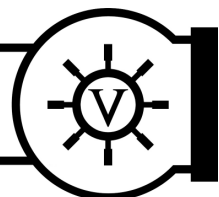


Wonderbolt

WovenWord

PONY FICTION VAULT



What *is* a Wonderbolt?

Sometimes I ask myself that, when I'm feeling particularly depressed. It's not hard getting into that mood these days, so the question buzzes around constantly. I've come up with several answers for it, but most of them aren't very satisfying.

What is a Wonderbolt? A Wonderbolt is a soldier.

No, that's not right at all.

A Wonderbolt is an aerial acrobat.

Pretty cut and dry.

A Wonderbolt is a hero.

I wish that were true.

A Wonderbolt is... a sister. A role model. A friend. A pony.

Just a pony in the end.

Is that really okay? To say 'just a pony'? A pony can be a lot of things, after all. But a Wonderbolt *does* have a little something extra added to that description. Everything I mentioned.

Except the soldier part. Never did care much for that one.

I look away from the torn up poster that started me down this familiar line of thought. The words are barely legible, but they still sting a little bit. 'Final show'... I didn't go to that one. Spits was *so* pissed. That was months ago, though.

I wonder what's become of her.

Now that I think of it, I've been pretty disconnected from the rest of the world since I came back here. It's like my life now consists solely of time spent at the market or in this library.

I'm not complaining. Why should I? I get to live with her. Spend time with her. Speak to her. Sometimes, I even get to speak *with* her. Besides, the list of places I frequent is still

longer than hers. I also need to take care of her. Make sure she eats. I'm her... friend, after all. It's what any friend would do, right?

I take a peek at her, out of the corner of my eye. She still hasn't moved.

Her head is resting on the rails, looking over the first floor. I absentmindedly run a hoof over the window's dark, wooden frame. Dead wood. It's been quite some time since this building felt alive. Figurative and literally. Looking outside, across the river's murky waters, it's easy to see why. Twilight doesn't look outside anymore. I don't blame her.

It really makes me wonder about the ponies that started all of this. How could anyone be so stupid? Our world used to be beautiful and green, even if I took it for granted back then. I think most of us did. Well, okay, Fluttershy didn't. She used to love all those little critters that roamed around. Even when things started changing, she'd still open her home to them. Feed them. Heal them.

I can't remember how long it was before she realized that she couldn't heal them all anymore. That the food wasn't enough. It was a horrible mess, with the land growing sterile and the trees dying. All sorts of animals losing their homes and feeding grounds. And, of course, they turned to her.

She said she could handle it. That the rest of us had bigger things to worry about. So she went to the market more frequently and kept buying more and more food. But storehouses have a limit. And since the lands weren't producing as much as they used to, the market eventually had to prioritize ponies. She didn't let that stop her, though. She started collecting as much food as she could from the wilderness. From the Everfree.

We used to be so scared of that place. I think I can see its lifeless husk from here. Well, that solution didn't last her long, of course. But she kept trying. She tried so hard to help her little friends. She had such a gentle soul...

On the other hoof, it has to take a very ignoble soul to do something like *this* to our world.

Heh, 'ignoble'. When'd *that* happen? Probably around the time I started reading things besides Daring Do. Or maybe it was when Daring faced off with that prissy, stuck up noblepony. Rarity had *nothing* on that guy. I remember back when Twi smiled every time I used fancier words.

I remember back when Twi smiled.

Heck, it takes a lot to make *me* crack a smirk these days, and I'm supposed to be the immature prankster. Must be the weather. Not many clouds out today, though. Well, what passes for clouds in a sky filled with smoke. It's still pretty obvious that the sun is setting right now. Setting itself.

I never managed to understand it, no matter how many times Twilight explained it to me between pain-filled sobs and wracked breaths. A body without a soul, moving across the sky because there's nothing else it *can* do. I wonder how long it can last like that... a shell of its former self without something to give it strength from within. Days are colder now – even though it's summer – and it's a bad idea to stay outside for too long.

That never stopped AJ, though. She just kept bucking those trees, day in and day out. Even when they had to take the 's' down from 'Acres'. That mare never broke. She never let any of it get to her, just keeping it all inside and staying strong for the rest of us. Even after...

Hmm. That's not a train of thought I want to board right now. Even my wings seem to agree, since they're getting all twitchy. I watch as a couple of feathers come loose and fall slowly to the floor.

They say pegasus feathers are full of magic. Or, at least, they *used* to be. It's what allowed us to fly. To glide and soar and race through the clouds. Just like unicorns used to have most of their magic in their horns or the way earth ponies could make things grow through their special connection with the land, just by letting their hooves touch the ground.

Now I'm lucky if I manage to slowly hover above Ponyville's rooftops. Twilight has difficulty levitating more than one thing at a time. At some point, something started to disappear from our world. 'Magic' would be one way to put it. Twi explained it better, but I can't really remember the terms she used...

Since pegasus feathers were full of magic to help us fly, they'd never touch the ground if they fell from our wings. They'd keep floating a tiny bit above whatever surface they had below, not quite ending their fall. I never noticed it back then, since you'd have to stay and watch for a while to tell. That just wasn't my style. By the time my feathers were halfway to the ground, I was already halfway to wherever I was headed.

My bedroom floor is full of cyan feathers now, lying still on the ground. 'Final show' indeed.

The sun has almost finished setting. That's a trigger around here, which basically means it's time to start making dinner. I know what we're making tonight. Nothing fancy, so it shouldn't take us more than ten – maybe twenty – minutes. After that, we'll eat in silence. Shower. Go to bed. Same old routine.

Twilight's routines are the only things that keep her going, I think. It's the only reason she still moves about during the day. So I'm pretty sure that I won't be able to break her out of it once she gets started.

I should probably just get it over with. Say what I have to say. Leave if it doesn't stick. Not that I'd ever actually *leave*, but I'm sure Twi wouldn't want to see me around as much. And she wouldn't, even though I'd still *be* around. Can't keep stalling though, since the clock's ticking must be very close to driving one of us insane by now.

That dumb clock. I can't believe it's survived this long. Every awkward moment, every announcement of bad news, every tragic day, every silence that stretched too long... it's always been there. And I've always hated it.

Right. The talk. How do I start? I don't want to sound too forward, but I don't have that much time either. Maybe a throwback to happier days? No, that's just depressing. Just come out and say it? She might ignore me... she does that sometimes, when she hears something she doesn't want to deal with. Heck, *I* do that sometimes.

Oh, come on! This wasn't so hard... once upon a time. I could actually talk with my friends about anything. I needed some coaxing, sure, but I got there eventually. And this is Twilight, the only one I *can* have a conversation with anymore. It's not often, but we still do it.

Buck it.

"Do you miss the old days?" Wow, my voice really cracked there for a second. Has it really been that long since I've spoken?

I wait for a couple of seconds. I'm suddenly all too aware of the fact that I'm sweating. I don't know if she's in the mood to talk, but I really *really* hope she is.

She doesn't move, still resting her head on the rail, but I manage to hear her soft voice. "Of course I do. But there's nothing to gain from chasing after days long past." She sounds so bored, so... lifeless.

Silence stretches between us for a long while.

Now that I know she'll answer, I have to take the plunge. I can do this. "You know," I start, understanding that there's no turning back now, "sometimes I wonder if there's still something worth living for in this world..." It's a grim thought. One that's also been circling around my head lately. Still, it does manage to tie into what I want to tell her.

I see her neck tense up. Twilight turns her head very slowly to gaze upon me with dead eyes. Well, maybe not dead. I think I see pity there. She's giving me a once over. I used to be proud of my body. It was vibrant, athletic, lithe and all those other things that I considered so important. Now? Not so much.

I try not to shift. I try to keep my eyes on hers, but it's actually painful to see her like this. I hope my face is still some semblance of neutrality, because I'm terrified right now. I can *feel* her scrutinizing every detail she can glimpse from my appearance. Every wrinkle and scar. The way I'm standing, leaning against the window's frame, not quite facing her. The fact that I've been holding my breath since I stopped talking.

It's too much. I snap my eyes forward and catch the sight of a discarded tiara among the shelves. Bad memories, not really what I need right now. The greyed out gem doesn't mean anything anymore. Just another reminder of what used to be. I can't even remember where I left my necklace.

Before I can start down another avenue towards depression, I feel her gaze break away. She turns, before looking forward into nothingness again. "There isn't."

I know she's given it thought. There's not much left to do except think nowadays, and I believe that's always been Twilight's favorite hobby, next to reading. Unfortunately, thinking has become a very self-destructive activity. I have to actively fend off bad thoughts, so I can't even imagine what it must be like for her. She's probably marred with them. If there's something I'm most thankful for, it's that she hasn't given up. *Yet*.

Okay then, here goes. "I know. That's the worst part" – *it really is* – "but I keep asking myself the same question, over and over, hoping that the answer will change someday."

There, I said it... I think. Well, not really, but the opening's there. Please take it. Be my new answer.

Nothing. No reaction.

Too subtle, I guess. Twilight was never Rarity, so this might not be the best way to go about it. The last sliver of light is about to disappear on the horizon. Only a couple of

minutes left, so this'll be my last chance. I don't know if I'll be able to work up the courage to try again tomorrow or the day after that. Straightforward it is.

"Let me put it another way, Twilight." I'm almost whispering. That wasn't my intention, but at least the sound carries in this place. "You're the only pony that I still care about. The only one that I still want to see happy, just for the sake of it. But you're so..." I trail off for a moment, looking for the right word. Dead? Defeated? "So *buried* in depression and sadness, that I could disappear tomorrow, and you wouldn't care." Wait, that's not –

In an instant, she's in front of me. I didn't see a flash of teleportation, but certain details escape me nowadays. There's a very frightening mixture of emotions in her eyes. Anger and sadness. I've seen it far too many times, but never from her. I'd be jumping with joy at the fact that she's expressing *something*, but my body's too busy being frozen in fear. That doesn't last long.

I'm too focused on studying her eyes to notice the hoof that strikes me on the side of my face. I don't break eye contact. I'm too frightened to let her out of my sight, and too shocked to do anything else. I notice that one of the emotions is winning over the other, and I pray to the stars that it's not the anger.

I can feel something warm trickle down my muzzle. I think I should be feeling pain, but maybe it'll register later. Twilight is weakened – we all are – but she isn't *weak*. Her magic can still do pretty nasty things if she puts her mind to it. Not that she'd ever do that. Not my – *our* Twilight.

And then, just as suddenly as she'd struck me, she pulls my muzzle towards hers in a very violent motion. Our lips basically smash together before I realize that she's *not* trying to break my teeth.

She's kissing me.

She's *kissing* me!

I regain enough control over my body to start returning the gesture, however clumsily. I can feel her tears running down my cheeks – they can't be mine, I don't cry – and her soft sniffs that have nothing to do with needing more air.

Eventually, the euphoria passes, the kiss slows and we break away from each other. She looks at me with pleading eyes. Pleading for me to understand that she would never be so cold. That she *would* care. I know that now. She doesn't have to say it. And she doesn't.

Words.

There should be words filling this empty silence, but neither of us can conjure them with the eloquence that would be necessary to not ruin the moment. So I let the moment pass by. And then another. And another. And I notice that she's doing the same thing.

Eventually, though, she decides to ask something. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Somehow, in her tone of voice, in the way she says it, I understand that she's not asking about my feelings. She's not wondering if I love her, if I'm just desperate to be with *anyone* or if I'm just mistaking one emotion for another. I can tell, so she doesn't need to spell it out for me. She's asking if I want to give us a shot in a world like *this*.

What's the right answer? I could say that she's the only one that keeps me going. That I don't want to stay on the sidelines and hope that nothing happens. Hope that everything stays the same, just so she'll still be there. I could say that I want to protect her from this world. That I want to be there whenever she needs me.

It's what the Wonderbolts stood for.

Protectors, more than aerial acrobats. Ponies that could be there because they were fast enough to arrive when they were needed. And that's what I want to be for her. Maybe not to protect her. Maybe that's an excuse, so I can justify staying near her.

Wait, why do I need to justify that? It's not like she actually needs protection, given everything she can do on her own. Aren't my feelings enough? They are... or, at least, they should be.

A Wonderbolt is a pony that takes care of others, even in the worst situations.

Is that really what I'm doing, though? Am I protecting a fragile heart or am I taking advantage of it? Am I latching on to a sure thing, just because I know that Twilight is probably as starved for love as I am?

I notice that I've been thinking for far too long now, and she's still waiting for an answer. Then again, long minutes of silence in the middle of our conversations aren't exactly uncommon. I suppose we should work on that, since it's no way to start a relationship. But the answer is simple. I shouldn't doubt myself right now, I need to look sure. I need to look confident. That's right, I never really needed to think about it.

"Yes."

I move forward to embrace her, and she lets me. She slowly hugs me back, with a single foreleg. I wrap my wings around her, letting her rest her muzzle against my neck. This is how it feels. This is how it *should* feel.

Warm and soft.

Sweet and safe.

This is what love feels like, I'm sure of it. It's that slight tingle spreading throughout my body. The very thing that had left this world, robbing us of our lives. Yeah, I'll be making rainbooms again in no time, while Twilight starts up her research once more. We'll bring back a little color to this barren land. This is love... right?

My right wing shifts a bit and a feather starts to fall. It twirls and sways in the air, under the final glowing light of the sunset, falling painstakingly slow and getting closer to the floor with each second.

Closer...

Twirl.

And closer...

Sway.

And closer...

I avert my eyes. I don't need to see it.

I give a glance over her shoulder towards the goggles hanging on the rail. That was my dream once, during happier times. Simpler times. 'Dreams are meant to be shattered, Rainbow.' That's what Rarity taught me once. 'If only so we can pick up the pieces, become stronger, and try again.'

I never *did* get to try for the first time. But now I have my chance. She'll be everything to me. The one I want to protect, even when she doesn't need it. The one I share everything with, even if she still holds things back. The one I love with all of my heart, even if I'll never know if she feels the same way. The one that makes me want to keep living, in spite of everything else.

And I...

I'll be her Wonderbolt.