

Gilda hated this. She had been nervous all the way to Junior Speedsters Flight Camp. She had started feeling sick during the tour of the camp. And now that they were all getting ready to line up to meet their instructor, she wanted nothing more than to fly as far away as her wings would carry her.

"Hey, what ARE you," piped up a red pegasus near Gilda. "Were you cursed by some evil enchantress or something? Where are your hooves?" She asked rapidly looking Gilda over.

Gilda sighed inwardly and answered for what felt like the thousandth time today, "I'm a griffon."

Another pegasus, a green boy, immediately chimed in, "So you're, like, a monster from one of those untamed forests? I didn't know monsters could talk."

Gilda ducked her head and walked away as quick as she could to her place in the line-up and said much too quietly for anyone to hear, "I'm not a monster."

Moments after the last pony had lined up a pink blur streaked into view and past the campers. The blur circled the field twice and then came to an abrupt stop in front of the line revealing an adult pegasus with two lightning bolts as her cutie mark.

"My name is Firefly and I will be your instructor for the duration of camp," the pegasus said rapidly. She began walking down the line looking briefly at each camper. "You are here because you all have shown amazing potential and if you commit yourselves and follow my instructions, I promise you, there won't be a single pegasus duty," at that moment she had come to Gilda. She stopped walking briefly, only a moment or two, but Gilda knew that every single pony in the line noticed and tried to get a look at what caused the disruption, at her.

Gilda felt panic rising in her until Firefly resumed both her inspection and speech, "There won't be a single duty that you won't be able to perform flawlessly in the service of Equestria and Celestia." Firefly had finished her inspection she turned to face them all and began roll call. Gilda only half listened as her fellow camper's names were rattled off and waited for her turn. When Gilda's turn came, her voice betrayed her and came out only as a croak. The light snickering felt like hot needles being pushed into her skin. She only again became aware of what Firefly was saying when she began repeating the same name with increasing irritation. "Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash! Has anyone seen Rainbow Dash?"

"Rainbow Dash is here!" a voice called out from above. All eyes looked to skies to see the colourful young pegasus come streaking towards the ground like a missile. Rainbow flared her wings to stop her rapid descent only for them to buckle a moment later and send her crashing to the ground and rolling towards the line like a bowling ball with hooves. Gilda was about to take to the air when the ponies on either side of her took flight, one of them accidentally kicking her in the head. She was dazed momentarily before the rolling pegasus crashed into her, sending her sprawling.

Firefly swiftly ran to the tangled limbs of the two campers. "I'm okay," let out the dazed Gilda. Rainbow Dash's face appeared from behind one of Gilda's wings dizzy, but unharmed and giggling with excitement.

"Sorry about that," Dash said to her irritated instructor. "The wind must have kicked up at the last second. I totally nailed that landing in practice."

"Well then," Firefly began stiffly. "If nothing is broken would you disentangle yourself from the griffon and take your place in line. And it would be best if you save the aerial stunts for

those who know what they're doing."

As Firefly turned to walk away Gilda felt the still entangled Pegasus tense up and then she shouted, "I know what I'm doing! I'll bet you before camp's over that I'll be able to circle this whole place in ten seconds flat!"

Firefly stopped walking and turned her head back to the young hot head, "Really? Ten seconds?"

"Yeah," said Rainbow Dash defiantly. She looked lost in thought for a second and then quickly added, "Twice!"

Firefly smiled and then resumed walking away and only said, "Big claim, better be ready to back it up."

Gilda cleared her throat to get Dash's attention, "Do you think you could," she began. Rainbow quickly rolled off of Gilda and apologized. Rainbow Dash then stopped and for the first time actually looked at Gilda. Gilda was already feeling embarrassed and getting ready to again explain what she is.

"I really like the whole," Dash made a vague gesture with her fore hooves, "The whole lion, eagle thing you got going on there. It's pretty cool." And with that Rainbow was running back to the reforming line.

Still lying on the ground, Gilda whispered to herself. "I'm cool?"

For the rest of that day, Gilda could not stop smiling.

The first couple of days they were instructed on the basics of flying. This proved frustrating for nearly all the campers. For the ponies, it was because they'd been over all of it before with their parents and friends. But for Gilda, it was a feather pulling aggravation since a lot of the most basic fundamentals just didn't work for her as a griffon and Firefly had to adapt nearly every instruction to suit her. These many early failures did nothing to endear her with her fellow campers or her instructor.

Anything to do with bucking was particularly irritating since she just wasn't built for it. After several dozen attempts, Firefly lead her away from the group, leading to much giggling and whispering from some of the other ponies. "Gilda, I know you're trying," Firefly began patiently. "But as a griffon there are certain things you will not be able to do. Just consider yourself excused from any practice involving bucking. Instead, take that time to use for free form practice."

"I understand," said Gilda without looking her teacher in the eye. As Firefly took again to the skies, Gilda looked up. She quickly spotted that blue pegasus with the rainbow mane, flying higher and faster than the others, and that Firefly was heading for her to tell Dash once more tell her to stick with the group.

Gilda and Dash hadn't spoken since that first day, but Gilda always was looking for some reason to bump into her. She had even caught herself hoping, that when Rainbow would attempt another stunt, that she would mess up, and end up crashing into her just so that they could speak again.

It was at the end of the second week when things took a major change for Gilda. But the day began as all others had, with the official camp chant.

Junior Speedsters are our lives,
Skybound soars and daring dives!
Junior Speedsters, it's our quest,
To someday be the very best!

The first several times Gilda had to perform she was just trying to follow all the moves that went along with the chant. After a couple of days she started wondering what she should do with her claws. She had eventually decided just to ball them up into fists as to make them more like hooves. But after having to sit out of hours of practice sessions she had decided if all she couldn't be like the others, then she'd at least have some fun with being different. Each day she added more little touches with her claws and more mobile tail. Today she choose to end with a particular flourish to cheer herself up.

On the way to the training fields, Gilda felt a hoof poke her in the hind quarters. She turned to see a dark grey boy, Stormy Skies, with a snide look on his face. "What's up with all those flouncing little moves you do during the chant?" Gilda just turned away and said nothing, hoping he'd get bored and leave her alone. "Don't tell me you actually enjoy that stupid thing? Wow, so you're a monster AND a dork!"

Suddenly, Rainbow Dash was next to Gilda and in Stormy's face. "Listen lamer, we HAVE to do that every day and if you're too dull to think of ways to have fun with it, then that's your damage!" Stormy backed off down the line muttering and Dash stayed walking with Gilda. "I'm thinking about adding a tornado whirl towards the end, you think that would look cool?"

Gilda, was too stunned to talk for a moment and quickly nodded. "Yeah, of course it would! It would add a little colour to," Gilda paused trying to think of the right words. "To those stiff and lame moves they have everyone doing."

"You are so right! We all look like a bunch of wind up toys out there every morning." Rainbow Dash's demeanor turned serious when she next spoke, "I've noticed that you've been having to sit out on parts of our lesson and I was thinking..."

Just then, Firefly swooped into the field and immediately called out, "Alright class, that's enough talking. Line up everypony, we have a lot to do today." Dash was rushing to her place in line without another word and Gilda felt a sudden strong resentment for her instructor.

Firefly did her usual trot down the line up, inspecting each camper as she spoke. "For the next week, I need to see what each of you are capable of. I figure a little competition will encourage you to push yourselves a bit harder, so you'll be grouped up in teams of two."

Gilda crossed her fingers as Firefly began assigning groups. Her hopes soared when Rainbow Dash hadn't been assigned a partner by the time she got to Gilda, which meant they had that much farther to fall when her partner was announced to be Stormy Skies.

Her beak was still hanging open as Stormy came over. "Well, on the bright side," he began. "You'll definitely make me look better."

Firefly addressed them all after assigning the last pair. "Now before we begin our regular lessons, I want to see your fastest on the ground run."

For the next few minutes they all watched each pair sprint from one end of the field to the other. And then it came Gilda and Stormy's turn.

As the two got in their starting positions, Stormy whispered to Gilda, "Don't look so

worried. I'm sure they'll be cheering for me too loudly for you to hear them laughing at you." Gilda felt her claws digging into the soft ground.

When the signal to start came, Gilda shut her eyes and ran. As she ran she just thought of all the campers and their prodding questions and mockery, she thought of Firefly and her constant disappointed looks at her, and she imagined she was running away from all of that forever. And then another thought entered her mind, a pegasus with a rainbow mane smiling at her and she imagined she was standing at the end of the field.

When Gilda opened her eyes she saw what was at the end of the field and she slid on the grass into a stop and looked behind her. To her amazement, Stormy was still only a three fourths across the field and the stretch that Gilda ran across was ripped up from her claws.

She looked around at all the other campers with their mouths hanging open, even Firefly. For several long seconds the only sound was Stormy's desperate hoof falls as he came to the finish line. And then a voice erupted from the line, "THAT WAS SO AWESOME!"

It was, of course, Rainbow Dash.

The rest of the lesson passed in a daze for Gilda. Stormy only looked at her once, when they came to the cloud bucking session, with his usual smug smile. But when Gilda looked from Stormy to Dash, she received an entirely different smile and she found she couldn't care about Stormy at all.

After their lessons ended for the day, Gilda was running to speak with Rainbow on their way to their bunks. Just as she caught up with her, Stormy flew in shouting.

"Don't be so proud about today, Gil-duh!" He was instantly in Gilda's face and the other campers quickly made themselves scarce leaving the three of them alone. "I don't know what your parents threatened to get you in here, but MONSTERS don't belong here! So why don't you just do everyone a favor," he turned around and Gilda saw his body tense up. "And GET LOST!"

The last word was punctuated with him bucking out as hard as he could. But Gilda had dropped down and sprang at his underside as he kicked out. Next thing she knew, she was standing tall and Stormy was in a daze on the ground over a dozen feet away. Gilda smiled proudly and turned to Dash.

Gilda's heart turned to ice when she saw the look on Dash's face, it was full of shock and horror. Gilda quickly looked at the ground as her mind raced, 'She saw me lose my temper, now she'll think I'm a monster too.'

"How could you?" Dash's voice seethed and Gilda's eyes began to sting as the tears welled up. "I knew you were a jerk, Stormy, but I didn't think you were so petty as to attack Gilda just for doing better than you at a race!"

Gilda's head snapped up to see Rainbow Dash yelling at the downed pegasus who couldn't face her in his shame. Dash then turned to Gilda and asked if she was okay to which Gilda nodded.

Stormy rolled over to stand on his hooves and shouted feebly at Gilda, with disgraced tears pouring down his face, "I'm gonna tell Firefly on you!"

Without looking back, Dash laughed, "Tell her what, Stormy CRIES? That you tried to kick Gilda and then tripped over your own hooves, because that's what I'll say I saw. Now go wash that dirt off your face." And with that she kicked a nice clump of earth which nailed him

right in the nose.

"Come on Gilda, I want to tell you what I was thinking about this morning. You've actually just given me a great idea..." With that the pegasus and griffon walked off, but not to their separate bunks. The two girls talked and planned well into the night.

The next day, when it came to cloud bucking practice, rather than go off to practice on her own, Gilda stayed with the line. Firefly looked confused at first and then fascinated as Gilda showed off what she and Dash had worked out last night. That day Gilda invented a new weather control technique, Cloud Pouncing.

Usually when the day's lessons ended, Firefly dismissed them and was off and away, but today she had them get into line up one more time. Gilda noticed that she looked agitated as she started to speak, "There's a rule here that I hadn't brought up, because I had hoped I wouldn't need to. But certain rumors have reached me today and let me be perfectly clear; there is to be no fighting in this camp."

Gilda involuntarily gulped and looked over at Dash who was chewing her lower lip nervously. Gilda didn't dare to look at Stormy as Firefly continued, "I'm not naming any names because the rule wasn't made clear to you until now. Anyone caught fighting by me or any of the other instructors will be expelled from the camp. There are no acceptable excuses and there will be no exceptions. You are all dismissed." And with that, she was gone into the sky.

After the others had scattered and Dash and Gilda were alone, Gilda was the first to speak, "I was this close to freaking back there. You?"

Dash made a dismissive gesture with her right foreleg. "No way. I mean, if they'd punish you just for knocking that jerk on his butt, then this place isn't good enough for you anyway."

Gilda was a little hurt by Dash's dismissal, but hid it. "You're probably right, but it would totally bite to be kicked out just as I was getting to know you."

Dash laughed and Gilda worried that she'd been too mushy when Dash said, "I wouldn't worry about that. If this place isn't good enough for you then it's DEFFINETLY not good enough for me. We'd take off together, make our own camp for only the coolest of the cool."

Gilda was waiting for some sort of punch line, but when none came she asked, "You mean that?"

Dash just smiled and said, "Yeah."

The walk back to their bunks was quiet, but not uncomfortably so. However, once they got to the point where they had to split off Dash started to act a bit awkward.

"Hey Gilda, we have a free day tomorrow and I was wondering if you'd want to maybe hang out with me... So do you?"

Gilda was surprised that Dash could seem shy about anything, but quickly said yes. They agreed to meet where they had talked the night before. Gilda was almost too excited to sleep despite the long and exhausting day.

Over the next several days the two got to know each other quite well, talking all about their families and homes. Rainbow was surprised to find that Gilda was as curious about daily pony life as she was about a griffon's. When they weren't talking and making jokes, they'd come up with new moves.

"Gilda, I noticed that when you were running super fast, you were still using your wings. How do you do that without taking off?"

"I'm only able to do it cause I'm also digging my claws into the ground and each step is more like a huge pounce."

"Hmmm, I don't think I could pull that off unless I got some custom horse shoes made. But maybe I could take the concept and do a kind of Super Speed Strut."

Every morning they'd wake up and try to out do one another with more and ridiculous moves for the Junior Speedsters chant before heading for their lessons. Even the daily tests with Stormy had gained a not unpleasant pattern. Some days she'd do better and Stormy wouldn't look at her while Dash would give a congratulatory smile or hoof bump. Some days he'd do better and would get that smug look on his face which Dash would mock from behind him.

After a week, the personal testing had reached it's final stage. A massive obstacle course was set up stretching around the field and even into a series of cloud rings. The entire day was devoted to the pairs going through the obstacle course.

After her run, Gilda was exhausted, but ecstatic. Gilda had completely wiped the floor with Stormy. After everyone was done Firefly took each of the campers aside and told them which tier they were in and Gilda was blown away to find out she was in the top three.

"And that concludes the first part of Junior Speedsters," Firefly addressed the full line up. "You will now be divided into class groups of ten so as to better suit the skills and needs of each of you. I've already told you all your grouping, you are dismissed."

Gilda ran to Dash afterwards to tell her only to find her pacing furiously. "What's wrong, Dash?"

Dash exploded, "It's Heart Throb, she beat me! I screwed up on the ground portion when I tried to do the Super Speed Strut. And she just would not stop going on about it. Talking about how "superior breeding" lead to her victory! She only beat me by a few seconds and I still made it in the top three!"

Gilda didn't like Dash being so mad, even if wasn't at her. Something else was bothering her as well, "So what was your final time?"

"Five minutes twenty seconds. And she still acted like her five and seventeen was so impressive. Ugh, I'm just getting myself madder. Anyway, how did you do?"

Gilda felt a small lump in her throat that she had to swallow before she could speak, "Five and thirty five, but I'm just glad I don't have to work with Stormy ever again." The last part was true at least. After seeing how angry Dash got at being beaten by a few seconds, Gilda didn't dare tell her that she had actually beaten Dash's time by close to a minute.

As they started the walk back Dash's angry demeanor relaxed and she stepped in front of Gilda with a sly look in her eye, "Hey Gilda, you wanna help me get back at that stuck up Heart Throb?"

Gilda was surprised, she hadn't seen this side of Rainbow before. But she was just glad she wasn't mad anymore. "What do you want me to do, rough her up for you," she asked standing on her hind legs and punching the air.

Rainbow Dash laughed and expressed mock consideration, "Tempting, but I have a better idea..."

The next morning Heart Throb got out of bed and headed straight to her vanity mirror as she did every morning. She began her routine arranging of her various make ups, but then caught sight of something terrible. It was her reflection, the fur of her face had been dyed in garish and clashing colours making her look like a clown after a funeral. She immediately shoved her face into the wash basin and begin scrubbing vigorously, but began shrieking after looking in the mirror again. "It won't come off! It! Won't! Come! Off!"

She never noticed the two figures peeking into her window, suppressing their laughter. Later, and far away from the panicked pegasus, the two let fully loose their laughter.

"That was great, Gilda! Are you sure that's the first prank you pulled? You were a natural!"

"Not enough griffons to go around pranking without getting caught. It was slow work getting the dye to set without waking her up, but her face made it so worth it."

Rainbow got the most mischievous look on her face when she next spoke, "Ya know, with the classes broken up, we're gonna have a lot more free time. You get me?"

"Oh I got you, Dash!"

The two girls then fell to the ground rolling with laughter until they had ended up as entangled as when they first met. They spent the next several hours scheming and deciding on the whos and whens.

Over the next several days many a camper found their possessions hidden or covered in itching or sneezing powder or even glued to the ceiling. A few woke up with mustaches either stenciled or, in once case, glued on. Some, who had been particularly rude to Gilda woke up with unwanted hair cuts.

Then one fine day, Stormy Skies found that a bucket of tar had somehow ended up precariously balanced on top his door as well as a pillowcase full feathers somehow ended up blowing in his face. Gilda would say that these things do happen, but it was odd about his toothpaste being laced with hot sauce.

Despite their now much harder training sessions, Gilda found the work much easier with Dash always nearby. At the end of the lesson today, Gilda was a little worried when Dash was called over to talk privately with Firefly.

Gilda was even more worried when Dash came back with a dazed look on her face, "Don't tell me she found out who was behind the pranks!" Gilda half joked.

"No, nothing like that..."

"Then what? Another lecture about being better than everyone?"

Dash's face broke into a giddy smile, "Firefly wants me to coming during our off days and after lessons for special training. She says, that with her help, I could one day join the Wonderbolts!"

Gilda smiled and congratulated her, but she refused to ask the two questions burning in her mind. 'When will you find time to spend with me' and 'Why wasn't I picked as well'.

After the lesson the next day, Gilda stuck around to watch Dash train with Firefly. It proved to be very very dull. As far as Gilda could see this "special training" consisted of Firefly talking to Dash forever ,doing a stunt quickly, taking Dash through the same stunt, followed by

talking for another eternity. It went on like that for hours and afterwards Dash was too tired to do anything but talk about how amazing Firefly was.

The next day was one of their free days, but not for Dash anymore. Gilda sat watching as Dash and Firefly went through more of their training as Gilda felt her eyes getting heavier. Two hours later Gilda woke up to Rainbow Dash gently poking her in the head with her hoof, "Oh, are you done already?" Gilda asked as she quickly stood up bleary eyed and blinking.

Dash screwed up her face apologetically, "Actually, we've still got a lot more to do. So maybe you want to take off and I'll catch up to you as soon as we're done."

Gilda stared at her blinking for a few seconds, trying not to show a shred of her growing irritation. "Well, yeah, of course," she said with a forced laugh. "I got better things to do than hang around here all day. Got my own life and all."

"Well have fun out there," Rainbow said with a smile as took back to the skies. She then called back, "And whatever you do, make it good! I wanna hear all about it later!"

"Yeah, it'll be totally cool," Gilda said with an awkward smile.

Later, Gilda sat under a tree idly scratching her neck and muttering to herself, "It can't be that hard to have some fun. I mean, what did I do for fun before Rainbow Dash?" After a few seconds of thinking her face drooped, "Oh yeah, I hid in my room and hoped for a natural disaster." She then picked herself up and began walking forward with determination, "Well no more of that, I'm not the same lame griffon I was before! I can think of a ton of fun stuff to do!"

A little bit later she was sitting outside the window of a cabin watching a pegasus, who had just recently had the misfortune of getting her head stuck in a bucket, fly about the room, crashing into walls. Gilda watched for a moment and then sighed loudly, "It's just not the same," and she walked off leaving the chaotic scene behind her.

Gilda was lying under that same tree as earlier, she had been drawing out plans for aerial stunts for some time. With a sudden burst of aggravation she smeared everything she had drawn. Scowling, she started to look around for something to do and let out a small cry as she found she was face to face with a grey pegasus.

"Hello," the grey pegasus said simply. "I was hoping you'd notice me, but you didn't. I came over to say 'hello', but then I saw you were busy and thought that might be rude. Then I started wondering why that would be rude, I'm just being friendly!" As she talked, her eyes became unfocused on Gilda and she began to walk around her in a circle. Gilda noticed that as she wandered so did her eyes, in opposite directions. "So I just started inching closer, hoping you'd notice me or you'd stop what you were doing so I wouldn't be interrupting and wouldn't be rude. Who do you think makes up the rules about these things like what's rude and what's not? Princess Celestia seems like a likely answer, but..."

Gilda grabbed the muzzle of the pony, silencing her. "Stop. Talking. Now, who are you?" The pony sat there in silence for a few moments before Gilda realized her mistake, "You can talk now," she practically growled.

The grey pony laughed nervously, "Oh yeah, that should have been the first thing I said. Sorry, I've been told that I think too much and then I start talking about what I'm thinking and..." She noticed Gilda's deepening scowl and stopped quickly. "I'm Happy Hooves, it's kind of a weird name and I'm thinking about changing it when I get older. I don't know if you know, but it's pony tradition for family names to have a theme and my family are all named after physical

habits. Like how I shuffle around when I'm thinking, I still think it's a dumb name. At least, that's what everypony around here tells me."

As Happy was rambling Gilda was staring at her eyes and watching the one swirl about. Waiting for her to take a breath, Gilda bluntly asked, "So what's with your eye?"

The pony laughed self consciously and put one of her hooves over her eyes, "You noticed that, huh? It's just something that happens when I get too distracted, or too focused, or if I bump my head, or when I sleep too late, or when I don't sleep enough, or when I'm really hungry, or..."

"Hey Gilda," the familiarly harsh voice of Stormy Skies called out, silencing Hooves. He strolled over with his dozen or so friends, but stayed several feet away from Gilda as he talked. "So what's this, your show off friend ditched you to kiss up to Firefly and now you've no one to hang out with but that dweeby remedial student?" Several of his buddies laughed after he was done.

Gilda clawed the ground as she spoke, "Hey Stormy, it looks like you still got a few feathers stuck in your mane. Why don't you let me help you with that?"

Stormy did his best to still look smug as he took several steps back. "Let's ditch these lamers before we get infected by their loser dust." And with that Stormy and his crew were gone.

"Those are the ponies who told me how dumb my name was," Happy said, breaking Gilda from her seething thoughts. "I don't think they like me very much. Or you, I guess. But I don't know why, you're all big and fast and pretty and scary and way cooler than they are. It makes sense with me, I'm not very fast as a flier. And I mess up a lot on stunts. And I crash into them when I fly... and when I walk. Come to think of it, I don't think anyone's stuck around and listened to me for as long you and I was ..." But when Happy finished walking in circles and looked over, Gilda was gone.

That night Gilda stopped by the shed where the dyes and paints were kept and then snuck into one of the neighboring cabins. She quietly crept out an hour later and went to sleep laughing to herself.

In the morning, Happy Hooves awoke and headed out for breakfast. On her way she noticed everyone seemed to be staring at her and she heard whispering and giggling as she passed. This wasn't the first time, but it usually followed her making some mistake. She racked her brain trying to think of what she did this time and suddenly the ponies around her burst out laughing and several started talking excitedly to each other.

"Look! Look! "

"That's so weird!"

Happy stared at the laughing ponies for a moment wondering what joke she was missing, "Um, what's so funny? Is it my mane? I know I don't usually brush it in the morning, but I don't really see the point in it since we're going to be flying around so much and it'll get messed up anyway," as she spoke the nearby ponies just started laughing even harder. She was starting to get angry, "I don't see what's so funny!"

"She can't see so what's funny, derp," an orange boy said almost falling over laughing.

"No big surprise there, " the girl next to him shouted, shrieking with laughter. "Maybe you should go look in a mirror, derp!"

Happy backed away and ran back to cabin and looked into the mirror. Her face had been stenciled all over in black dye. Written on her forehead, 'Watch my eye go!' with an arrow leading to her eye, when she winked it she saw a spiral stenciled over the lid, and beneath her eyes and across her nose, 'Derp, Derp, Derp,' with an arrow leading to her mouth. She suddenly found it very hard to see her reflection in the mirror, but she didn't have to wonder why as the tears started to spill from her eyes.

After her lessons, Gilda quickly said goodbye to Dash and set out around the camp. She didn't have to go far before she saw a crying Happy Hooves being chased by Stormy and his friends all shouting "Derpy" over and again. As soon the whole crew was in earshot Gilda said loudly, "Guess somepony doesn't like her makeover." She didn't even stop walking as she heard group stop in their tracks.

They were quickly running and flying to catch up to her. "Was that you," a red pegasus asked with awe in his voice.

"Maybe," was all she said.

"That is just too rad," a purple boy said jumping up and down. "You are wicked!"

"Hey, if she can't handle a little prank and some name calling, then she has no business being here."

"Gilda, you are the coolest!", a smaller pink girl said full of admiration.

Gilda took a lingering look at Stormy, now standing alone and seething with anger, and smiled warmly. "You bet I am."

That evening, Gilda and Rainbow Dash met up as usual. Dash spent the first hour or so talking about the various stunts and tricks that Firefly taught her and helping Gilda come up with her own variations.

"So what about you Gilda, I didn't get to see you last night. Tell me, were you able to entertain yourself without the great Rainbow Dash by your side?" Dash asked with a sly smile.

"I managed," Gilda said with an exaggerated yawn and stretch. It had the desired effect, Rainbow immediately sat up in attention. "There was this really annoying pony that just would not leave me alone, so I gave her a bit of the old business. Just a little razzling. I guess some of the others thought it was pretty funny because now I got a whole crew following me around."

"I guess making friends is just another thing you're great at."

"You're darn right," Gilda said as she reached out to rustle Dash's mane.

The next couple of weeks saw Gilda busier than she'd ever been in her life. She had the regular lessons and then spent all her evenings and nights with Dash. But it was during the rest of the day that she was truly active. She would roam the camp grounds with her crew messing with anyone she thought would give them all a laugh. She quickly exhausted those who had given her trouble in the early days of camp and moved on the unpopular and disliked. Every so often she'd see Stormy Skis sitting alone, but she felt no need to mess with him further. She'd just smile as she and his former crew passed, he'd already been beaten in every way. Well, short of her punching him in the nose.

Whenever there wasn't anyone around worth fooling with, she'd show off the latest stunts she and Dash had perfected. She never really talked with any of the members of her crew except to expound on her own accomplishments. She didn't really mind not knowing much

about them, they didn't seem like the most interesting ponies to her. Her gang didn't seem to mind either, they were too awed by her, except for the occasional moment when she couldn't be bothered to remember half of their names. But Gilda was happy; she was having fun, she wasn't messed with, and she was never alone.

Then came the most fateful of days. The daily practice had ended and Gilda had said her goodbye to Rainbow Dash for the day, but then Dash had come chasing after her moments later.

"Gilda, wait," Dash flew after Gilda with a puzzled look on her face. "Firefly wants to talk to you. She says it's important." She paused for a moment before continuing. "She says she wants to talk to you alone. Do you have any idea what it's about?"

Gilda shook her head left Dash behind as she flew over to her instructor. Gilda searched her face as she approached trying to look for some hint as to what she wanted, but Firefly just had that same stern expression she always had for Gilda.

"We need to talk, Gilda," Firefly said as soon as Gilda landed in front of her. She looked troubled as she spoke. "I've been putting this off for too long. Fly with me."

Without waiting for a response, Firefly took the air and Gilda followed. As they flew Gilda looked down to see Dash watching them go. Gilda had a sudden sense of being backed into a corner.

"You know, Gilda, this camp has a competitive air about it," Firefly began after they burst through the clouds. "It's even in our motto, 'It's our quest to someday be the very best,' this implies that we have to try to be better than others."

"So it happens sometimes that this competitiveness creates some hostility amongst the campers," Gilda's eyes narrowed as Firefly continued. "This is usually not worse than a little name calling or certain groups excluding some of the weaker fliers. Lately though, things seem to have escalated around here."

"Or maybe some of your campers are just whiners," Gilda spat without being able to stop herself. "You just said this kind of thing was normal and you certainly didn't care when it was happening to me."

Firefly continued after a few seconds pause, "I'm just saying general policy. I personally believe such behavior is damaging to the purpose of this camp. And as I said this is more than what is considered normal. Now, no one is naming names, but to be blunt, you leave an impression."

Gilda increased speed so that she could look Firefly in the eye, "You just said no one is naming any names and even then no major rules are being broken!"

Firefly kept her eyes looking ahead of her, "Harassing campers, stealing or vandalizing camper's property, and the storage shed has been broken into."

Gilda decreased speed and said defiantly, "No one's been hurt and you can't pin it on me or else you'd have kicked me out already."

"Okay, so how about a different topic," Firefly suddenly whipped around to face Gilda. "Why are you flying so slow?"

Gilda was stunned both by the sudden move and the question and could think of no response except to flap there. Firefly flew closer as she spoke, "In the early testing you finished at the top of the class by a wide margin, but your performance since then has been consistently

weaker. If you want to be specific, you always do just slightly worse than Rainbow Dash. Even when she makes a mistake you are always careful to do no better than her.”

Gilda liked this line of discussion even less, “What’s your point?”

“Are you afraid of Rainbow Dash,” Firefly asked sharply. “Do you think she won’t be your friend anymore if she found out you’re faster than her?” Gilda said nothing. “Should we bring her up here and ask her?”

“You don’t want me to hold back anymore,” Gilda couldn’t bring herself to care that she was yelling in her instructor’s face. “Fine! Try to keep up!”

Gilda beat her wings furiously as she tore through the top of the clouds. Gilda glanced back to see that Firefly was barely a full body length behind her. Not only that, but Gilda was frustrated to see that Firefly didn’t seem to even be struggling to keep up.

“That’s a bit more like it,” Firefly said as she pulled alongside her. “But it’s to be expected with your larger wing span. Is that really all you got?”

Gilda glared at Firefly and went into a steep dive. At first she only wanted to get away, but then a thought came to her when she saw Firefly following. She found herself thinking about how Rainbow had crashed trying to break a steep dive on the first day, this dive was much steeper. She found herself smiling at the thought of her teacher eating a little dirt.

Even though she was much younger, Gilda’s wings were much more powerful and sturdy than a pegasus. At the last possible moment Gilda flared out her wings which broke her momentum as sure as a parachute. She got a small jolt when she felt one of her wings slap into her instructor’s face, but it didn’t hamper her own descent.

Gilda was disappointed to see that Firefly wasn’t tumbling through the air like Dash, but had instead suddenly changed direction. That disappointment turned to shock when she saw that Firefly was heading directly towards a nearby tree. Gilda noticed several of her own feathers whipping from her instructor’s face, Firefly couldn’t see.

Before Gilda could even call out, Firefly had already crashed through the branches and was tumbling to the ground. By the time Gilda had touched ground, Rainbow Dash was at their teacher’s side.

“Get the nurse,” was what Rainbow said as Gilda got close, she was crying. “Tell her there’s been an accident and that Firefly,” She couldn’t finish but gestured pitifully at the tangled feathery mess of her wings.

Gilda nodded and ran towards the medical cabin, struggling to see through her bleary eyes. She couldn’t think about how bad Firefly’s wings had looked or the sound of her teacher’s sharp gasping breath. The only thought in Gilda’s mind was a looping sentence, ‘It was an accident. It was an accident. It was an accident.’

Gilda sat not far from the medical cabin. Rainbow Dash had not come out since Firefly had been taken in hours earlier and Gilda couldn’t bring herself to enter. Night turned to day and Dash still hadn’t left so Gilda still refused to move.

That afternoon Gilda’s gang came by to check on her, or maybe they just didn’t know what to do without a leader. She tried to ignore them, but then they started talking.

“So I hear you knocked the high and mighty Firefly down a peg or two.”

“More than that, I heard you roughed up pretty good.”

“So, how about it? Tell us what really happened!”

They were practically bouncing with excitement as they interrogated her. Gilda found herself filling up with disgust just looking at them. “I don’t really care what you heard, it was an accident,” She said dismissively.

“But Gilda...”

Gilda stood up and approached the group, “Listen up dweebs because I’m not repeating myself.” She found her voice getting louder as she went on. “It was worth a few laughs having you dorks around, but now you’re cramping my style. So why don’t you do me and yourselves a favor and GET LOST!” She practically roared the last two words.

The ponies slowly walked away, one of the smaller ones were sniveling and being comforted by another. Gilda couldn’t care less, she had her own problems. When her former gang was out of sight, she resumed her vigil.

It wasn’t until late that night when Dash came out. She furiously kicked the door shut behind her as she left the cabin. She looked surprised to see Gilda waiting and she quickly snorted back her tears as she approached.

“I’m sorry you were waiting out here so long,” She began. She looked exhausted and Gilda realized she probably didn’t look any better. “I need some sleep and so do you, but promise you’ll see me in the morning. It’ll still be a day or two before they can bring in a replace- a substitute instructor.”

Dash flapped her wings once tiredly, but then settled for walking. After a few steps she stopped and went back to Gilda, “It wasn’t your fault, you know that right?” Dash then shot a furious look back at the medical cabin. “No matter what anyone says, it was a stupid accident.” Gilda just nodded and watched Dash leave. She went back to her own cabin right after. Even though she was so tired, she found it difficult to sleep.

After going through the motions of the morning recitation of the camp motto, she and Dash went to their usual spot to talk. But it was some time before either one actually spoke. “So how’s Firefly,” Gilda finally asked.

Dash’s face darkened, “She doesn’t matter, I don’t have time to waste on quitters.” This wasn’t Gilda expected to hear at all, so she just sat quietly until Dash continued. “She says that she won’t be able to fly again like she used to. She says that this is what she got for trying to force her dreams on somepony else. She says it was a mistake for her to train me beyond just the regular class instruction. She says,” She stopped suddenly and kicked a small rock off into the distance. “Who cares about what she says.”

Rainbow looked to Gilda guiltily. “I’m sorry I haven’t been spending much time with you. I thought that Firefly was... I thought she could help me to be better. I should have just stuck with you and not wasted my time.”

Gilda felt her heart pounding, but didn’t let her feelings show on her face. Instead she leaned back waving Dash off, “Don’t go getting all mushy on me. You’ve nothing to be sorry about.” She stopped briefly and sat back up to look Dash in the eyes. “But I’m sorry Firefly let you down. You know you can always count on me.”

Dash smiled, “Now who’s getting mushy, G?”

It was still another day before the substitute teacher for the high tier class arrived, so Dash and Gilda spent the day together as they used to. They only time they broke from their

old routine was when they come across some of Gilda's former crew. They weren't back with Stormy or even all together anymore, but they gave Gilda a very dirty look.

"What's their deal, G?" Rainbow asked after sticking her tongue out at them as she and Gilda passed. "I thought those were friends of yours."

"It doesn't matter," Gilda said with a shrug. She then gave Dash a quick one armed hug. "Who needs those dweebs when I have you around?" Rainbow laughed and pushed Gilda off of her playfully.

The next the day the high tier class was told to assemble for the first time since the accident. The students all gathered into their line and began to wonder aloud what their new teacher would be like.

Gilda turned to Rainbow and asked her opinion.

"I don't really care what they're like, so long as they actually help me to get even better and doesn't quit on me."

Another pegasus whispered into Gilda's ear, "Personally, I'm looking forward to the SURPRISE!" The last word was shouted so loudly that Gilda everypony in the line leapt into the air. As Gilda was trying to shake the ringing from ears she watched as the shouter, an adult pegasus with white fur, a light green mane, and a cutie mark with a series of purple balloons, came skipping from the line and turn around to face them.

"Hellooooo everypony and a griffon, I'll be you're teacher for the rest of camp. You can call me Surprise because that's my name and I'm really unlikely to respond to anything else except maybe teacher, teach, instructor, and the ever popular 'hey you blathering pony'. Now let me see if I have all your names memorized." She paused in heavy contemplation for a several seconds. "Nope, can't remember a one. Oh well, you're all different colours anyway!"

Surprise began to walk further away from them as she spoke, "I've been told that you're all the fastest and most daring flyers in our camp right now, but I'm gonna need to see it for myself." She then flew up to a nearby tree and pulled down a bag almost twice her own size. Rainbow and Gilda exchanged a look of confusion. "With that in mind," she paused as opened the bag revealing dozens of large red rubber balls, "DODGEBALL!"

The assembled campers started muttering their own confusion. Seconds later the balls startled hurtling towards them. "I said DODGEBALL! Dodgeball, dodgeball, dodgeball, dodgeball, dodgeball, dodgeball, dodgeball, dodgeball, dooooooodgeball!" She rapidly kicked the balls, scattering the class, and with blinding speed chased down the balls and kicking them upwards as they all took to the sky.

Dash and Gilda separated as everyone scattered to catch the balls and return fire. Gilda threw two which Surprise effortlessly dodged as she disappeared behind a cloud bank. "This is stupid," Gilda complained loudly. "How is this lame little kid game supposed to help us be better flyers?"

"Oh silly filly, this is just step one." Gilda turned around to see the Surprise was directly behind her holding a shiny red ball in hooves. Before Gilda could even twitch a feather, she had reached out and gently bopped the griffon on the head. Surprise then called out as loud as she could, "HEY EVERYPONY, GILDA'S IT!"

"What!?" Gilda roared as suddenly a dozen balls were hurtling right for her.

Hours later the entire class lay on the grass, too tired and sore to move. The only one

still standing, or flying in this case, was Surprise. "Well that was a good start. I'll see you all tomorrow where the lesson will be a SURPRISE!" And with that she was a blur disappearing over the horizon.

Gilda looked over to the nearby Rainbow Dash and tried to speak, gasping between words. "I don't like that pony."

"Me neither. She's just so," Dash made a sour face and groaned, "random."

They both chuckled briefly. Dash started to struggle to move. "Oh G, one thing. You got me pretty good up there."

"And?" Gilda asked. A second later she was smacked in the face by a ball still in her friend's hooves. Gilda stuck out her tongue and played dead as Dash sat next to her and proceeded to ruffle her feathers.

The days passed swiftly for Rainbow Dash and Gilda. True to their teacher's name and word, each lesson was something new and different. She talked endlessly, but Gilda couldn't care less since she had never split her up from Dash for team events, unlike Firefly.

As the weeks went on, though Gilda noticed a change in the atmosphere. Everyone was a lot more somber and it became common place to see the occasional pony or two crying with their friends. Camp was coming to an end.

It was not a subject that either of them brought up. Even though it was on the forefront of her mind, Gilda didn't want to appear wishy washy. So it was very welcome that Dash was the first to mention it one night. Sort of.

"Can you believe those ponies getting all weepy, just because camp's ending soon? It's not like they'll never be able to see each other again."

Gilda didn't respond, she was too busy thinking about how far her home was from Ponyville and all that responsibilities that would keep her busy when she returned there. She spoke before she could stop herself, "I can understand a little, I know I'll miss you." She clapped her claws over her beak, embarrassed.

"Well I won't," Dash said dismissively. Gilda suddenly found a patch of sky very far away to be intensely interesting. "Cause I know exactly where and when we'll see each other again." Gilda looked back at her friend flabbergasted, this was the first she'd heard of this. "Well, maybe not EXACTLY where and when. But I got it all planned out. There's only one place where you and I will truly be able to strut our stuff, THE WONDERBOLTS!" She ended flaring her wings and pointing to the sky.

Gilda was touched, but there was a niggling doubt. "Not that I don't think I'm good enough, but I'm not sure if the Wonderbolts will take a griffon. I'm just not sure they make uniforms in my size."

"Well they'd better write their tailor then," Dash said it as a joke, but she looked very serious. "You're not just 'good enough', you're the best. And if they won't see that then who needs 'em! We'll form our own team, er, duo. 'Rainbow Dash and Gilda, The Best in Equestria'!"

Gilda discreetly rubbed some dirt that had gotten in her eye. "Yeah, that's not bad. One thing though, 'Gilda and Rainbow Dash' has a much better ring to it."

Dash rubbed her chin in contemplation. "Ah yes, save the best for last," she said with a

smile and a wink. Gilda rolled her eyes, but was smiling just as happily.

The day of their final lesson was upon them. Surprise addressed the line up with all the authority of a rodeo clown. "Alright you foal ups! It's time for your FINAL EXAM! Are your bodies ready for the challenge of EXTREME Capture the Flag? Because if you aren't, it's time to get ready! Two teams, Skybound and Daring. Team Skybound's captain will be Rrrrrrrrainbow Dash!"

"A wise choice," Dash said with all the modesty she could muster, which was none.

"Well you'd better hold on to that moxy because team Daring's captain is the great Giiiiiiiildaaaaaa."

Gilda felt herself glaring at her teacher when she felt a poke and turned to see Dash rubbing her fore hooves together excitedly. "You ready to get a beatdown, G?"

Gilda ran her claws through her head feathers coolly, "That's a question you should be asking yourself."

The game was long and hard and while Gilda's strength did a lot to hold back the other team, she found her own team was slow to follow her orders no matter how loud she yelled. It had come down to a tie, much to Surprise's glee.

Gilda had planned to blitz to the other team's flag while the rest of her offensive team pulled a feint, but she noticed her defense had left a wide open gap and that Dash had already taken her flag and was heading back to her own side. Gilda did a quick 180 and sped to intercept Rainbow. Dash's eyes went wide with shock when she saw Gilda heading for her head on. When Gilda looked in her friend's eyes her vision flashed and she was suddenly seeing her former instructor lying in a heap on this very field.

Gilda's wings gave out and she found herself rolling on the ground until she caught hold of the earth. Dash sped to her side, scoring the winning point. Surprise flew around the field throwing confetti as Dash pranced happily past Gilda's team.

"You got lucky, pony!" Gilda said with mock menace. Dash only smiled wider.

Surprise quickly herded all of the class into line up to address them for the last time. "Alright class, that was... acceptable. You've all proven that you're at least good enough to fetch my morning mocha. And remember; no matter what you do in life, if you're not having fun, then you're doing it wrong! Now get lost!" And with that she produced a smoke bomb from her mane and threw it to the ground. When the smoke cleared she was, of course, gone.

"What a corn dog," Gilda said loudly eliciting much laughter from the rest of the class. She felt something touch the back of her neck and she turned around to see Surprise holding a bull horn.

"WHO YOU CALLING A CORN DOG, CORN DOG!?" Surprise then gave her a raspberry as she took to the skies laughing all the way and shouting one last, "SURPRISE!"

As they started the trip back to their bunks to pack their things, Gilda kept giving the still giggling Dash dirty looks. "It wasn't that funny!"

"Oh come on, it was pretty funny."

Gilda let herself smile, "Okay, maybe a little. Now meet me back here when you've got your stuff."

It didn't take Gilda long to get her small bag of stuff together so she had a couple of minutes to wait as Dash gathered her things. Gilda watched the campers as they went to the

main entrance with their friends. She saw Heart Throb with her friends, all with matching hair bows and horse shoes, fly past gossiping amongst each other. She saw that Stormy, while never reconciling with his old gang, seemed to have made friends with that annoying grey pegasus. The pony even smiled when he called her "Derpy". Gilda stuck out her tongue in disgust when Stormy actually kissed the pony on her still faintly dye stained cheek. Stormy blushed and flew off faster than Gilda had ever seen him, leaving the little girl giggling to herself as she trotted off... and right into a tree.

Finally Dash arrived with her duffel bag and the two made their way towards the main gates. Gilda told Dash what she'd seen and Rainbow also stuck out her tongue at Stormy's twisted act of depravity. As they walk passed the training fields a voice called out, "Rainbow Dash!"

They both looked up and saw a familiar form come gliding slowly down. Gilda could swear her heart stopped and Dash's face lost all expression as she said, "Firefly?"

Their old teacher stumbled a little on the landing, but she quickly composed herself. "I was just out stretching my wings. I gotta start getting back into shape."

Dash looked like she was debating between anger, sadness, and joy. "But you said..."

Firefly smiled apologetically, "Here's a free non-flight related lesson for you. When someone's really hurt, they'll often say or do things they don't really mean. I may not be ready for the next batch of fillies, but the one after that won't be able to get out from under my hoof." Her face took on a serious look. "But I'm not quite done with this crop. You and I have unfinished business," she said pointing her hoof towards them.

Gilda felt her throat clamping up as Firefly walked closer. A million things raced through her mind that she wanted to say. Then Firefly stopped directly in front of Dash. "I recall a certain pony saying that she'd circle the whole camp in, I believe it was, ten seconds flat." Dash smiled warmly and suddenly all of Gilda's guilt turned to anger. This was her last day with her best friend and in sweeps Firefly to take even that away from her. She hid it as best she could.

Gilda punched Dash lightly on the shoulder and said, "Well go on, show her how good you are." Dash then leapt straight into the air and streaked into the sky. Gilda could feel it every time Firefly glanced her way, but Gilda made sure that her eyes never left the rainbow blur in the sky.

After the longest seconds she'd ever experienced Rainbow Dash came sweeping and landed, panting heavily. "So, how'd I do?"

Firefly's face was stern, "Well, it wasn't ten seconds. Not by a long shot." Firefly then smiled, "But you did just demolish the camp record. A record that, I might add, has stood since I earned it back in my Junior Speedster days. So I suppose that counts for something. You are dismissed Rainbow Dash, give my regards to the Wonderbolts."

They both turned to leave when Firefly called out again, "Gilda, a moment please."

Gilda swallowed hard as Dash said she'd wait for her at the gate. Then she slowly approached her instructor. "Gilda, I want to talk about what happened." Gilda couldn't read her face, but a thought suddenly struck her; 'Camp was over, she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to.'

Gilda ran a claw through her head feathers as she spoke, "Hey listen, I'm glad you're feeling better, I really am. But I got a long way to fly until I get home so I'm gonna go. Like,

right now. See ya.” Gilda then turned around and flew as fast as she could to catch up with Rainbow, leaving Firefly far behind her.

Gilda caught up with Dash right by the main gate. “So what did Firefly want with you?”

“Nothing important, just told me to stay out of trouble and all the junk,” Gilda said as though it was the most boring thing in the world. Gilda then began to claw the ground uncertainly, “So that’s it for Junior Speedsters huh? It was actually kind of lame if you think about it. Just a bunch of repetitive exercises wrapped up with a doofy chant and-,” Gilda was cut off as she found herself being hugged very tightly by her friend.

“Promise me you’ll write as often as you can,” was all Dash said. Gilda felt her shoulder becoming damp.

“I promise, I promise,” Gilda said quickly and then added, “C’mon, don’t cry! You’re going to make me lose it too.”

“I’m not crying,” lied Dash as she squeezed tighter.

“Me either,” Gilda also lied as ran her claws through her friend’s mane as she held her, neither one wanting to let go.

Gilda was comforted by the sight of her own room again. Everything in its place as she left it. She tried to stay busy, but her mind was decidedly elsewhere.

Less than a week after her return the first letter came. In it Dash spoke of returning to Ponyville and how they had welcomed her and the others back with a goofy party. She regarded the whole thing as tedious and was much more excited in detailing her personal training regiment and gave Gilda tips on what she should work on.

Gilda immediately set about writing a response, putting everything she could think of on paper. So it went for months and years, it wasn’t quite as good as being able to see each other face to face, but it was okay. The rest of her life kind of became what she did between the letters and her own training.

Some weeks she got multiple letter from Rainbow Dash, so she wasn’t surprised when a letter showed up the day after she had sent out one of her own. She prepared to tear it open when she caught sight of the name on the envelope, Firefly.

She stared at for a long time, her mind blank. She then just sat the letter down and left her room to attend to some chores she had put off. But it was still there when she came back. Gilda grabbed up the letter and prepared to open it, but found she was shaking too bad. After composing herself, Gilda resolved to destroy the letter but only managed a tiny rip before she shoved it into a drawer.

Gilda stayed out of her room as much as possible after that. Whenever she was there, she felt like she was being watched.

When Dash’s next letter arrived, Gilda had a hard time responding and it was a couple of weeks before she finally sent off a reply. Rainbow had sent several letter in the mean time the last of which asking Gilda if anything was wrong. Gilda had no idea how to respond.

Gilda busied herself with anything at all to take her mind off that stupid letter and her growing guilt for not responding to Rainbow Dash. Without response, Dash’s letter became shorter and more infrequent before finally stopping all together.

Gilda tried to bury herself in work to forget and it almost worked. Some days there were

whole hours when she didn't find herself thinking back to those days at camp and that blue pegasus who had been the best friend she'd ever had before or sense.

One day a letter from Rainbow Dash arrived again. It was only two lines:

Gilda,

I miss you. Please write back.

-Rainbow Dash

Gilda pulled out the drawer she'd had avoided and balled the letter from Firefly in her fist. She hated Firefly right then, she hadn't seen her in years and yet she still found a way to keep Rainbow Dash from her. A thought struck Gilda and set the letter down and started smoothing it out. She had to deal with this letter and she couldn't do it alone. She wrote a response letter to Dash, one line:

"Can I come see you?"

Less than a week later the fattest envelope she'd ever seen came to her door. In the letter Rainbow gave detailed instructions on how to get from Gilda's home all the way to Ponyville. The rest of the letter was dedicated to describing every thing they'd do when she got there in various tiers of importance depending on the length of her stay.

Gilda immediately began packing and finished by tucking the tormenting letter into a pouch that hid under the feathers of her neck. Gilda felt, for the first time in a long while, an eagerness for the future.

The sun was all but set when Gilda reached the edges of Ponyville. Dash had given Gilda good directions for getting to the town, but it got a bit sketchy once she actually arrived in town. Maybe she was just tired from the trip, but all the building looked exactly the same to her.

As she walked down the street she spotted a young white furred unicorn playing on the doorstep of her home. Gilda walked quickly over, "Hey kid, can you help me for a second? I'm looking for a pegasus named Rainbow Dash." The filly only got to let out a small gasp of surprise before a purple furred head reached out and pulled the unicorn inside and slammed the door. Gilda felt her temper flare up when she saw another young unicorn with a blond mane staring at her from across the street.

"What's a matter kid, never seen a griffon before?" Gilda asked with a smile. The unicorn mumbled something Gilda couldn't make out. "Speak up when you're talking to someone. Didn't your momma ever teach you nothin'." Gilda joked, but felt her patience waning.

"I said, 'I'm not gonna let you hurt Rainbow Dash.' I know all about you monsters from the Everfree forest, I know you eat ponies. My friends told me so!"

Gilda suddenly felt like she was back in Junior Speedsters, but in the earliest days. She hated that feeling. "Listen up kid, we monsters only eat young ponies such as yourself. So why don't you stop messing around and tell me what I want to know before I get hungry."

An adult earth pony came from a nearby doorway looking angry, "That's no way to treat

a little filly!”

Gilda sighed with exasperation “Look dude, I was just messing with the kid. How’s about you just tell me how to find Rainbow Dash and then none of us have to look at each other anymore. Deal?”

The earth pony indignantly gave her directions and Gilda took off without another word. ‘That was annoying, but at least that’s done,’ Gilda thought as she flew ever closer to Dash’s house in the clouds. ‘Everything will be alright now.’

“That. Really. Sucked.” each word was followed by another punch into the barn wall. Gilda had managed to fly to the outskirts of town before she had to stop, she was having trouble seeing straight.

“All I wanted was one day with my friend,” *punch* “But that STUPID Pinkie Pie wouldn’t even give me that!” *punch* “And Dash LEFT me for some dumb weather work that anypony could do!” *punch* “NO ONE laughed at my pranks or would even TALK to me!” *punch* “And then that wimp!” *punch* “After I frazzled her they all stared at me like I was...” *punch* *punch* *punch* “And then that party! I KNOW Pinkie had that planned somehow! She HAD to of!” *PUNCH* “And now Rainbow Dash...” Gilda pulled her fist back but just collapsed against the wall and buried her face in her fore legs.

“Excuse me,” a small voice broke Gilda’s sobbing and she looked over to see a little red haired earth pony with a large ribbon in her hair. “Why are you beatin’ up my family’s barn and why are you cryin’?”

“I AM NOT CRYING!” Gilda roared as loud as she could. “Don’t you know that monsters don’t cry?”

The little pony said simply, “But you’re not a monster. You’re just a girl like me you look like you could use a friend.”

Gilda stood up and shouted, “Well, what do you know about it?! You’re just a kid!” Gilda took to the skies and headed away from Ponyville as fast as her wings would carry her.

When Gilda finally got back to her room she looked at the mess she saw in the mirror. The main thing that caught her eye was the pouch around her neck that had come dislodged from underneath her feathers. She ripped it off and tore out the envelope.

“This is all your fault!” She screamed at the envelope. “Why did you hate me so much that you couldn’t let me have anything good? WHY!?”

With nothing left to lose, she tore open the envelope and looked at the letter that had haunted her for so long.

Dear Gilda,

I just want you to know first thing, what happened to me was not your fault, it was mine. And not for the reason I told Rainbow Dash, this accident had nothing to do with an old flyer like me trying to keep up with the kids. I know you, Dash talked about you so much that I couldn’t not know you. You’ll blame yourself for this and even now you’ll think I’m doing the “adult” thing and lying to make you feel better. The truth is that I failed you in so many ways as a teacher and this was my punishment.

You see, I had never met a griffon before, let alone taught one. I didn't know what to do with you, you were just so different that most of my lessons wouldn't work for you and I didn't want to take the time to work with you. I just hoped if I ignored you that you'd just take care of yourself and you did just that with a little help from Rainbow. But it was my job to teach you how to work with others as well. And I know Rainbow Dash helped you out in many ways, but there are things that a young pony just won't think about. Such as simple safety measures that everypony knows and they don't apply the same way to you. If I had taken the time to learn how exactly you fly as a griffon, I wouldn't have gotten myself hurt.

Now that's out of the way, let me count all the other ways I failed you. I knew it would be hard on you from the start, being the only griffon surrounded by ponies. Kids (and adults too while we're being honest) can be mean about the littlest things and there you were, as different from the others as you could possibly be. I could sit here and plead ignorance about how rough you got it, but the only reason I can is because I purposefully ignored it.

When you and Rainbow Dash became friends I breathed a sigh of relief. I figured a pair of outcasts like yourselves could watch out for each other and I wouldn't have to worry about either of you.

So I, of course, stole Rainbow Dash from you first chance I got. I'm sure that's what you're thinking. Oh, but the truth is so much worse.

I saw in Rainbow Dash the kind of potential and raw talent that I'd never seen before and I had to try to mold it so that when she became great she'd say it was all thanks to me. The same potential was in you as well, but that would mean I'd actually have to come up with whole new teaching techniques and that was simply too much work as I've said earlier. I just sort of hoped that having a friend you only saw for a few minutes of the day would be enough for you. Surely that's enough for anyone away from their home for the first time and surrounded by hostile strangers.

I figured the worst case scenario is that you go to bed crying a few times and maybe write some bad poetry. But I underestimated how you'd learn so quickly that the easiest way to make friends is make common enemies. But hey, that's what friends and mentors are for, to help you with tough moral decisions. So it was a really good thing I took both of those away from you.

I'm not saying you're a misguided monster that needed MY guidance or anything egotistical as that. Do you remember what I said to Rainbow Dash on the last day of camp? "When someone's really hurt, they'll often say or do things they don't really mean." And you were hurting something awful, weren't you?

And then I went I busted myself leaving you with a "I hurt everyone around me" complex. I can't blame you even a little for not wanting to talk to me back at camp, I really can't.

But time passes and I find it harder and harder to pretend like I didn't do anything wrong. So here we are. Now, this isn't an absolution for you. Everything you did, that was still your choice, and you'll have to deal with that your own way. But let me make a suggestion, stick with Dash. The two of you together, I can't even imagine what you two will be able accomplish. And when you are soaring high above us all and everyone's asking you how you did it you'll just laugh and say, "On our own."

One last thing. I started writing this letter because I wanted to help you in all the ways I

failed to back at camp. But now that it's done I have to admit that there's a selfish reason for it too. You see, I find myself hoping, insanely, that after you've forgiven yourself you might be able to

Never mind. I don't deserve it.

~~Your Teacher,~~

Your Friend,

Firefly

Gilda let herself cry until she fell asleep. When she woke up, she pulled out a stack of paper and a quill. She had so very many letters to write.