

Within and Without
by [Cloudy Skies](#)
Chapter 9

"Twilight."

It was very tempting for Twilight to just pretend she hadn't heard Rainbow Dash. If she fell asleep again, she could go back to her dream. She had no idea what it involved, but she knew it was a regular dream entirely devoid of unnatural scary moons or frustrating princesses. Not a single Luna to confuse her and annoy her.

"Twilight. Get up. Get up!"

That may be a slight exaggeration. She did miss Luna, even though the princess frustrated her to no end. Half the time it felt like Twilight was trying to solve a puzzle box wrapped in barbed wire. It was fascinating, yet painful, and she had never been the type to give up on easily. When that puzzle occupied her mind half the day, though, she had to question her own sanity.

"Come on! I can see your mouth moving, I know you are awake!"

Twilight finally gave up and opened her eyes to find Rainbow Dash hovering over her, close enough that she could smell her breath. All around them, the others were stirring and packing up their things while Fluttershy was fussing over Applejack again. There was no telling what time it was in the dark of the cave. The single firefly-lamp in the ceiling provided scant illumination.

"Finally! And ponies say I'm a sound sleeper. We got to go. I think the chief wants to see us. Like, now," Dash said.

Suddenly more worried than annoyed, Twilight was fully awake and scrabbling out of bed in a second. "What happened? Are you okay?" Indeed, everypony did look okay, but Twilight half expected griffins to break down the door any moment.

"Yeah, I'm okay, but, uhm, well, Brenliana came by. Turns out that the chief wasn't very happy that she hadn't taken us straight to him." Dash winced. "She didn't look so good. I think he hurt her."

"Somepony needs to buck that chief in the head," Applejack muttered angrily. "Might just be that it's gonna be me."

"Yeah, well, Bren's outside. Said she'd 'appreciate it' if we would come with her, but she wasn't going to order us to do so, no matter what chief what's-his-face says. I don't think

Brenliana and the chief are friends," Rainbow Dash finished with a sour grin. "Yay, right?"

Out from under the blanket, the room was a little cold, and Twilight was glad to slip into her cloak. They were reluctant to leave the room when they realized it was even colder on the outside. Leaving the caves that hosted the inn in favor of the cold dawn outside, they were approached by a single griffin. While she still struggled to tell them apart from each other, Twilight had no trouble recognizing her as Brenliana, even with the state she was in.

Bren walked with a noticeable limp, as if putting down her left foreleg hurt her. Her sides and chest were bandaged, and her warpaint was smudged almost as an afterthought. The griffin flight leader did not offer comment on this, though, speaking up the second she spotted them. "Okay, I'm taking a big chance with you here. Please be worth it," Brenliana said. There was no anger in her voice, even if the words were harsh.

"Um, what?" Twilight said. "Why? How? You were just ordered to take us in, right?"

"Without tellin' us why," Applejack grumped.

The griffin began walking towards the mouth of a huge cave nearby. It wasn't situated on the same level, but a small pathway hugged the mountain and led to the plateau that hosted the entrance. Perhaps the path was intended for young griffins who had yet to learn how to fly, Twilight mused.

"Because of Gilda," Brenliana finally said.

Dash gave a start. "Wait, she mentioned you, I think. You're the gal-pal back home she talked about? Oh hay, I get it now. Uh, listen, I'm sorry about-"

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. I should have given you a chance to explain yourself earlier," Brenliana interrupted. "I've known and taken care of Gilda since she was a little hatchling. Her mother, ah, isn't here any more, and the chief is... busy. She needed a friend. I don't know if I've been the best of friends, but I tried."

The griffin snorted derisively. "The chief blames me for letting her run away from home the first time, and he's right. I told her that if she didn't want this life, she should get out of here."

Brenliana looked around to make sure that no griffins were nearby, and indeed they were alone. Perhaps griffins started their day later, or the unusually cold day kept them inside? Twilight pulled her hood up as the griffin went on, still ascending towards the cave entrance.

"The second time she ran away, I understand it was to see you, Rainbow Dash. She came back hurt and told me and the chief what had happened. The chief wasn't happy. Nor was I."

There was a little pause while the griffin stared contemplatively at Dash, who for her part looked very discomfited and offered no comment. Brenliana eventually shrugged. "Chief said that she couldn't be trusted any more, and that he would arrange for someone to marry her. Gilda didn't like that one bit, and there was a bit of a fight."

"If he's hurt Gilda..." Dash snarled.

"He hasn't. He never would. Anyway, she said that you would come save her, to take her away. I doubted it, but the chief spread the word and told us to be on alert for a blue, rainbow-maned pony with ill intent." The griffin was still looking straight at Dash, and frowned. "I was happy to be on the lookout but I never thought you'd come, and certainly not to take her away."

Dash swallowed. "Uh, I'm not-"

"I know. I guessed," Brenliana said wearily. "I don't need to know why you came here, or if you just happened by and went with it. I just know things can't get any worse. Chief Blackclaw is getting old. Some say he's not himself anymore, that he should let someone else take up the mantle of chief. He disagrees. Whatever comes of this, I'm hoping something will change, and that's why I'm taking this risk."

The griffin paused at the cave entrance. It was natural, unworked stone - an irregular and craggy thing, but richly decorated. Masks, fetishes, stone totems and bone crafts were all spread around the area and mounted above. Every flat stone surface was covered in claw-painted scenes depicting griffins diving for fish and soaring through the sky.

"I don't know what Gilda thinks, though she knows you're here. I'll be very disappointed if you hurt her, but let's skip the threats of violence and all that for once, yeah?" Brenliana said with a mirthless chuckle.

"Let's," Twilight hastily agreed as they followed their griffin guide into the cave.

The inside was decorated with just as much care as the outside. Braziers lined the tunnel and brightly illuminated smooth stone walls lined with innumerable paintings. From the very second they stepped inside, they were surrounded by delicately claw-painted scenes that seemed to tell a story. It all started with a large mottled egg which hatched into the sun and the moon, and went on to show a large griffin ruling over smaller griffins. There were battles, celebrations, griffins shaking claws in agreement- it was a storybook that followed them as they went.

"The story of the griffin tribes," Brenliana commented with ill-concealed disinterest. "It's very uninteresting and irrelevant until you get to the more recent stuff higher up. That, we can

use. These are just stories retold.”

As the tunnel wound upwards, it got steeper and began turning, but Twilight’s attention was fully on the walls. The larger griffin made its last appearance, lying down in front of a mountain. The sun was painted in zenith over the mountain, but there was no telling what had happened to the griffin. After this scene, the griffins were all painted with solid-colored claws, perhaps signifying that it was the story of the Blackclaw. It had a few dozen paintings of major events showing treaties and agreements, a strong and happy community until a conflict was depicted. The last scene was one of griffins raising claws against each other, and then the walls were bare.

Brenliana offered no comment. The passage’s curve became tighter and tighter, steeper and steeper until they finally reached a set of stone stairs. Twilight halted.

"Uh, Brenliana? What's the chief like? I mean, I'd hate to say the wrong thing at the wrong time."

Rarity nodded at the question. "A primer on griffin etiquette would be most welcome."

Brenliana just kept walking, shaking her head. "Etiquette? That's a very Equestrian thing, I think. Just don't make him look weak in front of other griffins. That's common sense, not 'etiquette', though."

At the top of the stairs the tunnel opened up and the walls fell away to leave them standing on a plateau that Twilight quickly realized made up the very peak of the mountain. A large throne stood near one of the edges, a massive thing of polished stone upon which rested a huge griffin. The griffin, presumably Chief Blackclaw, dwarfed the other griffins. He reminded Twilight more of a manticores than a griffin as far as sheer size went.

The ponies were being watched from all around the barren rock area by scores of griffins. Some of them wore warpaint and stood guard in pairs, but the vast majority were clean and curious, with more of them arriving by wing every minute. At the chief's side stood three griffins, two of which were adorned with fetishes and weird paints. The third one, Twilight immediately recognized by her smallish size and dyed feathertips.

"Gilda," Dash breathed, but her voice was swallowed up by the winds that ravaged the plateau. The young griffin in question saw them approach, and her eyes lit up when she saw the ponies, the blue pegasus among them.

Chief Blackclaw slowly stood up on his throne, and Brenliana halted them not ten paces from the throne. "Well well well, little Equestrians. You've come to my town, slept in my beds, eaten my food, and now you finally deign to come to my court. I am delighted to see that your politeness has wings at least." His voice boomed across the plateau, eliciting a round of amused

squawking laughter from the crowd.

"We didn't eat any of your damn food, and we *paid* the innkeeper," Dash snorted, but Fluttershy shot her a glance to silence her. Rarity quickly stole the spotlight by taking a quick step forward and bowing.

"We are delighted to visit your beautiful town, and it's a truly splendid sight. We heard that your lordship has requested our presence, and so, here we are," Rarity said, smiling. The unicorn was the very picture of elegance, and even the chief looked a little surprised, though it faded quickly.

"Yes. Yes I have. If you choose to think of it as a 'request', then you are free to lie to yourself if it makes you feel better." The old griffin snorted and glanced pointedly at the warlike griffins spread around the plateau. "Just because one of my wing leaders has gone soft does not mean they have all become mewling cowards." There was another round of raucous laughter at this, though many of the griffins were grimly silent along with Brenliana. Many murderous glances were exchanged between the griffins of the Blackclaw tribe, and some of the laughter sounded forced.

The chief's face grew grim as the laughter died. He lowered his voice a bit, but he was still loud as a storm and a half as he pointed a huge, sharp claw at Rainbow Dash. "Our business is this. You have poisoned my daughter with your ways, and I demand satisfaction. I will take it from you one way or another."

"Jeez dad, she hasn't 'poisoned' anyone!" Gilda yelled, glaring at the chief. "I'm going with Rainbow Dash. I told you she would come, and you're not going to stop us."

"Silence, child," Chief Blackclaw growled.

"I'm not a child, and you know it!" Gilda said, rolling her eyes. "And I'm not the only one who thinks you are being way uncool." Neither father nor daughter was watching the crowd, but glances were exchanged, griffins trying to decide who agreed and disagreed, who stood where.

"As long as you keep speaking out of turn, behaving like a child, you are a child, and you *will* hold your tongue!" The chief towered over Gilda, who turned her back and walked towards the ponies in silent defiance.

"You get back here, Gilda, or I swear on the ancestors-"

"No dad, I'm gone. I warned you." Gilda ran up to Rainbow Dash and grinned at her, holding out a claw for a high-five. The pegasus seemed utterly paralyzed, and the crowd was mute.

"We going, yeah, Dash?" she asked, looking at Dash expectantly.

The chief looked about ready to explode, and Twilight flinched, unsure of what was going to happen, but certain it wouldn't be good. The threat of something horrendous and violent hung in the air, obvious to everyone but one pegasus pony and a young griffin. Painted griffins slowly spread their wings. Pinkie Pie's smile faltered almost imperceptibly and one of her eyes twitched.

Rainbow Dash halted it all with a few words. She looked away, unable to meet Gilda's eyes. Gilda's paw was still waiting, and would be kept waiting still. "Actually, that's not why I'm here."

"You're kidding, right?" Gilda's voice was pure disbelief tinted by a growing hysteria. "C'mon Dash, you are not saying you came all the way here, and you're not- I thought..."

"We're here to help," Dash stammered. "I mean, whatever we can do. If you want to go back to Equestria, then that's cool. We'll take you." She looked past Gilda to the chief, who was looking at the unfolding event with narrowed eyes. "I'll even fly over and buck that rotten dad of yours in the face if you think it'll help, but I don't- I'm not in love with you. I never was. And besides, I'm, uh. I kind of have someone else."

"What?" Twilight whispered. Applejack, Rarity and Fluttershy all glanced over at her and rolled their eyes or sighed in exasperation for some reason. Pinkie Pie was still looking at the exchange with great interest.

Gilda's face fell. "Ah. Sweet. Great. Awesome. I guess I'm cool with that." She sounded everything but "cool" with it, and Twilight winced. Neither Rainbow Dash nor Gilda would look at each other right now.

"Your place is here, Gilda. The tribe needs all of its wings." The chief's voice sounded almost sympathetic, now. "Swoop is a good griffin. You will be good for each other."

"Yeah, except for that part where I don't like him," Gilda shot back, moving closer to Brenliana, away from Dash.

Brenliana spoke up next, making Twilight jump a little. She had almost forgotten the griffin was standing next to her, and she was terribly loud. "And except, also, for the part where it is not for you to decide in the first place, chief or no!" Brenliana's words triggered a lot of noise from the surrounding griffins, some in her support, some in abject disagreement. There were a lot more griffins at the peak now than there had been when they arrived, Twilight noticed. They had never stopped coming.

"I do what I must to keep the Blackclaw strong," Chief Blackclaw said. "And as long as I

am chief, my word is law. I only want what is best for everyone." He seemed to have noticed the same thing as Twilight, and his eyes roamed, looking for dissent in the crowd. Most griffins quailed under his gaze, but when his attention came to rest on Brenliana and Gilda, neither of them so much as flinched.

"Law?" Brenliana replied. Her eyes shone and it looked like she was presented with a problem and a solution both. A revelation. She looked over at the ponies by her side, fixing her attention upon Rainbow Dash for as long as it took her to whisper two words under her breath. "I'm sorry."

Without giving any explanation, she approached the throne boldly. "Law includes the right to challenge the laws with contests. No one has exercised this right in your reign so far, but that ends now. Chief, I challenge you for the throne in a contest of speed. I suspect your wings are rusty, and it's about time someone stood up to you."

The chief was impassive as Brenliana walked a slow circle around the edge of the crowd. How many griffins were here now, Twilight wondered? Three hundred? Four hundred? Over half of them were hovering in the air, with no space left on which to stand.

"You've done a lot of good for the Blackclaw, but you wield your subjects as tools. We toil as slaves in the fisheries stockpiling food for a war that will never come. Our flights patrol until their wings are ragged and their families weep, lonely and forgotten. We find no enemies because the wars are over. They were over long ago!" she shouted, voice laden with passion as she tried to engage the crowd.

"Your father had cause to be cautious, but we are free and at peace. It's time you realized this! You bind us to Clawford with chains of steel where bonds of family and love would hold us just as surely without chafing." The crowd was getting noisier and noisier, and it seemed fights would break out any minute. The griffins were slowly splitting into two camps. Many of the painted griffins took up position near the chief, who for his part was scowling as if the sheer weight of his disapproval could snap Brenliana in half. The majority, however, ended up flocking to Brenliana, standing or hovering by the injured wingleader.

"And now?" Brenliana continued, indicating Gilda who stood at her side, head held high. "Now you're trying to force your own daughter to marry off to another tribe in one of your ploys for power? It ends now! I challenge you for the leadership of the Blackclaw tribe, chief. A test of speed."

Under the deafening cheers, yells and arguments that ensued in the wake of Brenliana's speech, the ponies huddled together. "Okay, so we're in the middle of a civil war. Fantastic. Ideas? Escape plans?" Twilight asked, speaking quickly.

"I just want to know why Brenliana apologized to me," Dash said, looking very sceptical.

"Nothing's happened. Uh, yet. Oh horseapples, I said it."

"War?" Fluttershy echoed. "I don't think it's that bad. Is it that bad? We can't let that happen!"

"Oh don't be so dramatic, the word they used was 'contest'," Rarity pointed out.

"There're still a lot of griffins that look awful angry," Applejack huffed. "But Ah hope yer right. Don't fancy our chances right now if this goes south."

"This is no fun at all. We just make people angry wherever we go," Pinkie Pie said sulkily.

"Very well! I accept your challenge," Chief Blackclaw boomed, and all the other noise died almost instantly. He faced Brenliana, stepping down from the throne. Even on level ground, the older chief was a lot bigger than Brenliana. He spread his wings, huge and tattered things. Brenliana followed suit, though it obviously pained her a little. She was apparently still hurting from whatever fight she had been in earlier, and it was plain for all to see that now. One of her wings didn't fully extend.

"You intend to make me fly the challenge like this, oh fair and just chief of the tribe?" Brenliana asked, loudly. It was clear she was counting on the presence of the tribe, now. The chief scowled.

"We will settle this with champions of our choosing, then. It is my right to decide as the defender. You have named the stake. Name your champion." The chief looked as if the words tasted mightily sour. Twice as much so when Brenliana replied.

"Rainbow Dash of Equestria will be my champion."

Less than an hour later saw Twilight Sparkle in a sparsely decorated soil home in the fishing village below mount Blackclaw. With her were all her friends plus Gilda, Brenliana, and Brenliana's husband Kinther. The interior was surprisingly due to a lack of tables or other wooden furniture. This left the assembled ponies and griffins sitting in a loose circle in the center of the house. The sun was barely up, but the room quickly warmed up with so many occupants.

"Okay. Okay. So I'm in a race. Cool. I'm gonna win it. Also cool. But can anypony tell me how the hay this could happen?!" Dash yelled the accusation at Brenliana, who looked only moderately sorry about the whole business.

"I think perhaps I can answer that. Bren?" Kinther asked, receiving a nod from his wife.

The male griffin was slightly smaller than Brenliana, and he smiled kindly. He was the least threatening griffin Twilight had seen so far.

"I am tasked with recording the history of the tribe. Or, I was, before the chief set me to the task of fishing. I kept listening and talking to our tribesmembers, though, and I'd be happy to explain."

"Oh wait, so you're like a librarian? Or a historian?" Twilight asked hopefully. She had not expected to find someone like that here. "Are the paintings in the cave at the peak yours?"

"Librarian and historian both, in a sense, yes. Minding that cave used to be my duty," Kinther said with a nod.

"You don't have a library though," Twilight objected. "And the paintings were only major historical events, right?" She looked around, suddenly twice as surprised by how bare the house was.

"Not everyone lives where they work," Rarity said. "This is obviously not their library."

"There is no library," Kinther said with an amused grin.

"Oh!" Twilight said, her eyes wide with wonder. "Oral tradition! You have it all in your head!" It was obvious she had hit the nail on the head, and Kinther nodded, tapping his own head with a claw.

"I carry with me the history of the Blackclaw, even though the Chief has forbidden me from the cave of memories, deeming it a 'waste of time'," the griffin snorted.

"To answer your initial question, before we fly off course here, this 'could happen' because there is no law saying it can't. Challenges favor the challenged, and as such, they are rare," the griffin said.

"Uh, favor the challenged how, exactly? Might be that Ah'm missing something, but Bren here chose the challenge," Applejack pointed out, face scrunched up in confusion.

"So she did," Kinther said with a nervous glance at Brenliana. "She exercised the right of the challenge, and cleverly baited the chief to let them use proxies because of what he did to her – may he drown for that. But he chooses the specifics of the contest as well as his own champion. Last, he chooses the counter-stake."

"Wait, so he chooses what happens if I lose?" Dash asked.

"Yeah," Gilda said. She'd been quiet up until now, only tossing Rainbow Dash the occasional

hurt or angry glance. "Your flank on the line, heh."

"My flank, rather," Brenliana interjected. "If I lose the challenge, I may not challenge him again, but I have more support than him. He will probably still see me as a threat and demand my exile. The chief isn't an idiot."

"Okay, whatever, what do we do when Dash wins?" Gilda asked impatiently. The fact that she used the word 'when', not 'if', gave Twilight a measure of faith.

"I'll let your father stay if he wants to, but I imagine he'll exile himself out of pride. I just want the tribe to be what it used to be," Brenliana said, extending a foreleg to rest a claw on top of Gilda's head.

"Yeah, great." Gilda replied shaking Brenliana off and staring at Dash. "But I mean, what do we do when you win? You have someone else? Who?"

Obviously less comfortable talking about this in front of an audience, Dash shrank back a little. "I, yeah. I do. I don't think you know them."

Pinkie Pie made a noise next to Twilight. The pink earth pony's ears drooped a little. Dash did not look over at her, looking even more depressed and lowering her head.

"Awesome," Gilda said with a sigh.

"Will you be coming with us?" Rarity asked, trying to shift the subject a little. Applejack muttered something angry to Dash. The pegasus looked like she wanted to sink through the ground, and thanks to the soil floor, she actually made some real progress in that department.

"If Dash wins, then I guess this place won't be so bad. If she loses, well, then I don't know what happens, right?" Gilda shrugged. "Just don't mess it up, Dash."

"Yeah. No problem," Dash said with the least convincing smile Twilight had ever seen.

"Right," Kinther said. "I believe we should get some food down our gullets before deciding the fate of the Blackclaw tribe. I was thinking of making some fish soup, if you-" He stopped speaking at Brenliana's warning expression. Twilight just looked away, embarrassed for his sake. Fluttershy was hiding behind her hair. The rest of the ponies were in varying states of discomfort and awkwardness.

After reassuring Kinther that they were okay and that the offer had not offended the vegetarian ponies, the griffins arranged for transport back up to the main plateau of Blackclaw mountain. When they took off so close to the mountain, it was easier to appreciate just how expansive the network of caves that riddled the mountain was. There had to be over a hundred

different caves in all shapes and sizes. Right now the entire mountain was bustling with activity, no doubt in preparation for the upcoming contest. The wind had died down somewhat, but it was still cold, and everything smelled of the sea.

As they flew up the mountain, they were approached by a griffin who informed them that the chief was ready to announce the terms of the challenge. Without time to even dismount, they flew straight up to the peak at a sharp angle. The top of the mountain was packed with griffins both standing and hovering nearby. The chief waited by the throne, looking pleased with himself.

"I have been challenged!" Chief Blackclaw roared. "Challenged by Wingleader Brenliana for the leadership of the tribe. The challenge is one of speed, to be performed by chosen champions, and it falls to me to set the rest of the terms."

"At your leisure. I am the challenger, Wingleader Brenliana of the Blackclaw, and I say your reign ends here," Brenliana answered confidently.

As the two griffin leaders exchanged unpleasantries and titles, Twilight leaned over towards Gilda. The younger griffin looked a lot less convinced than Bren. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"He's smiling. Bren doesn't know my dad like I do. This is gonna bite us in the flank, backfire big time," Gilda said, shaking her head.

"The fliers," the chief boomed, "will take the challenge of the first flight, for the traditional two laps."

There was a round of mutters at that. Brenliana seemed surprised and explained in a whisper to the ponies. "That's the first trial that hatchlings take when they have learned to fly. It's in and out through all the narrow caves on the mountain. Rainbow Dash is quick and agile. Adult griffins will barely fit. It's perfect."

"Too perfect," Gilda muttered.

"My champion will be my daughter, Gilda," The chief continued, his smile growing. Another round of mutters. Gilda blanched.

"That's a joke, right? You're joshing me, this has got to be a joke. Why would I-" Gilda began, only to be cut off by her father's triumphant voice as he made a grandiose gesture with a forepaw.

"And the stake is this blue pegasus, Rainbow Dash."

"Wait. What?!" Dash shrieked. The audience was shocked into a silence, down to the last griffin. Twilight considered the implications, and soon found herself looking at Gilda.

"It's brilliant," Twilight admitted, and the ponies, including the panicked Rainbow Dash all turned to her. "Gilda is smaller than the other griffins and she's a trained flier, almost Dash's match. The only obstacle was that she's had no reason to want to fly for her dad." She stared at the back of Gilda's head as it dropped in defeat.

"Surely Gilda can't think..." Rarity muttered.

"Oh come on Gilda. You can't do this. *They* can't do this!" Dash groaned. "That's muleshit, you can't-"

Gilda turned around, silencing Dash with a glance. The griffin looked positively feral, angry even as tears streaked down her face. "Can't I? It's all I ever wanted, Dash. I can't not do this. You'd do the same if someone dangled a spot in the Wonderbolts at your nose. I'll take whatever I can get, because so far, I've been living on scraps. Equestria or Blackclaw territory, it's always been the same. I want something for myself for once!"

"You're not this stupid!" Dash yelled, but Gilda was no longer listening

"Buck it, Dash. They don't have any power over us here. They can't make us do this. Ah say we just go home. If Gilda's gonna be a pea brain-" Applejack began

"Then we'll just leave the Blackclaw tribe, Brenliana, Kinther, Gilda and all the others to this?" Rarity asked quietly.

"Forfeiting will also default to exile," Kinther muttered sourly. All around them, the confused crowd was looking to Brenliana, the leader of the opposition to the old chief, but she was silent, staring at the ground.

Twilight glared up at the chief. His grin was positively infuriating, but Twilight forced herself to stay calm for Rainbow Dash's sake. This was getting out of hand. "It's Rainbow's call," she said, and meant it.

Fluttershy slowly walked up to sit next to Rainbow Dash. "You don't have to do this, but it would be nice. But, um. It's not your fault if you walk away. Please don't be angry with yourself."

"Walk away?" Dash asked, hollowly. "*Walk away?* Are you kidding me?" She shook her head in disbelief. "Okay, I love the idea of a race. I hate the fact that Brenliana is using us and put me in this situation. I hate that I know this is the right thing to do. But you know what?" She pointed a hoof at Gilda who had sat down at her father's side, much to the latter's amusement. "I'm gonna do this to show that featherbrain how stupid she is being! You can't put somepony up

for grabs in a contest like this, and you can't *win* a pony!"

"What they hay are you even thinking, Gilda? That I'll love you because you're gonna try to lock me up or something? Are you that dumb?" Dash yelled at the griffin in question. Gilda made no reply, looking away.

"If we're quite done with the posturing, yelling and delicious drama, perhaps we should get to it?" the chief asked, looking at Brenliana. "Unless of course your little pony champion is feeling weak-kneed?"

"Not. A. Chance," Rainbow Dash growled from between gritted teeth.

The chief shrugged as if it mattered none to him, though the hint of a scowl played across his lips. The griffins around the peak knew what was at stake, even if most had not quite figured out the details yet. When the chief himself took off and set off down the mountain, almost every griffin followed save for Brenliana and Kinther. The noise and wind of hundreds of griffins taking off nigh-simultaneously was something Twilight would not soon forget. A couple lingered, casting worried looks at Brenliana.

"Right, let's get off this mountain. The lightest two of you ride with me. I'm hurt but I can still glide. The other two, get on Kinther's back. Let's go," Brenliana barked as she snapped to.

There was a brief moment of silence and confusion before Rarity quickly scurried over to Brenliana without a backwards look. Applejack and Pinkie Pie joined up with Kinther, leaving Twilight with little choice but to get onto Brenliana.

"We're checking when we get home! 'Lighter' my hindquarters!" Applejack yelled over at Twilight and Rarity. Rarity snickered.

"Just more to love, Applejack!" Pinkie said cheerily before the rush of wind cut off any further chatting, the two griffins going into a dive. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were on wing as well, following the flock down to ground level. The tribe had landed in a vague semicircle around two narrow tunnels not far apart, both of them a small way off the ground. The chief had taken up position in the center along with Gilda. Brenliana and Kinther landed close by, letting the ponies off.

Gilda was already warming up, flexing her wings and flying in small circles, and Dash immediately set about doing the same.

"Two laps, remember!" the chief said.

"There are markers along the way," Brenliana told Rainbow Dash. "In and out through a lot of tunnels up the mountainside, and then down the exterior. Look for strips of green cloth. In

fact, Kinther, would you be a dear and fly the path to make sure our esteemed chief hasn't messed with them? You're smaller, and I'm not exactly fit for maneuvering."

"And so the claws are bared. You truly don't trust me, do you, Bren?" the chief muttered so the crowd could not hear. Kinther took off, darting into the closest tunnel.

"No," Brenliana said, inspecting her damaged leg.

Looking up the mountain, Twilight could see Kinther soaring out one tunnel only to disappear in through another. When she squinted, she could see small green markers along the side of the mountain, but what went on inside the caves was anypony's guess. After a little while, he exited from a cave near the peak and began his descent. The griffin male hugged the mountainside, going via marker halfway down.

The chief chuckled dryly when Kinther touched down by Brenliana's side. "Excellent. I hereby give you the right to take wing in name of the tribe. Well done, Kinther, and may you fly forever for the Blackclaw."

"Spare me your wit." Kinther snorted before he turned to Dash. "The path is as it has always been. Fly near the middle marker on your way down, or you're disqualified. That's the easy part. The problem is that the tunnels have forks and a few shortcuts. Even though the markers are all in place, it's still a bit of a mess. Any questions, Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash had been paying close attention, and shook her head. "Nah. I'm cool."

"Actually," Twilight said. "Wouldn't it make sense to let Rainbow Dash have a test run first? Just so she knows what the caves look like?"

"She has a point," Brenliana agreed.

"She does," the chief admitted, smiling cruelly. "As there are no rules for that, I am going to have to go with... no."

"That's only because no one's designed a challenge through the caves like this before!" Brenliana protested. "It's usually around mountains or a flat stretch, and other challenges don't require beforehand knowledge!"

"I guess that means I'm really clever for deciding to use the caves, huh?" Chief Blackclaw said with a laugh, but the mirth disappeared very suddenly. "What a bleeding shame that someone trying to betray me feels I'm *unfair*. I'm so sorry."

Brenliana's eyes narrowed, but the chief ignored her, turning to Gilda. "Are you ready, child?"

Gilda gave a start, and landed on the ground with a soft thud, taking her place next to where Rainbow Dash was waiting. "Ready."

"And you. Pegasus. Are you ready?" the chief asked.

"Hope you said goodbye to your chair, chief," Dash answered with enviable confidence.

"Three," the chief said, his face crinkling in disgust.

"Who is it?" Gilda asked Dash in a whisper.

"Who is who?" Dash whispered back.

"Two," the chief counted.

"Who's the 'lucky' one?" Gilda clarified, looking curious and sour at the same time.

Dash focused straight ahead.

"One," the chief said, frowning at the two chatterbugs.

"You're kidding me! You're such a coward that you don't even dare-" Gilda began, incensed.

"Go!" the chief roared, and in the blink of an eye, they were gone. A faint rainbow-trail pointed to the nearest cave entrance as the only indication that the competitors had ever even been there. Even as Twilight looked up, she saw Gilda exit through the mouth of a cave higher up. Rainbow Dash exited the same cave just as Gilda entered another one.

"She's behind," Applejack said as if it wasn't obvious.

"She doesn't know the route. She'll do better on the second lap," Twilight said, sitting down on her haunches. "I guess we just have to wait and see. Um, and while we do so, did you guys know Rainbow Dash had a special somepony?"

Rarity just stared, again. Applejack rolled her eyes, and even Fluttershy looked disappointed in her. "Sugarcube, you don't think anything's odd about this here picture?" Applejack asked.

"About what?" Twilight asked, frustrated and staring at Applejack. "What aren't you telling me?"

Fluttershy coughed delicately, drawing Twilight's attention. The pegasus mare pointed her snout over at Pinkie Pie. "Well, I don't really want to say, but, um..."

"What?!" Twilight gasped. Thinking back on it, it of course made some measure of sense, but she had just figured it was Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie. It was hard to tell, sometimes! She leaned closer to the present party pony. "Pinkie?"

Pinkie Pie offered no comment, eyes still on the race. Twilight had expected some form of answer, but either she was being ignored or Pinkie was not paying attention to absolutely everything around her at once. That would be a first.

Rarity sighed. "Pinkie Pie is quite clearly under a Pinkie Pie swear regarding something, don't you think, darling?"

"That's kind of what I assumed too," Fluttershy admitted. Pinkie Pie was still watching the two competitors, heedless of the conversation behind her back. Gilda was racing down the mountain from the top now. She was well past the half-way marker before Rainbow Dash exited the top cave. "Gilda is very fast," Fluttershy added.

"But, but, if she loses, what-" Twilight sputtered. "This doesn't- Pinkie?!"

Pinkie's eyes were locked on Rainbow Dash as the pegasus became a multichromatic blur clinging to the side of the mountain. She was gaining on Gilda now, but the griffin had a huge lead still.

Pinkie Pie mouthed three simple words as she stared up at the approaching pegasus. Three words that she could not speak until Dash let her, because she had promised, because she took it seriously, and because she did indeed love her. Rainbow Dash was too far away to see her gesture intended for her.

Gilda, however, was not. The griffin was just passing by the starting area, about to begin her second lap, when she glanced at the ponies spectating. She saw Fluttershy and Twilight talking, looking worried. She saw Rarity adjusting her cloak and Applejack frowning at her.

Gilda also saw the pink earth pony who had tried her very best to welcome Gilda to Ponyville, a pair of big blue eyes looking up the mountain, her mouth moving silently. Suddenly, Gilda understood. She arrested her flight with a few rapid flaps of her wings, coming to hover on the spot near the start. She crossed her forepaws expectantly as she waited, eyes narrowed.

"What do you think you are doing?" Chief Blackclaw roared. "Do you know what's at stake here? You have the lead! Go!" A ripple of confusion went through the audience, some yelling for her to get a move on, others laughing at the chief's misfortune.

Gilda did not appear to hear her father, content to wait for Dash until she arrived a few seconds later. The pegasus did not appear to slow down until the last second, but when she did, the blast from the force of her wings sent manes askew.

"Okay, wait, it's two laps, right? You said two! I can do this!" Dash asked desperately as she panted for breath.

"Way. Uncool. Never thought I'd say this, but you are a coward, Dash," Gilda said amidst gulps for air.

"What the hay are you on about?" Dash asked. The chief was roaring at the top of his lungs for Gilda to get flying, but even if he had breathed tornadoes, neither of the two competitors would have moved.

"She deserves better, you dweeb," Gilda said, slowly coming to rest on the ground. "I don't know how I didn't see this before. You are just a coward."

"You take that back!" Dash yelled back at her, landing in a wide stance and pressing her snout up against Gilda's beak.

Pinkie sniffled. The earth pony was trying very hard to keep up her smile, but tears were lining her big blue eyes. Dash glanced over and trembled, closing her eyes tightly.

"Seriously Dash, I thought you were better than this. This is such a load of crap. You've got someone you claim to love, but you're afraid to even say it? You're hiding it? Loser!" The griffin sneered and began walking away, leaving Dash there. Pinkie Pie looked like she wanted to go to Dash, but she sat still, lips trembling as she forced herself to keep smiling.

"You..." Dash tried, faltering. No other words came out.

There was a long quiet. Even the chief had run out of steam momentarily. As Gilda started walking away from the gathered griffins, he opened his mouth, no doubt to berate his daughter again.

"Oh *do* shut up!" Rarity snapped at the much larger griffin, and to his credit, he did.

It looked as if though it would end there. The onlooking griffins had no idea what was going on, but parted before Gilda. The chief looked aghast, and Brenliana didn't seem sure of what to think. The only sounds were the howling wind and the flapping of scores of wings.

"I love you, Pinkie Pie. I'm so sorry." The words were faint. Twilight wasn't sure she had heard it right. Pinkie Pie looked up and swallowed.

Rainbow Dash still had her eyes closed and was flat on the ground, quivering even as she spoke. "I love you. I'm sorry. I love you. I was just scared. You scare me. I scare myself. I don't understand it, but I love you, I need you, and I'm sorry for making it a secret. I never should have made you swear. I'm sorry. I love you!"

Rainbow Dash finally opened her eyes, and she was met with a galloping mass of pink that scooped her up in a hug, squeezing the pegasus tightly. Pinkie's tears were forgotten and there was no trace of sadness left in Pinkie Pie, only sheer, unbridled joy as she clung to Dash who finally cried her heart out, limp in Pinkie's embrace.

"Silly Dashie, it's okay, we all get scared sometimes! But it's all okay now. And I love you too!" Pinkie chirped. "Just please don't cry. Aw, okay, no, cry all you want, but I'll be here. I'm here for you."

Twilight just shook her head mutely, smiling despite herself. She pretended to scratch something in the corner of her eye. Rarity had produced a handkerchief from somewhere, daubing her eyes as Fluttershy clung to her, sniffing. Applejack averted her eyes and muttered something about public decency, though Twilight was pretty sure she could see her eyes glistening.

When Rainbow Dash finally dried her tears, Gilda was hovering nearby. Pinkie grinned up at the griffin. "Hi! I'm still sorry you didn't stay for the entire party that time, but don't you two have a race to finish? We can have another party afterwards! I even brought games!"

"Oh yeah, race, right," Dash said with a sniff, wiping her snout with a hoof.

"I guess," Gilda said with a grin before taking off. "Race ya!" Her voice disappeared into one of the tunnels.

"Go Dashie!" Pinkie cheered and smacked Rainbow Dash on the flank with a hoof. There was a distinct excess of red in the rainbow streak that rocketed after Gilda. Pinkie bounced back to the rest of the friends, all smiles.

"Race you'? After this? Are they *playing* with the fate of the Blackclaw?" the chief asked, incensed. "This is ridiculous! I declare this challenge null and void!"

"You can do no such thing and you know it," Brenliana said with a chuckle. "The second we declared our champions, this matter was out of our own claws, chief. I'd say I'm sorry, but I don't think I am."

"Uh huh," Pinkie Pie said cheerfully, munching on a stale reserve muffin she had extracted from one of her saddlebags. "Guess that means you lose!"

Brenliana nodded at this and grinned triumphantly. "Gilda has no incentive any more. You've lost."

"Oh, I didn't mean just him," Pinkie said, shaking her head.

"What do you mean? Surely I've won the race?" Brenliana asked, sounding a little concerned now. Far above, the two racers were neck and neck as they exited a tunnel and entered another.

"Probably, but who cares about *that*? Gilda and Dashie are the real winners!" Pinkie laughed before swallowing the rest of the muffin in one bite.

[Chapter 10](#)