at it. "Self-help books."

"Third shelf from the top?"

"Anger management. Why do you bring... this..." Gilda's voice trails off for a moment. "Oh. Never mind."

*"Can you remember the **contents** of those books?" I ask.*

Gilda shrugs. "It probably wouldn't hurt to re-read them."

I nod. "That should be a start. Whatever the books can't help you with, I'll be happy to."

*Gilda stares blankly at me. "Seriously, are you actually offering to give me lessons in... being **nice**?"*

*"Yeah." I chuckle. "It's not like anyone ever comes in here anyway. We've both got to do **something** to pass the time, don't we?"*

"...To pass the time. Yeah, why not?" Gilda smiles. "Let's do this... uh... Hey, what am I supposed to call you, anyway?"

"Call me Breeze," I say.

The gryphon nods. "...Breeze. Alright. Let's begin."

"For the next few months, the two of us worked on, as Gilda put it, 'making her nice', Breeze continued. "Mostly it was anger management, patience, teaching her to swallow her pride, stuff like that." She shrugged. "Over that time, I'd seen some improvement, but she wasn't anywhere near ready to return back to Ponyville when..."

"When she disappeared?" Dash said. "And Discord showed up?"

"Yeah," Breeze replied. She laughed humorlessly. "That's when the manure hit the fan."

Rainbow's eyes narrowed. "What happened to Gilda?" she asked.

Breeze sighed. "Like I said before, your guess is as good as mine. Everything went crazy, including half the residents of Farrington. I didn't even see her that day, or any any day afterwards, for that matter." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "The last time I heard about her was when a couple of city guards showed up and asked some questions. Routine stuff, they claimed, but I think there was more to it than that..."

"City guards, you say?" echoed Rainbow. She got up and approached the door, looking over her shoulder as she continued. "Huh. Well, Breeze, thanks for your time, but gotta go. If Twilight ever visits Farrington, I'll tell her to stop by here." She smiled. "I'm sure you two eggheads would get along."

"Okay," Breeze said, nodding. "If you ever find out what happened to Gilda, let me know."

Dash left the library and made her way to the City Guard's headquarters. On the way, she pondered the librarian's words.

*Gilda's sorry? She's actually **sorry** for what she did? Huh. I'd never have guessed... Then again, Rainbow thought, it sounds like she's only sorry for what she said to **me**.*

But I don't think she'd bother to stick around so long for all that "niceness training" in the library if she didn't really want to improve, Dash argued to herself.

*A small, nagging part of her added, She **didn't** stick around, though, did she? Not in Ponyville, and not here, either...*

*Whatever. Either way, now I **really** want answers from Gilda...*

Soon, Dash reached the steps of the Guard headquarters. Once inside, she approached the front desk. The guard stationed there straightened out of his slouch and turned to address her. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You know anything about a certain gryphon by the name of Gilda?" Dash said.

"Oh, you mean the one that used to come to the city often?" the guard said. "Yeah, I remember her. She used to stop by the library nearly every day. Now that I think about it, she always looked—"

"...A little angry or sad or whatever, I know," Dash interrupted, holding up a hoof. "I already got that part of the story. I just wanna know why the City Guard was looking for her after we stopped Discord."

The guard coughed delicately. "Yes, well," he said. "After things returned to normal... more or less... we found a body."

Dash paled. “Whose?”

“It was a pony, I can tell you that much,” the guard answered, shifting uncomfortably. “Kind of hard to tell what race, though. Whatever had killed the poor thing had torn her to shreds... and ate a good bit of her, too.”

Dash’s stomach lurched. “And... and you think Gilda did that?” she breathed.

The guard shrugged. “Tell you the truth, we have no idea. *I can* tell you, though, that half of the abominations that were running around when Discord arrived could’ve done it.” He shuddered. “So many things with claws and teeth... Let me tell you, there were a few *other* corpses, too. But *this* body was different. It was the only one that was half-eaten, and the wounds... they’d been inflicted by talons and a beak. Some of those *monsters* had those, but so did your gryphon friend...” He snorted. “...and they don’t pay us guards to ignore things like that.”

“Did you find Gilda?” Dash said.

“Nah,” the guard replied, shaking his head. “Couldn’t find anypony who actually knew her well enough to guess where she went. Not even the librarian knows where she lived *before* all this crazy stuff... Hay, for all we know, she’s in the Everfree Forest or something.”

Dash frowned thoughtfully. *Do gryphons live in forests? I kinda assumed they’d prefer clouds, she thought, or maybe caves. I guess it’s worth looking into if I can’t find any other leads...*

“Well,” the guard continued, “according to the official report, one of those monsters killed that poor pony, but if you think there’s more to it, we can reopen the case... with more paperwork, of course,” he added glumly.

Rainbow shook her head. “Nah. I’ll look into it on my own.”

“In that case, good luck finding her. I hope that your friend didn’t have anything to do with – well, you know.”

“Me too. But if she *did* kill somepony...” Dash said, a cold glint in her eye, “...then she’s no friend of mine.”

Rainbow left the building and trotted towards the city gate. Once outside the city limits, she stretched her wings.

“Everfree Forest, huh?” Dash said to herself. Sure, it had been only an offhanded comment, but still, it was either follow up on it or head back empty-hooved.

Rainbow’s eyes narrowed. *Well, I’m never gonna do that.*

She glanced towards the sky. The sun was already setting, but perhaps it wouldn’t hurt

to search a *little* before it got too dark...

Rainbow nodded. "Okay, then, Everfree it is." She flew off towards the dark woods.

Pinkie stared at a small pile of stones. She stood there silently for a moment, picturing the task she had in mind. If she concentrated, she could just make out... well, *something* magic-related, perhaps Gilda would know what to call it. Maybe "aura" would be the right word.

In any case, a faint luminosity filled the air, but brighter glows took recognizable shapes – flowing lines deep beneath the earth; streaks passing through the air; or nearly liquid-like forms that gently sloshed within certain organisms, like water in a vase. Vibrant hues filled the forest with light.

But the chaos magic inside Pinkie Pie was different – a deep, dark blue, like a shadow in a field of wildflowers. It flowed out of her heart and throughout her body, shifting and dancing like fire. It felt anxious, restless, waiting to be released in whatever way Pinkie saw fit...

The draconequus's eyes locked on the pile of stones.

Pinkie Pie snapped her fingers.

Effortlessly, the stones lifted into the air and circled Gilda in lazy, complicated spirals. After a minute or two, the rocks shot downward, burying themselves in the dirt. A split second later, green shoots burst from the ground, sprouting buds that quickly bloomed into glittering, gemlike flowers.

"Well done, Pinks," Gilda said. "You're really getting the hang of this."

Pinkie giggled. "Thanks, Gilda! But really, it's pretty easy once you figure out how."

Ever since Gilda's "Eureka" moment, Pinkie had gotten better and better at... *manipulating* her powers. Really, it was just a matter of coaxing the chaos to do what she wanted. Now that she was actually intentionally using the chaos more often, it was foal's play to achieve the desired effects... Oddly enough, the chaos magic seemed almost eager to *please* Pinkie Pie.

But that was silly. The Chaos couldn't actually *think* for itself... could it?

Gilda interrupted Pinkie's thoughts. "Well, I think we're done here," the gryphon said.

"That was fun! Ooh, so now what?" Pinkie asked, bouncing excitedly.

Gilda rolled her eyes. "Didn't you *hear* me? We're done. Over. Your training is now complete."

Pinkie's eyes widened. "We're... done? But we haven't done much at all!"

"I don't think we *need* to," Gilda replied. "Like you said, it's pretty easy for you now. It's clear that if you can imagine it, you can do it, so long as you have the power. Since you no longer seem to be having issues with control, really there's nothing more I *can* teach you."

"Oh." Pinkie frowned thoughtfully. "So... does that mean we're gonna start looking for a way to turn me back to normal?"

"Yeah, I think so," Gilda said. "The sooner this is over with, the better."

Pinkie grinned. "Okie Dokie Lok—"

"*Gilda!*" a familiar voice shouted.

Both Gilda and Pinkie jumped. The pair of them turned towards the voice. There, they found Rainbow Dash staring at them in shock.

After a moment of silence, Dash narrowed her eyes. "*You...*" she snarled. "You're working for *her?! Eris?!*"

"...Uh-oh," Pinkie said.

[< Part 2](#)

[Part 4 >](#)