

Wingmares

CouchCrusader

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PONY FICTION VAULT



The counselors took a clear stand on the issue from the first day of summer flight camp: any pegasus caught flying Cloudsdale Circuit after hours would face permanent expulsion. The miles of towering cloud-link fences and red "NO ENTRY" signs surrounding the Circuit enhanced the gravity of the counselors' warnings. On this particular afternoon, the miles of thunderheads churning out of the weather factories did what they could to help drive daredevils away, and most campers were happy to comply with the camp staff's policies.

Rainbow Dash wasn't like most campers. As soon as she heard the instructors had closed the Circuit two hours early, that meant private track time all for herself. How generous of them.

Little more than a cyan blip beneath the darkening curve of the sky, the pegasus quickly tunneled her way beneath the fence sequestering the Circuit's southeastern hairpin. Emerging from below with bits of cloud lodged in her prismatic mane, she shook them out and surveyed the track before her.

A double line of nimbus rings rose up to her from below, forming the course's tallest point where they came together. To her left, the double heads of Lark's Head Loop swayed in the mounting wind. To her right loomed the large, rising stretch of Titan's Curve.

Rainbow Dash stamped her hoof. Just that morning, she had been on the verge of setting a new personal record for the Circuit's hardest test of stamina - only to have her run sabotaged by *them*.

She was never sure how they got away with it. The instructors would be elsewhere, or occupied with another pony, but they would never, ever be watching.

The air pulsed with electric potential, standing Rainbow's coat straight up, and every breath of its petrichor quickened the beat of her heart. She stared down the descending line of rings to her right, opened her wings in the unstable air, and squatted into a ready stance. All she heard was a pounding in her ears.

A lightning bolt ripped the sky in two; the thunder shattered what remained, and she hurled herself into space.

With her wings thrown wide, Rainbow Dash pointed her hooves through the first ring, and let gravity take care of the rest. The wind whistled in her ears, her mane whipped from side to side, and the first drops of rain bumped against her forehead.

Flying was so much easier alone. She didn't have to worry about bumping into other ponies. Nor did she have to worry about other ponies bumping into *her*. Which was exactly what had happened - one of them had snuck up behind her and bucked her wing while the instructors were looking elsewhere. None of them had been willing to look into the matter afterward, either, claiming she had only suffered a normal cramp.

This was her second year at flight camp, but she was still treated like a newborn. Her pinions had yet to grow out to their full lengths, and even the instructors would sometimes try to send her away from the Circuit until they realized she was no yearling. She thought being the only pony in Cloudsdale with a colorful mane and tail like hers would make her easier to remember.

She could think of only two ponies for whom that had worked out.

The course banked her to the right way too soon, and she found herself staring up at the impossibly long arc of Titan's Curve. She knew enough to power through its first rings with the momentum she'd built up, but there was no mistaking the mounting ache in her shoulders and chest before she'd reached the halfway point. Her wings could not put out as much lift as the others, and the extra flapping wore her out by the time she passed, winded and wheezing, into Swayback.

Rainbow Dash let that part of the course drop from her mind as she navigated the four generous turns that welded Swayback together. She had better things to care about than the times she posted along Titan's Curve. The part she had really come for - the part for which she knew she risked her whole future at camp - lay further ahead.

Beyond the exit of Swayback's final bend, the nimbus rings fell away in a ballistic arc toward Cloudsdale Meadows. Rainbow Dash's stomach did a little flip as she approached Long Gone Drop. No pegasus - not even a Wonderbolt, a member of the Princess's hoof-picked cadre of elite fliers - entered the world with an innate love for free fall.

Blinking against the growing precipitation, Rainbow Dash aligned her hooves with the rings below her. The sky spasmed in white fury, and the pegasus plunged with the thunder.

A scream swelled within her lungs as ring after ring whizzed by her head. If the descending straight from the southeastern hairpin was a mane-raiser, Long Gone Drop went for scaring ponies bald. Rainbow Dash's hooves shuddered as she fought to maintain her line.

The turn-out for End-Around announced itself quickly as a barricade of black and yellow arrows and flashing "THIS WAY" signs leading up and to the right. With the right line, a pony could bleed her momentum all the way around to the home stretch without pumping her wings once.

Rainbow Dash had flown this section only one time before as a first-year, but that had been enough to notice the other trail of rings hidden behind the barricade. An instructor had hovered there the previous summer to guide campers along the right path, as well as call down swift punishment on those who dared to try and break through.

The dare itself was as old as the camp cafeteria and just as familiar to anypony who passed through the campground's front gates. Glory would be the friend of the pony who succeeded, respect their companion. It represented the best in a good challenge: simple in theory, crushing in execution.

Survive Deadmare's Dive.

No other section of Cloudsdale Circuit held the honor of ending more racing careers, inspiring more campfire tales of vengeful shades, or inciting more nightmares in the sleep of young campers. Condemned by the city and ignored by maintenance crews, Deadmare's Dive was nothing more than a wild chute of wind and velocity: a ninety-degree charge toward green and solid oblivion, anchored mere yards above the grass by a solitary ring.

The rain had started to come down heavy by then, and the flashing lights at the End-Around turnout urged her to reconsider. It was still not too late to turn away. Long Gone Drop was scary enough for only her second time through, and she still had the rest of the summer to come back and try again.

Rainbow Dash gulped - not an easy thing to do when the wind whipped her lips against her cheeks. Maybe she was getting in over her head. Deadmare's Dive didn't look *that* intimidating from afar, but staring down its throat was something different.

Better fliers than her had perished down there.

When will you get another chance to try it? cried a petulant voice in the back of her mind. *Get real. This is your one and only chance to make history.*

Yeah - in the history of bad ideas, maybe! she argued back. *I dunno if I'll make it!*

But what if you do make it? You'll shut those bullies up for good.

They'll never believe me. Rainbow Dash thought about flexing her wings to take her up.

Keep those wings where they are, Rainbow. You came out here for a reason.

But -

Whoops.

One moment of hesitation was all it took the little filly to whip past the turnout. The horizon lurched out of her vision, and the wind roared her mistake in her ears.

Ohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh. Rainbow's pupils contracted into tiny black dots as she blasted past ring after creaking ring. Her stomach floated somewhere behind her, and the air fought to shake itself free from beneath her hooves.

Just hold on! she urged herself.

And then the world flashed in stark color beneath a new volley of lightning: the greens and browns of the fields below, the blues of the creeks and brooks, the rings white as bright snow - and a yellow and pink blip clinging onto one of them like a gemstone on a bracelet.

Rainbow blinked. That blip had been a filly.

She turned her head to bail out. She barely turned it back in time as several rings screamed past the tip of her muzzle, warning her that she'd be cut to pieces the next time she tried that. Panicking, she splayed her hooves and rammed her wings perpendicular to her the wind as hard as she could.

Her head snapped down as her pectorals exploded in pain. It wouldn't be enough. The other filly filled up her vision like a drop of oil on a lake, and the scream raging within her chest finally wrenched itself free.

"Look out!"

The other filly whipped her head skyward. Another blast of lightning lit up the pink mane covering one half of her face and the terrified teal-green eye on the other.

Rainbow braced herself and prayed it wouldn't hurt.

Stars exploded behind her eyes as her head crashed into the other filly's wing with a sickening *crack*. Blinded on one side, Rainbow saw rings tumbling around her as she caromed off of them like beans in a rain tube. The other filly tumbled just a few yards over her head, her neck and limbs horribly limp.

"Oof!" The wind left Rainbow's lungs as she landed belly-up on the cottony contours of a cumulus. The other filly joined her a moment later and lay still beneath the falling rain.

Seized with regret, Rainbow Dash rolled over to check on the other filly, but a dark splotch exploded in her vision and laid her back out in no time flat. Her hooves went to her eye to press away the pain.

"Are you two all right?"

Rainbow Dash tensed - she knew who that voice belonged to. It was gruff and edged with irritation, as if rescuing two fillies from a condemned section of a racetrack in turbulent weather was the last thing he'd wanted to do. Answering his question felt like lifting the moon in her current state, so Rainbow settled for a moan instead.

"The head counselor's gonna want to speak with you two," said Amber Swift, Team Firefly's lead counselor. He began to pull the cloud with the two fillies back up towards Cloudsdale. "I hope you've enjoyed your last day at flight camp, ladies. I don't think you two are coming back."

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The Cloudsdale summer flight camp office was a shack, and that was using the term generously. It was more like a box somepony had thrown together using squares of cheap sheet clouding, with only the barest of struts and rafters on the inside shoring it up against storms like the one raging outside. A small reception room greeted ponies who walked in through the front door while the head counselor worked in the next room over. A lantern housing only four or five aging fireflies provided the only light in the reception area, and a plain clock on the wall saluted every second as it arrived, never betraying surprise or boredom. Two benches flanked the door to the head counselor's office, and at that moment, they were occupied by two quiet fillies.

Shivering beneath a blanket, Rainbow Dash alternated between keeping a cloud compress against her eye and shooting venomous glares at the other filly. The both of them had come away from the collision somewhat roughed up, and things would be sore for a week or two, but they were otherwise in fine shape. In turn, the other pegasus tried to make herself disappear into the corner where her bench met the wall, and her mane draped over the near side of her face. The thin line of her back heaved every so often, but Rainbow Dash couldn't hear any crying.

What was she thinking? Of course that cirrushead was crying. She had never seen a more pathetic pegasus in her life - those yellow legs, ungainly and thin, and her wings were large enough to swallow her flanks like curtains. Now that she thought on it, Rainbow had seen that pegasus sneaking around camp a couple of times before. She wasn't from Cloudsdale, that much was certain - they'd never met outside the campgrounds. She was no good even on the training course, and her idea of flying a straight line suggested she needed glasses. Thick ones, like the glass on the bottoms of cider bottles. No pegasus could ever be *that* bad at flying otherwise - could they?

"Why the hay were you even out there?" growled Rainbow. She allowed herself a snort as the other pegasus flinched. "I was *that close* to making it through Deadmare's Dive," she continued, bringing the tips of her hooves close for emphasis, "but no. You and your terrible flying just *had* to beat me to it, huh? Was that what it was? Were you trying to prove something out there? Were you just trying to pull some stupid stunt and get yourself hurt? Huh? Well, *look where you got us, featherbrain!*" She lasered her compress directly at the other filly's head, but, being a cloud, the compress merely bounced off of her mane.

"Thanks for ruining my life." Rainbow crossed her front legs across her chest and turned around, pouting.

From the other side of the room, she heard a tiny snuffle.

Ha! Rainbow Dash broke into the largest grin she'd had that evening. *Take that, you dumb filly.* She couldn't resist peeking back over her shoulder to see just how much she had gotten to that spineless sack of feathers.

The other filly had laid herself belly down along the length of the bench. She poked at the floor for a little bit, her mane spilling all over the side of her head. And then she lay where she was, ceasing all movement save the in and out of her breath - and even then, she looked for all the world like she wanted to cease that, too.

Rainbow Dash stared at the clock. While its second hoof completed two or three trips around its blank face, the other pegasus remained still the whole time.

Words bubbled up in the bottom of Rainbow Dash's gut. She was fed up of listening to the rain drum against the walls and the ticking of that clock. She needed to talk.

"So, um..." Rainbow's gaze slid to the floor. The words had suddenly turned as heavy as lumps of granite. What did she want to say, exactly?

The other pegasus stirred to curl up on her side. The clock sent its second hoof around another time.

Rainbow bit her lip. She was used to other ponies resisting her, fighting her. The pony on the other bench was way too fragile, and Rainbow had only needed to give her a good glare and a quick insult or two to put her down. Sure, she'd done the same thing to other ponies before. Her smallness practically demanded it for her survival. Here though, her victory meant nothing coming from an unworthy opponent - she might as well have declared her supremacy over a butterfly.

Really, what was the point of that?

"Well." Rainbow Dash tapped on her bench. "You haven't talked much tonight. In fact, I don't even remember hearing you say a word. As in, ever. You're around this camp a lot, aren't you?" When no answer was forthcoming, she snorted. "You can talk, can'tcha?"

The other filly propped herself up on a foreleg and cast a silent gaze on the discarded compress on the floor. Rainbow's face throbbed. Throwing it away had been a dumb decision.

She lay back herself, kicking around spare thoughts like cirrus tangles. Maybe that pegasus had been born without a tongue. Was that even possible? Living without a voice? Cold tendrils of guilt began to weave through her insides. Not only had she utterly shattered the self-esteem of a bad flier, but she had done it to a mute, too. There was absolutely nothing to gain there.

"Hey, uh." Rainbow Dash tapped her hoof while she weighed her next words. "I know you're feeling kinda grounded right now, and that you don't feel like talking a lot, so I'll just ask you to do this for me. Okay?"

No response. Still, Rainbow soldiered onward.

"If you were born without a tongue, nod your head once." She craned her neck out toward the other pegasus, her ears extended as far forward as she could put them. But despite her best efforts to reach across to the other filly, all she received was silence. Snorting, Rainbow turned her body toward a window, and took to watching the rain dribble down the glass.

Then her ear flicked. Was that a noise? For a moment, she thought it was a creak coming from the walls under a sudden gust, but it would have had to been much lower pitched than that. She relaxed after a little while and resumed her gaze out the window.

"..."

Yes, there it was - a cross between a squeak and a whimper. A squimper! It was definitely coming from the other pony.

"What?" said Rainbow Dash, turning toward the other pony. "I can't hear a thing you're saying."

The wind suddenly picked up outside the shack, jiggling the window panes in their settings as a fresh surge of raindrops pelted the roof. For a while, Rainbow Dash wasn't sure if the other pegasus had answered her during that time, or if she still needed some encouragement to do so. Should she ask again? Should she wait? She groaned. Why were ponies so frustrating at times?

"...'m sorry."

A door latch clicked between the two ponies, and Amber Swift poked his head into the reception room. He beckoned them into the office with a hoof, his brown mane still plastered to his neck with rainwater.

"All right, ladies. Come on in."

Rainbow Dash hopped to her hooves at the same time as the other filly - and she froze where she stood.

Celestia, were fillies allowed to grow that tall? She hadn't been able to tell while they were sitting around, but boy. If that pony ever bothered to raise her head, she could have reached Amber Swift's jaw. Rainbow Dash barely came up to the top of his withers.

She followed the other two ponies into the head counselor's office without a word. There he waited for them, his dun mane cropped short against his gray coat with a whistle

hanging from his neck. A bank of filing cabinets, all of them gray and boxy like his eyes, lined the wall behind him. His desk annexed the center of the office like a large altar, and a name plate screwed into its front face read "Wind Storm, Head Counselor."

Two manila dossiers lay beneath his hooves; two thin chairs seemed to bow before his desk. Rainbow clambered onto the one on the left and immediately found a part of the floor to study while the other filly got herself seated.

Wind Storm spoke. "I take it you ladies know why we're talking with each other tonight?"

"Yes, sir." Rainbow muttered it, the other filly barely whispered.

"It's a pleasure to see you here, Miss Dash. Again." The head counselor fixed her with a flat-browed, flat-lipped look as he opened her dossier, allowing the heavy thud it made on his desk to speak for his true thoughts. He skimmed a few pages. "Since you've come to us last year, you've been in ten incidents of threatening other campers, picked fights with five of them, you're constantly defying your counselors, and the instructors tell me you're reliably absent when you're supposed to be on the training course. And now Amber Swift here is saying he caught you trying to fly Deadmare's Dive after Circuit hours." It wasn't a question.

"And as for you -" Wind Storm skimmed his other dossier. Rainbow noticed it was significantly thinner than her own - only two pages to her novel. The head counselor's brow furrowed. "Well, now. You've been a well-behaved camper, Miss Fluttershy. I must say I'm... bewildered to see you here tonight."

Fluttershy? Rainbow Dash bit back a snicker before it landed her in even more trouble. She'd never before heard of a more appropriate name for such a scaredy-pony, ever. *Fluttershy*. Really.

"Nevertheless." Wind Storm raised a hoof before his mouth and cleared his throat. "The both of you were reported missing for dinnertime earlier this evening. That we found you tumbling down a *condemned* segment of Cloudsdale Circuit should speak for itself. You two should be thankful to even be sitting in those chairs right now.

"So. Before I send the both of you back home, I would appreciate some answers." The head counselor leaned back in his chair and pressed his hooves together. A couple of seconds staggered by as if they were clutching gut wounds. "What were you two even doing out there at that hour, when you knew we would be shutting the Circuit down early? Miss Dash?"

Rainbow Dash's insides crystallized. She sank into her chair, unable to provide the answer that would expel her from flight camp forever, terrified of remaining silent and prolonging the inevitable. Even she would rather spend the rest of her summer in this tiny office, sitting beneath a light with too few fireflies, than to leave it all behind and never set hoof on the campgrounds again.

Recognizing he would not receive satisfaction from the cyan pegasus, Wind Storm turned his attention to the yellow one. "What about you, Miss Fluttershy? Would you kindly explain what you were doing out on the Circuit just now?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes.. She already knew first-hoof how difficult it would be to extract a single word from that filly, much less a complete sentence.

"Well, sir, I - um. It was all an accident."

Rainbow's brows flew in a double take. Her sudden movement forced a squeal from the filly's mouth, who covered it up with her hooves.

Wind Storm whirled on Rainbow Dash. "Did you have something to say?"

She couldn't give him the "I'm fine" wave quickly enough.

The other pegasus - Fluttershy - glanced over at Rainbow Dash with some of the hugest, wavering eyes the latter had ever seen. What in Equestria? Was she asking for permission or something? Rainbow Dash didn't care.

"Anyway, Mr. Wind Storm, sir..." Fluttershy fidgeted in her chair. She sounded a little sick, but even though she spoke very, very quietly, she enunciated well. Her voice carried a self-conscious kind of music in her words. "Skylark took my group to the Circuit to work on improving our top speed, so she had us flying Long Gone Drop the whole afternoon. And, um. Everypony was having a lot of fun... but I wasn't. I don't like going very fast, you see." She gave the counselor such an embarrassed smile that it actually squeaked.

Rainbow Dash couldn't believe what she was hearing. A pegasus who didn't like going fast? Everything she thought she knew about this world was slowly crumbling around her ears.

"By the time the thunderheads started appearing, we had all lined up for one last round. I was at the back of the line. One of the fillies ahead of me hit a ring next to the turn-out, so Skylark had to fly over and help her finish the rest of the course. I didn't know she did

that until I started down the track. When I didn't see her at the bottom, I panicked - and that's when I shot past the turn out. That's how I wound up in Deadmare's Dive, and by that point, I was too tired to fly my way back up."

Fluttershy paused to look at one of her wings. Seeing it unfurl up close sent a burning blush through Rainbow's cheeks. Yeah, she had noticed they were a little big on the filly back in the reception room, but she had not thought about how heavy and awkward they were to use. They were beautiful wings, even after the accident - her feathers gave off a soft glint in the light, and they all tapered smoothly toward their ends - but Rainbow Dash understood that it would take a while before she became strong enough to use them to their fullest.

Wind Storm tapped his chin. "Hmm. Skylark should have been there to help you. That's the job we hired her to do."

"Oh, don't take it out on her," Fluttershy implored. "She was already trying to help another pony, and I'd been flying, well, not exactly fine for the entire day, but I was managing. She couldn't have expected me to end up where I did."

The head counselor chuckled. "Don't you worry about Skylark. We'll get things sorted out with her. We're all here to improve ourselves, after all, and that includes the counselors. So, then - you're sure that what happened in Deadmare's Dive was all an accident?"

Fluttershy nodded.

"I see." Wind Storm flipped through the filly's dossier once again. "As I've said before, you're a well-behaved camper. You've never gotten into trouble in your three years here, and neither do you go looking for it. Perhaps we can make something work out, if you're interested in hearing what I have to say."

"What? Now wait just a minute!" The words escaped from Rainbow Dash's lips before she could stop them. Her hooves clamped over her mouth.

"You have something to say this time?" Wind Storm's brows pressed themselves flat.

"I, uh." The filly's eyes darted over to Fluttershy, who was cowering in her chair. Sudden outrage flared up in Rainbow Dash's mind, and she lowered her hooves. "Yeah. I *do* have something to say. Why are you going easy on her? Amber Swift there comes by telling us we're going home, you say the same thing -" and here she jabbed a hoof at Fluttershy - "then *she* gets off easy because her weak flying got her into trouble in the first place?"

"I don't get it. I had Deadmare's Dive on lockdown before she got in my way. Take me back out there. I'll show you I can fly it without any problems, and yet you're going to make a deal with *her*? That's not fair!"

"Sit. Down."

The glare the head counselor leveled at Rainbow Dash was hair-thin, but its passage through her eyes left her fury scattered like bowling pins in a strike frame. Her body obeyed.

Wind Storm rubbed his temples amid the ensuing silence. He poised himself after a moment and continued. "Frankly, Miss Dash, you've been in here enough. I'm tired of dealing with you. The counselors are tired of dealing with you. Where we've sent other ponies home for less, you remained. You know what I think? It's time you moved on."

"What?"

"Flight camp just isn't for you anymore. Amber Swift will show you to your tent, and you can pack your things." He dismissed her with a wave of his hoof. "Farewell."

"Waiiit!"

Rainbow Dash whipped her head around the counselors. Fluttershy's hoof hovered in the air in pleading. Suddenly conscious of attention, her ears folded along with the rest of her, until she was more mane than pony. "Um... I'm sorry, Mr. Wind Storm. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Not at all, young lady. Speak your piece."

"Well..."

Fluttershy floated a glance over at Rainbow Dash, who returned it with a flat face and an arched eyebrow. What was she going to say now?

"I... oh dear." The yellow pegasus shut her eyes. "I mean... I don't think you should expel Rainbow Dash."

Wind Storm made his own contribution to the raised eyebrow collection. "Is that so? How do you figure?"

"She's, um. She's nice."

The mind boggled. The air could have turned into solid ice, and yet that would not have been anywhere near as stifling as the silence that followed the filly's claim. The only explanation Rainbow could come up with for what she just heard was that Fluttershy was some kind of space-pony who had somehow wound up far away from her home planet.

"When I was alone out there in Deadmare's Dive," Fluttershy continued, "I was too tired to call for help. I was barely hanging onto one of the rings, the rain was really coming down, and there was thunder and lightning everywhere. It was awful."

"That was when I heard Rainbow Dash coming up behind me. I suppose she could've been the teensiest, eensiest bit more careful when we crashed into each other. But seeing another pony out there on the Circuit with me for that moment - I was so happy to see her there. Somepony found me. I was going to be okay. The next thing I know, I'm awake here in the office, safe and sound."

"Because Amber Swift brought the both of you here."

The tip of Fluttershy's mane bobbed up and down with her head. "That's right. But - and this is just my own, personal, unimportant opinion here and everything..." She let off an embarrassed smile. "If Rainbow Dash hadn't yelled like that when she saw me in her way, I don't think he would've noticed us to come to the rescue."

Wind Storm leaned back in his chair. His hoof tapped his chin. "Amber Swift?"

The junior counselor nodded. "No offense, Rainbow Dash, but you weren't born with a 'quiet' setting."

"You - !" Rainbow Dash rose in her seat. She'd hardly felt like clobbering somepony this bad before - but Wind Storm rose from his chair and levelled a hoof at his subordinate before she could deliver her vengeance.

"That was out of line. You know better than to spout that kind of garbage."

"Sorry, chief."

Wind Storm grunted as he sat back down. "You'd better be. Now then - did Miss Dash's yelling tip you off to her presence there?"

Amber Swift looked off to the side, and did something with his head that could have been construed for a nod.

"And would you have known Fluttershy was stranded out there had it not been for her?"

"Well, maybe." The counselor dragged a hoof through his mane. "I was patrolling the northern end of the Circuit close to the Dive. I bet I would have seen her anyway. Rainbow Dash just made me aware of her sooner."

"What?" Rainbow Dash glared at Amber Swift. "Were you even out there the same time I was? It was pouring! There's no way you could've seen her in that mess!"

"This isn't a courtroom, you little -" Amber bit down on his lip. "Mmph. Sorry." He shook his head and continued. "Anyway, like it or not, I caught you two on the Circuit while it was closed, and the both of you are lucky to have even made it back here. Honestly, if it were up to me, the both of you would've been outta here half an hour ago. We have rules for a reason, Rainbow Dash, and you don't need to be here if you refuse to follow them."

"You wouldn't have seen her if I hadn't been there!"

"All right, you two - that's enough!" Wind Storm ground his teeth in agitation. "Hundreds of heapin' humid haystacks, you two argue worse than my fillies. Anyhow." He laid his hooves on top of his desk. "Amber Swift is correct, Miss Dash. It's not all that clear that your presence saved Miss Fluttershy. And Fluttershy, I'm not deaf. I heard this pony yelling at you through the wall earlier. Though I respect your willingness to stand up for her, she doesn't share that same respect. I'm not certain she deserves yours."

Rainbow Dash slumped in her chair. "But -"

The head counselor shook his head as he closed Rainbow's dossier. "I don't think there needs to be any more discussion. Miss Rainbow Dash, I hereby expel you from flight camp. Kindly pack your things and clean your tent. You're going home tomorrow morning."

Most campers learned to leave their alarm clocks at home by their second year - why bother packing the extra weight when the camp reveille did the job fine enough? Campers tottered out of their tents every morning in ones and twos, their hooves jammed in their ears as they made their way down to the lake. There they saluted the Equestrian flag, sang the national anthem, and stood around bored and restless for several minutes as the instructors announced the upcoming day's schedule.

Rainbow Dash slept through it all, as she always did.

When she did wake up, the left side of her face throbbed like an overinflated water balloon. Though she didn't have a mirror in her tent - what kind of camper worried about having one, anyway - she guessed she would be walking around that day with a doozy of a shiner over her eye. She wasn't able to open it quite all the way, and the area beneath it was swollen and warm to the touch.

She was expelled from flight camp. For good. As far as thoughts to start the day off with went, that was not the one she wanted to have in her head.

She sat up in her cot and glanced over at her saddlebags, which lay rumped on the floor by the wall. Aside from a towel, a few comics, and her very own pair of Wonderbolts flight goggles, she had not brought much with her to camp, and everything had packed quickly.

Even her possessions were trying to get her out of there as fast as possible.

Rainbow rolled out of her cot and winced as her face throbbed with warm pain. She couldn't go outside looking like she'd run into a wall, could she? After some thought, she spat into one of her hooves and tried to flatten her mane over her left eye. It wasn't a perfect cover by any stretch of the imagination, but she hoped it would ward off the suspicions of most ponies.

She suddenly wished she had a mirror so she could have been sure. Oh, well. It would have to do.

The little filly squinted as the mid-morning sun hit her eyes on her way out of the tent. With nothing else to do as she adjusted to the light, she paused to take in one last view of the campgrounds. Fed by three different rainbowfalls, Rainbow Lake sat in the middle, anchoring everything else on its iridescent shores. The boxy, thirties-era exterior of the cafeteria squatted near the edge of the lake a quarter-loop away from the campers' tents,

while streams of campers navigated the training course on the lake's opposite banks. The staff stayed in cottages off to the left, and a large schoolhouse separated the staff lodgings from the campers.

Rainbow Dash snorted and set off toward the cafeteria. Dumb place. Even if they were kicking her out, she was entitled to one last meal on the house. However, she'd only gone a few steps before her eye and ears started to flit around like radar dishes. If at all possible, she wanted to get there unseen.

Her vigilance paid off: by the time she left the campers' area, she had done so undetected. The trail leading down to the lake doubled back on itself multiple times during its descent - had this been any other day, she would have glided all the way down to the cafeteria as easily as leaving a letter to drift on the wind.

Once she'd descended by the lake side, Rainbow Dash began passing little knots of ponies as they converged on the cafeteria, or emerged from it. She kept her gaze fixed on the path just in front of her hooves, taking in every subtle curve, every sidestep it made as it meandered around the lakefront. In time, she found herself anticipating parts of the path before she reached them, plucking them from two years of camp as her hooves touched a familiar bump, or shuffled over a grainy patch she knew to expect. Of all the memories she would take from this camp! Why was her brain trying to put the walk back to the cafeteria in with them?

Before long, she found herself at the cafeteria's front doors. The chatter of a hundred campers rattled from within, suddenly spiking in volume as a trio of fillies filed their way out. Rainbow Dash dove to the side and waited for them to pass before she could even think about it. One of them told the others a joke, and their mutual laughter prevented them from noticing the filly squatting on the other side of the door.

Hold on a minute. Sneaking around? Avoiding other ponies? Being *quiet*? - She got back on her hooves. Since when did she become that kind of filly? Her eyes hardened. Nope. Uh-uh. She was going about this all wrong. If this was to be her last day of flight camp ever, she was going to go out *in style*.

She turned around, braced herself on her front legs, and yelled at the top of her lungs. "Hee-yah!"

Her back hooves blew the door open, and the diners fell silent as they turned in their seats. Rainbow Dash stepped through the open threshold with her head held high,

basking in the gazes of her peers as her hooffalls echoed through the building. The high windows shone like spotlights, lighting her way as she sauntered up the middle aisle.

The younger campers shrank back from her as she passed; the older ones fixed her with flattened ears and hard frowns. Foals. What did she care about their opinions anymore? Flight camp *was* stupid. If they couldn't handle how hardcore she was, that was their problem.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't Rainbow *Crash*."

Two colts stepped in front of her path - colts she'd had plenty of... dealings with by that point. She always thought their necks were sufficiently thick enough to act as support columns at the Cloudesseeum. The taller one, tan like dirt, reeked of cheap deodorant, and the shorter one with the darker brown coat didn't even bother putting any on. She smirked.

"Hey, Buster. Hey, Buck." She brushed past them like they weren't even there.

"Where're you going in such a rush, Rainbow Crash?" The taller one, Buck, stuck his hoof between her legs. One of them snagged for the shortest of instants, but it was enough to interrupt her stride. A murmur spread throughout the cafeteria.

Rainbow Dash's grin faltered, but she caught it quickly enough to hold onto her pride. "Me? I'm not in any hurry." She faced her adversaries to prove it. "What do you want?"

"We're not looking for much," said Buster, closing in. Despite lacking the vertical presence of his musclebound cohort, he still towered over the filly by at least half a head. "I just wanted to know something, Rainbow Crash."

Rainbow Dash held her ground beneath his slitted blue eye. "I'm all ears."

Buster grinned, revealing an array of disgustingly white teeth. "I heard it on the slip stream this morning that you were caught flying on the Circuit after it was closed."

Rainbow Dash cackled and rolled her eyes. "Ugh, seriously? You just heard about that? You're faster at growing pimples than you are about hearing the news. And it's not even big news, either. I fly the Circuit when it's closed all the time."

"Well, you can't be very good at it, Rainbow Crash." Buck leaped over her head and boxed her in on the other side. He reached for the part of her mane hiding her black eye. "When did you get this, an-"

Rainbow Dash lashed out with a head feint. "You lay a hoof on me, and I *swear* to the Princess that I'm gonna lay you out." Her cheeks flushed.

"Aww, is Rainbow Crash getting upset?" Buster crooned from behind. "Does Rainbow Crash not like getting touched?"

A pair of heavy hooves landed on her flanks and pushed her off balance. She careered face-first into a breast reeking of Foal Spice, and a burst of tight pain swarmed the left side of her vision.

"That hurt, you jerk!" she cried, whirling on her attacker. "How about you have the guts to do that to my face next time, wi-"

Another push from behind. She stumbled on her hooves amid a storm of nasal guffawing. "Cut it out!"

"Never, Rainbow Crash," sneered Buster. "This is too much fun!" He pushed her again, and she tottered precariously on her back hoof.

"Stop -"

"Think fast!" A final shove on her wings sent her over the top, and before she could do anything else, her face crashed into the floor. Both of the colts were outright howling with glee.

"I'm sorry," Buster scoffed, running his hoof through her mane. "Did we interrupt you, Rainbow *Crash*?"

An epiphany entered her mind like a heavenly choir as she bolted back on her hooves. She was already expelled from flight camp, right? Nothing she did from this point forward mattered. The staff wouldn't be able to touch her, which meant that finally - after having to suffer through two summers of endless assaults on her height, flying skills, and future prospects from some dumbbells with swamp gas for brains - she could finally get even. She spoke her next words slowly and clearly to maximize the chance that as they went through one ear and out the other, they would leave behind a swath of head trauma.

"The name is Rainbow *Dash*." She scratched her hoof back along the floor, unable to care less that her voice chose that moment to break like a window. "And I am gonna *kill ya*!"

She charged. All she needed was one punch, and not even the coroner would be able to identify the mealy pulp she left behind. The oaf wasn't even bothering to move out of the way - surprise lit up his big, stupid mug like a bawdy Manehattan billboard.

"Rainbow Dash, *stop!*"

A pink and yellow blur rushed into the vengeful filly's vision, driving spikes of adrenaline straight into her wings. With a mighty wrench, Rainbow Dash tore herself back just enough so her hoof stopped a mere whisper in front of the newcomer's muzzle.

"F-Fluttershy?" she stammered as she touched back down on the floor. "W-what were you thinking, cutting in front of me like that? I could've sent your teeth on a one-way trip to your brain!"

"Then I'm glad you didn't."

The sudden hardness in the filly's voice caught Rainbow flat-hoofed. She glanced up at her eyes and found herself backing away - those teal-green rounds bored into her brain with the same intensity the head counselor had unleashed on her the night before. Her wings snapped shut against her sides. "But I - I, uh..."

"Shh, shh." Fluttershy's voice resumed its normal, quietly musical tone. "Let's find a place to sit, shall we?"

She led the stupefied filly past Buck, who moved aside without seeming to notice he did so. A fly buzzed in to investigate his teeth, and was able to do so free of difficulty and inconvenience. The other ponies in the cafeteria immediately brought heads and hooves close together and exchanged furious whispers.

The two fillies found a corner when the campers there quickly cleared their places. Rainbow Dash took a seat with her back against the wall while Fluttershy entered the breakfast line, returning with a bowl of oats, a plate of apple slices, and a cup of carrot juice.

"Here. Eat."

Rainbow Dash stared at the food for a minute and knew the gesture was wasted - a huge stone was plugging up her stomach, and she pushed the tray away without touching anything. "Why did you stop me?"

On the other side of the table, Fluttershy's mouth collapsed into a tiny "o". "Why did I?" she squeaked, tapping her hooves together. "Well... you see. I didn't want to see anypony get hurt."

"Really, now?" Rainbow didn't bother to rein in the rising of her voice. "And you didn't think those swamp whompers weren't hurting me back there? That's great. Wait to step in until Rainbow Dash's the bad guy, huh?"

"Um..." Fluttershy fidgeted in place. "That wasn't what I really meant at all..."

"Of course you didn't. You open your mouth and say some stuff, but you don't have the guts to back it up."

"Rainbow Dash, there's something I need to tell you -"

"And I've got something to tell you," snarled Rainbow, pounding the table with her hoof. Some carrot juice spilled onto the oats. "Stay out of other ponies' businesses if you know what's best for you. Do you know how long those two have been yanking my feathers?"

Fluttershy shook her head.

"Ever since I've been here," Rainbow answered. "And it was all because I beat them in a sprint during my first week of camp."

"Maybe they keep bullying you because you keep reacting to them." Then Fluttershy's eyes shot wide open, and she clapped her hooves across her mouth. Too late. She had offered herself up with those words. Rainbow stood up and tore into her like a starving dragon.

"Reacting? You think it's because I'm reacting to them? Are you kidding me? You think those morons would go away just because I ignored them? That only works for a little bit. When I wouldn't respond to them, they turned on the other ponies until they wouldn't hang out with me anymore. Once they got me alone, they just turned it up from there."

Fluttershy bit her lip. "I... I don't understand. Why would they even go that far?"

Rainbow threw her hooves up and sank back into her seat. "I don't know." Her anger left her in a sigh, leaving behind a hollow melancholy in her chest. "If I did, they wouldn't be bothering me anymore, would they?"

By that point in the conversation, business had returned to normal in the cafeteria. Somepony spilled their tray on the other side of the building, drawing enthusiastic applause from the other campers. The sun had advanced into the windows on the far wall, from where it shoved oblivious light into Rainbow Dash's eyes.

"This place stinks," she muttered, rising from her seat. She gazed over the other campers as they left the cafeteria in larger and larger clusters. "The rules stink, the staff stink, the ponies stink. Everything stinks. Wind Storm was right. It's time I headed home."

"Rainbow..." Fluttershy reached her hoof out, but she was too late. Rainbow left her breakfast tray where it was, made her way over to the side exit, and stepped outside.

Her tirade in the cafeteria had drained her. Just by putting one hoof after another, step by step, she found herself halfway up the path to the campers' tents without remembering how she got there. She looked out over the lake and saw strings of foals threading through the rings of the training course.

Yep. She turned back around. *It all stinks.*

"...bow dash..."

She flicked her ears. That sounded like Fluttershy's voice. Then again, that filly spoke so quietly that there was no way her voice could have carried all the way over from the cafeteria. Nevertheless, Rainbow lingered and listened for a few more moments, just in case she had heard correctly.

Nothing followed. She just needed to leave camp already. Shaking her head, she started up the path once more, determined not to hesitate again.

"Rainbow Dash!"

Her hoof rose to her face before the voice finished calling her name. That pony just didn't give up, did she? She turned around in place, flicking her tail from side to side, as Fluttershy galloped up the path.

"What is it this time?" Rainbow called down.

Fluttershy's head lowered in a fit of panting by the time she drew even with her. "Why'd you leave?" she asked from behind her mane. "I didn't get the chance to tell you..."

"Tell me?" Rainbow Dash's ears perked up. "Tell me what?"

"About what happened at the office after the counselor led you away."

"Huh?"

Fluttershy gulped. "Well... now I'm not sure if you'll be glad to hear this, since, um... you said it was time for you to go home." She shifted her hooves as if she were standing on hot embers. "I mean, if that's what you really want to do, I suppose I can't stop you or anything. In fact, maybe I should be encouraging you to take your own path and -"

Rainbow moaned and pressed a hoof against the other pegasus' mouth. "Spit it or save it."

A squeak escaped from Fluttershy's lips as she crouched low to the cloud. "Please don't be mad at me for doing this," she babbled, "but I went ahead and convinced the head counselor to let you stay here after all. I - I hope that's okay with you, and that you're not mad at me! Eep!" She shut her eyes and clasped her hooves over her head.

A whomping, however, was the last thing on Rainbow Dash's mind. Her head flitted to the far off horizon, the words she just heard failing to find hoofholds in her brain before they were swept out of her head. She was certain she had misunderstood. "I'm... not expelled? How?"

Fluttershy's chin made a little rut in the trail as she shook her head. "I just assumed you really did love being here, and that you love to fly and go fast and do all sorts of wonderful things in the air and if I'm wrong about that, I'm so sorry - I shouldn't have assumed anything."

Rainbow Dash knew the other filly hadn't gotten what she was really after, but the results of Fluttershy's intervention were washing over her questions like a thunderstorm. She sat down. Something drained away through her spine, and its absence spread a strange kind of warmth throughout her body. Her vision still struggled to focus on anything closer than a thousand yards off, but her hoof came upon a trembling shoulder and tapped it.

"Hey," she said. "You really did it? You got the counselors to back off?"

The terrified pegasus looked up at Rainbow from under her mane and gave the barest hint of a nod.

A breeze rushed up the hill and over the two fillies. Rainbow felt the spaces in her head expand to twice their normal volume, and her mind cleared out the debris from her encounter in the cafeteria. Her mane played out behind her like a small, cheerful flag.

For the first time that day, a smile - a real one, rooted in a clear and untroubled present - emerged onto her face. "Wow." She looked back out over the camp with new vision, spotting a trio of pegasi planing strands of rainbow from the lake's surface with their wingtips. "That's something."

She leaned over, wrapped her hooves around Fluttershy's neck, and pulled her close. The soft-spoken pony's coat was warm, and the silky heft of her mane caught Rainbow off guard. Flight camp just wasn't one of those places where personal appearances were worth keeping up. And yet, Rainbow Dash caught herself wondering what would happen if she groomed herself more often.

Not that she was about to fly to Manehattan and buy herself a bunch of Fifth Avenue conditioners, of course. She didn't have time to worry about that kind of girly business. Nevertheless, she wondered.

"Why help me?" She helped the other filly to her hooves. "I... I was really mean to you last night."

Fluttershy flinched. "Oh. Um. Well, I remembered what you said about me ruining your life and everything..." Her eyes slid to the side.

Rainbow Dash cringed.

"No, no, it's okay," said Fluttershy, waving her hooves. "You were right to be angry with me. If I hadn't been in your way, you probably would've flown Deadmare's Dive just fine." Her tail flicked repeatedly as she dug for more words. "It - I felt bad for keeping you from your goal. That's when I asked the head counselor to let you stay." Her eyes drifted toward the sky in apprehensive recollection. "Besides... despite crashing into me, and yelling at me, and throwing stuff at my head, you seemed - nice."

All Rainbow Dash could do was stare. Did this filly ever carry a grudge? Did she even know what one was? A long moment of silence passed between them.

"I..." Fluttershy tapped her hoof on the cloud. "I guess I'll be going, then." She turned to walk back down toward the lake.

"No!" Rainbow put a hoof to her mouth, but her outburst had already sent the filly into a hunch. "I mean - wait up." She trotted over to the skittish pony and raised a hoof across her chest so she couldn't run off right away. What did she even want to say? Words were some other pony's talent. She expressed herself best in the sky, where her wings spelled

out a language she understood better. Fortunately, Fluttershy remained where she was, one teal eye looking down at her with quiet attention.

Rainbow Dash knew what she wanted to say was in her head, but she couldn't get to it with her huge brain just standing there in her way! She clenched her teeth and tore through her gray matter like a werewolf - or was that more a zombie's doing? - and all that did was leave bits of brain scattered on the floor of her mind.

Well, she accomplished more than that. The words she wanted to say wobbled from the debris like thin smoke, and she managed to glimpse one word of it before it faded into the background. "Thanks," she said, lowering her hoof. She started picking at a little lump on the path, realized what she was doing, and shook her head out.

"Um. You're welcome." Fluttershy began making her way back to camp, and this time, Rainbow didn't bother saying anything else. She shook her head and headed toward her tent, unable to articulate why she suddenly felt so out of it all.

She needed a nap. Yeah, a nap would do nicely.

"What do you mean, 'I'm not going'?"

Several days after her pardon, Rainbow Dash lay in a winded pile of mane and feathers at her counselor's hooves, having made the five-minute flight to the shuttle station in less than three. Her nap had lasted longer than what she expected. But the be-whistled pegasus standing before her on the open platform refused to move aside

"Just because another pony put in a good word for you back at the office doesn't mean you're getting off that easy," he said. "You're not going back to the Circuit for the rest of the summer."

"What? That's not fair!" Rainbow Dash tried to push her way past her counselor, but wasn't having any of it. Once again, her vertical absence worked against her. "How am I gonna get better at flying if I don't go with everypony else?"

"Too bad." Amber Swift kept his biggest headache at hoof's length as he back-stepped onto the shuttle. "You're to remain on the training course until we return. We're going to be practicing on the Circle Slalom today, so I expect you to pay close attention to that part of the training course." He signaled the chauffeur to set off, and the shuttle departed with the campers of Team Firefly minus their most colorful member.

Rainbow Dash glared at the retreating shuttle as it curved to the left and down out of sight. She rubbed her cheek until the hoofprint her counselor left there buffed out. What did they feed ponies on his home planet? Circle Slalom had actual turns in it - large, high-speed arcs like the writhing of a roller coaster. The training course had a line of poles bunched so close together that even she tagged them with her wings every time she flew them. Circuit flights were part and parcel of flight camp - why stay at the latter if she couldn't fly the former?

Well, the counselor could take his orders and... and do whatever ponies did with what they took. He wasn't gonna be around to watch her. If she got in trouble, so would he. Holding her tail high, she hopped into the air looking for things to do.

There was the camp further up the hill, but the rainbowfall on the other side of the lake caught her eye in particular. She started from the prismatic haze it kicked up as it splashed into the lake, following its descent upward until her gaze settled on the promontory from which it fell. A solitary pavilion stood there, both source and guardian of the tumbling stream.

Skyhead Falls was one of the very first things she saw walking out of her tent every morning. She had always wondered what it would be like to fly up there - but she never had time to do so, or always forgot to go when she did. It was like remembering to look at the night sky when the new moon was out; it was still there even if nopony paid attention to it.

That was that. She spotted a pair of daisy-chained updrafts not too far off from the shuttle station, and she rode them until she was well above Rainbow Lake. As much as she enjoyed flying fast, she held a quiet appreciation of gliding close to herself. Something about the way the warm air felt shoring up her wings from below, tilting her side to side in a natural rhythm - it was a way to fly and a way to take a breather at the same time. What pony couldn't find something to like between the two?

More updrafts appeared to Rainbow Dash high above the lake, their presence betrayed by the little vapor wisps they plucked from any cloud hapless enough to wander too close. She surrendered to their currents, and as the yards fell away beneath her, her previous irritation fell away with them.

For fun, she banked out of the updrafts every now and then to pass behind the rainbowfall, where the falling colors echoed curiously against the cloudface they concealed. She would emerge flicking specks of green and orange from her wings, and she watched them spiral their way down to the lake below.

Soon a different sound filled the filly's ears: a quiet kind of rush, carrying with it an abundance of primal force, but dampened before it could build itself up to a roar. The apex of the rainbowfall came into her view. With a sudden surge of adrenaline, she burst out of her updraft to flap the final few yards herself. The air this high up had grown cold enough to notice, but not cold enough for her to care, and she came to rest in the corner of the pavilion she had spotted back at the station.

The source of the rainbowfall rose up from a generous, straight-cut channel in the middle of the pavilion, bisecting the floor in the process. Scrolled pillars placed all around the perimeter held up a marvelous, angular roof inlaid with friezes of flying creatures like rearing dragons and screaming gryphons. Rainbow Dash tapped her hoof on the floor and heard it echo.

She turned around, and all of Cloudsdale opened before her like a storybook. There was the campground, the Circuit (she skipped over that feature quickly, before it ruined her mood), and the Cloudesseeum in the distance, leaning out from its circular foundation like a trumpet bell. She saw little colored dots walking or flying along wide, white

promenades, or milling together in an open square. Pennants sprouted from every other rooftop like little flowers.

Rainbow Dash sat against a pillar, only then noticing a slight sheen on her coat from her journey up to Cloudsdale's highest point. With a constant easterly breeze flowing over her, she would be comfortable and dry in no time, free to pass the hours in solitude.

Solitude? Yeah, solitude. It wasn't like she was much bothered by being alone.

"That's enough of that! I mean, only if you're, um, finished."

Her ears perked up. That voice again - it couldn't be. It had come from the far side of the pavilion.

"Get outta my sight, you cretins! Well, maybe cretins is a bit strong for the word I'm looking for..."

What the hay? Rainbow Dash descended onto the promontory and looked back toward the pavilion's far side. She didn't see anypony there, but when she looked closer, she saw a trail of colorful droplets start from the side of the rainbowfall channel as they made their way outside. Maybe someone was around the corner?

"Do you know who you're talking to? Because I think you could be a little less mean, personally. You might be liked better for it."

Unable to contain her curiosity any longer, Rainbow Dash flew to the corner to have a look.

Boy. She got one. "F - *Fluttershy*?"

The filly's wings shot up with enough violence to make Rainbow Dash flinch in sympathy. Yep - it was the same pegasus from the Circuit and the cafeteria, except she looked... well...

Her mane and tail had been cut short and ragged - had she cut them herself? What pony could've let that filly near a pair of scissors in the first place? Moreover, she looked for all the world like Andy Warholer had just used her as a paintbrush. Red splotches engaged oranges and yellows for territory on her forelock while greens, blues, and purples quarreled over her crest. Her tail had suffered a similar fate, where all six hues crashed together in a grand *mêlée*.

Fluttershy hit the cloud as soon as she recognized Cloudsdale's true one and only rainbow pegasus-in-residence. "I-I-I-I'm sorry!" she blurted. "I-I really didn't expect you to come up here!"

Rainbow Dash fell onto her back, whooping with whole-bodied laughter. Her legs couldn't kick the air hard enough to uncoil the huge knot in her belly, and tears streamed from her eyes like water from a pair of fire hoses. She made the mistake of looking in Fluttershy's direction again, saw atrocious jumbles of color, and paid dearly for it. "Gyaaaah-hahaha! Someone, help! I can't breathe! Who!"

Fluttershy blushed so hard that a layer of cloud vaporized beneath her face.

"Oh, Celestia, I can't believe you did that." said Rainbow Dash, standing up and wiping her eyes. Her composure didn't last very long - her third glance sent her into another attack of the giggles.

"I-I know." Fluttershy got to her hooves as well, unable to suppress their trembling. "I... I think I'll just leave and never ever ever come back."

"Ah-haha-" Rainbow's ear twitched. "Wait, what?"

The yellow pegasus said nothing. Instead, she turned and jumped off the side of the promontory.

"Wait!" Rainbow Dash managed to say that much and nothing more. Her legs took over from there, propelling her over the edge and downward, downward, downward into the keening gut of free fall.

Catching up with the other pony would be the easy part. The hard part was negotiating the hail of rainbow drops she trailed in her wake. Getting one of those in the eye was a guaranteed ticket to a dark cot in the nurse's cabin, and Rainbow Dash could only fly so fast with one hoof covering her face.

Still, she had Fluttershy within her sights. The other filly was on the wrong dive angle, and her wings were snapped closed against her sides. All it would take was one bad pocket of turbulence, or a lapse in concentration, and -

"Ahhhh!" One of Fluttershy's wings wrenched open, sending her into a violent tailspin.

"Hey!" yelled Rainbow. "Just stay calm, okay?"

Fluttershy kept screaming, her hooves flailing as if somepony had attached rockets to them.

"You've got to stop spinning!" Rainbow checked ahead. The bottom of the cliff was approaching awfully fast. "Flap your opposite wing from the direction of your spin!"

"Hellp!"

"That's what I'm trying to do, featherbrain! You -" Rainbow Dash groaned. She wasn't getting through at all. She focused her eyes on the other filly's tail, which remained fairly motionless compared to the rest of her - a tail still dripping with rainbow.

"Hang on," she screamed. "I'll get ya!"

She lashed the air with her wings once, twice, three times as more drops of rainbow splattered against her foreleg and coat. But now she had caught up with Fluttershy, the latter's tail whipping just before her mouth.

Oh, she was going to regret this. She bit down.

Her head exploded in an instant.

She wished it had, at least. Tasting a rainbow was like having an Aristotle treatise on everything in the universe punch its way out from the center of her brain. The experience would leave you a better pony: able to outplay the Princess at chess, perhaps, or to convince everypony that eating brussels sprouts really would turn you into a mutant - if only it left you with your memories intact afterward.

Rainbow Dash wasn't quite sure what happened in those following moments, but when she came to, she and Fluttershy were lying in the back of a demolished cart surrounded by a bunch of unfamiliar, crispy green globes.

"Fluttershy?" She poked the motionless filly beside her. "You okay?"

The other pegasus' eyes blinked themselves open. "R-Rainbow Dash?"

"Oh, geez." Rainbow Dash pulled Fluttershy into a swift hug. "Come on, let's get out of here."

The two ponies clambered over the pile of globes toward the back of the cart and hopped off - short of a couple of tender spots, they stood on their hooves without much pain. As

they trundled off toward the campers' tents, they didn't notice the cart's owner, an aging, brown-coated pegasus with an ash-colored mane, stagger around its side to assess the damage.

"...It happened again. Just when I thought I'd gotten away from it all. It happened again." The luckless stallion sank to his knees, and a single tear traced the curve of his quivering cheek. "My cabbages..."

"So, what exactly were you doing all the way up at the top of the falls?" asked Rainbow Dash, quite able to ignore the sudden wailing behind her.

"Oh." Fluttershy's eyes shifted from side to side. "I'd rather not say."

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. "Really, now? You were talking up a storm while you were up there."

Fluttershy's facial features scrunched inward as if she'd just swallowed a jar of lemon drops. Unable to speak, she lowered her head and shook it solemnly.

"Be that way then," said Rainbow, snickering. "Here's what I saw up there. I saw you marching all over the place with an awesome new manestyle and color job. You were saying all of these really awesome lines, too. Y'know, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to imitate somepony," she concluded, nudging the other pegasus in the ribs.

"Ah." Fluttershy's gasp was so tiny, so quiet, that the very air stood still to hear her.

Rainbow Dash cackled. "You know what, Fluttershy? I like you. You're not half bad. We should hang out more often."

The cowering pegasus' wings shot up in surprise. Giving Rainbow Dash a sidelong glance from beneath the blue part of her mane, she mumbled, "Really?"

"Totally. The rest of summer flight camp's gonna be a blast with you around." Rainbow Dash extended a hoof. "What do you say to that?"

Fluttershy stared at the offered hoof for a long time, her ears flicking this way and that. Her mouth was unsure whether to cringe or smile or yelp or frown. She failed to find a compromise between the four. Her hoof came an inch off of the ground. "Do you really mean that?" she whispered.

"Of course I do. You're the first interesting pony I've met here."

Rainbow's words hit the filly like a sunbeam breaking through a storm. By degrees, her wings lowered themselves back to her sides and unclenched, and she drew closer to her first flight camp friend. She stood taller, more radiant, and the ridiculous collage of colors coating her mane and tail suddenly suited her posture very well.

"You got it." The two fillies bumped hooves, breaking out into laughter soon afterward.

"It's settled," said Rainbow, strutting by the other pony's side. "You're my pal from here on out. If you ever need me for anything, I'll be there for you."

Fluttershy smiled. "Same with you."

"Let's go get you washed up before dinner, then. Say - how did you even get on top of Skyhead Falls in the first place? Did you fly up there?"

"No, I walked the trail."

"Ah."

The conversation between the two fillies blended with the afternoon glow of the sky as they arrived back at the campers' area, making their way between the rows of tents.

The two fillies soon fell into a comfortable routine: they met twice a week at the bottom of Skyhead Falls while the rest of Team Firefly went off to fly the Circuit. Sometimes, they stole away to the city proper - Fluttershy's meekness gave them the edge when it came to evading counselors. For the most part, however, they stuck to the campgrounds and journeyed to the top of the falls for the afternoon.

Rainbow Dash spent much of that time figuring out how to get Fluttershy more comfortable in the air. She knew the fundamentals after three years of camp attendance, but her ponderous wingspan gave her grief with burst maneuvers like hovering, cutting, and climbing. Rainbow suggested she try to make her flight more fluid - gliding, using updrafts, turning in large, sweeping arcs - and that was that. The air accepted Fluttershy as eagerly as she accepted it. The look on her face when she flew all the way down Skyhead Falls for the first time - the astonishment in her eyes, that ear-to-ear grin - would stay with Rainbow forever.

Eager to pay something back for her lessons, Fluttershy took Rainbow sightseeing. Three years of camp had given her ample time to find places not even the Cloudsdale native had known were there before. She showed her a little alcove just behind the top of Skyhead Falls where tiny bluecaps glowed quietly on the walls. She took her to the cloudvine trellises on the west side of camp to play tag amid the tendrils of white foliage. She also brought her to the Dragonpact Gardens, a memorial to those who brokered the alliance between ponies and their fire-breathing neighbors, and the fillies watched fires dance in raised bowls until well after the sunset.

Days flowed into weeks with the lazy ease of time well spent. Word reached Rainbow Dash's counselor that she was skipping her assigned laps around the training course. When he tried to confront her on the issue, however, the filly peeled off a hot lap only a mare's breath from breaking the camp's record time.

She still wasn't allowed on the Circuit, but that didn't seem like such a huge deal anymore. They could have their dumb racetrack. Hanging out with Fluttershy was much more fun.

That filly had come a long way since the beginning of the summer. She was the pony who met Rainbow Dash at her tent before morning assembly, and the newfound joy with which she sang the Equestrian anthem beneath the flagpole turned heads at first - including Rainbow's. She was still pretty lousy at talking with the other ponies, having spent several minutes on her knees begging a colt's forgiveness after brushing him with a

wingtip. But progress was progress, and Rainbow was happy to see it blooming in her friend.

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"I'm telling you, he wouldn't shut up. He just laughed and laughed and laughed - boy, he got on my nerves. So I waited until his fat mouth opened as wide as it would go, and *bam!*" Rainbow Dash pantomimed a vicious sidearm pitch. "Hard-boiled egg, straight to the back of his throat! Mwa-ha ha ha ha!"

Fluttershy winced. She maintained her opinion that Rainbow Dash was a nice pony from the day they met, but she had her... moments. "Ha ha?"

"Aw, lighten up." Rainbow Dash's voice peaked as it usually did when she got excited. "It's not like he died or anything, right? Took him a week to cough all the pieces back up after that, but he got better."

The final week of flight camp had arrived much too quickly. In less than three days, Fluttershy could finally tell the place goodbye for the rest of her life. As she walked with Rainbow Dash along the road lining the training course, she glanced over at the one place that had given her the most misery she'd ever suffered in her life. How often had she crashed into one of those rings, or veered off course into a nearby pillar? How often had she posted the worst lap times in her team? She remembered looking forward to the day when she would never have to fly the course again, but now that she had completed all of her required sessions, she only felt confused.

"Hey, Fluttershy?"

The inquiry snapped her out of her blues. Shaking her head, she said, "Ah, sorry. Yes?"

Rainbow Dash tapped her temple a couple of times. "I just remembered Leica told me that I could pick up my flight goggles from her today. You feel like coming along?"

"Well..." Fluttershy stole another peek at the training course. "Actually," she said, turning back to her friend, "since this is my last year at flight camp, I was thinking about taking one last lap around the course."

Rainbow Dash blew a raspberry. "That old thing? Puh-leeze. You're too good for it now. Are you telling me you'd rather fly that brain-drain than feast your eyes on a pair of *official*, shiny, and just-like-new Wonderbolt flight goggles?"

In a word? "Yes."

"Bah. Sometimes I don't know what to do with you." Though Rainbow Dash shook her head in consternation, her ill-concealed smirk told Fluttershy the full story. "I'm telling you, you're gonna miss out."

Fluttershy replied with a smile of her own. "I know."

"Be that way. I'll meet you back here in a few." Rainbow Dash took off at a forty-five degree angle toward the campers' tents, taking a little bit of the wind in her wake.

Fluttershy watched Rainbow go as she retreated into the distance, all the way up to the moment when her friend dropped behind the first few rows of tents. Then she turned her attention back to the course.

She had paused by its longest straightaway in the hour after lunch, when everypony had open access to the training course. Streams of buzzing colts and fillies raced each other through the rings, but they collided with each other with discouraging frequency. She began to suspect that entering the course at that part was a poor idea.

Unfortunately, poor ideas have a way of conspiring with determination to ensure they are carried out, and the latter was something Fluttershy had had no idea existed within her until a couple of weeks ago. She had uncovered it deep within herself as a little, glowing node attached to the back of her heart. Furthermore, it reacted to Rainbow Dash's presence - it grew whenever she was nearby, spreading through her core like the roots of a vital plant.

She was a different pony now. She didn't need an instructor to tell her to fly anymore. She could take to the skies on her own cognizance, and embrace the wings she'd once thought were accidents of her birth.

Just after that filly passed by, of course. And that one. And that colt as well. And his friend. And that cluster of five, pushing and shoving each other out of the way - oh dear. Her chest constricted.

Come on, Fluttershy, she told herself. Just remain calm, and remember what Rainbow Dash taught you.

She waited for a pink filly to pass through the ring in front of her. Taking a deep breath, she pushed off of the cloud and flapped her wings.

What if somepony caught her doing this?

She dropped back onto her hooves. *No*. She cut herself off before she could question herself further. So what if somepony saw her? *Again*.

She leaped, flapping her wings harder. Her eyes drew level with the bottom of the first ring, then rose above it - just a little bit more to go!

Suddenly, the rings lined up before her. Her lips parted into a huge smile as she eased her flapping. She was on the course, all by herself, and nothing could stop her now!

That was the moment gravity pulled up alongside her, pointed at her now motionless wings, and grinned its irresistible grin.

Before she knew what was happening, Fluttershy's front hooves struck the bottom edge of the ring - the world tumbled around her - she crashed onto the slope below and proceeded to pick up a terrifying amount of speed -

The edge! It flipped up at the very last possible moment, shooting her through the sky like a stone. Her stomach evaporated, and her vocal cords followed its example.

An orange pennant rose into the center of her vision on her downward arc, and then all she saw was orange. Moments later, she crashed on the clouds below.

Shaken, but unhurt, Fluttershy lifted the fabric draped over her eyes.

"Aw haw! Haw haw haw! Haw haw!"

The cold daggers of humiliation pierced her heart. She recognized those voices.

"Nice going, Klutzershy! They oughta ground you *permanently*!"

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"What the hay, Leica," Rainbow Dash muttered as she flew away from the campers' tents. "Telling me my goggles are suddenly missing like that? How do you misplace goggles? They're not that hard to keep track of. They have smaller plates at the cafeteria, for pete's sake!"

With her only errand up in flames until Leica straightened her act out, Rainbow Dash decided to check up on Fluttershy. The cyan pegasus would be flying against the flow of the training course, so she didn't think spotting her friend would take that long.

She made her way past the slalom, the double corkscrew, and even reached the S-turns without running into her target. The back-half hairpin was empty, too. The straightaway, then -

"Baw haw haw! Haw haw haw haw!"

She recognized that laughing. Jerking her head down, she glimpsed a familiar, dark brown colt and his dirt-colored crony standing over a shock of pink mane.

Blood surged into her cheeks. Those creeps!

She dove like a hunting peregrine, only she landed at Fluttershy's side instead of on their big, fat heads. They had the good sense to gape at her arrival, at least.

"Leave her alone!" she snarled.

"Oooh," said Buck, recovering his jaw remarkably quickly. "What're you gonna do, Rainbow *Crash*?"

"Keep making fun of her and find out!" Her voice squeaked as if someone had replaced her throat with a rubber toy, but she could hardly care less.

Buster glared at her. "You think you're such a big shot?. Why don't you prove it?"

"What do you have in mind?"

At this, the bullies turned to each other, hiding their mouths behind their hooves. The tall one said something that brought both their brows down maliciously. He turned back to Rainbow Dash.

"How about a race?"

"Done!" Rainbow Dash spat on her hoof.

"Now wait a moment," said Buster, sneering. "You don't even know when or where we're gonna do it."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Ugh, come on. I'll take you guys on anytime, anywhere."

"Oh yeah?" Buster shot the filly a grin so full of teeth that it begged to be punched in. "Sunrise. Tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Cloudsdale Circuit."

Fluttershy gasped.

"What?" Rainbow Dash's ears flattened back. "Are you stupid or something? The counselors will eat you alive."

"Then too bad you weren't out there with us last month, Rainbow Crash," Buck squawked as he circled around to her other side. "The instructors decided to open the Circuit to anyone who could finish a lap under two minutes."

"We blew that time away!" said Buster.

"That means we can go on the Circuit. Any. Time. We. Want." Buck punctuated each word with a jab at Rainbow's chest. "We've gone every day for the past month, and now we know it as well as we know your mom."

Rainbow stamped her hoof on the cloud. "You've never even met her!"

Her nemesis jammed the tip of his muzzle against hers. "That's not important, Rainbow Crash. All you need to know is that we've been training on the Circuit, you haven't, and we're gonna crush you so hard that you'll get kicked outta Cloudsdale and live the rest of your life on the ground."

It was all Rainbow could do to stop herself from biting that hay-eating grin off of that stupid mug. "In your dreams, maybe. You chumps had better show up at the Circuit tomorrow, 'cause I'll be out there, permission or not."

"Shake on it!"

Spit-slicked hooves hooked around each other and the race was on. Rainbow Dash wished her glare could have melted the bullies on the spot, but she had to settle for watching them fly away. She turned to Fluttershy. "Hey. Did those goons hurt you at all?"

The older filly shook her head in silence and looked away.

"C'mon," Rainbow tried to smile as she knelt by her friend's side. "On your hooves, let's go - hi-hup! There you go. You wanna head to the shop and grab a juice box or somethin'? I'll cover you."

Fluttershy shook her head - at least that was what Rainbow assumed she was doing. It was hard to see face underneath all that mane. Rainbow's almost-smile washed away like a napkin in a rain shower.

This was all her fault, she realized. She could've held off on grabbing her goggles for another day (and she hadn't even gotten them back, anyway). The idiot twins would never have entered the picture had she stuck around instead. No wonder Fluttershy didn't want to look at her.

"Sorry." Rainbow's apology sounded thin in the cooling afternoon air. She raised her wings to fly away, unsure of what good her presence would do now.

"It's okay."

Rainbow Dash furled her wings and turned around.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything earlier," said Fluttershy as she walked over by Rainbow's side. She tilted her head up toward the sky, as if trying to hold back tears. "I was just... those colts."

Rainbow Dash only nodded.

"What are you going to do?" Fluttershy wiped the back of her hoof across her eyes. "Are you really planning on racing them tomorrow?"

"I don't really have a choice anymore, do I?" Rainbow Dash beat the air with two curt wing strokes. "If I don't go out there, they'll never let me show my face around here again."

"And if a counselor catches you out there, you'll get kicked out of flight camp forever."

"I know, I know." She planted her face into the cloud and groaned. "I know."

The sounds of camp crept into her ears, one by one: the oblivious giggling of campers navigating the training course above her, the breeze swirling in from the west, the muted

rush of rainbows cascading into the lake just over there. These were the sounds she'd known during her past two years at camp - the whole idea struck her as kind of dumb, but she found herself missing those sounds already.

Something brushed the inner edge of her wing. The face-down filly leaped to her hooves with a strangled noise, and she whirled on the culprit.

"Fluttershy? Was that you?"

"I-I-I-I'm sorry!" The hapless filly drew her hoof to her chest as if she'd burned it. "I... I -" She folded in on herself. "D'oooh."

Rainbow Dash swept her hooves in front of her with embarrassed speed. "No, no, I'm not mad or anything. I just wasn't expecting you to do that - that's all."

Fluttershy hesitated. "Well, um. I know you're in a little bit of a tight spot with the race tomorrow, and that no matter what you do, it probably won't end up all that well..."

"Thanks." Rainbow's brows fell flat enough to build a house on them.

"No! I mean, what I mean is..." Fluttershy tapped her front hooves together, her next words becoming quieter and more hesitant. "that I... just want to..." She shut her eyes in exasperation.

"I want to help you win!" she blurted.

It was Rainbow Dash's turn to shrink back. The moment her friend said those words, her eyes flared open as if somepony had stoked bonfires behind them. The heat of that look washed over Rainbow, and for a moment, she thought she saw her friend's mane ruffling in a gale that wasn't actually there. The moment passed as quickly as it arrived, leaving her with the strange urge to smile when she should have been scared silly.

"You're right!" she exclaimed, punching the cloud with a hoof. "Who cares if I never come back here again? All I care about is getting those two morons back for messing with my girl!" She threw a foreleg around her friend's shoulders. "Nopony gets away with that, you hear?"

Fluttershy nodded.

"So, what's your plan to help me beat those two?" asked Rainbow, rubbing her hooves together. "Extra training? Sabotage? A secret technique?"

Fluttershy motioned Rainbow to follow her. "S-something like that. Let's head to the showers first, and then my tent. I'll show you when we get there."

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A damp Rainbow Dash landed in front of Fluttershy's tent with a heavy pink towel slung across her withers. Drops of water arced from her mane as she shook it out.

"Did I seriously have to take all of those showers?" She pointed this question at the yellow pegasus landing by her side. "Geez, I was perfectly fine after one - I *do* keep myself clean, you know."

Fluttershy closed her eyes and pressed a hoof to her chest. "Father always says, 'When unsure, clean some more.'"

"What is he? Some kind of neat freak?"

The look Fluttershy leveled at the soggy speedster could have silenced a morning assembly. "He's a doctor," she replied.

Rainbow Dash wasn't the kind of pony to pay attention during morning assemblies. "I don't follow," she said.

Fluttershy gestured her into her tent.

Rainbow Dash had never thought about what Fluttershy's living space looked like. The other pegasus was the one who showed up at *her* tent most mornings. And really: what would a pony like her put in her tent, anyway?

Whatever she could have imagined, it wasn't this.

Strings of firefly globes ran in arcs along the uppermost edge of the tent's interior. Squares of earth-toned fabric imbued with airy patterns covered the walls on either side, and long-stemmed flowers with pointed petals cropped up in places Rainbow only saw in the corners of her eyes. The air was warm and thick like a full-body scarf, and a slight trace of spice drifted across her nostrils. She spotted a jar of thin sticks with their bottom ends dipped in some amber liquid on a small table by Fluttershy's cot, which took up the center of the carpeted floor. A cluster of vials joined the jar of sticks on the table along with a photograph propped against a small stack of books.

"Well..." Fluttershy's hoof poked the carpet underneath as she gave her friend the biggest smile she could manage. "It's not much, but... welcome."

Rainbow Dash was too busy retrieving her jaw to answer right away. Who in their right mind would ever bring this much stuff to camp? She thought back to her own tent and its only decoration, new that summer - a photo of her and Fluttershy during one of their trips into Cloudsdale.

Fluttershy's tent made no sense - and, at the same time, it couldn't have fit the filly any better. She led Rainbow over to her cot and helped her lie down on her stomach.

The pillow beneath her muzzle smelled like lavender, and it sent her thoughts elsewhere as a pair of hooves rotated her head to the side. One by one, she felt her limbs being moved toward the foot of the cot. Her towel ran up and down her mane, tail, and wings a few more times for any straggling moisture before it lifted off of her. Then she heard a ruffling sound, and a heavy blanket settled over everything between her dock and withers.

"So, uh," Rainbow started, shaking her head. She had no idea where she'd been during those last few moments. "What are you up to, anyway?"

"I'm helping you win tomorrow." Fluttershy's voice was soft, even more so than usual, but there was no missing the touch of purpose beneath her tone.

Rainbow Dash decided not to ask any more questions - at least for the moment. She still wasn't sure what was going on, especially when she heard the quiet tinkling of glass somewhere behind her, but she was getting this impression...

The impression, however it all worked, that things would work out okay.

"Are you comfortable?" Fluttershy's voice crooned from somewhere above her. "Say something if you aren't."

The blue-coated filly inhaled, but remained silent as the seconds stretched in her head.

"That's it." The warmth in that voice was unlike anything she'd ever heard from anypony speaking to her. "Breathe however you like, but make sure you keep doing so. It helps. Now, I'm going to take a wing, and we'll go from there."

There was a moment between when Fluttershy stopped speaking and when she started working, and it reached down to grasp the very heart of the world.

Rainbow felt a pair of hooves shore up her wing and lift it into the air. She wasn't sure how to describe the feeling of moving her wing without moving it. The deliberate arc it traced as it descended to hang off of her flanks was equal parts soothing, terrifying, and exhilarating. The inside of her head went a little woozy. She pulled another lungful of breath through her nostrils just as the sound of hooves tapping together reached her ears.

Grasping the base of Rainbow's wing, Fluttershy rolled her hooves all the way down to its tip with several smooth motions - press, roll, release; press, roll, release. Every new stroke left behind a coat of oil that sank beneath her feathers and liberated tense filaments along the muscle fibers below, draining away sores and strains Rainbow had hardly even felt before. She wondered how long Fluttershy would be at this - just this - press, roll, release; press, roll, release.

A glow coalesced within her wing like the heat of a fire after a cold winter's day. How was it even possible to feel this good - or to make other ponies feel this good - with just a little rubbing? She didn't even realize she had moaned until Fluttershy whispered into her ear.

"Too hard?"

"No, no..." The front of Rainbow Dash's head was beginning to swim, but the feeling would go away if she talked too much. "Keep going."

Fluttershy paused to warm some more oil between her hooves. Then, one by one, she gently sandwiched each of Rainbow's primaries at their bases and drew them out to the tips. "I should've asked to do this sooner," she mused, nudging a section of misaligned barbs into place. "How often do you preen yourself?"

"Say what?"

"It's when you groom your feathers to fly better. It's a bit like flossing. Not everypony does it, but it's very good for those who do."

A heady thrill coursed up Rainbow's wing as another one of her primaries was gently pulled outward. Her thoughts wandered back to the first day they had met, back when they sat together in the head counselor's office. The way Fluttershy's feathers caught what little light there had been, how smooth they looked - they didn't look nice on accident. She probably did this preening thing every day or something like that.

For all the effort Fluttershy put into maintaining her wings, they had yet to repay her kindness in full. Rainbow Dash had to wonder at that. She'd never bother taking the time to care for her wings that often if they wouldn't keep her in the skies.

"Who taught you how to do this?" she asked.

"Papa did." Finishing with Rainbow's primaries, Fluttershy reached over for more oil. Bottles clinked together. "I told you he's a doctor, right?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"He's been one for a very long time." With more oil on her hooves, she started to work through Rainbow's secondaries, always slow, always gentle. "And he has to stay at the hospital late to take care of all the patients he sees. Sometimes they're sick, and he treats them with medicine. He sees injured patients more often, though, so he spends a lot of time setting bones, healing burns, mending tired wings..."

Firm hooves pushed deeper into Rainbow's wing, and her feathers continued to transmit every little press, tug, and knead down to their roots as their barbs untangled, zipping back into alignment. She was beginning to slip away..

"Back home, Papa takes me with him to visit his morning patients," Fluttershy continued. "I don't usually say much to anypony while I'm there. But I'm learning a lot just by walking with him during rounds. It's... nice."

A puff of curiosity swirled through Rainbow Dash's mind. "He sounds like a pretty cool pony," she said into her pillow. "I'd be okay with meeting him someday."

Fluttershy just smiled. Finishing her work on Rainbow's first wing, she tucked it against the younger filly's flank and covered it with the blanket. She kept one hoof on Rainbow's back as she circled around to the other side of the cot, where she drew out the other wing like a violinist drawing her instrument from its velvet case.

As waves of pressure traveled up her wing, Rainbow Dash caught her memories wandering again - organizing themselves not in sequences of time, but presences. She turned to those that made her happy inside: winning her first sprint ever beneath the skies of dawn. Her first lap around Cloudsdale Circuit. The first day the instructors coached her team on inversions, and flying with the ground above her head and the bright sun on her belly.

The first time she dropped into Deadmare's Dive. She remembered the weather had been pretty bad - that decision hadn't ended all that well.

Oh, it hadn't, now? Smiling, she motioned that notion over and escorted it around to the back of her mind, where she imagined herself bucking it straight into outer space.

Deadmare's Dive *had* ended well. If anything, it ended even better than she could have hoped for than if she had just flown it.

"Thanks for - mmph. For all this," she grunted, her pause triggered by Fluttershy's hooves rotating her shoulder.

"It's nothing at all," said the other pegasus.

"No." Rainbow Dash shook her head. "It *is* something. And it's more than this." Complete sentences were becoming harder and harder to come by. She winced, remembering how she'd yelled at Fluttershy the first day they met. She winced harder when she remembered the other filly had convinced the instructors to let her stay. "You've done a lot for me since I've known you. Hanging out with you's the most awesome thing that's happened at camp, ever."

Fluttershy's hooves stilled. "You're... you're too kind," she stammered. "I-if anything, I should be thanking you. Just knowing you're there for me is enough to make me happy."

"What? Aw, geez." Rainbow raised her head a little, finding herself struggling for words of gratitude. Strange work for a pony who'd grown used to relying on herself. "I don't feel like I do enough for you."

"Well, I've never asked you for anything, have I?" Fluttershy resumed her ministrations, nudging an errant primary back into alignment.

"Not that I can think of."

Fluttershy made a contented noise. "Then everything's fine."

"But -"

"Shhh... lay your head back down, now, and just focus on breathing. Let Auntie Fluttershy take care of the rest."

Rainbow paused, opened her mouth to protest - and, seeing the contented smile on Fluttershy's face, closed her eyes and did as she was told. A little smile of her own emerged soon afterward, and her mind went blurry.

Cloudsdale was not a city of many secrets. There are things to be said for cities on hills which apply even more to cities in the sky, and chances were that if you were a pony living somewhere in Equestria, you could look up on a clear day and spot the pegasus settlement swaying in the atmosphere.

But looking at Cloudsdale was not the same bag of oats as being in Cloudsdale, and for those who ate and played and slept and lived within its borders, theirs was a sight not even the Princesses, dwelling within their twilight spires of ivory and stained glass galleries, could lay claim to.

Cloudsdale enjoyed two sunrises a day. This was not a secret, but a fact, and facts are rather boring. This was only the natural consequence of overlooking two horizons: the one far in the distance that welded earth and sky together in a blue line wider than vision, and the one running along the edges of the city's hoofprint.

The city's secret, rather, lay with that second sunrise like the dew beading on its roads, foras, and parks. In the early morning, this dew rose into the air in thin curtains a wandering pony could part in place. A brief interlude followed these ascensions when everything stood still - no breeze dared stir such perfect air, nor any sound move the immense silence.

Then rose the sun.

Walls of golden light surged forth from its top edge over the streets and houses, reducing the dewy curtains to prismatic haze with kinetic efficiency. In the moments before the haze faded away, it threw the light in all directions like a fountain, and the walls and terraces danced with swirling magentas, baby blues, and greens. It was during those moments, when light caromed off the clouds and illuminated the gaps in between, that Cloudsdale itself seemed to take its first waking breaths.

Rainbow Dash stood transfixed beneath the arching gates of Cloudsdale Circuit's main entrance, unable to tear her eyes from the auras rising above Titan's Curve. A brisk northern wind swept across her body and tugged at her mane. She barely noticed.

"Why didn't you tell me mornings had stuff like this?" she asked, rounding on the pony standing next to her. "Why did you never wake me up earlier?"

Fluttershy wilted under Rainbow's gaze. "I-I'm sorry! I thought you enjoyed sleeping, so I didn't want to wake you up too early..."

"It's cool," said Rainbow. "Ha, I just never thought about being a morning pony before. Come on. Today's the day we bring down sweet justice on a pair of deserving jerks." She held out her hoof for a bump.

Fluttershy obliged her. "I know you can beat them," she said.

Rainbow Dash flared her wings as she walked her way toward Cloudsdale Circuit's starting line - they felt as light as paper and as sharp as the edge of a sword. They hungered to carve up the sky, and it was all she could do to keep herself contained as she stepped onto the track. Buster and Buck were already out there waiting for her arrival.

"Sup, guys?" she said.

"Ooooh, check out Rainbow Crash!" cooed Buster. "She thinks she's so big and tough, doesn't she?"

"We're gonna pound you down to size," Buck added, swinging a slow hoof at Rainbow's head.

She ducked it without even noticing it. She was in the zone, and nothing would shake her out of it. Not this time.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here." The filly turned with a grin and snapped her tail against Buck's muzzle. Ooh, that got him mad. "Let's go ahead and get this done," she continued, taking her place behind the line, "while there aren't as many ponies to watch you two crash and burn."

She looked to either side of her. The grandstands running along the sides of the starting line gleamed in the morning light and were large enough to accommodate a hundred times the current enrollment of flight camp. A few clusters of campers had already taken seats along the front rows and whispered excitedly amongst themselves.

"Hey, Klutzershy!" Buster had noticed the gangly filly lurking off to the side. He tossed a checkered flag at her head - only to provoke gasps from the audience when she caught it between her teeth.

"Her name's Fluttershy." Rainbow's grin at that moment threatened to tear her face apart. "And she's a hundred times the cool you two dweebs will ever be combined."

Buster spat to one side. "Hmph." He ponied up to the starting line with the others. "One lap. First pony across the finish line wins."

Fluttershy flapped over to the starter's cloud only a few yards in front of the starting line. She gave her friend a worried look from beneath her mane.

Rainbow, in turn, pulled the corner of her lip up and nodded once. Her heart pounded against the base of her throat like a jackhammer.

"You're going down!" Buck taunted, jabbing his hoof at her.

"In history, maybe! See you boys at the finish line!"

Shaking their heads, Buster and Buck turned their attentions to the course before them. Rainbow did the same, tracing the starting stretch leading into Circle Slalom with her eyes as adrenaline gnawed at her insides. The cloud beneath her hooves was firm and suitable for an explosive start, and the breeze tumbled over her back.

Fluttershy raised her head, her eyes screwed shut, and the world stopped to balance on the edge of a checkered flag.

Rainbow licked her lips. This was it. This was her chance to show the world what she was made of.

The flag fell.

The opening straight vaporized behind her in a heartbeat, and a snarl etched itself onto her face as she tore between the pillars leading into Circle Slalom. The first gate rose up several wingspans off to her left, but no sooner did she tilt toward it was it directly before her, and then behind her. She swung right like a shuttle sliding through a loom, passed through, swung back left, passed through, again and again.

She had no time to think. She had no time to doubt. Her wings had gained minds of their own, and they tossed her back and forth with careless perfection every time.

Entering the hairpin leading into Lark's Head Loop, she took a glance over her shoulder and saw Buster and Buck lagging behind by several lengths. The short one was already beginning to sweat, and his teeth ground together so hard that she could even hear them from where she was. She looked ahead once more, just in time to bank her wings and brush a safety pillar with her belly as she screamed through the turn.

Buster was not so lucky. Unable to rein in his speed behind her, his head punched through the pillar with an air-splitting *clang*. When Rainbow exited the first loop of the

section, she saw him stuck there with his eyes rolling in his head and his tongue hanging out like a banner.

One down.

She pumped her wings hard going into the second loop and rolled onto her side, catching a glimpse of the forest below becoming a floorless wall to her left. She had an instant to consider what she was doing. It passed, and she pulled her head back.

The hard hoof of inertia slammed into her like a train, and dark fringes immediately crawled into the edges of her vision. No - she had to hold onto her speed, no matter what happened, and she kept pumping her wings all the way through the turn even as her blood drained from them. And just before she slipped away, a spark in the back of her mind told her to level out, and she rolled back upright just as the next line of rings snapped into place in front of her.

Her maneuver paid off: rings, flags, and an occasional spectator whizzed past in seconds on her way to the top of the southeastern hairpin, and she crested the top of the turn with plenty of momentum to spare for the descent. On the other side of the turn, her only remaining rival struggled to gain altitude, having run out of speed halfway up the incline.

"Hey, Buckyballs!" she called. "How do ya like my wake?"

The bully shouted back something rude.

Rainbow Dash didn't hear it. She was too busy being awesome as she rolled right and glided through the first ring of Titan's Curve. The second ring came and went as easily as the first, as did the third. By that point, she had to flap a little harder to maintain her speed, but that was an improvement over the beginning of the summer by far. Fluttershy's preening accounted for some of that, definitely - but the rest of it had evolved over their long hours of flying together, building the younger filly's stamina a little higher with every day.

She could enjoy all of this, now: the speed of the wind, the adrenaline shooting through her heart and wings, the wind whistling in her mane - the sky was her domain, more so than any other pegasus. A smile dawned across her features as she made this realization, and by the time she had left Titan's Curve behind to wallow in sad mediocrity, her cheeks had begun to ache.

Swayback's generous turns fell away behind her as she wove her way through them, one, two, three, and four. Long Gone Drop yawned seductively behind the final ring. She leaned to her left in preparation, and -

Pow! A hard tackle sent her skidding off course. She barely hauled herself up short of a section of grandstands, the red and gold insignia of Cloudsdale Circuit mere inches from her muzzle.

"Haha! Later, Rainbow Crash!"

"Hey!" The fouled filly glared at the larger bully as he saluted her from the top of the course's ultimate speed straight. Now she was the one chasing after him, and he already had a sizable lead going into the Circuit's final stretches.

You can't let that jerk win, she told herself, angling her body toward the ground. *All you've got left is End-Around, and - waitamminute. What is he - ?*

The familiar warnings and arrows pointing ponies into the Circuit's safety flyout closed on the speeding colt with shocking velocity, and soon he would be going too fast to heed their directions. Rainbow Dash relaxed her dive a little, only to realize her mistake a heartbeat later.

He smacked one of the warning arrows with a hoof as he shot past the barricade. He'd never planned on playing it safe.

He was running Deadmare's Dive.

You're not gonna get away from me! Rainbow Dash stretched her front hooves out as far as they would go, dropping into the Circuit's condemned section only a couple of seconds behind her enemy.

She saw him copying her pose off to the side, but her attention suddenly turned elsewhere. As she streaked through ring after ring with increasing force, the ground below her loomed large like a tidal wave of fields, forests, roads, and rivers.

She willed herself on, suppressing the fears crawling along the sides of her brain. This was her sky. Her wings had carried her this far.

They would carry her wherever she needed to go!

Her wings lashed the air with redoubled tenacity, and the ground up ahead shuddered in response.

The last of the guiding rings had fallen away. First bit by bit, then length by length - Rainbow Dash was closing the gap faster with every passing moment.

More! She implored her wings to flap even harder, and they answered. Her heart pounded against her ribcage like a tap dancer on a stage.

Individual trees rose from the forests below, gaining detail and dimension as the racers drew closer.

He's still too far off! Faster! Her lungs began to burn as her windpipe throttled her breath. *Faster!*

A shining wall of air shimmered into existence before her hooves. Before she could blink and wonder at it, it began to push back at her.

Rainbow Dash could not believe this was happening to her - of all the times for this to happen, it had to pick that moment? She had not come this far only to be turned back, and as much as she wanted to scream in frustration, the wind would only jam her voice back down her throat.

So be it. That rage stayed inside her, swirling like a terrible hurricane, and it charged her breath with new-found energy.

She pushed back at the shining wall in front of her, and pushed, and pushed - and it yielded enough to allow her a glimpse of her rival as she ripped past his head.

"Whoaaaaaaa!" Buck's voice modulated as Rainbow's backwash swept him up, up, and out of sight. It was the sweetest music she'd ever heard, and a tune she would keep with her forever.

The ground advanced upon her at a steady pace - she could pick out lanterns and flower patches planted near the roads below. However, she also saw the last ring of Deadmare's Dive at the very bottom of the track: under-maintenance and overexposure had stained its exterior a dirty blue. To any pony, it looked like it was ready to move on to whatever afterlife clouds believed in.

Rainbow Dash understood her duty then: to be the ferrymare who shuttled that decrepit circle of cirrus to its new life.

How quickly could she go before she hit the ring? Sure, she had put the other two out of commission, but how else would anypony truly know she won if she didn't leave a memento of hers to be remembered by?

She urged her wings onward. Her chest felt hollow and her eyes stung in the wind as it howled against them. The air, definitely trespassed upon by that point, pushed back at her with doubled fury.

The ground was definitely close now, and growing larger in a hurry. Before she could worry about making a pony-sized crater in the grass, though, she saw it just beyond the air she pushed against: a circular distortion of colors like what she'd seen only minutes earlier at sunrise, all of them as vibrant as her mane. She knew she had to reach out and touch it, and if she wanted to do that, she had to work even more.

More!

Tears were ripped from her eyes as soon as they formed. The veil of color was just an inch away from her hooves! Even as the blue ring closed in impossibly quickly, even as it looked like she had no chance to pull out of her dive - she knew it would not end like that. All she had to do was reach out just a little bit further.

The wall of air buckled beneath her hooves, and the veil transformed into a luminescent cone that swirled and buzzed all around her. Her body stretched to impossible lengths and shuddered, and her wings were beating so fast they were beginning to hum.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! Her entire body wanted to shake apart. And maybe that would happen. But it wouldn't happen *at that moment*. She knew she was on the cusp of touching greatness, and the laws of physics would step back to grant her that greatness.

Her hooves touched the veil.

The world exploded in silence, accompanied only by a light of immeasurable white that subsumed everything it fell upon. Rainbow Dash's vision filled with swirling colors that spun around each other like water reflections on the ceiling of a cave. Her mind had turned peaceful, and her body felt free of gravity's nattering call.

I did it, echoed the words in her head. She floated around for a few more seconds until she heard them again. *I did it*.

A whistling, faint at first, began to creep into her ears, and she gradually became aware that her hooves were still locked in place out in front of her. She blinked, and each time she did so made the sky above a little bluer.

She was still flying. Somehow. She looked back over her shoulder.

A massive ring of color sprawled over the land beneath her and continued to spread outward like a wave in a pond. Trees bent and rocks split in its wake. A rainbow-colored contrail originated from its center, and the filly traced it up from there all the way to - herself.

Whatever that thing was down there, she had been responsible for it. The words sprang unbidden to her mind, and she knew right away what to call her signature move.

Her momentum had shot her well up to Cloudsdale's height, and she crossed the finish line at Cloudsdale Circuit only as a side thought. She left behind the cheers and celebrations of the other campers as she careered ever higher, higher than the camp, higher than Skyhead Falls - higher even than the cirrus sheets forming the very ceiling of the sky.

She stopped only when the air turned dark and her ears brushed against the cold edge of space. Far into the distance, the sun rested upon the bright blue arc of the planet like a signal fire, large and powerful. Mountain ranges like frosted chocolate drops danced with little cottonball clouds beneath her hooves. The only sound she heard was her breath in her ears. It was just her and the border of the great ghastly cosmos, breathing, soaring. Living.

A sharp tingle stitched itself along her flanks. Rainbow Dash turned to look - and gasped. There, tattooed into her coat until the day she left for the Summer Lands, was her cutie mark: a lightning bolt, trisected into the three primary colors as it burst forth from a cloud.

Radical.

She lingered for one last moment as her contrail faded into nothingness - the infinite, the world, and herself in between, and she wished for a moment that she could stay there. But gravity extended its hoof out to her, and she had no choice but to accept its gesture. She took her time gliding down, feeling no heavier than a shadow, and the grandstands of Cloudsdale Circuit soon fixed themselves in her vision.

By the time she touched down by the starting line, the scattered campers had become a throng, as if the entire camp had assembled to witness her victory. A rainbow-colored mob moved in toward her from all angles, every one of them competing to make themselves heard over their neighbors.

"Congratulations, Rainbow Dash!"

"Way to go!"

"That was totally awesome!"

But Rainbow Dash knew who she was looking for the most. She quietly pushed the other ponies out of the way as she made her way toward the main entrance. She beat her bullies, pulled off some crazy rainbow thing, and had earned her cutie mark in the space of a morning. And she wanted to share her best day ever with the one pony responsible for keeping her there.

"Rainbow Dash."

The filly froze in place. That wasn't Fluttershy's voice.

Wind Storm's voice called out from over by the main gates with her camp bag at his side. The stallion skewered her with a gaze that could have turned a circus into a cremation, which was exactly what the little filly felt was happening to her insides the moment she heard her name.

Gotta fly, she thought, just before a hoof hooked itself over her back. When Rainbow looked up, the stern eyes of Amber Swift looked back into hers. He escorted her over to Wind Storm without a word.

Rainbow searched the ponies behind her as the head counselor took her back out of the circuit. But alas - the pony with the yellow coat and pink mane she'd gotten to know so well, the pony who'd never spared any kindness to her, the pony who had always been there for her in times of need - was nowhere to be found.

"I *know*, darling - these spa treatments are always over too soon!" The white-coated unicorn threw a curl of her immaculate purple mane onto the other side of her neck as she walked down the hall.. "Lotus and Aloe are the best of the best, though, so I always make sure to enlist their services whenever I come by. I do hope you enjoyed yourself?"

"I did, um, Miss Rarity."

"Oh, please, dear, how many times must I say this? There's no need to be so formal around me." Rarity stopped before the door leading into the main reception room, as if to linger in the comfortable, jasmine-laced air for a moment longer before stepping outside into the dirt and dust of the world once more. "I understand the stress of moving into another town that isn't your own. Perhaps you'd like to make this a weekly thing for now, to get you comfortable while you're here? I mean - if you say you're going to be working with *animals* -" She let the implication hang in the air.

"They're not all bad," said Fluttershy, pushing the door open for her spa partner. "A lot of them are quite skilled at cleaning themselves. Besides, I made the mistake of bathing a cat once - never again."

"You're too nice a soul to be dealing with such creatures on a regular basis," sniffed Rarity.

Fluttershy blushed and hung her head as she passed through the door.

"Aaaaand I want that one. No, wait - gimme that one instead. Orrrr was it that one? Hang on, that one's part of a set? Just grab me something that comes in one bottle. Aw, haystacks, I don't even know what I'm doing here."

The pegasus's head bounced back up as she stopped in her tracks. She knew that voice from somewhere.

"Rainbow Dash?" Rarity gasped.

The noise of glass bottles shattering on tile filled the air. "R-R-Rarity? Boy, of all the ponies I had to run into today, I just -"

Fluttershy's eyes grew wide at the same time the other pony's voice died away. They gaped at each other for a moment that could have spanned the life of a glacier. And then

Fluttershy broke out into the largest smile she'd smiled ever since she moved to Ponyville.

"Rainbow Dash!" She launched herself across the room just as the other pegasus threw her hooves out wide, and the two of them embraced as if the years after their last meeting had never happened at all.

"I-I-I can't believe this!" Rainbow's voice sang in her ear. "Fluttershy! I looked for you everywhere after I got kicked outta camp! You live here now?"

Fluttershy's throat tightened in ecstasy. "I moved here last month, yes."

"Ahhhh! Get outta here!" Rainbow hugged her all the tighter, and the two of them moved toward the front door. "You've gotta tell me what you've been up to all this time!"

Behind the animated chatter of their reunion, Rarity reached up and scratched her head. "Goodness, Rainbow Dash," she sniffed, surveying the broken bottles by her hooves. "I, well... hm. If you wanted to get the right conditioner for your mane, all you had to do was consult me on the matter and I could've saved you all this trouble."