

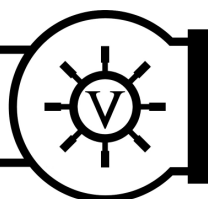
# The Games We Play

AbsoluteAnonymous

## Table of Contents

First Sight	2
Stormy Weather	13
Close Encounters	28
The Bet	42
A Proposition	58
The Language of Flowers	74
Who You Are In the Dark	91
Intimacy	109
It All Falls Apart	121
Hot Chocolate	141
Time Out	161
Back to Normal	180
Dead End	200
A Truce	219
Upon Waking	237
What Love Is	257
Correspondence	275
A Happy Day	295
Game Over	311
Climax	330
No More Secrets	347
Picking Up the Pieces	364

PONY FICTION VAULT



The mare in black stood on the edge of the bakery rooftop, surveying the streets below.

A wide-brimmed hat was pulled low over her eyes, her face hidden by a mask and a swirling cape draped theatrically over her shoulders. Normally, such a conspicuous costume would have attracted the attention of countless wandering eyes by now, and she would have had to bolt – but tonight, she was yet to be spotted. She almost blended in with the shadows, melting into the scenery like yet another facet of the night.

Her eyes followed the street as far as they could in the direction that the blue pegasus had gone. Although the pegasus moved quickly, she wasn't completely out of sight yet. Her current speed was *nothing* compared to how fast the mare knew she could fly during a race. As long as Rainbow Dash didn't realize she was being followed, catching up with her would be a cinch.

Mare Do Well smiled.

Wasting no time, she jumped, her cloak fluttering behind her. With a soft *thud*, she landed nimbly on the roof of the next building across the way. As soon as she touched down, she sprung into the air once more, and continued like this for some time, leaping easily from rooftop to rooftop.

Sure enough, she'd soon caught up with her quarry; but the pegasus remained as oblivious as ever, unaware of the shadow that trailed her.

• • •

Okay, so, spending a night in Cloudsdale, watching a Wonderbolts show – awesome. Returning to Ponyville so weighed down with merch that she couldn't even fly – *not* awesome.

Still, Rainbow Dash reflected, the purchases had been worthwhile ones, even if they *did* bulge so much in her saddlebags that her flight pattern had been thrown all out of whack, forcing her to walk. How she'd made it so far in life without a set of officially licensed Spitfire and Soarin' shot glasses was beyond her. Sure, she didn't like to drink, but she could start.

Casting a quick glance behind her, Rainbow Dash saw that she was alone. Since there was nopony here that she needed to maintain a cool facade for, she relaxed just long enough to let a single giggle escape, giving a giddy little hop.

*Best night ever? Oh, yeah,* Rainbow thought, still caught in the throes of excitement. Even if it probably *wasn't* the best night *ever*, a night of getting to watch her idols perform live and up close definitely qualified as the best night in recent memory, at least.

She was so caught up in reliving the highlights of the evening that she almost didn't notice when she walked straight into a stallion.

"Oops," Rainbow Dash said, catching herself and taking a quick step back. "Sorry. 'Scuse me."

He didn't move.

Since being burdened down with such heavy, lumpy saddlebags had made flying too awkward to consider, Rainbow Dash had instead opted to try and find a route on the ground that would allow her to get home as quickly as possible. Such a route naturally involved plenty of shortcuts, and, ignoring every safety rule she'd ever been taught as a filly, Rainbow Dash had found herself cutting through all kinds of back alleys and narrow streets as she'd charged through Ponyville, eager to unpack her purchases and further add to her collection of Wonderbolts memorabilia.

But now as she stood there, alone, too weighed down to fly and her path blocked by a wide, heavyset unicorn stallion, the pegasus was wondering if that had been a very good idea.

"Um, excuse me?" she repeated. Her voice remained steady – she was cool that way – but her nervously fluttering wings gave away the sudden uncertainty she felt.

Rainbow Dash stretched her neck, trying to peek behind him and preparing to sidestep him – or even just push him out of the way – if she had to. But the stallion matched her movements, blocking her view.

"Those bags look pretty heavy," he said casually, but his friendly smile had an edge to it.

"Yeah, they are, so that's why I wanna just get home as soon as possible, y'know?" Rainbow Dash answered in a breezy way. She took a quick step to the right, hoping to squeeze past him, but again, he matched her step, successfully blocking her way once more. Any anxiety she might have felt before was replaced with a surge of irritation. "What is your *problem*?" she snapped, narrowing her eyes.

"You're a pegasus. Can't you just flap your little wings and fly away if you wanna get past me so bad?" he asked.

It took every ounce of what little self-control Rainbow Dash had to resist bucking him in the face right then and there. "Can you just get out of my way?"

"What's in the bags?"

"None of your business. *Stuff*. Now move, before I *make* you." Rainbow Dash snarled, sharply flapping her wings once with a snap. Just for good measure.

"How're you gonna make me?" he said. He took a step forward, giving a dark laugh. "There's nopony else here, we're alone in a dark alley, and I'm guessing you can't fly. Probably because of those bags, right? Why don't you let me help you take those off your hooves?"

"What? No! I spent, like, a million bits on this stuff, I'm not just gonna give it away!" Rainbow Dash cried. Although she'd heard and understood every word of his implied threat, the part about the bags was all that seemed to reach her. After all, the contents were precious; there was no *way* she was going to let some random stallion try and take them from her. "Do you even know who I *am*? I'm *Rainbow Dash*. Ponyville's most awesome pegasus, winner of the Best Young Flier's Competition, local hero? Do you *seriously* think you can intimidate me? If you do, then you must be dumber than you look."

"I don't have to," he answered simply. And with that, his horn lit with an orange glow, an aura that proceeded to encircle her saddlebags and yank them loose.

"What the hay? Give those back!" Rainbow Dash shouted. She leapt forward, forelegs waving wildly in a panicked attempt to retrieve them, but the stallion only grinned smugly and jerked them out of her reach with his magic, again and again, like he was playing keep-away.

"Worth a million bits, huh? What's even *in* here?" he asked, still in that infuriatingly playful tone as he casually undid the flap to rummage through the contents. "Big Wonderbolts fan, I see."

"Oh, that's it, *it's on!*" Rainbow Dash spat. "You messed with the wrong pegasus, buddy. Give me back my bags or I'll have to kick your flank, and then you'll –"

She paused. The unicorn stallion's eyes had widened in fear, his jaw dropping in shock. The orange aura holding the bag aloft vanished, dropping it unceremoniously on the ground. The contents spilled on the road.

"...be sorry?" Rainbow finished. "Wow, you're kind of a chump, aren't you? Is that seriously all it took to scare you?"

The stallion lifted a shaking hoof, taking a clumsy, unsteady step back, then again, and then once more. Still he gaped, babbling incoherently as he struggled to speak.

"*Mare Do Well!*" he finally whispered.

Rainbow Dash frowned.

"Huh? Did you just say –"

She turned her head to glance behind her, and her jaw dropped as well.

Perched on the roof of the building above them was a figure cloaked in darkness, a black cape streaming behind it, its shape illuminated only by the light of the silver moon.

"*Mare Do Well!*" the stallion yelped again. "*Mare Do Well's back!*"

He turned and broke into a run, and although Rainbow Dash normally would've given chase right then and there, she remained frozen in place, utterly dumbfounded.

Mare Do Well leapt with surprising grace from the roof, landing in the alley directly beside Rainbow Dash – who continued to stare, jaw still hanging open in shock. The stallion's hoofsteps faded into the night, but the masked mare didn't even attempt to go after him; instead, she bent her head to gather the straps of Rainbow Dash's saddlebag in her mouth before offering it to the pegasus, who accepted it wordlessly.

"Um, thanks?" Rainbow Dash ventured after she'd affixed it onto her back once again.

Mare Do Well nodded, and Rainbow Dash blinked, still somewhat stunned, before scowling.

"Okay, very funny. Who is it?" she asked before reaching for the mask that hid the other mare's face; but Mare Do Well took a step back, just barely escaping Rainbow Dash's reach.

"Twilight? Is that you?" Rainbow Dash guessed, once more reaching for the mask; but Mare Do Well again backed away. "No, Twilight would've used magic to get the bag. Uh... Applejack? Oh, wait, it's probably Pinkie, isn't it? This is a prank."

Mare Do Well silently shook her head.

"Didn't you humiliate me enough *last* time?" Rainbow Dash said irritably. "Are you going for round two, now? Come on, take off that stupid mask. You made your point, whatever it is."

Instead of answering, the mare gave a brief, mocking salute before springing out of reach with a surprisingly nimble leap. Again, Rainbow Dash was too taken aback to consider giving chase, and instead stood alone in the dimly lit alley, watching as the caped crusader disappeared into the night, leaving no trace or sign that she'd been there at all.

• • •

The next day was a beautiful and sunny one in Ponyville, and several very close friends were gathered for a picnic by the stream in celebration of the lovely weather – courtesy of Rainbow Dash, thank you very much.

It had been Pinkie Pie's idea to throw a *Hurray It's the Last Warm Day Before We Bring In Winter* picnic, and although they'd gathered under the premise of enjoying the sun together, they'd already divided into individual factions. Twilight was stretched across the red-and-white checked blanket they'd brought, a book spread open before her like always. Applejack was leaning lazily against a nearby tree, eyes shut as she chewed on a piece of straw that she held clenched between her teeth. Off to the side, Rarity was brushing Fluttershy's long, rose-colored hair, exclaiming softly over how lovely and fine it was, and Pinkie Pie was stuffing her face with a batch of cupcakes that she'd pulled out of nowhere.

Rainbow Dash was, as always, late, but when she finally arrived, she stopped in front of her friends, forelegs crossed over her chest before curtly demanding, "So which of you guys was it?"

"Was what?" Twilight asked, not even pretending to look up from her reading.

"Come on, you know," Rainbow Dash answered impatiently, tapping a hoof irritably.

"Um... I'm pretty sure we don't," Applejack said with a yawn and a stretch.

"Which of you guys dressed up like Mare Do Well just to embarrass me? Don't you think I learned my lesson the first time? Way to keep rubbing it in. Geez." She rolled her eyes.

*That* caught their attention.

Twilight lifted her head from her book, looking puzzled. Applejack opened one eye, her brow furrowed. Rarity and Fluttershy exchanged confused glances. Pinkie Pie continued to eat cupcakes obliviously, apparently having not heard a single word of the conversation.

"Rainbow Dash, what are you talking about?" Twilight Sparkle finally asked, her head cocked in perplexity.

The pegasus sighed heavily before pushing her sunglasses up onto her forehead, so as to look at her friends disdainfully through narrowed eyes.

"Last night I ran into somepony dressed like Mare Do Well. It must have been one of you pulling some kind of a stupid prank, so, who was it?"

"Are you sure you weren't just seeing things?" Twilight asked carefully, marking her place in her book before closing it and sitting up.

"Positive," Rainbow Dash answered before plopping down onto the blanket, striking what she hoped was a casual, relaxed stance. She didn't want anypony to see how shaken up she really was from the whole experience. It wasn't just the fact that she'd almost been robbed; it was the fact that one of her supposed friends had once again donned the cloak of the now-legendary Mare Do Well with the express purpose of embarrassing her. If word got around that *Rainbow Dash* of all ponies had almost been overpowered by some street tough, her reputation would be completely ruined. "She was wearing the hat and mask and everything. Very funny, you sure showed me, yadda yadda yadda."

"It wasn't me," Twilight said, looking over to Rarity. "I gave my costume back to Rarity because I thought she might be able to use it for something."

"That's right," Rarity agreed, nodding emphatically. "I thought maybe I could work it over into a new ensemble. It would be such a shame for all that lovely fabric to go to waste. And of course you know I never *had* my own."

"I still have mine, but I can promise you right here and now that I haven't worn mine since the day I put it away," Applejack said sleepily. "I don't plan to, neither."

"Oh, I could never wear it again, it was so embarrassing," Fluttershy squeaked, seeming to shrink a little behind her curtain of hair, which Rarity once again took up to brush. "Everypony was watching me. It was terrible."

"Gummy ate mine!" Pinkie Pie said happily. "He tore it into itty bitty little pieces and got a really sick tummy after. Poor little guy."

Rainbow Dash carefully examined the matching expressions of earnestness that her friends wore. Their eyes were all wide and sincere.

Applejack, at least, wouldn't lie, and Fluttershy didn't seem the type to moonlight as a masked crime fighter when she was scared of the dark. As for the others, their stories seemed probable enough.

"Fine," Dash said at last, pulling her sunglasses back down over her eyes and stretching out to lie on the blanket. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I was just seeing things."

• • •

Although she'd ended up agreeing that she must have imagined it, privately, Rainbow Dash knew better.

That wasn't the kind of thing you could just imagine. Her encounter with Mare Do Well had been *real* – up close and personal, not just some trick of the light or an instance of her mind playing games with her. She knew the truth; she'd seen the mare herself. Not only that, but so had the thug who'd tried to take her bags. Why else would he have run?

Rainbow might've liked to imagine that he'd run due to how intimidating Rainbow Dash herself was, but as much as it pained her to admit it, she knew that wasn't the case.

She was the only one who knew that Mare Do Well had been nothing more than an elaborate hoax played on the town by her friends to teach her a lesson about humility. As far as everypony else knew, Mare Do Well had been some sort of incredible hero, performing feats of inequine strength and bravery in order to protect the town. A hero who had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as she'd arrived. Rainbow Dash was the only one who knew that the truth was that her friends had decided she'd gotten the point and no longer needed to keep up the charade.

If Mare Do Well had made some sort of comeback, then it must have been one of them. That, or a copycat artist of some sort. But who would do that? And why?

Rainbow Dash tossed and turned on her cloud bed, eyes squeezed shut, body tense. She felt frazzled, and couldn't sleep, no matter how hard she tried to relax. Her brain was spinning in circles, her mind working faster and faster, thoughts pinging back and forth as she considered.



When the pegasus closed her eyes, all she could see was that sleek mare in black, playfully saluting her before fading into the dark, and all she could feel was irritation that she hadn't even *thought* to chase her.

*I can't sleep*, Rainbow finally decided with a sigh, pushing aside her blanket and glaring at the ceiling. Midnight in Ponyville. Everypony in town dead to the world – all except for her. How annoying.

If her friends were telling the truth and really *weren't* just trying to mess with her, then it must have been a copycat Mare Do Well, but the costume was too perfect to have been made by anypony other than Rarity, so it must have been one of the original outfits.

Rarity had never had one in the first place. Applejack and Fluttershy still had theirs, but they'd both said that they wouldn't wear them again, and Rainbow doubted that they would've lied to her face. Pinkie's had been eaten, apparently. Twilight had said that she'd returned her costume when she'd finished with it, and Rarity had said that she'd been planning on making it into an ensemble. But if she hadn't made the alterations yet... then maybe somepony had stolen it.

Her eyes flew open. It was possible.

All she needed to do to find out for sure was talk to Rarity.

With a sudden purpose in mind, Rainbow Dash sprung out of bed, ignoring the fact that it was at least two in the morning as she bolted out of her cloud home and flew straight for Carousel Boutique.

• • •

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?!"

Rainbow Dash pawed at the ground anxiously, wings beating in frustration.

When she'd first arrived at Rarity's doorstep, she'd immediately begun pounding on the door, bellowing for Rarity to answer because it was "really important."

When Rarity had finally answered, the unicorn had been more than a little annoyed at the interruption to her beauty sleep, but when she'd seen how flustered Rainbow Dash looked, her anger seemed to drain away and she'd invited her friend in. But apparently

she hadn't been expecting Rainbow Dash to ask her what she did with the Mare Do Well costume.

"Well, customer confidentiality, for one thing," Rarity answered icily. Although she was feeling a little more gracious towards Rainbow Dash than usual due to the burst of sympathy she'd felt earlier, she was still far from forgiving of the disruption, and the venom in her tone reflected that. "I can't just go about announcing exactly what everypony purchases from my shop, you know. It's bad business."

"So somepony definitely *bought* it? They didn't just steal it?"

Rarity sighed, rubbing her temple with a hoof. "I can tell you that Twilight returned the costume to me, and that I intended to alter it into a new outfit, but before I could, somepony asked to buy it. I can't tell you who it *was*, though. That would be stepping out of line."

"But it's just a costume!" Rainbow Dash protested loudly, and Rarity winced. She would have expected Rainbow Dash of all ponies to understand how vital sleep could be, considering how much the pegasus seemed to love it, but apparently she had no qualms whatsoever about bursting into a pony's house at all hours of the night and making all kinds of racket. "What's so private about a stupid outfit? If you're planning to *wear* it, what's the point of buying something you'd be embarrassed if anypony found out about?"

"Well, obviously there are exceptions," Rarity said pointedly.

"I guess so," Rainbow Dash grudgingly admitted, scowling at the ground. Even she had to admit that it was likely that a superhero might want to keep their identity secret. "But it's really important, okay? I want to know who's running around dressed like Mare Do Well. It's weird."

"Why do you care so much?" Rarity muttered. Her cheek rested on a hoof. Her eyes were shut, and she yawned, already half-asleep. Normally she made a great effort to carry herself with as much grace and nobility as possible for a unicorn such as herself, as befitted a proper lady, but when Rarity felt sleepy, she was in no mood to put forth that much effort and it showed.

Rarity opened an eye, ears cocking in interest. "You said you ran into this Mare Do Well imposter, but you never actually told us what happened. How did you see her? What happened?"

"Nothing," Rainbow Dash said quickly. She hadn't mentioned the almost-robbery to anypony else, not even her friends, out of embarrassment, and she certainly wasn't planning to. "I was just flying around like normal, and everything was cool, when I saw her standing on the roof."

"Hmm," Rarity mumbled. She'd already lost interest apparently, and was again slumping in her chair, slowly drifting back off to sleep. "Look, I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash, but I can't help you. Could you go, now? I need my beauty sleep, and I'm in no mood for company. I still have curlers in, for Celestia's sake. You're just lucky Sweetie Belle wasn't here when you barged in."

"Yeah, whatever," Rainbow Dash answered in a faraway tone, already preparing to leave. "Thanks for your help, I guess. I'm gonna go look for clues now."

"What kind of clues could you *possibly* expect to find at *this* time of night?"

But Rainbow Dash was already gone.

If somepony out there really *was* masquerading as Mare Do Well, then chances were that they would once again strike at night. Not that Rainbow Dash actually knew for sure; it was just a gut feeling.

Luckily, she had fantastic guts, guts that could usually be trusted, and she figured that if she flew around for a while, she was *bound* to run into the Faker Do Well.

• • •

Rooftops were overplayed. So cliché. Time for something new.

Skulking in dark alleyways was proving to be much, much more enjoyable, Mare Do Well found. There was something so *fun* about seeing the look of surprise on the faces of the ponies she leapt at from the shadows. They always looked so bewildered; it was like the best kind of practical joke. She could only imagine what it must have looked like; it must have been so surreal – to think you're completely alone, only for a mare to emerge from the darkness, seemingly out of nowhere.

In the past, she'd worked only during the day, but the night was quickly proving to be her new favorite time to wander. But she needed to take care. She wasn't doing this for the same reasons as before. Defeating crooks and protecting the weak and helpless was all very well and good, but that wasn't her purpose anymore.

Her purpose was a pegasus, with hair made of rainbows and a coat the exact color of the sky on a clear day. A pegasus that was currently held in the grips of insomnia and circling the village from overhead, apparently scanning the streets. Looking for something. Or somepony.

Mare Do Well watched from the shadows, protected from Rainbow Dash's wandering eyes by her cover of night. Funny how she felt safest while hidden and unnoticed, when she was supposed to be the savior of the town. What kind of superhero felt comfortable only when out of the spotlight? Wasn't the point of donning an identity as gaudy as this supposed to be the attention? The desire for recognition?

It was almost laughable. But not quite.

She watched Rainbow Dash for a long time.

Her eyes were hungry for her. She wanted to know everything about her. She wanted to see everything there was to see. She observed every graceful dip and dive, every powerful beat of her wings, memorizing the way her technicolor mane flowed in the wind.

Mare Do Well slipped from street to street, ducking behind buildings and sneaking from alley to alley as she trailed the pegasus, and Rainbow Dash continued to fly, never once suspecting that the pony she was seeking was much closer than she thought. That she was, in fact, right under her nose.

The search proved fruitless. Although Rainbow Dash patrolled the village from the air for what felt like hours, she'd lost track of time a long time ago and had no idea how long it had actually been.

She knew *one* thing, though – it had been a huge *waste* of it. Time, that is. Although she'd kept an eye out for any potential crime scenes that might have attracted a wannabe superhero, it had been a relatively peaceful night for Ponyville for once – much to her disappointment.

Privately, Rainbow had been half hoping to come across at least *one* mugging, or something like that. Even if Mare Do Well hadn't come to the rescue, she would've felt a lot better about almost getting robbed herself if she'd been able to save somepony else from meeting the same fate. Although nopony knew what had happened, not even her friends, she still felt a little twinge of shame twisting around her gut at the memory.

Spending a night flying – no tricks or flashy stunts, just raw speed, for as long as she could sustain it – was a strange experience for her. Rainbow Dash had never tried it before. Usually she flew only to race or with the express intention of showing off for an adoring crowd, and she was a pony that loved her sleep; flying alone at night was basically unheard of. But she'd pushed ahead, driven by insomnia and her desire to find the Mare Do Well imposter.

At last, the horizon began to glow with the rosy tinge of dawn, indicating the beginning of another day.

The sun was going to rise soon, and Rainbow Dash hadn't slept at all. All at once she felt exhausted, burdened as if the sleep she'd missed had chosen just that moment to catch up with her and happened to carry considerable, tangible weight.

Rainbow's wings ached, and her eyes began to roam as she tried to figure out where, exactly, she was. Then she saw it, just in the distance: her cloud house, not too far away. With a sigh she changed direction and began to return home. It would be nice to catch a nap.

• • •

"Hey, Twilight. 'Sup?"

"Where have *you* been?" Twilight asked accusingly, throwing Rainbow Dash a pointed glare. "It's almost three in the afternoon! Did you really sleep that late?"

"Hey, what can I say? I'm a growing mare. I need my sleep," Rainbow Dash answered with an easy shrug.

They were in the library. Twilight sat at her desk, surrounded by enormous stacks of thick, complicated looking books. She had one open in front of her now; a book filled with tiny words and elaborate diagrams, which she was busy scratching away in now, frowning in concentration.

"Is there something you need?" Twilight asked, sounding distracted. She appeared to be utterly focused on her reading, not even bothering to look up when she spoke to her friend, the way she tended to when she was busy.

Somepony with a little more tact might have been able to read the atmosphere in the room and realize that Twilight wasn't exactly in the mood for company and that it might have been better to come back later. But Rainbow Dash wasn't especially known for her tact, and this wasn't just a friendly visit. She was here on *official business*.

"So, what did you do last night?"

"Stayed in and studied," Twilight answered immediately. "I'm trying to learn this new spell. See, it's supposed to..."

"Yeah, I don't really care about that," Rainbow Dash interrupted, cutting her off with a wave of her hoof, earning her an annoyed look from the unicorn. "If you're curious about what *I* did, I happened to visit *Rarity* last night."

"She mentioned that, actually. She's still a little huffy about it."

"Let me cut to the chase," Rainbow Dash blurted, interrupting Twilight yet again. She slammed her hooves on the surface of the wooden table, causing Twilight to jump and drop her quill. "I *know* that I saw Mare Do Well that night; I don't care if you think I was just seeing things. Last night I went to look for her, and I didn't see anything. I talked to Rarity, though, and found out that she doesn't have your old costume anymore, because somepony bought it. Do you know anypony that might have done that? Somepony with a superhero obsession?"

"Rainbow Dash," Twilight said patiently, lifting her eyebrows. "Are you *sure* that you –"

"Positive! I *know* what I saw, Twilight! What I *don't* know is why anypony would want to do that in the first place."

Rainbow Dash scowled, face screwing up into a childish pout as she crossed her forelegs over her chest.

Twilight pushed back her chair and stood up from her desk, walking over to a nearby bookshelf. The pegasus followed, floating beside her as she examined the titles the spines displayed.

"Well, with maybe the exception of Pinkie Pie, nothing ever happens without a reason, Rainbow. You just need to find it. There must be a good explanation. Maybe your mind was playing tricks on you, or maybe you just *thought* you saw somepony dressed like Mare Do Well, because it was dark and you couldn't really tell."

"But I did! I totally know what I saw! I told you, she had the hat and cape and everything!"

"Maybe –"

"Look," Rainbow Dash said curtly, landing neatly on the floor and placing two hooves on Twilight's shoulders, turning her around to face Rainbow so that the unicorn could see how serious she was. "I know what I saw. What I don't know is *why* I saw it, and this is going to drive me crazy if I don't figure it out. I just wanna know two things. First of all, did you *really* give away your costume?"

Twilight blinked, looking confused, then wriggled free of Rainbow Dash's grip, her expression of confusion suddenly replaced with one of annoyance. "Are you implying that I lied to you?" she asked sharply, looking and sounding offended by the very notion. "Don't you think I would've come clean when you first asked us about it, especially when I saw how bothered you were? Do you really think I'm the kind of pony that would do something like that?"

"How should I know?" Rainbow snapped back, flushing in anger. Her wings were beginning to beat harder and harder as her temper flared. "I didn't exactly think you were the kind of pony to humiliate me again and again and turn me into the town laughingstock just to teach me a dumb lesson about being humble, either, but you sure proved me wrong *there*, huh?"

"No!" Twilight shouted, and the volume of her outburst took Rainbow Dash aback. She'd heard Twilight get angry before, but she'd never heard her yell so loudly. "No, I didn't

dress up like Mare Do Well and follow you around just to bug you! Okay? And I don't know who *would* be that stupid, either! Now get *out* of my library, I'm *trying* to read!"

A burst of magical aura suddenly enveloped Rainbow Dash, and she felt the invisible force of Twilight's magic begin to push her towards the exit. Before the unicorn could shove her out the door, though, Rainbow Dash stuck out her hooves and grabbed the doorway, struggling to hold on despite the almost overwhelming force of Twilight's magic.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," she said quickly. Twilight was scowling, her cheeks red and her normally perfectly tidy mane frazzled, but as soon as Rainbow Dash apologized, the unicorn sighed and the aura was swept away, releasing the pegasus.

"If you say you didn't do it, then I guess I believe you," Rainbow Dash said hesitantly from the doorway. She pawed at the ground with a hoof, a nervous habit that she'd picked up from spending too much time around Fluttershy but which she rarely ever had cause to use. "I was just thinking... that except for Applejack and Fluttershy, you all said you didn't have costumes anymore. But nopony else in town knew that Mare Do Well was never real, so I don't know who would have the idea to dress up as her except for one of you. So if Rarity was selling one, then even if you'd given yours away, you might have bought the one she sold."

"I didn't buy it, Rainbow Dash," Twilight said gently, lifting a hoof to her head to smooth her hair. She looked exhausted all of a sudden, as if she hadn't slept at all, either. "I'm sorry that you're so upset about this, and I'm sorry that you're still mad about what we did. But we apologized for that, remember? We *all* did. So why would one of us want to trick you again? And besides, I was the one that gave Rarity the costume back in the first place, so why would I buy it back from her? It makes no sense."

Hmm.

The truth was, that line of thinking simply hadn't occurred to Rainbow Dash. Of *course* somepony would have to blatantly point out the obvious for her to even consider it herself, and of *course* it would have to be the smartest unicorn in all of Equestria who did it.

"Okay," Rainbow said at last. "Fine, I believe you. But just so you know, if I find out later that you really *were* just messing with me and you were somehow behind this the whole time, we're not friends anymore. This'll be the last straw. Got it?" She extended a hoof.



Twilight grinned wryly, and extended a hoof herself so that they could shake on it. "Deal."

• • •

After leaving the library, Rainbow Dash ran over the facts of the case in her mind again and again, considering all the possible explanations that she could think of.

Twilight had made a good point. If she'd really wanted to play Mare Do Well again, why would she have returned the costume, only to buy it back? Unless she and Rarity were collaborating for some unknown reason, and were lying to cover for each other.

Applejack had flat out said that it wasn't her, and unless Applejack's Element had been broken, she wouldn't have lied about that. Although... she'd specifically mentioned her *own* costume. She hadn't said anything about any of the *other* costumes.

That was the problem with the whole situation, Rainbow Dash was quickly beginning to realize; there were so many loopholes that led back to the fact that more than one Mare Do Well outfit existed. The Applejack she knew couldn't lie worth squat, but if Applejack had somehow figured out how to at least stretch the truth, she could have intentionally misled Rainbow to throw her off the trail.

It was incredibly unlikely that Fluttershy was the one that had appeared to her as Mare Do Well, if only because it was *Fluttershy*, for Celestia's sake. But Rainbow Dash couldn't rule anypony out; not until she knew for sure. Same with Pinkie Pie. For some reason, it seemed incredibly unlike the party pony to pull a stunt like this, but at the same time, it was also incredibly *just like* Pinkie Pie to do so as some kind of elaborate, misguided prank.

And Pinkie Pie had never explicitly said that she didn't do it. All she'd said was that Gummy had eaten her own costume. If somepony had bought the one Rarity had in her store, why couldn't it have been Pinkie Pie?

In the end, Rainbow Dash realized that she was going around in circles and decided to take a break.

As far as she knew, Mare Do Well had made no more appearances since Rainbow had first run into her. If she had, Dash would have heard about it; or at least, the pegasus assumed so. Considering the buzz the superhero had created the first time she'd mysteriously appeared out of thin air, an unexpected return surely would have garnered

some attention. Yet nopony was talking about her at all, and Rainbow Dash had no choice but to assume that there had been no other sightings or further incidents.

Knowing that Twilight doubted her and that her friends were all insisting it wasn't them had begun to shake Rainbow Dash's confidence the slightest bit. At first she'd been absolutely focused, determined to figure out who'd done it, even though she didn't fully understand why it was so important to her that she knew who Mare Do Well was, but now she was finding herself doubting that it had even happened.

Maybe Twilight was right. Maybe it had been some kind of optical illusion. Maybe the mare who had helped her had just been some average, everyday mare who'd been taking a late night stroll and saw the stallion giving Rainbow trouble, and *that* was why she didn't chase after him – because she wasn't a superhero, just a random concerned citizen.

Maybe Rainbow Dash needed to let it go. It had disturbed her for whatever reason, but the incident had been an isolated one. Maybe it would be better if she just went back to normal. And normal meant kicking back and having a good time, so that was what she was going to do.

• • •

Rainbow Dash was flying. The sky was wide open and empty over Whitetail Woods, and she was alone except for the sea of clouds that surrounded her – just the way she liked it. Or at least, the way she liked it when she wanted to think.

She sliced through a thick stack of clouds, cutting her way across the sky. The clouds were the rolling, dark, menacing kind that always tended to precede thunderstorms. The weather team had spent the past few days putting together a storm for next week, and the entire time, Rainbow Dash had been able to think of nothing but getting in a quick dip in the clouds before the storm was primed to burst.

Now that she had free time on her hooves, she flew to help herself relax. Sure, storms were always a little dangerous for pegasi to swim through, maybe even a little scary or disorientating, but she wasn't called Rainbow *Danger* Dash for nothing. She could handle a little trouble.

The wind buffeted all around her. It was like floating on rough water, sealed within an endless sea of gray. It was completely, one hundred and twenty percent *awesome*.

Grinning, Rainbow Dash looped back up before folding her wings and plummeting straight into the clouds, practically delirious with the rush of adrenaline that followed each time she made a dive.

Something bright flickered in the corner of her eye. Thunder boomed through the sky, roaring right through her.

A dim, half-recalled memory returned to her. A memory of a question that she'd asked Soarin' during the brief time they'd spent together during the Grand Galloping Gala.

*Have you ever soared past lightning? It's awesome!*

Rainbow's mouth went dry. Her heart was in her throat, pounding like a drum.

When Rainbow Dash had asked him that, it had been part of a desperate bid for attention. She'd wanted to make herself look like a risk taker, the kind of bold, adventurous pony that the Wonderbolts would practically *beg* to have join their team. Long story short, she'd been exaggerating and had no actual idea what it was like to fly with lightning, having never been stupid enough to try it. Lightning, *real* lightning, the by-product of the storms brewed by the weather team, was incredibly, incredibly dangerous. Not even adrenaline junkies like herself risked it. At least, not the ones that wanted to live.

*Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.*

She had to get out of there. Fast. Before –

A crack of light.

It hit her right in the center of her back, between her wings. Sharp pain radiated through her entire body.

She fell.

• • •

The figure in black watched from her place amongst the trees as the pegasus swam through the thick masses of clouds.

During the day, going out in public was riskier, and she knew that she was going to be seen eventually, but she wanted to draw it out as long as possible. She didn't want the

attention of the public; that wasn't why she was doing this. Even disguised, it was safer for her to keep to the background.

Although many couples enjoyed taking strolls together under the autumnal colors provided by the trees of the Whitetail Woods, it wasn't exactly a popular destination once the trees were left bare after the Running of the Leaves. It became even *less* popular when it was used by the weather team as a focal point for storms and the sky overhead was left thickly overcast with storm clouds, but that was where Rainbow Dash was. A place where Mare Do Well could keep an eye on her without attracting too much attention herself was a place she wanted to be, even if it *was* a phenomenally stupid place to stop for a sky swim.

Mare Do Well was there to see the first flash of lightning striking and to hear the beginning rumbles of thunder, and she knew exactly what was going to happen and what she had to do when Rainbow Dash was first hit. She wasted no time springing into action as the pegasus first began her plummet to the ground.

She moved fast; almost impossibly so, like a bolt of lightning herself.

• • •

Rainbow Dash didn't scream while she fell. There wasn't enough time, and she was too much in shock to even think of it. Instead she began to flap her wings as hard as she could, desperate to catch herself before she hit the ground, but each beat of her wings sent another current of pain rushing through her body. Some of her feathers had been torn out, and her primaries were singed from the lightning strike.

But she wasn't afraid. The shock had probably been the worst pain she'd ever felt in her entire life, and sure, falling wasn't exactly the greatest sensation in the world – the wind was shrieking jarringly in her ears, and her stomach was lurching unpleasantly – but she'd fallen from greater heights than this plenty of times before in her life. As much as she hated to admit it, she'd gotten the nickname "*Rainbow Crash*" for a reason.

And then somepony slammed into her.

• • •

"It's Mare Do Well!" an excitable pink pony with a curling yellow mane shrieked. "Mare Do Well's back, everypony!"

A crowd was gathering around the pony that had first made the announcement, but Mare Do Well stoically ignored them all. She was too focused on her cargo: an unconscious blue pegasus with singed wings that she carried slung over her back.

Although she remained silent in the face of the eager fanatics pressing against her from every direction, she occasionally glanced behind her to make sure that her passenger was doing all right.

Her return to the public hadn't exactly gone as planned. If she'd had a choice, she probably would've done something a bit more theatrical, to take full advantage of the costume. Maybe let a couple of ponies catch a fleeting glimpse of her, possibly stop a few bank robberies or apprehend a few murderers, a dramatic chase or two, let the rumor mill run its course, build up the legend a little. Then, and only then, would she have been ready to make a proper entrance again.

But although the circumstances weren't perfect, she'd gotten to catch Rainbow Dash, and holding her for even the briefest of moments had been more than enough to satisfy her.

She almost shuddered with happiness at the memory of it, but managed to restrain herself.

But as nice as it had been, Mare Do Well had to admit that it could have gone better. Ideally, she would have sprung forward only to have Rainbow Dash miraculously land in her outstretched forelegs, bridal style, and then she could have carried the pegasus to safety. Instead there had been a lot more kicking, flailing limbs, and screaming of "*Get away from me, you freak*" during the actual catch, which hadn't been what Mare Do Well had hoped for at all. She was lucky none of Rainbow Dash's hooves had made contact and knocked her unconscious. That would have just been ridiculous, to have made a comeback waking up unmasked in a hospital. At least this way, there was no doubt as to who the hero was, here.

Her fans followed her as Mare Do Well strolled down the cobblestoned road to Nurse Redheart's, chanting her name and waving Mare Do Well signs that they'd seemingly pulled from nowhere. All very flattering, of course, but maybe a tiny bit excessive.

"Mare Do Well!" a unicorn reporter cried, pushing against the crowd as she tried to reach the front and pass the mike to the mare. "Mare Do Well, what prompted your return to the public circuit?"

"Isn't that Rainbow Dash?" somepony in the crowd gasped.

"What happened?"

"Did you two fight?"

"Who won? Was it *you*?"

"I bet it was!"

• • •

Rainbow Dash opened her eyes with a groan. Her entire body ached, down to her very last feather.

The first thing she heard was the roar of a crowd, and her face instinctively broke into an arrogant grin, already taking on the cocky attitude that was so habitual to her.

Then she started to listen, and heard the name they were chanting.

"MARE DO WELL! MARE DO WELL! MARE DO WELL!"

"*What?*" Rainbow Dash muttered, shaking her head to clear her mind, blinking groggily.

She'd been draped over the back of a pony dressed in shades of midnight, and when she lifted her head, she saw a familiar looking crowd: the adoring kind, that wore T-shirts with your face on it and carried signs with drawings of you. Only the pictures on the shirts and signs weren't of her, or even of the Wonderbolts. They were of –

"Mare Do Well!" Rainbow shouted, immediately leaping into the air, only to wince when her injured wings failed her. They seized up, and with a cry she fell to the ground, landing on her haunches.

The masked mare turned to stare at her wordlessly. Like always.

"What the hay are you doing?" Rainbow Dash snarled, immediately getting back up and ignoring the pain she felt as she did so. She fell and crashed into things all the time; pain was something you got used to after a while. "What is this? It's not enough that you –"

"Did you guys fight?" a colt shouted.

"I bet Mare Do Well won!"

A cheer rose up from the crowd.

"No, we didn't fight!" Rainbow Dash snapped back, not even caring which direction she shouted the response in. All that mattered was the caped mare that stood in front of her right then and there, whose eyes never left her for a moment. At least, that's the impression she gave with the mask.

"Listen, pal," Rainbow Dash hissed. "I don't know what your problem is, but whatever you're doing, *cut it out*, okay? It's not enough that you humiliated me before, you wanna try for a *second* time?"

"She saved your life."

When Nurse Redheart spoke, Rainbow Dash jerked her head upright, startled. The nurse pony stood before her in the entrance to the hospital, looking as serious and solemn as ever, even though what she'd just said was so obviously ridiculous that she must have been telling some kind of a joke.

"Apparently you were flying in an electrical storm and were struck by lightning. She caught you and brought you here," the nurse continued, with a pointed nod at Mare Do Well.

"She... she... that wasn't *saving my life*!" Rainbow Dash cried in ever-growing frustration. Her mind flashed back to how worked up Twilight had grown when she'd confronted her in the library, and she briefly wondered how she must have looked to everypony watching them right then. "I fall all the time! Ask anypony! It *happens*, okay? I would've been just fine and dandy if she'd just left me alone! That totally didn't count!"

"Do you fly through *lightning storms* all the time, too?" Nurse Redheart asked dryly.

"Well... I..."

"I wouldn't recommend it," the nurse interrupted before turning a concerned eye to Rainbow Dash's singed wings. "Now, if you'd let me –"

"No!" Rainbow Dash blurted, taking a step back. The rush of indignation she felt made no sense to her; she had no idea why she was choosing *now* of all times to be as stubborn as Applejack, since she knew very well that she'd done something stupid. But she didn't want to give the Faker Do Well the satisfaction of knowing Rainbow Dash had accepted any help she had to offer. "I'm fine! I'll be fine! My, my wings are tough. Like me. So I'll just be going now."

"If you're sure –"

"I'm *sure*. And as for –"

But when she turned, Mare Do Well was gone.

With their idol gone, the crowd appeared to lose interest and began to disperse, but out of the corner of her eye, Rainbow Dash thought she caught sight of a flapping black cape as the owner ducked around the corner. Just like that, the pegasus was off like a bullet.

Even if her wings were injured, Rainbow Dash could still run pretty damn fast when she put her mind to it. Just like she was doing now.

The chase felt eerily familiar. It reminded Rainbow Dash of the *last* time she'd chased Mare Do Well through Ponyville. Just like before, it was as if the mare was taking great pains to let Rainbow catch just enough glimpses of her prey to keep the pegasus interested in the chase itself, even though Mare Do Well somehow managed to remain just out of reach the entire time.

Without wings, it was infuriatingly difficult to keep up with the other mare; but in the end, Rainbow Dash rounded a corner only to find herself in a nondescript cul-de-sac and staring down Mare Do Well, who was pressed against a brick wall with seemingly no means of escape.

"I've got you now!" Rainbow Dash declared, voice ringing with triumph. "And boy, have you got some questions to answer, *Miss Mysterious!*"

Mare Do Well met Rainbow Dash's gleeful smirk with a level stare. Any change in expression that there might have been was hidden by the mask that covered her face.

"So, who are you?" Rainbow Dash demanded, slinking forward, eyes narrowed. "Twilight thought I'd just imagined seeing you, but I *knew* I was right. And now everypony else knows, too, so you might as well just give up. Do the smart thing and come clean now, while I'm still feeling *relatively* merciful. Okay?"

No response. Rainbow Dash felt her feathers bristle in irritation.

"Cut the silent act! It's annoying like you wouldn't *believe!* It's almost as bad as the way you keep just disappearing when somepony's talking to you!" Rainbow finally snapped, frustrated. Her ears were pinned back, nostrils flaring and tail swishing as she pawed at the ground in rapid succession: one, two, three. Her entire body was tense, as if she was primed for a fight. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?!"



Instead of an answer, there was a sweep of a cape, and Mare Do Well suddenly appeared beside her.

Rainbow Dash froze.

The mare still didn't speak, but instead ducked her head low, leaning forward to brush against Rainbow Dash's cheek in a brief, affectionate nuzzle.

This little show of intimacy caught the pegasus completely off guard. The touch was surprisingly gentle, almost hesitant, as if Mare Do Well wasn't entirely sure how Rainbow Dash would react to the caress, but wanted to risk it anyway.

For a moment – only a second or two, really – they stood there, side by side, faces softly pressed together.

Rainbow Dash's jaw dropped, heat flooding her cheeks. Warmth summoned from deep somewhere within her coursed throughout her body, extending to the very tips of her poor, battered wings and spreading them as far and full as they would go.

Only then did Mare Do Well make her getaway. With a second flourish of her cape, she was gone, leaving Rainbow Dash to stand in shock.

• • •

When she could finally move again, Rainbow Dash realized that she was alone. Only then did she take the opportunity to examine her surroundings and recognize it for what it was; it was the same narrow back alley that she'd mistakenly gone down on the night she'd first run into this new Mare Do Well.

And just like that night, Rainbow Dash was now standing in it alone – confused, somewhat shaken, and wondering whether the encounter had actually happened or if she'd imagined the whole thing.

"Dashie!" a familiar high-pitched voice shrieked. A pink blur rocketed forward, crashing into her side and knocking her to the ground.

"Pinkie, she's hurt!" Twilight chided from behind. "Be gentle... Rainbow Dash, are you okay?"

With a groan, Rainbow Dash lifted her head to see her friends walking towards her.

"I'm fine," Dash answered, but her voice sounded hollow, even to her own ears. "You guys... you saw that, right?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Saw what?" Applejack asked, coming from around the corner and joining the cluster of friends. Rainbow Dash stood in the center of them all as they huddled around her, the five of them all wearing identical expressions of mingled curiosity and concern.

"Oh, no," Fluttershy said in that soothing way of hers upon seeing Rainbow's injured wings. "We'll have to get those bandaged right away. You should've let Nurse Redheart treat you... it might be two or three weeks before you'll be able to use them again..."

"I don't care about that," Rainbow Dash answered, shrugging off Fluttershy in annoyance. Pinkie somehow managed to maintain an iron grip around her middle, even though Rainbow Dash tried as hard as she could to shake *her* off as well. Rainbow turned to her friends, eyes wide and pleading, and the others exchanged confused glances; Rainbow Dash had never shown such indifference to the thought of being grounded before.

"You saw it, right?" Dash asked, a touch of desperation in her voice.

"Do you mean *Mare Do Well*?" Rarity asked with a haughty sniff. "Yes, we saw her, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if the news of her so-called comeback was all over the papers tomorrow. I must say, I feel a little cheated that somepony will be getting famous for donning one of *my* creations, and I won't even be getting credit for it."

Rainbow Dash resisted the urge to smack her. *All you have to do is say who bought it*, she wanted to scream; but just then, Twilight spoke up.

"Wow, Rainbow Dash," the unicorn began, voice faltering slightly. She looked immensely uncomfortable. "I... I'd thought there must have been some kind of misunderstanding, but somepony really *is* trying to pass themselves off as Mare Do Well. Huh," she finished lamely.

"Dashie, wow, it was so cool!" Pinkie babbled, still clinging to her. "She just swept in from nowhere, all *vooom* and *whoosh*, and then we saw she was carrying you and it was like, *oh, no, Dashie got hurt!* But she totally brought you to safety, and it was like she was being a *real* superhero when before we'd just been pretending –"

"Whoever it was can't keep it up for long, at any rate," Applejack interrupted, adjusting her hat. Together, the six of them turned, walking side by side down the alley and back into town. Rainbow Dash, as the center of attention – something that she wasn't

especially enjoying for once – walked in the middle, with Pinkie still draped all over her and Fluttershy fussing over her like one of her pets. "It took *four* of us to pull it off the first time around, and that was hard enough. I reckon they'll slip up soon enough, especially if they're tryin' to follow up the original Mare Do Well."

Rainbow Dash nodded. "Yeah. You're right."

But although she agreed out loud, privately, she still found herself wondering.

Loyalty meant having absolute faith in your friends, and they in turn had absolute faith in you. Feeling doubts such as these about her friends almost physically hurt. It was like there was a dull, throbbing ache somewhere in her heart, but as much as it pained her, she couldn't ignore the growing suspicion she now found herself regarding her friends with.

Whatever the new Mare Do Well was trying to accomplish, Rainbow Dash was going to figure it out. Not only that, but she was going to find out who it was and make them *pay*, friend or no. If not for her pride, then for the memory of the surprisingly gentle touch that still burned on her cheeks.

At first, Rainbow Dash insisted that she was fine, because she *felt* fine – but only a few minutes after arriving back in town, a wave of dizziness washed over her. Next thing she knew, her legs had given out and suddenly Rainbow was sprawled on the ground.

The collapse made it clear. She was *not* fine. The fall and the chase immediately afterwards must have certainly taken their toll on Rainbow, something that was obvious to the third-party observers nearby but which Rainbow Dash herself was in complete denial about.

Fluttershy, being uncharacteristically assertive, insisted on treating Rainbow Dash's injuries if the pegasus was serious about refusing to see a proper doctor. In the end, Dash gave in. She didn't want to become reduced to arguing with her best friends just because of those nagging doubts swirling about in her mind. She was smarter than that. Too smart to let what had happened bother her.

That didn't stop it from bothering her.

During the days immediately following the incident, Rainbow Dash was confined to bed with her wings wrapped in bandages, unable to escape Fluttershy's fussing. The entire time, she ached to spread her wings and return to the sky.

What made it worse was that for the first time since she'd moved to Ponyville, Rainbow Dash had to miss a storm. Specifically, the one that she'd flown through which had gotten her *into* this whole mess in the first place. Sure, Rainbow could be a little lazy or unreliable at times, but she had never, *ever* shirked her duties on the weather team before, and being forced to sit out – literally – while the storm broke was almost more than she could take. Especially when she could see the whole thing from her place by the window, able to observe and criticize every move made by her substitute as she pondered all the ways she would have done everything better.

Just like Rarity had predicted, the story of Mare Do Well's return soon hit the local paper. To Rainbow Dash's further aggravation, her so-called rescue was featured rather prominently in the article. She first saw it when Twilight gave it to her during one of the visits her friends made together during her recovery.

"We thought you'd want to see it," Twilight explained, looking embarrassed on Rainbow's behalf. "So that you're not taken by surprise later."

The article was the usual flattering drivel, probably written by one of the Faker Do Well groupies that had been in the crowd – or rather, audience – that day. And of course it made sure to mention how Mare Do Well's triumphant reappearance had been highlighted by the courageous rescue of a local weather pony. The writer hadn't even had the decency to mention Rainbow Dash by *name*. There was even a picture of Mare Do Well carrying her limp, unconscious self on her back, a picture presumably taken while Rainbow had been out. She looked pathetically frail in it.

After reading the story through, Rainbow Dash threw the newspaper away in disgust, only to end up digging through the garbage to pull it out and read it again. It was on the fourth or fifth reading that she finally noticed something.

"How did the reporter find out all this stuff?" Rainbow Dash asked one day while scanning the article. "And why did Nurse Redheart know, too? How did either of them find out what happened? I'm pretty sure I was alone when I, uh, fell. So nopony would've seen me, and *I* sure didn't tell anypony."

"Maybe Mare Do Well told them," Fluttershy suggested as she tenderly dressed Rainbow Dash's wings in fresh bandages. Rainbow Dash was stretched out on a sofa in Fluttershy's cottage, trying to ignore the way Fluttershy's touch never failed to send a fresh wave of pain through her wings. At first she'd fought Fluttershy's efforts to play nurse, but in the end, she'd given up and given in. When Fluttershy wanted to take care of you, it was pretty much impossible to tell her no.

"But she doesn't even *talk*," Rainbow Dash protested. "That's, like, her thing. She's the no-talker."

"She doesn't talk in front of *you*," Fluttershy pointed out in an off-hoof way, still focused on the bandages and moving as slowly as she could so as to avoid causing Rainbow Dash undue discomfort. "Maybe she does that on purpose, because she's afraid you'll recognize her voice. But while you were unconscious, she could have explained what happened."

Rainbow Dash considered. "Wow, Fluttershy," she finally said, sounding mildly impressed. "You're a lot smarter than you look sometimes."

Fluttershy smiled, choosing to ignore the insult in favor of the compliment.

When the yellow pegasus had finished with the bandages, she fluttered over to the loveseat in the corner of her cottage parlor and settled in, looking as content as ever before continuing on in her serene way.

"When Twilight first had the idea for Mare Do Well, she told us all to remember not to say anything while in costume. She was worried that our voices would give us away, because we all sound really different, even *with* our voices disguised, and nopony was supposed to know that Mare Do Well was played by more than one pony, but *also* because she figured you'd recognize us."

Fluttershy opened her eyes, looking at Rainbow Dash meaningfully – but Dash only stared back, looking like she didn't understand what Fluttershy was getting at.

"Nopony in the village knows what Mare Do Well is supposed to sound like, because when Mare Do Well first appeared, she never spoke. So the only ponies she'd have to be careful when speaking around would be ponies who *did* know," Fluttershy explained patiently. "This new Mare Do Well has one of the original costumes, too; so unless you're somepony who knew the truth, there'd be no way to tell that this isn't the same Mare Do Well as before. But *we* can tell, because we *do* know the truth. But nopony knows that we were behind it or that we told you, so as far as everypony *else* in Ponyville knows, *we* shouldn't know the difference, either."

The entire time Fluttershy was speaking, the cogs in Rainbow Dash's head were in motion, and as soon as she had finished, it was like somepony had flipped a switch, suddenly bringing a light bulb to life.

"Which means it *must* be one of us!" Rainbow Dash finished, voice rising in excitement. "I mean, if you're right and Mare Do Well was the one who told everypony what happened, then that must be it! If this Mare Do Well was anypony else, then she wouldn't know that I'd unmasked the original Mare Do Well, and she'd expect me to just buy whatever she did, since she'd think I wouldn't know – but I *do* know. So it *must* be one of us, since she knows enough to hide her voice around me so that I don't recognize it!"

Then Rainbow Dash frowned, rubbing her forehead with a hoof. "Wait, what? I think I'm confusing myself."

Fluttershy smiled a shy little smile from her perch on the loveseat. "It's just an idea," she said softly, looking down in embarrassment at her hooves, which were folded neatly before her.

Rainbow Dash gazed up at her reverently from her place on Fluttershy's sofa, looking awed. "Wow," she breathed. "Applejack was right. You're like some kind of freaky genius."

The butter-yellow pegasus blushed delicately in that adorable way of hers, but she appeared to be growing uncomfortable under Rainbow Dash's gaze. She squirmed, fidgeting uncertainly. "I really like reading mysteries," Fluttershy explained in an almost apologetic tone. "They're... nice."

"Geez, Fluttershy. We keep finding out all these weird things about you. Next it's gonna turn out that you're really..."

Rainbow Dash paused.

The thought that had just now flitted through her mind was one so impossibly ridiculous that her first instinct was to laugh it off and forget that she'd ever had it; that's how little it was worth thinking about. But it was the doubt again. Doubt that she'd never held towards her friends before. The paranoid feeling that they were all somehow scheming against her, and that the moment she turned her back, she'd learn that they'd all played her for a fool again.

When Rainbow spoke again, her normally brash, easygoing voice practically shook.

"Fluttershy, this is gonna sound totally crazy, but I really, really need to know that it's not you. I promise I won't be mad."

Normally, being around Rainbow Dash made Fluttershy a bit nervous. Her arrogant, attention-seeking personality was at a direct contrast with Fluttershy's own more timid and reserved nature. To put it simply, Rainbow Dash intimidated her.

But moments like these, when she allowed the tiniest bits of uncertainty to slip through the cracks, allowing Fluttershy to catch a glimpse of the fragility beneath the surface, never failed to endear Rainbow to Fluttershy and win her sympathy. After all, Fluttershy was never one to turn her back on a creature in need.

"It's not crazy. I understand," Fluttershy said gently. "I promise that it's not me. Why would I be helping you and trying to trick you at the same time? That wouldn't be very nice of me."

"I don't know," Rainbow Dash muttered. She was almost sulking, scowling somewhere at the ceiling. Suddenly her head was throbbing, and she brought a hoof up to her temple, wincing. "All I know is that somepony is messing with me and I really, really don't want to think it's one of you guys."

Rainbow Dash sounded so lost that Fluttershy could feel herself instinctively switching over to nurturing-mother mode.

She fluttered over to the sofa that Rainbow Dash was now sitting up on, propped up by her elbows, and grabbed the other pegasus by the shoulders, firmly pushing her back down onto the cushions.

"You need to rest," Fluttershy explained sweetly, draping a blanket over Rainbow in response to the puzzled look she got. "You poor thing. You're very tired, aren't you? I bet you'll feel better after getting some sleep."

"Maybe..." Rainbow Dash grudgingly acknowledged. She had to admit, Fluttershy had a surprisingly comfy sofa. It was *almost* as nice as a cloud, but not quite.

She pulled the blanket closer. Rainbow Dash was the kind of pony who could sleep anywhere and anytime if she so chose, no matter how worked up she'd grown during the day, so it only took a moment for her eyelids to begin to droop.

Satisfied, Fluttershy returned to her seat, but just as she began to settle in, a weary voice drifted over from the mound of blanket Rainbow Dash had created for herself, asking, "You won't tell anypony how I acted like a baby, right?"

"Of course not."

"Kay. Thanks." Rainbow Dash yawned, loudly and obviously, before snuggling under the blanket again. "But I'm only letting you treat me like this while my wings get better. After that, no more fussing. I don't wanna look needy."

"Of course not."

"Okay. Good."

"Have a nice nap."

"Yeah, whatever."

And like that, Rainbow Dash was asleep.

• • •



Once the bandages were off, despite Fluttershy's orders that she stay grounded for at least two weeks before attempting to fly again, Rainbow Dash decided to take to the skies the moment she was able to beat her wings without feeling like they were being torn off. She was a sturdy pegasus, after all, and it would take more than getting struck by lightning to finish her off. A few days of rest were all she needed; further proof that she hadn't needed rescuing after all. Not that anypony listened to her. Or cared.

When Rainbow Dash had first chased after Mare Do Well after the incident with the lightning, she'd been able to push through the pain that she'd felt, too focused on catching the other mare to let herself get slowed down. But after the initial rush of adrenaline had worn off, Rainbow had been left completely drained, her body stiff and tired.

That was how she felt all the time, now. When she tried to fly, her movements in the air were noticeably clumsier and slower than usual. Occasionally Dash stopped to mull this over, bitter, but when she did, a tiny voice in the back of her mind would always pipe up to remind herself that it was *technically* her own damn fault.

The conversations that Rainbow Dash had with herself tended to go something like this:

*It was stupid to go through a storm.*

*Well, Faker Do Well shouldn't have paraded me around town like that! It made me look dumb!*

*...but I deserved it. I was dumb.*

*Shut up!*

And so forth, her mind once again spinning around in circles as Rainbow argued with herself like some kind of schizophrenic.

Apparently, there'd been no more Mare Do Well sightings during the entire time Rainbow Dash had been out of commission, and she had no idea whether it was a coincidence or not. It was unlikely, but possible. Maybe she'd only been present at both incidents by pure coincidence. Maybe there were plenty of other ponies out there that were getting harassed by the so-called superhero, who were just too embarrassed to say anything or report it to the police.

The conversation with Fluttershy had given her an idea, though, and it had also strengthened the idea that it couldn't possibly have *been* Fluttershy. For the time being,

Dash was at least seventy percent sure of Twilight's innocence, and about eighty percent sure of Fluttershy's. Rarity was standing at approximately sixty percent; even if she *wasn't* the one behind the new Mare Do Well persona, she was being exceedingly unhelpful, refusing to relinquish the one piece of information that might have helped Rainbow Dash and causing Dash to hold a grudge.

If the new Mare Do Well truly was one of her friends, that left either Applejack or Pinkie – unless Rainbow Dash was going about this whole thing the wrong way. Most of the conclusions that she'd drawn were based on assumptions, after all, and it was always possible that one of her friends had just lied to her.

But she didn't want to believe that.

The next logical step, then, was to talk either to Nurse Redheart or to the newspaper reporter who'd written the article about Mare Do Well in the first place, to find out who their source was. If Mare Do Well had spoken to either of them directly, then that basically confirmed Fluttershy's theory that she was specifically hiding her voice from Rainbow Dash, and from there, Rainbow Dash would figure out what to do next.

• • •

"So it was definitely her?" Rainbow Dash asked. "No doubt about it? You spoke to the real deal, accept no substitutes Mare Do Well?"

"Yes," Nurse Redheart answered, looking awkward. "That's what I just said."

"Can you tell me again exactly what happened?"

"She was carrying you on her back and brought you straight here. She said that you'd been flying through a storm when you got hit by lightning, and she wanted to make sure you were okay, but then the reporters started to crowd in and I couldn't catch the rest. They made too much noise."

"Okay," Rainbow Dash answered with a curt nod. "That's all I needed to know. Thanks."

And then she took off, leaving behind a perplexed Nurse Redheart to watch her go.

The entire exchange, from Rainbow Dash's abrupt landing to her sudden departure, took about ten seconds in all, but at least the pegasus seemed to be getting back to her old self. Lately, she'd seemed out of sorts, and the nurse had credited that to the fact that she couldn't fly. Maybe getting back in the air would be good for her.

Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash was scheming. As a master prankster, creating traps to trip ponies up was her forte – and now, all of that practice would finally prove to be useful.

For whatever reason, the new Mare Do Well seemed to have a habit of coming out of nowhere to *save* Rainbow Dash, so it should be easy enough to draw her out. All Rainbow had to do was get in trouble somehow, then wait for the pseudo-hero to come to the rescue, and *then* she could confront her.

The first time, Rainbow Dash had almost been robbed by some random unicorn stallion. The second time, she'd been flying through a storm. Both times, she'd been alone and, for whatever reason, hadn't been able to fly. So, if she wandered alone along the streets by hoof at night, she was *bound* to run into some kind of trouble at some point. Nothing Dash wouldn't be able to handle, of course; just the *good* kind of trouble. The kind that she could take care of herself, but that Mare Do Well would probably want to try and get a piece of anyway, just to make Rainbow Dash look bad.

The sun was already setting. She couldn't waste any time. It was a good thing Fluttershy had made Rainbow Dash sleep so much; it was shaping up to be another long night.

• • •

For once, the dark alleyways of Ponyville didn't seem to be housing any riffraff. How disappointing.

Rainbow Dash could distinctly hear the sharp *clap, clap, clap* of her hooves echoing on the cobblestoned roads with every step she took. Although it was late, she felt wide awake and alert.

The streets weren't exactly empty. After all, there was the odd couple here and there taking a romantic stroll under the moonlight, or the occasional groups of friends happily chatting together as they headed out to some party, their evenings just beginning.

She walked for a long, long time, her frustration increasing with every passing moment, until Rainbow Dash started to wish that she'd run into Pinkie or somepony, and that she'd be invited to come hang out. That way, she'd have had an excuse to quit this pointless patrol, but her pride wouldn't allow her to quit on her own, and she'd intentionally chosen the downtown area of Ponyville so that there would be less of a chance that she'd run into any of her friends. As boring as the slow, steady pace of her stroll was, if it led to any insights in the true identity of the Mare Do Well imposter, it would be worth it.

She walked a circuit, turning the same corners and circling the same buildings, treading a route so steady and unchanging that Dash eventually came to expect to find her hoofprints worn into the street and was mildly surprised when she didn't see them.

Gradually the streets emptied, until she found herself wandering the more unfamiliar areas of Ponyville completely alone, without even the excuse of having attended a Wonderbolts show that had run late.

It was then that Rainbow Dash first started to feel that old familiar prickle in the back of her neck. It was the feeling of somepony watching you. It was a feeling that she tended to get a lot, being friends with Pinkie Pie and all, so she'd almost gotten used to it, but it was definitely not a sensation that you wanted to feel when you were alone in an unfamiliar area of town, the streets dark and empty and vaguely menacing in their silence.

But she'd wanted trouble, hadn't she?

Rainbow Dash ignored the trepidation she had begun to feel. Instead she thought, *Now we're getting somewhere.*

• • •

Mare Do Well had a dilemma.

On one hoof, the only reason she was keeping an eye on Rainbow Dash in the first place was because she liked feeling like her protector. It was almost a guilty pleasure. So if she wanted to fancy herself somepony's protector, then it was naturally up to her to protect them from harm, but if Rainbow Dash was actively seeking danger in a misguided attempt to draw her out, was she still supposed to rush forth and defend her?

A part of her wanted to. Not just because she secretly loved that adorable indignant expression Rainbow Dash got when she was riled up, the way the pegasus always seemed to get when they ran into each other, but because Mare Do Well genuinely didn't want to see her hurt. But on the off chance that Rainbow Dash actually *had* some sort of cunning scheme beyond "make Mare Do Well come out so we can have a showdown," then she didn't know what she would do. She wasn't going to *fight* Rainbow; she knew that. But it was definitely Rainbow Dash's style to try and set up some kind of duel in the moonlight.

It was more than that, though. It was the desire for the perfect moment. To wait for just the right time to do and say just the right things to sweep her off her hooves. To be charming and romantic, the way any good vigilante was. To render her speechless. To be dashing, for lack of a better word. No pun intended.

But in the end, the desire to keep her crush safe won out. The thought of Rainbow Dash wandering the streets alone, literally begging for trouble, made Mare Do Well too nervous to let it stand.

• • •

There was a light *thud* from somewhere behind her, and Rainbow Dash whipped around eagerly.

She'd been expecting to see a gang of chain wielding thugs when she turned to look, thugs that she could kick the flanks of before Faker Do Well showed up – just a little too late, most likely – leaving her and Miss Mysterious free to sit down and have a friendly chat about whatever Mare Do Well thought she was doing back in Ponyville.

Instead, Rainbow Dash turned around to see Mare Do Well herself.

"Oh. It's you, huh?" she asked, affecting an absent-minded tone and indifferent posture. All ways of indicating that she could care less about whether Mare Do Well was there or not.

No response.

The two of them faced each other in silence.

It was like a game, a staring contest to see which of them would give in first, either by looking away or breaking the silence. But in the end, it was Rainbow Dash who did so, jerking her head away so that she didn't have to look at the other mare anymore. She began to pace briskly from side to side in quick little trots as her multicolored tail swished back and forth.

When she finally glanced back up, Mare Do Well was still standing there.

It was impossible to tell for sure due to the mask, but her eyes seemed to follow Rainbow's every movement, head turning ever so slightly to watch the pegasus as she paced.

"Why're you following me?" Rainbow asked after a moment, in her characteristically blunt manner, but the mare remained as stoic as ever, not even faltering in the slightest.

"I know that you talk," Rainbow Dash said suddenly, pausing in her pacing to glare. "You told Nurse Redheart what happened, and she went to the news with the story. It's in the

paper. Did you know that? The Ponyville newspaper ran a story *specifically* about how awesome you are, and how I'm a weak little damsel in distress. Was that your plan? Because if you wanted to turn me into even more of a laughing stock than I already *was* because of you, then, wow, you're doing a great job, buddy!"

"That wasn't my intention."

"*Gah!*"

Rainbow Dash was so taken aback that she literally jumped practically five feet in the air, propelled by the rapid beating of her wings.

*Oh, wow, I didn't think she'd actually answer.* But she had to save face. Couldn't let the enemy see that they'd managed to surprise her. She was *Rainbow Dash*, for Celestia's sake. It should take more than that to catch her off guard.

"Wasn't your intention, huh?" Rainbow spat, summoning her best scowl. "Then what *was* your intention?"

"Maybe I wanted to be close to you."

The first time Mare Do Well had spoken, Rainbow Dash had been so surprised that she hadn't really listened to the quality of the other mare's voice, but the second time, Rainbow had intentionally provoked her to gain a response, just so she could hear it again. But when Mare Do Well spoke, it didn't sound at all familiar. She was obviously disguising her voice, pitching it lower and gruffer than it must have actually been. Not only that, but it was slightly muffled by the cloth of the mask. It almost sounded like she'd been smoking too many packs of Mareboros.

Rainbow Dash had hoped that actually hearing her voice would finally give her an idea as to who it was behind that mask, but what she heard wasn't at all familiar. It was only after she realized this that she heard what the mare had actually said.

"Huh?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"Maybe I wanted to be close to you," Mare Do Well repeated in a conversational way, strolling forward, closer and closer to Rainbow Dash. Before she could get too close, Rainbow Dash took a step back, but Mare Do Well was pressing closer and closer still, like she was trying to back Rainbow up against the nearby wall.

Which was exactly what she did. Rainbow Dash's back was pressed against the side of Quills and Sofas, the mare in black's face unsettlingly close to her own. Their snouts were practically touching.

"So, you're a stalker?" Rainbow Dash challenged, ignoring the way her voice shook. If she wanted to maintain the upper hoof here, she couldn't allow herself to feel intimidated, even if Mare Do Well really was starting to freak her out.

"I wouldn't call it that."

"What would you call it then?" Rainbow Dash challenged. "Following a pony around for no reason and messing with her life just to prove some dumb point? What can I do to make you go away?"

"I don't think there's anything you can do, really," Mare Do Well answered, sounding entertained, and suddenly, Rainbow Dash really, really wanted to see what she looked like under the mask. Not only to find out who the mare *was*, but to see what kind of expression went along with a tone like that. "Not when you're making that face."

"What face?" Rainbow snarled.

"*That* one. It's cute."

"I'm not *cute*!"

She was teasing her. Mare Do Well was playing with her. She sounded amused by their entire exchange, as if Rainbow Dash's anger meant so little to her that she couldn't even be bothered to take it seriously.

Wait. No. It wasn't just teasing. She was –

"Are you *flirting* with me?!" Rainbow Dash asked, an incredulous expression on her face.

The very thought was... well, unthinkable. It was almost too bizarre to consider – but Mare Do Well made no comeback to this accusation.

"Oh, wow," Rainbow Dash muttered. Any intimidation that she might have felt before now vanished, having melted away when she realized what this was. Just another stupid crush. It was almost embarrassing to think that she'd been so upset about Mare Do Well when the truth was so... dumb.

"You don't care for my approach?" Mare Do Well asked, affecting a petulant air, but her voice still had that lilting, teasing edge to it that caused Rainbow Dash's temper to flare up again.

"No, I don't!" Rainbow Dash snapped. "Usually when somepony likes somepony else they do... I don't know. Flowers and moonlight and stuff. Not this. They don't dress up like a superhero and seriously creep them out just to get their attention."

"It worked, though."

"No, it didn't! This doesn't count! When you like a pony, you're supposed to... take them out on romantic dinners, or whatever! I don't know, I'm not good at stuff like that, but that's not the point! The point is that this whole... *thing* is weird!"

Rainbow Dash was waving her forelegs wildly to demonstrate her point, nodding emphatically as she spoke, and Mare Do Well almost seemed to be listening respectfully, watching the pegasus as she flailed in the air. But as soon as she touched the ground again, Mare Do Well just pressed forward once again, moving dangerously close, and with a yelp, Rainbow Dash was back against the wall.

"Well... I *could* bring you flowers, if you want. We already have the moonlight. But this is fun, isn't it?" Mare Do Well almost purred.

"What is?" the pegasus spat, trying to ignore the sudden blush she felt spreading across her face.

"The games we play," Mare Do Well whispered, and Rainbow Dash could hear the smile in her voice as she said that. "I chase you, you chase me. Like an elaborate game of hide and seek; neither of us reaching each other, both of us circling one another..."

"I'm not *chasing* you! I want you to *leave me alone*."

That last heated remark earned Dash a soft laugh in response. Mare Do Well ducked her head in, *too close too close too close oh man* and Rainbow could feel the shape of the other mare's mouth against her ear.

"*Too bad*," Mare Do Well whispered.

Rainbow Dash could feel the mare's hot breath on her neck. Her eyes widened in surprise, and for the second time since she'd begun hunting Mare Do Well, an unexplained surge of warmth coursed through her body, extending throughout her



wings. Dash opened her mouth to speak, to say something of the sudden rush of confusion she felt, but the mare had already turned to leave.

"W-wait!" Rainbow cried, and instantly hated herself for the way her voice broke.

Mare Do Well cast a glance backwards, and their eyes met. Rainbow Dash knew, she could just tell, that she was smirking behind that stupid mask of hers.

"Don't worry," the mare said sweetly. "You'll see me again."

And then, with a final mocking salute, just like the one she'd given Dash when they'd first met, she was gone, cape fluttering behind her as she disappeared into the night.

It was Pinkie Pie's firm belief that every problem she encountered could be solved with a party. Not just *any* kind of party, of course; it had to be the right one. And there was *always* a right one, for every situation imaginable.

Whether Twilight was in a panic over her studies, Carrot Top was in a foul mood from having arrived home to discover an empty fridge yet again, Applejack had overworked herself and needed to unwind, or somepony had just had a bad day and needed cheering up, she could *always* think of a party idea that was bound to make everything better. That was her special talent, after all, and one that she loved putting to good use.

Currently, the pony most desperately in need of a bona fide Pinkie Pie Party was Rainbow Dash. The pegasus had been uncharacteristically sullen, and just generally out-of-sorts for days, so naturally it fell upon Pinkie to cheer up her friend. She'd even gone to the extra effort of delivering the invitations herself, because she knew it was the little touches like that that really made a party special – but for some reason, Rainbow Dash seemed less than excited about it.

Rainbow Dash had been in line at Sugarcube Corner, waiting to reach the counter so that she could grab something for breakfast, when Pinkie had first cornered her. The invites for her emergency parties always played out more like sneak attacks than party invitations, and never failed to take the recipient by surprise – not that she ever noticed.

"Sorry, Pinks, but I'm not exactly in the party mood," Dash had apologized, giving a little shrug, prompting Pinkie Pie to gasp in shock.

"Rainbow Dash! *Never* say that!" she scolded, sounding comically serious. "Ponies are *always* ready to party! That's just how we are!"

"It's just that I'm kind of burned out. Y'know?" Rainbow Dash explained, yawning. At first the yawn had been exaggerated for emphasis, but it became real halfway through.

Pinkie Pie could be random, and she could be utterly *bizarre*, but she definitely wasn't dumb. Even if Rainbow Dash wasn't specifically bringing it up, it was immediately obvious to Pinkie what her friend was talking about. Everypony could see it, after all. For the past week and a half she'd been obsessed with the new Mare Do Well; it was all she talked about, and almost certainly all she thought about.

As far as Pinkie knew, Rainbow Dash hadn't slept in days – a definite sign that something was wrong. Rainbow Dash was a pony who loved her sleep. If something was keeping her

awake at night, it must be something serious. That was why Pinkie had wanted to throw the party in the first place – as a distraction, to get her mind off things.

Not that she was going to explain any of that. Not in so many words, at least. Instead Pinkie started to hop in place, bouncing quickly from hoof to hoof, her tail twitching in that spastic way she had.

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaashie, c'mon!" Pinkie pleaded, doing her best imitation of Rarity's whining voice. Rainbow Dash flinched at the way it grated against her ears. "My parties are the very bestest parties around! Maybe you're not up for a normal *boring* party, but you should *totally* be up for a super-special Pinkie Pie party just for you!"

And then Pinkie suddenly stopped, growing very still.

"Don't you like my parties anymore?" she pouted.

That was all it took for Rainbow Dash to flash back to Pinkie's birthday and the mental image of a deflated Pinkamena sitting alone at a long table, surrounded by and talking to inanimate objects.

"No, your parties are great," Dash said quickly. "Uh, I guess I can probably find time in my *very* busy schedule... to go... to this one."

"Oh, *yay!*" Pinkie Pie cried, bounding into the air with a joyful leap. "I need to go deliver the rest of the invitations, now! Bye-bye!"

With that, Pinkie Pie bounced off, literally skipping out of the bakery. The bell chimed as she pushed through the door.

Rainbow had been pretty sure that Pinkie Pie was supposed to work that day, but the pink pony seemed to have a knack for always managing to get time off whenever she decided to throw another one of her parties. It was uncanny. Rolling her eyes, Rainbow Dash approached the counter, ignoring the way Mrs. Cake was smiling to herself as she placed her order.

...

Rainbow Dash left the bakery carrying a bag with freshly made muffins – loaded with carbs, perfect for getting back her energy. *Wanting to be alone* was a concept Pinkie Pie seemed to have trouble grasping. In her mind, there was no fate worse than being abandoned, and evasion of any kind was a crime of the highest order. She wasn't exactly

known for being subtle, either, and it was obvious that the only reason Pinkie was so insistent that Rainbow Dash attended was because she was worried about her and convinced that a party was exactly what Rainbow needed.

Rainbow Dash went straight home, hoping to escape any further attempts to cheer her up, only be interrupted yet again immediately afterwards – this time by a happy voice chirping "mail call!" from somewhere outside. With a sigh she went to get the door, hooves sinking slightly in the soft masses of clouds that comprised her floor.

The door swung open.

"Hey, Derpy," Rainbow Dash called out upon spotting the gray mail mare.

When Derpy Hooves saw Rainbow Dash, her face broke out into an enormous grin and she pointed at the still-warm bag from Sugarcube Corner. "Muffin?" she asked eagerly.

"Sure," Rainbow Dash answered, digging in to pull one out before tossing it over to her. Derpy caught it gratefully. The look on her face when she took her first bite was one of pure ecstasy. "You got mail for me?"

"Oh! Uh-huh," Derpy answered, nodding importantly before shoving the rest of the muffin in her mouth, then turning to her saddlebag. It was emblazoned with the logo of the Ponyville postal service, and Rainbow Dash never saw her without it, even on days when she wasn't delivering. She took a bite of her own muffin; it was deliciously sweet and fresh-tasting.

"Here ya go!" Derpy announced, pulling something from the bag with her mouth and handing it to Rainbow.

It was a letter, sealed and addressed to her, but with no return address. Rainbow eyed it, frowning, before taking it. It was more traditional for ponies to send mail through scrolls, since sealed envelopes could be tricky for anypony except unicorns. No pony she knew used them, not even Twilight; they were too much of a hassle. She had to tear at it clumsily with her teeth just to open it, and when she finally did, the letter itself fell out, swaying gracefully in the air. Rainbow Dash caught it neatly before reading it.

*I have the flowers, but if you want the moonlight too, you'll have to come get it.*

With a cry, Rainbow Dash dropped the note. It floated to the ground, passing through the floor before getting caught in the breeze and carried off on the wind. Derpy watched it get blown away, her mouth hanging slightly open.

"Here," Dash said curtly, shoving the bag with her breakfast forward. "Take them. I'm not hungry anymore."

"Yay – !"

Derpy's exclamation of greedy delight was cut short by the slamming of the door.

Rainbow Dash sunk to her floor – so soft and spongy and comforting – and curled into herself as tightly as she could, trying to ignore the racing of her heart.

• • •

The party that night was like any other Pinkie Pie party, and on any other night, Rainbow Dash might have enjoyed it. There was a whole crowd gathered, and the room had been decorated with Pinkie's trademark flair so that everything in sight was draped with balloons and streamers. The bakery was closed for the night, specifically so that there would be no interruptions. How Pinkie always managed to secure the building for her personal use was beyond her.

A buffet table off to the side was loaded with snacks and drinks, and games stood ready in the corners. Music was pumped out of an invisible source; some ponies were dancing, but *all* of them were talking and laughing and mingling. All of them except for Rainbow Dash, that is, who couldn't shake how uncomfortable she felt in the crowd for once.

For Pinkie's sake, Rainbow tried her best to fake enthusiasm, but that proved to be much harder than she expected. The strain of acting as energetic as usual when she felt nothing but exhaustion and hesitance was quickly draining what little energy she actually had.

For a little while she almost thought she was pulling it off, until Pinkie appeared out of nowhere and yanked her aside.

"Dashie!" Pinkie hissed in a fierce whisper, before glancing around them to see if anypony was listening. They weren't. "Why are you being such a frowny grumpy pants? What's wrong?"

*I have the flowers –*

"Nothing," Rainbow Dash answered immediately, feeling the heat rising up her neck.

Pinkie examined her closely with a suspicious glint in her eyes before hooking a foreleg around Rainbow Dash's neck and practically dragging her upstairs.

Once they were in Pinkie's bedroom, she deposited the pegasus on the bed before yanking the curtains shut and slamming the door. Rainbow Dash watched in bewilderment as Pinkie Pie searched the closet, then the dresser drawers and the wardrobe, and finally under the bed itself. When Pinkie seemed to be satisfied, she plopped down on her haunches before Rainbow Dash.

"Okay, Dashie, we're alone. So what happened?"

For once there was not even a hint of laughter in Pinkie's voice. Only concern. It made Rainbow Dash feel guilty, for some reason.

"Nothing," Dash repeated, looking away. She couldn't handle seeing Pinkie's enormous, piercing blue eyes right then.

The feeling of somepony's hot breath on her neck. *Too bad.*

Rainbow could feel herself flushing, and she knew her face must have been as red as the streak of color in her mane.

"Nuh uh, not nothing!" Pinkie said, jabbing Rainbow's chest with her hoof. "You've been acting all sad and blushy and weird *all day*, and the Rainbow Dash I know never does that! Something happened!"

"It's dumb!"

"No, it's not!" Pinkie insisted. She looked and sounded so earnest, like getting Rainbow Dash to spill her guts was the single most important thing she could even imagine doing right then. "If something happened that made you sad, you should tell your friends so we can fix it. As your very bestest best friends in the whole wide world, it's *our* job to make you feel better when you start going loco in the coco!"

Rainbow Dash considered. On one hoof, Pinkie had a good point. On the other, even thinking about it privately made her insides squirm, so how was she supposed to *talk* to anypony about it?

"Well," Rainbow began. Then stopped.

Pinkie was gazing up at her with those huge, earnest eyes, but as sincere as she seemed, Rainbow Dash was yet to find a good reason to write Pinkie off her suspects list.

Even just being around any of her friends felt strange, now, because she couldn't erase those nagging suspicions she had – that maybe they were lying to her, that maybe they were all laughing at her behind her back and making fun of how stupid she was for getting so worked up over Mare Do Well when it was just a practical joke. But her last encounter with Mare Do Well changed all of that – now Rainbow Dash felt infinitely more awkward, and every word spoken between them seemed layered with hidden meanings that she couldn't even begin to decipher.

Dash desperately wanted to believe that she was wrong and that Mare Do Well *wasn't* one of her friends. Not only because she wanted to be able to trust her friends, but because it would make everything between them incredibly *weird*, now. Yet until she found some concrete evidence pointing one way or the other, she had no choice but to stick with the assumption that Mare Do Well had to be one of them.

"I ran into Mare Do Well again," Rainbow blurted.

For once Pinkie was silent. Grateful, Rainbow Dash found herself continuing, the words spilling out in a rush.

"Not exactly ran into her. More like *went looking for her*, I guess, but then she showed up, so, yeah. And she said all these really weird things that kind of creeped me out, but I didn't tell anypony because it was really lame and embarrassing, but I can't stop thinking about it now."

"What did she say?" Pinkie asked, sounding curious.

Rainbow Dash fidgeted.

"I asked why she was bugging me, and she said... that... that she wanted to be *close* to me. Then she got all weird and flirty, with *serious* personal space issues, before just running off again."

"Close to you?" Pinkie repeated. She'd pulled a bag of popcorn out of nowhere and had crossed her legs in a casual stance as she munched away at it, adopting the air of an enraptured movie-goer. "What does *that* mean?"

"Well... you know."

"Did she mean like *this*?" Pinkie Pie asked, and then the popcorn was forgotten on the floor as she bolted forward, suddenly sitting directly beside Rainbow Dash with her side pressed up against Rainbow's.

"No, she meant... like when a pony really likes somepony, and..."

"Ooh! Ooh! I know this story!" Pinkie interrupted. "When a mommy and a daddy like each other very much, they –"

"Yes!" Rainbow Dash interrupted. "*Close to* as in when you really like somepony and always want them around. Not the mommy and daddy kind, though."

"So she likes you?" Pinkie asked innocently, batting her eyelashes.

"I... think so," Dash answered, voice low. Her cheeks were flaring up again, heat rushing to her face. Even thinking about it was enough to make her completely shut down from shock, but apparently Pinkie didn't feel the same way, since she laughed instead.

"So? Big deal!" Pinkie giggled. "Lots of ponies like other ponies, Rainbow Dash. I bet lots of ponies like *you*. I mean, *I* like you, right?"

"Not *that* kind of like," Rainbow explained, sounding like she was growing irritated, which she was. Having conversations with Pinkie Pie were rarely worth it, and tended to leave one exhausted from the skipping around from topic to topic and ridiculous misunderstandings that so often occurred.

Pinkie's face went blank. Then she jumped in the air and gasped, one of those patented heart-stopping Pinkie Pie gasps that made Rainbow Dash jump as well.

"You mean *K-I-S-S-I-N-G*?!" Pinkie squealed, looking scandalized. "The kissy face *smoochies* kind of like?!"

"...Maybe?"

"Dashie, no!" Pinkie wailed, stricken. "You can't do kissy face smoochies with Mare Do Well! That's... that's..."

"I'm *not*! I don't even *want* to be, I just meant that she was kind of acting like *she* wanted to!"

"Oh." Pinkie paused. She blinked a few times, just staring, before settling back down on the floor. "You don't?"

"No."



"Okay then!"

And that seemed to be all it took for Pinkie Pie to revert back to her normal, cheery self.

Rainbow Dash deliberated over whether or not to keep talking, but in the end, decided not to. Pinkie Pie wasn't exactly the best pony for deep heart-to-heart conversations; she either got distracted too easily, or took everything said literally and became obsessed with the smallest details. So she pushed off from the bed and swooped over to the door, preparing to leave, before turning back and seeing Pinkie Pie watching her go.

"Um, Pinks? Before I go, I had a question."

"A question? Sure thing, Dashie! What is it?" Pinkie asked, springing to her hooves in a spry movement.

"How did Gummy eat your costume?"

Pinkie giggled, bringing a hoof to her mouth in an exaggerated attempt to stifle it. "With his mouth, silly! How else would –"

"No," Rainbow Dash cut her off. "You said it was ripped to pieces, but how did he do that without any teeth?"

A silence fell over the two of them.

Rainbow Dash floated by the door and Pinkie Pie looked up at her, smile frozen on her face. Her expression was unchanging, but she seemed lost for words for once. The only sound in the room came from the beating of Rainbow's wings and the steady *tock tock tock* of the clock on the wall.

"Gee, um, I dunno," Pinkie giggled. "I said the wrong thing, duh. You know how I get, Dashie. I get mixed up a lot. I'm a topsy-turvy kind of pony."

"Was your costume really ruined?"

"Yeah-huh!" Pinkie immediately answered with an emphatic nod. "It totally was! See, he was chewing on it, and I felt sorry for him because he only has his gummies to chew with, so I was all, don't worry, buddy, I'll help you. Like this! Grr!" She sprung backwards, leaping onto the bed and taking up a mouthful of blanket, whipping her head around furiously while Rainbow Dash watched, bewildered. Then she spat it out and grinned up

at the pegasus. "See? And then when we stopped, I saw that it was all in pieces and that he'd swallowed a bunch, so I threw the rest out."

Rainbow Dash stared at her.

"Pinkie Pie, you are so random." Rainbow finally sighed. "I'm gonna go now. I need some fresh air."

And she flapped out of Pinkie's bedroom.

It might have been her imagination, but she almost thought she saw Pinkie look relieved before she left, as if she'd been carrying some sort of tension and had only just let herself relax. Or maybe she was reading too much into things.

• • •

Rainbow Dash left Sugarcube Corner while the party was still in full swing, not bothering to stop and make her goodbyes. She wasn't leaving, not really; she just needed to step outside, maybe take a quick flight. It was like she'd said to Pinkie; she needed some fresh air.

Pinkie had almost sounded jealous when she'd told her about what had happened with Mare Do Well, but when Rainbow had confronted her about her Gummy alibi, her story had quickly fallen apart, and she'd sure looked guilty under Rainbow Dash's stare. Or maybe Rainbow Dash was just seeing guilty faces and incriminating evidence *everywhere*, now.

Before Rainbow flew off, she needed to stop and take a quick breather. She rounded the corner of the bakery, slumping against the wall and sinking to the grass.

She took a deep breath. In, and then out. In and out, and again. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall.

It didn't surprise her when she heard that now-familiar *thump* of hooves landing on the road, but it still made her wince in anticipation. She didn't speak, just kept her eyes screwed shut and her head against the wall, ignoring the sound of approaching hoofsteps as the intruder on her private moment drew near. Maybe if she pretended she didn't notice her, Mare Do Well would lose interest and go away.

Instead, she felt something brush against the top of her head.

"*Gah!*" Rainbow Dash cried out, quickly jerking back from the touch. Her hooves flew to her mane, scrambling to figure out what Mare Do Well had done to it. "What was *that*?"

"I told you I had the flowers," Mare Do Well answered smoothly. "I also said that if you wanted the moonlight, too, you'd have to come and get it. And here we are." She lifted her head, turning her gaze to the sky, and Rainbow Dash followed suit. The moon was practically directly overhead.

"I didn't come out here on *purpose*," Rainbow Dash muttered. "What..."

She had continued to feel her mane, trying to find what Mare Do Well had done, but just then, her hooves reached it.

Her mane had a flower tucked in it.

Her first instinct was to tear it out and throw it on the ground so that she could stomp it under her hooves and grind it into mulch, but for some reason, Rainbow couldn't move right away. She could feel herself growing stiffer under Mare Do Well's stare, her entire body freezing tighter and tighter until she couldn't move or speak as long as the other mare was around. If Dash had tried to talk right then, her throat would've seized up and she would've choked, spluttering her words incoherently.

"I would've gotten you roses, but that seemed a little overdone," Mare Do Well said conversationally, completely ignoring the way Rainbow Dash was fumbling with her hooves to pull the flower out, but she waited for Rainbow to do so before continuing. Rainbow Dash threw it angrily onto the ground, refusing to say anything about it, but Mare Do Well nodded at it. It was a red blossom, and if Mare Do Well hadn't specifically told her it wasn't a rose, she might've assumed it was one. Rainbow Dash had never been one for keeping track of things like that.

"Red carnations," Mare Do Well explained. "If you have a favorite flower, I'll be sure to get you *those* for next time. But for now, I chose them based on the meaning."

"I don't *have* a favorite flower," Rainbow Dash snapped. "Flowers are stupid. I don't waste my time on them. And even if I *did* like them, I wouldn't want you to get them for me. What are you even doing here? Isn't your whole shtick supposed to be that you heroically leap in to come to the rescue whenever things get dangerous? I'm not exactly in *peril* right now," she added sarcastically, eyes fixed on the broken flower in front of her.

"You're upset, and it's my fault," Mare Do Well said simply. "I wanted to see if you were all right."

When Rainbow Dash didn't answer right away, the mare walked forward and knelt on the grass beside her. They sat side-by-side like that for a moment, neither of them speaking.

Rainbow Dash felt paralyzed. She almost wanted to kick Mare Do Well, or at least scoot a little further away so that they weren't sitting quite so close. But she couldn't move.

"Why do you keep coming back?" Rainbow finally managed to ask, careful not to let her eyes wander over to her new companion accidentally.

"I care about you."

"I don't want you to."

"That doesn't matter."

"Right now, I'm pretty sure you're one of my friends, which only makes this whole thing a heck of a lot weirder. But when I look at you, I can't really see any of them in you," Rainbow Dash said in a last-ditch attempt to change the subject. "It's hard to believe any of them would do something like this for any reason at all, especially when I keep telling you to cut it out and I keep asking them to either stop it or fess up. And you don't really act like any of them, either."

"Oh?"

"If I told Pinkie that I didn't think a joke was funny, she'd cut it out, because she only likes pranks that don't hurt anypony. Applejack would never deceive anypony for any reason. Twilight's way too smart to treat a friend this way. Fluttershy would never do something so mean. And Rarity – um, I can't really think of anything good to say about her generosity, but she wouldn't act this way either. At least, I don't want to think that."

"How do you even know I'm one of your friends? I've been careful so far. I doubt I've slipped up enough times for you to really know for sure yet."

"Who else could you *be*? Scootaloo?"

Mare Do Well snorted, but tried to hide it by covering her mouth with a hoof in an attempt to muffle the laugh. "I think she might be a little young for you."

Rainbow Dash almost grinned before remembering who she was talking to. She caught herself just in time to turn the smile into a scowl.

"Well, what am I *supposed* to think?" Rainbow growled. "I don't know anything about you, and you keep showing up out of nowhere and then running off."

"If you really want to know who I am, why don't you just tear off my mask right now?" Mare Do Well asked conversationally. "Nothing's stopping you."

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to respond, then shut it, dumbfounded, when she realized she had nothing to say to that. They were alone, and Mare Do Well was making no move to pull away, not even looking at Dash when she spoke. It would have been so easy to reach over right then, tear off that stupid mask, and put an end to the whole charade.

But she just couldn't do it.

When Rainbow hesitated, Mare Do Well continued, still using that easy, light-hearted manner that was at such a direct contrast with her gruff, low voice. "The first time we ran into each other, that was the first thing you did, and I backed away because you took me by surprise. But last time you didn't even try. I don't think I would've fought you if you had."

"Oh, yeah, *you're* one to talk about getting taken by surprise. And what's that supposed to even mean? Are you trying to say that you don't want to be in disguise anymore, or something? Why bother wearing one in the first place if you wouldn't care if somepony unmasked you?"

"Have you ever wanted to be somepony else?"

She sounded wistful.

Rainbow Dash turned to look at her.

"Huh?"

"Wearing a mask feels... safe. No pony knows who I really am, so I can be whoever I want. I get tired of myself sometimes; being Mare Do Well gives me a chance to try something new. But I wouldn't mind if you unmasked me because a part of myself wants *you* to know the real me, even if I hide it from everypony else."

Strangely enough, Rainbow Dash actually knew what she was talking about. Not that she'd ever tried actually taking on a new identity before, but she could remember feeling that way back in flight camp, during her days as *Rainbow Crash*. She'd never donned a

real disguise, but she'd worn a mask of sorts. She'd hated being the filly that was victimized by the bullies and snobs that chose to taunt her, and had instead chosen to act the role of the cocky show-off instead – the filly that never let anything get to her. Because if she played the part long enough, then maybe it would start to sink in, and that's who she'd become.

"I guess... I can understand that. But if you wouldn't mind me unmasking you, then why don't you just come clean on your own? Right here, right now?"

"Because I'm a coward, and hiding is easier than trying to face the truth. I like you and I want you to like me, but I'm afraid you won't. So I stopped being me, and became somepony that could be more confident, who wouldn't be afraid of things changing. And then I could be free to pursue you like I wanted."

"Changing?" Rainbow Dash repeated. "We had a prior relationship, that might change? So I *do* know you!"

Mare Do Well didn't answer.

"One slip-up," she finally said. "Just one. And is that *really* all you heard of what I said?"

Rainbow Dash ignored her, dodging the question by answering an earlier one. "You asked why I didn't just rip off your mask. I guess probably because it doesn't really seem fair."

"Since when did you ever care about playing fair?" Again, Rainbow Dash could practically hear the smile in Mare Do Well's voice and felt her feathers bristle.

"I mean, you're right there, you wouldn't fight me off... what's the point? It wouldn't be a real victory."

"Victory?" Mare Do Well asked, sounding intrigued.

"Yeah. You said before that whatever we're doing here is like a game. And if I find out who you really are, then I win. But if I just pounce on you and make you take the costume off, then it seems kind of like an empty victory, I guess."

"Victory."

"Uh, yeah?"

"I have a proposition for you."

Mare Do Well rose to her hooves, but Rainbow Dash stayed put. For some reason, the mare seemed incredibly tall when they were positioned that way, even though they were the same height when both were standing. Rainbow Dash rose as well, just to restore the balance of heights.

"This *is* a game, isn't it?" the other mare mused, bringing a hoof to her chin in a thoughtful stance. "I said that, true. And you're right; if you find out who I am, you win. So how would *I* go about winning?"

"I wasn't serious," Rainbow Dash said quickly. "I didn't mean that I was literally gonna win, with a trophy and stuff. It was just a figure of speech. You don't –"

"If you discover my identity, you win. And if I can get you to fall in love with me, *I* win."

*Love.* For all of her teasing words and dangerously flirtatious behavior, Mare Do Well had been yet to use *that* particular word even once around Rainbow Dash. The shock of hearing it made her entire body seize up with that paralyzing terror that had been striking her so often lately, wings stretching fully erect.

"What?" Rainbow Dash squeaked.

"It'll be a game. A *real* game, not just a metaphor. No cheating, though; I know how you get with competitions, and I don't want you to have any unfair advantages."

"Unfair...?"

"We'll see who can accomplish their goal first. You'll try and figure out who I am, but you're restricted from tackling me and forcibly unmasking me. Like you said before, it would be unsporting, and the victory would be hollow. And I'll try and win you over, but I'm not allowed to, say, drug you and carry you off to a secluded prison somewhere where I can keep you to myself forever."

"*What?*"

Mare Do Well turned to look at her, and Rainbow Dash was certain that she would've been smiling if her face hadn't been hidden. As it was, it looked more like Mare Do Well was staring at her expressionlessly, making her words sound all the more ominous.

"You want me to leave you alone, and I don't want to do that," the other mare explained patiently. "If you can find out who I am, I'll disappear quietly, and then you'll never have to deal with Mare Do Well ever again. You'll get what you want. If I can convince you to want something else, then that in itself will be enough of a prize for me."

Rainbow Dash swallowed. It felt like there was a sudden lump in her throat that words couldn't get around, and when she tried to open her mouth to speak it just hung open helplessly until she shut it again.

"Buh," she finally managed to splutter.

"Are you turning down a challenge?"

"No!" Rainbow said quickly. Mare Do Well seemed to have a knack for sending her temper flaring; that single question was all it took for the lump to vanish and for her body to unseize. "No, if that's all it takes to make you go away, then fine, you're *on*! This'll be such a snap, it's not even fair. To *you*. Like you said, I don't play fair."

"Neither do I."

The two of them stood together, face to face, Mare Do Well's mask as blank as ever and Rainbow Dash glaring, but with the slightest hint of a grin tugging at her mouth. She could feel that old, familiar rush of adrenaline that always went hand-in-hand with the possibility of winning some kind of competition. It didn't even matter what, really, as long as she could beat somepony at something.

"Rainbow Dash?"

At the sound of Twilight's voice, both Rainbow Dash and Mare Do Well whipped around, only to see her rounding the corner of the bakery to approach them. Brandishing her cape with a flourish, Mare Do Well was gone, quick as a flash. Rainbow Dash didn't even see where she went.

Twilight did a double take. "Was that – ?"

"What's up?" Dash interrupted.

"Nothing." Twilight blinked, then shook her head a little. "Uh, we were just wondering where you went off to. Pinkie was kind of upset."



"Oops. Sorry. I just stepped outside for a minute, but I guess I'm ready to go back inside now." Rainbow Dash walked past Twilight, who followed her with a curious gaze, back to the scene of the party.

Earlier that night, she'd seemed so unsettled. But now, Rainbow's eyes were narrowed in determination, and she wore just a trace of that old cocky smile. In place of doubt, she now felt anticipation, the way she always did before any major race.

This back and forth she had going on with Mare Do Well – just like she'd said. It was a game. And she liked winning.

Mare Do Well was trembling.

The challenge hadn't been planned at all. Rather, it had been a desperate, last-ditch attempt on her part to recapture Rainbow Dash's waning interest in their little back-and-forth. Now, she didn't know what to do. She'd taken this whole thing too far; she was in it too deep. It had been too long.

So what was she supposed to do? If she came clean now, Rainbow Dash would hate her forever, but if Rainbow Dash successfully discovered her true identity, she would hate her forever anyway. Her only chance at salvaging their friendship was if Rainbow Dash never found out at all – if Mare Do Well just quietly disappeared, never to be seen again.

That, or if Mare Do Well actually *won* somehow.

But for all of her confidence and smooth talk, her Mare Do Well persona was just an act – one that she wasn't even sure she could keep up for very much longer. Not without giving something away. Not without Rainbow Dash figuring everything out.

If she'd confessed to Rainbow Dash as herself, their friendship would've been changed forever, and she hadn't known whether or not she'd be able to take that. So she'd hidden herself, only feeling comfortable acting on her feelings when their friendship wasn't on the line. If she'd confessed and Rainbow Dash had somehow reciprocated her feelings, she would've felt safer revealing herself, since she would've known that she'd be forgiven and they could live happily ever after; but if Dash hadn't, then she knew that she'd be able to fall back on their friendship with none of the awkwardness that a rejection would typically bring.

The whole facade had been a game from the very beginning, in the most literal sense of the term. She'd been like a foal playing pretend, wanting nothing more than to play the part of a hero so that she could feel worthy of her crush.

But she'd made so many mistakes.

The biggest was that she'd treated the pegasus like a *friend* the other night. When she'd seen how upset Dash was, her first instinct had been to go and offer what little comfort she could – but she'd forgotten that Mare Do Well and Rainbow Dash weren't actually friends, and that Rainbow Dash in fact seemed to really resent her alter ego.

She'd exposed herself. She'd been too honest during their talk, and had ended up telling Rainbow more than she'd intended to. The more Rainbow Dash knew about her, the greater risk there was of the pegasus figuring out who she really was. She'd made herself vulnerable.

Tonight had been a mistake, plain and simple. She hadn't wanted to approach Rainbow Dash again for a day or two, to build suspense and all that, but then she'd seen how forlorn the pegasus had looked, sitting alone outside the party, and all of a sudden, she'd forgotten about being the aloof, mysterious stranger in favor of being the friend that Dash had needed. She'd been too open. She'd almost given herself away right there. She'd fallen out of character, and that almost cost her everything.

Mare Do Well tried to think. What were her options?

She couldn't confess to everything *now*; Rainbow would hate her. She couldn't let Rainbow Dash solve the mystery herself; Rainbow would hate her. She *could* give up the act without actually admitting to what she'd done and letting Ponyville know what had happened to their hero, but the guilt would probably gnaw away at her until she'd completely broken down. And then Rainbow would hate her.

Or she could win.

It wasn't just the fear of being discovered. It was the simple fact that she was far too selfish to throw in the towel *now*, as much as it pained her to know that she was causing Rainbow Dash so much frustration. *Especially* after the stating of a formal challenge.

So Mare Do Well could either accept Rainbow Dash's seemingly inevitable hatred, or she could find a way to win her love and therefore the game, and the truth was, as uncertain as she felt right then, the possibility of winning something so monumental made any potential risks suddenly seem worth it.

Mare Do Well wanted to win.

Rainbow Dash might hate Mare Do Well at the moment – she wasn't stupid, she knew that – but under the guise of the mare in black was a pony who knew Dash better than anypony else. A pony who wanted the pegasus to be happy. She just needed to find a way of letting Rainbow *know* that; if only Rainbow Dash could see it – but she couldn't, not as long as Mare Do Well was hidden this way.

How do you make somepony love you when they don't even know who you really are?  
How do you become brave enough to confess as yourself without needing something to hide behind?

But Mare Do Well, the character, didn't doubt herself, and for the time being, she was Mare Do Well. Mare Do Well was charming and self-assured, and if she was going to impress Rainbow Dash, *that* was who she needed to be.

*Everything's so complicated now.*

She cradled her head in her hooves, and tried to ignore the panic she felt fluttering in her stomach.

• • •

Rainbow Dash and Twilight returned to the party only to see that nopony had noticed their absences at all – save for Pinkie, who was utterly distraught, moping in a corner with her hair deflated in a very *un*Pinkie Pie-like way. Applejack and Rarity were talking quietly and rather heatedly about something off to the side, while Fluttershy hovered nervously beside Pinkie. None of the other guests paid any attention at all, despite the party ostensibly being for Dash.

Apparently Pinkie Pie was hurt that she'd walked out on the party, and when Rainbow Dash first approached the pink pony to apologize, she gave Rainbow the cold shoulder. The silent treatment ended up lasting a whole five minutes before Dash was seemingly forgiven, and Pinkie tackled her, mane back to its normal, bouncy self to match her buoyant mood.

"Dashie!" Pinkie cried, burying her face in Rainbow Dash's sky-blue coat in a ferocious hug. "Where did you *go*? I thought you'd left us for-*EV*-er because you'd decided you wanted to go make kissy face smoochies with Mare Do Well!"

"Wait, what?" Twilight gasped.

The sounds of the party seemed to drown out the noise of their conversation, and nopony else reacted to Pinkie's statement, although Twilight herself looked shocked.

"Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash hissed furiously, shoving a hoof over Pinkie's mouth, but Pinkie continued to try and talk anyway, despite the way her speech was muffled. "*You weren't supposed to tell anypony!*"

Pinkie Pie twisted her head away from the hoof covering her mouth. "But I didn't," she said, looking puzzled.

"You just announced it in front of, like, *everypony*!"

"But nopony's even listening! Besides, you didn't make me Pinkie Swear, so how was I supposed to know?"

Rainbow Dash groaned, bringing a hoof to her now-throbbing temple.

• • •

There was a nip in the air. Since the day of Pinkie Pie's "Hooray It's Winter Now Or Whatever" picnic, the weather had been on a steady decline, the chill growing more pronounced with each passing day. Frost decorated the windowpanes, and the skeletal trees of fall looked decidedly more eerie with their bare branches hung with ice. The grass was slowly freezing and crunched under each step. Fluttershy and the rest of the animal-care team had begun to herd the hibernating animals to their caves in preparation for their seasonal sleep, and the pegasi had begun to guide the birds south.

But the snow itself was yet to fall, even though the first snow had been scheduled for a week ago. A storm had been brewing in the Everfree Forest, a by-product of the wild magic that ran rampant there, causing plants to grow on their own and animals to take care of themselves. It had taken the combined forces of all the pegasi on the weather team to keep it at bay. Unless Ponyville wanted a full-on blizzard, they had no choice but to postpone the initial fall a little longer.

Dealing with the stray weather ended up taking up most of Rainbow Dash's free time for the next few days after Pinkie's party, leaving her no time to investigate any further, despite her newfound zeal. It was frustrating. She had a genuine incentive to unmask Mare Do Well now, not just a personal vendetta. Of course she happened to be too busy to do anything about it.

Apparently something was keeping Mare Do Well occupied, as well, as she was apparently too busy to make any more appearances, expected or otherwise. Rainbow Dash herself hadn't seen her at all since their last encounter, and as far as she knew, despite the townsfolk's initial excitement over Mare Do Well's return, interest in the superhero faded quickly when she made no more thrilling public appearances.

It was almost like life had gotten back to normal.

Almost, but not quite.

Again and again, Rainbow Dash found her thoughts straying back to the game that Mare Do Well had so boldly challenged her to; a bet, almost. *Who will give in first?*

The day after the party, there had been another note, again in that nondescript writing. Just perfect enough to possibly be from a unicorn, yet flawed enough to have been written by an earth pony or pegasus with plenty of practice. Writing that it was impossible to decipher anything from.

It had been simple, just like before, and had come with another bouquet of those flowers – red carnations, Rainbow Dash remembered. It read only *Miss me yet?* and bore no signature.

Other than that, there'd been no sign of Mare Do Well at all.

If Mare Do Well wasn't hanging around anymore, did that mean she'd already given up? Had she lost interest? Or perhaps Mare Do Well had suddenly realized that there wasn't any possible way for her to beat a seasoned competitor like Rainbow Dash in *any* kind of contest at *all*, so she'd decided to play it safe by backing out before her inevitable defeat – a defeat that would preferably be somewhere very public and humiliating, to maximize the impact.

That particular train of thought never failed to make Rainbow Dash grin. Yet at the same time, she felt almost disappointed. After all, victories only counted when one was faced with seemingly impossible odds. If your rival backed out before you began, then there wasn't really a contest, was there?

Her time was spent sleeping and working, much the way it had always been. But it somehow felt emptier, now.

But even if Mare Do Well had lost interest, Rainbow Dash vowed that she wouldn't give up. A victory of any kind would do wonders towards soothing her oft-bruised ego, as hollow as said victory may be. Even if Dash didn't actually get to rub it in the mare's face afterwards, finding out who Mare Do Well *was* would at least satisfy her personal curiosity and restore some of her lost pride.

That was how Rainbow Dash ended up making a resolution. First chance she got, she would resume her clue-hunting. This time with renewed vigor. There was more at stake now, after all.

• • •

There was no way to avoid telling Twilight, not after what Pinkie had let slip at the party, but unless Mare Do Well was somehow being played by multiple ponies again, ponies with identical voices, Rainbow Dash was finally reasonably certain that she could phase Twilight out as a suspect. There was no possible way, not unless the unicorn had used some kind of nonexistent duplication spell – which actually wouldn't have surprised Rainbow Dash that much, considering Twilight's magical prowess.

That was why she could only be "reasonably" certain.

But the point was, Twilight had to be told, and Rainbow Dash finally felt comfortable doing so. The bright side was that she now had the smartest unicorn in all of Equestria on her side.

It had been difficult, though. Much, much harder than Rainbow had been expecting. Explaining what was up with the new Mare Do Well had been bad enough with Pinkie, but that was because Rainbow Dash had known that Pinkie Pie probably wouldn't take it very seriously at all. She would've treated it like one big joke, just like she did with everything else. With Twilight, though, it was the exact opposite problem. The unicorn would take every word said completely seriously, offer up some kind of condescending egghead judgment and advice, then write Princess Celestia a letter about it, satisfied, finding a way to spin the whole ordeal into some kind of lesson.

Rainbow Dash hadn't wanted to put up with Twilight's patronizing attitude, and *definitely* hadn't wanted Twilight to try and wrap up the situation with a tidy little bow to be mailed to Celestia for the princess' perusal. Just *thinking* about whatever her relationship with Mare Do Well was could be embarrassing enough, but if the princess somehow found out, Rainbow would die.

But the truth was that Twilight was the only pony she could trust implicitly right now. Other than Applejack, at least. So if Rainbow Dash wanted advice on what her next move should be, who better to talk to than Twilight?

Twilight managed to surprise her, though. She made no snarky comments and gave no presumptuous advice, and didn't even *attempt* to bring up her friendship reports. Instead, she listened. She seemed almost sympathetic as Rainbow Dash stammered the whole story, blushing furiously the entire time, speaking up only once Dash had finished.

"You know, I'm pretty sure you could get the authorities on this if you wanted to," was Twilight's unexpected response. "There *has* to be something illegal about this. Wouldn't it qualify as stalking?"

"But I don't *want* to," Rainbow Dash blurted, still fidgeting, wings fluttering anxiously. "I, I mean, what if it *is* one of our friends? Like, if it had been you, I wouldn't want to get you arrested or anything just because of a dumb joke. And I don't feel threatened or anything, just... awkward. I dunno. I feel..."

"Out of your element?"

"I guess."

"Well..." Twilight Sparkle said slowly. They were talking in the library, and Rainbow Dash had brought the note that she'd received for Twilight to examine, to see if the unicorn could discern anything from the writing. "I'll do what I can to help you, and I promise I won't tell anypony, but only if *you* promise to let me do something if you start to feel unsafe somehow."

"I don't feel *unsafe*," Rainbow insisted, but her voice sounded feeble, even to her own ears.

It was true, though. Mare Do Well's behavior seemed risky, somehow, but not outright dangerous. Rainbow Dash hated how helpless the other mare made her feel, but it was a different kind of helpless. It wasn't the kind that could be overcome through pure strength. It was because of how easy it seemed to be for Mare Do Well to toy with her. All it took was a single word or glance and Rainbow Dash lost control, either becoming paralyzed in fear or flaring up in anger. No pony else she knew could make her lose her cool that easily, and she hated it, but Mare Do Well seemed to *enjoy* riling her up.

Not that Rainbow Dash explained any of that, because Twilight was already absorbed in examining the note and wouldn't have heard her anyway.

The library was silent as Twilight read it over, but finally she sighed and gave it back to Rainbow Dash with a little shrug, looking discouraged.

"I honestly can't say," she admitted. "It doesn't look like the writing of anypony I know, and it looks like it's been disguised. It's shaky enough to either be an unskilled unicorn or a *very* skilled earth pony, but mostly it's just kind of bland. It's very... careful. Each letter looks like it took time and intention to pen."



"...There's only nine letters."

"I know. And it looks like it took a lot of time to write them."

"So what does *that* mean?"

"It *means* you either need to find an expert on writing analysis, or wait for *me* to become one. I think I have a few books lying around on the subject somewhere; it shouldn't take me too long to read through them." Twilight gave her an apologetic, yet almost hopeful smile, as if she was secretly hoping that Rainbow Dash would ask her to do this so that she'd have an excuse for further study on yet another obscure topic.

"Never mind," Rainbow Dash sighed, yanking back the letter with her teeth. As she did so, she once again caught sight of the words on the page.

*Miss me yet?*

No, she thought bitterly.

Before Rainbow left, she turned back to Twilight one last time. The unicorn was already absorbed in another one of her books, and probably wouldn't have wanted to be disturbed, but who better for Dash to ask than a librarian?

"What do red carnations mean?"

"*Dianthus caryophyllus*, a species of *Dianthus* –" Twilight immediately began to recite in a mechanical way.

Rainbow Dash cut her off. "No, I meant, like, that whole language of flowers thing. Do they mean something special?"

"Oh. Um... I'm not too sure about that. I don't know a whole lot about flowers that way. Maybe Fluttershy or Rarity would know? Sorry."

With a curt nod, Rainbow Dash swooped towards the door, prepared to go, when her eyes strayed and she once again caught sight of the words on the paper. She could practically feel the smugness emanating from them. With a sudden surge of disgust, she crumpled the paper in her hooves and tossed it into Twilight's fireplace. She stayed a moment to watch it burn before finally leaving.

• • •

As soon as Rainbow Dash left the library she was attacked.

"DASHIE!"

Even though she heard it coming, she wasn't fast enough to escape it: a blur of pink, rocketing straight for her, and suddenly Dash was on the ground in a tangled heap of limbs as the pony who'd lunged at her giggled like a maniac.

"Oh, you should've seen your face, you were so surprised," Pinkie chortled happily, climbing off Rainbow Dash.

"Pinkie Pie, what are you *doing* here?" Rainbow Dash muttered. *I should be used to this by now*, she thought unhappily. Pinkie Pie glomped her friends every chance she had; getting tackled should just be second nature to Rainbow by now. And Pinkie's habit of appearing mysteriously out of nowhere was no surprise, so she shouldn't have been startled.

At least, that's what Rainbow Dash kept telling herself. It was the only way she could keep herself from throttling Pinkie Pie right then and there.

"I came to find you, silly!" Pinkie sang, oblivious to Rainbow's heavy sighing as she rose to her hooves and shook herself off. She was dancing a little circle around the pegasus, almost making an audible *sproing* noise with every happy little hop. If she *had* made some kind of cartoony sound effect, that probably wouldn't have surprised Rainbow Dash, either. "I came to find you because I had a totally fantastic idea and I really wanted to tell you about it right away so that you can know about it too and then we can have a fantastic idea together!"

"Fantastic idea, huh?" Rainbow Dash asked, only half listening. She was already lazily flying away – slow enough for Pinkie to keep up with her, but fast enough so that it was obvious she didn't really care to stay behind and hear the rest. But Pinkie remained unaware, just picking up the speed of her own trot so that she could keep up with Rainbow.

"Yeah! *Totally* fantastic! You wanna know who Mare Do Well is, right?"

Rainbow Dash almost froze in midair, but she remained composed enough to continue flying.

*Does Pinkie Pie know something?* she thought, her mind already racing. Pinkie hadn't been as high on her list of suspects since the party, since she'd seemed almost jealous

when Rainbow had told her about Mare Do Well's flirtatious behavior, but her alibi just didn't make *sense*, so she'd obviously been lying. *Why* Pinkie was lying was a whole other story – though it could theoretically just be attributed to her being Pinkie Pie. Pinkie Pie did stuff like that sometimes. She was weird. That was her thing.

"Yeah, so?" Rainbow Dash asked, trying to keep her voice steady and her manner casual. She was cool. She was relaxed. *No big deal, yeah, who cares about Mare Do Well anymore? That's old news.*

"Well, I can *help* you, you goofball! With Detective Pinkie Pie on the case, silly old Mare Do Well doesn't stand a chance at making kissy –"

"Don't say it!"

With a heavily exaggerated sigh, Rainbow Dash turned around to face Pinkie, who was beaming, looking utterly satisfied with her idea and completely oblivious as to why Rainbow Dash might not be one-hundred percent on board with it.

"Pinkie Pie, that's great and all, but you don't have to, okay?" Rainbow said, trying to sound patient. She knew now that Pinkie Pie's feelings were hurt easily, almost as easily as Fluttershy's were, but in a different way. When Pinkie was hurt, she buried it down deep inside until she finally broke, and somehow, that was worse than the openly sensitive Fluttershy. "This is something I need to do by myself. You don't have to get involved."

"But I *want* to," Pinkie said sweetly. "Friends help friends, right? And a good friend always wants her friends to be happy! So if Mare Do Well is being a meanie pants and making you a sad-face Dashie, then it's up to your Auntie Pinkie Pie to take care of it. *Pinkie Pie style!*"

Despite herself, Rainbow Dash smiled. "So you're gonna throw Mare Do Well a party?"

Pinkie's eyes widened, her jaw dropping in surprise, and suddenly she was squealing, practically quivering in delight. "Ooh, that's a *great* idea, Dashie! We should totally do that! Ohmygosh *yes* I should do that *right now!* I didn't even *think* of that! How did you get so smart?!"

"Just the way I am, I guess. So, yeah, you can go do *that*, I'll keep doing *this*. Okay?"

Pinkie seemed prepared to nod her agreement before stopping herself, setting her jaw in a dramatic show of determination. "Nope! No way! No parties for Mare Do Well today!"

Maybe later, though," she added. "Today is not a Party Pony Pinkie day! Today is a Detective Pony Pinkie day, where I help you solve the case of the costumed... um... the puzzle of the... pony... um... the *Mystery of the Masked Mare!*" Satisfied with the alliteration, Pinkie Pie struck a serious pose, sitting firmly upright and saluting like a soldier awaiting orders.

*Oh, for...*

"Listen, Pinks," Rainbow Dash said carefully, flying towards her friend and placing her hooves firmly on her shoulders so that they were facing one another, meeting eye to eye. "I don't *want* you to help me. You don't *have* to. Just... go throw a party. That's what you do. That's your thing. Okay? *I'm* Ponyville's local hero, remember? I don't need any help; I can take her all on my own! Who cares if she's a superhero?"

And as Dash said it, she almost believed it. For all of her posturing, she almost never boasted without meaning it completely. The only reason she was assuring Pinkie now of her confidence was because when Rainbow Dash was with Pinkie, she *felt* confident.

Pinkie only listened, gazing up at her admiringly. But when Rainbow Dash finished, she blinked, fluttering her eyelashes, all wide-eyed innocence.

"I know I don't have to," she said sweetly. "But you're not very good at judging other ponies."

Rainbow Dash blinked and let go of her shoulders.

"Huh?" she asked.

"Remember meanie-pants Gilda? She was your best friend, even though she was a total bully and was really, really mean to Fluttershy. You didn't even notice. You might *think* you know how to handle Mare Do Well, but you really don't have any idea what you're doing."

Conversations like these were what often lead Rainbow Dash to suspect that Pinkie Pie was secretly some kind of brilliant mastermind who always knew exactly what she was doing, and that seemingly innocent comments like these were actually expertly veiled barbs that were designed to sting precisely as much as they did.

Even though Pinkie Pie was acting so sweet, Rainbow Dash almost felt a physical pain in her chest at her words and the memory of her old friend.

So instead of answering, Rainbow turned her back on Pinkie, and quietly flew away.

Any other day, Pinkie Pie might've chased after her, but when Rainbow Dash glanced behind her to see what the pink pony was doing, she only saw Pinkie standing alone outside the library, just where Dash had left her, watching her fly away with an inscrutable expression on her face. Or maybe it was just the distance between them that made it unreadable. Either way, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that Rainbow Dash could finally be alone to think.

• • •

That night, Rainbow Dash made no effort to hide what she was doing or disguise it as anything but what it was. She just headed straight for the cul-de-sac where they had first met and waited, certain that Mare Do Well would show up with time if she stayed put long enough.

For a long time Rainbow Dash was alone. No sign of anypony else at all; there was only her, leaning against the dumpster and tapping a hoof in boredom. Then suddenly, she heard the sound of somepony breathing behind her.

With a shriek, Rainbow Dash leapt forward. Heart beating furiously, she whipped around with a growl, only to see Mare Do Well hanging upside down behind her.

"How are you –" she began. Then Dash paused and glanced up. Mare Do Well had hooked her legs over the edge of the dumpster, hanging off the edge the way a foal would hang upside down from monkey bars in a playground. Somehow her hat stayed in place.

"I saw this in a movie once," Mare Do Well explained. "It would be better if it was raining, though."

"I'm not going to kiss you," Rainbow Dash said quickly.

"I never said you had to." With a nimble little somersault, Mare Do Well unhooked her legs and was standing upright, facing Rainbow Dash one-on-one. "But if that's where your mind went, then, well..."

"You –"

"So did you have a nice little chat with your friend today?"

"What friend?" Rainbow Dash asked, then immediately felt stupid for doing so. Mare Do Well obviously meant Twilight. Then, instead of confusion, she found herself feeling annoyed. "It's none of your business who I talk to, and I'm pretty sure whatever method you used to find that out is illegal."

"*Did* you miss me? I'm sorry I haven't been around much."

"No," Rainbow shot back. She could feel Mare Do Well gradually obtaining the upper hoof in this conversation, and now she was desperately floundering to regain control. There was that sensation of helplessness again. The only reason Rainbow Dash had come to the cul-de-sac in the first place was because she'd figured that if there was anywhere she'd be likely to run into Mare Do Well, it would be there, and now *she* was the one being interrogated. "I only kept that stupid letter so I could get Twilight to look at it."

"That's nice. But she wasn't the friend I was talking about."

"Then who –" Oh. "Do you mean Pinkie?"

"Of course," Mare Do Well answered lightly, and then Rainbow Dash realized something. Whenever they'd spoken before, Mare Do Well had managed to retain an air of mingled playfulness and casualness, with a smug tone that she seemed to love taunting Rainbow Dash with. Now, though, she sounded tense. Almost angry.

If Rainbow Dash was right, then this would be the first time Dash had ever heard the other mare upset about something – the first time that *Mare Do Well* had been the one to lose her cool.

"So she's going to help you track me down, huh? Detective Pinkie Pie, and all that? That's cheating, you know. You shouldn't be allowed to get outside help."

"You never said that," Rainbow Dash countered instinctively. Justifying unreasonable behavior to herself and others was a habit by now, since she ended up doing it so often. "It was never in the rules. Besides, I warned you right at the start. I don't play fair."

"Maybe we need to go over the rules sometime, then. Tomorrow, same time, same place?" But Mare Do Well didn't wait for a response, instead continuing in her conversational way. "So you're *accepting* her offer? Unless I misheard, you two had a little spat, didn't you? Something about how you don't need her help?"

"Why do you even care? It's none of your business." Rainbow was rapidly losing her temper again; and there it was, that loss of control, like she wasn't in charge of her feelings when they spoke.

Mare Do Well didn't answer right away, instead stalking past Rainbow Dash, cape fluttering behind her, and Rainbow Dash realized that she *hadn't* been mistaken. The tension the mare carried was clear in the quick, furious little stomps of her hooves across the cobblestone as she walked forward, then turned back, pacing.

"She's not stupid, you know. You underestimate her. She did that on purpose. She knows exactly what I'm doing and she's trying to send me a message. She wants me to know that she doesn't like it, so she approached you. Flaunting it."

"Flaunting what?"

"You don't know?" A short, bitter laugh.

Rainbow Dash definitely wasn't imagining it. For the very first time, she was seeing Mare Do Well angry. There was something both hilarious and incredibly disturbing about it. On one hoof, seeing the masked mare finally get just as aggravated as Rainbow so often did was so delicious that she could almost taste it, but on the *other* hoof, she'd somehow come to the conclusion that Mare Do Well was always supposed to be reserved – if annoyingly conceited. If Mare Do Well was upset – about Pinkie Pie, of all ponies – then it must be because of something important. Only something big would have made the masked mare drop the good-natured formality that had pervaded all of their previous encounters.

But Mare Do Well seemed to catch herself, as if she'd just realized the same thing, and immediately stopped in her tracks. She stood with her back to Rainbow Dash, staring down the alley, and took a deep, steadying breath, as if to calm herself.

"I'm sorry," the other mare said at last. "I would've liked to come see you earlier, but I didn't want you to see me like *this*. I'm, I'm not supposed to be upset. I'm..." Her voice faltered. "I'm sorry," she finished weakly.

Neither of them spoke. It was so surreal to see Mare Do Well like this that Rainbow Dash wasn't entirely sure what to say, and Mare Do Well herself seemed to be struggling to regain her composure. When the mare finally turned around to look at the pegasus, her mask, so carefully blank, hid any emotion that might have been written on her face right then – an expression that Rainbow Dash might have actually been a little curious to see.

"She doesn't care about helping you. She just wanted me to know how easy it would be for her to get close to you before I could. But you two had an argument, from what I can tell, so it doesn't matter. It's not important."

A sense of realization dawned on Rainbow Dash.

"You're jealous."

"I'm not *jealous*!"

But Mare Do Well's voice, so even when she'd spoken before, betrayed her true feelings from the way it shook, as if she couldn't restrain herself. It wasn't calm and collected anymore; it was angry and all over the place. For just a moment – on that one word, *jealous* – she'd dropped the husky tone she normally spoke with, and it cracked into a higher octave. One that immediately sounded familiar, that Rainbow Dash hated herself for not recognizing the moment it sounded.

"I'm not jealous," Mare Do Well repeated, this time sounding more subdued. "She's just intentionally trying to make things difficult for me, and I don't like it. But you turned her down."

"You don't know that," Rainbow Dash said immediately. "I got upset about something completely different and irrational, so maybe I'm planning to go see her tomorrow and tell her I accept, and then we'll figure you out. And we'll beat you, *together*."

For once, Mare Do Well seemed lost for words.

"We're not working *together*, you know," Rainbow Dash continued, picking up steam. She felt like she had a handle on the conversation again, like *Mare Do Well* was the one being overwhelmed, and she liked it. A lot. "I'm not going to make things easy for you, and if you don't want Pinkie helping me, then I'm probably gonna get Pinkie to help me, *just* to bug you. In case you missed the memo, we're competing *against* each other. I have no reason to wanna help you. *At all*."

Mare Do Well almost looked like she was going to respond, but before Rainbow Dash could hear what the other mare had to say, Rainbow whirled around and took off into the night.

The air was crisp and cool and felt amazing to fly against, but not nearly as amazing as the way it felt to know that for once, *she* was the one doing the leaving, and that *Mare Do*



*Well* was the one left behind in the empty alley, struggling to find the right words to convey whatever confusion she might have felt.

• • •

When Rainbow Dash had stood before her, spitting out her declaration with magenta eyes blazing in triumph, she'd almost wanted to give up right then and there. To tear off her mask and fall to her knees, to prostrate herself before the pegasus and ask forgiveness and to beg Dash to please, please not hate her.

She hadn't, because Mare Do Well wouldn't do that, and she was starting to find herself resenting Mare Do Well almost as much as Rainbow Dash certainly did.

True to her word, Rainbow Dash approached Pinkie Pie the very next day, prepared to accept the pink pony's offer of help. Not because Dash thought Pinkie would actually *be* any help, but because she knew that it would upset Mare Do Well if she did so – and that was enough of a reason for her.

When Rainbow Dash spoke to her, the subdued, inscrutable Pinkie Pie of the day before was gone; in her stead was the familiar hyperactive pink whirlwind that she'd always known. The smile Pinkie beamed at Dash carried no trace of the cryptic lucidity from earlier. It was a relief. Maybe it was shallow of Rainbow Dash to prefer Pinkie like this, but it was *much* easier to be around her when she was being her usual, if annoying, self.

Even though they'd had their first ever argument, as small and inconsequential as it had proven to be, Pinkie Pie seemed to hold no kind of grudge. Another small relief. Because of that, even though Dash herself still felt mildly upset by what Pinkie had said to her, she held it in, choosing to ignore any lingering resentments there might have been in favor of getting back to normal. That was what this whole thing was about, really, getting life back to normal – and if Pinkie wanted to help, well, why couldn't she?

But although Rainbow Dash had gone to Pinkie more out of spite than out of a real desire for her assistance, Pinkie Pie managed to surprise her by actually seeming to take the whole mock-investigation thing seriously. Or at least as seriously as could be expected. She *was* still Pinkie Pie, after all.

Neither of them exactly apologized – Pinkie for bringing up an old hurt, Dash for leaving so abruptly – but since neither of them brought it up again, they left it at that, both pretending not to notice any tension that there might've been between the two of them. It was easier that way, and Pinkie Pie was a genuinely sweet pony, who seemed eager enough to take up the mantle of Detective Pinkie Pie for Rainbow Dash's sake. At least, that's what Dash gathered from the way she insisted on donning a trenchcoat and fedora as they brainstormed.

Pinkie had also insisted on meeting at Sugarcube Corner so that she could continue her baking for the morning, and Rainbow Dash had been too exhausted to protest. She'd pulled way too many all-nighters lately, and tended to have zero energy during the day now. Even on those nights where Dash *didn't* go looking for Mare Do Well, her sleep was interrupted by fitful dreams that she always promptly forgot upon waking.

Pinkie made for an odd sight – odder than usual, at least – as she stood before the open oven, sliding in a tray of cookies. She was decked out in her very best private investigator gear, complete with a magnifying glass tucked in her pocket, and Rainbow Dash didn't bother to ask where she'd gotten any of it. At the same time, she wore a frilly white apron tied around her waist, and was happily humming and bouncing along with the song in her head.

The contrast between Pinkie's attitude and the different aspects of her appearance simultaneously amused and perplexed Rainbow, but she didn't try and make sense of it. Instead, she focused on how good the cool, smooth wood of the kitchen table felt when she was resting her poor head on top.

"Okie dokie lokie!" Pinkie sang, energetically slamming the oven door shut. "Now just twenty itty-bitty minutes of waiting, and then we'll have a yummy batch of Pinkie Pie's special homemade chocolate fudgie cookies!" She yanked off the apron, throwing it off to the side before immediately adopting a serious, all-business attitude and going to join Rainbow Dash, slamming her hooves on the table and making the pegasus jump. "First! Tell Detective Pinkie Pie everything you know!"

"Well –" Dash began with a nervous beat of her wings. She was still hesitant to share too much with Pinkie Pie, but she *had* offered to help; what reason would Pinkie have to aid Rainbow Dash if she was actually somehow involved?

*It's just Pinkie Pie*, Rainbow Dash told herself, and that time, she almost halfway believed it.

"I first saw Mare Do Well when some jerk tried stealing one of my saddlebags and she scared him off for me," Rainbow finally began to explain, albeit a little uncertainly. "The next day, I talked to *you* guys about it but you all denied it. Since Twilight had said that she gave her costume to Rarity, I thought that whoever was posing as Mare Do Well again might have stolen it, so I asked Rarity, and she said somepony might have bought it, but wouldn't say *who* because of *confidentiality* or whatever."

"Is that *all* you did?" Pinkie prompted after a beat of expectant silence. She looked wide-eyed and alert, unlike Dash, who hadn't quite found the strength to lift her head yet. Pinkie was practically bouncing with pent-up energy, squirming around on her seat. Aside from the get-up, she didn't look much like a detective.

"What do you mean *all*?" Rainbow Dash mumbled, voice muffled from the way her cheek was pressed on the tabletop as she slumped forward.

"Didn't you ask any other questions? Or look for her sales records or anything?"

"Sales records?" Dash repeated, a little disbelieving. She hadn't considered doing either, and here was Pinkie Pie, jumping to those conclusions first thing. "Well..."

As soon as Rainbow had realized that Rarity was refusing to answer, she'd dropped the subject, electing to take the unicorn's word for it that she wasn't involved. Obviously Dash should've pushed it a little further. Pinkie Pie had the right idea; she would have to talk to Rarity again.

"What else?" Pinkie asked, and this time, Rainbow Dash managed to look up. Pinkie's eyes were narrowed and she had a grim set to her mouth, like she was playing the part of a hardboiled detective on some cheesy, low-budget movie and was taking the role very seriously. She leaned forward, and it was all the pegasus could do to keep from snickering in her face. As it was, a chuckle escaped before she could answer.

"I talked to Fluttershy, too. She told me that she thought it would probably be one of us; we were the only ones who knew about Mare Do Well the first time around, and whoever the new Mare Do Well is knows to be careful around me, even though nopony else should know that I ever found out who it really was. And I tried getting Twilight to analyze one of the notes I got, but she couldn't help me."

"Hmm," Pinkie mused, a thoughtful expression crossing her face as she rubbed her chin, pondering. "Anything else?"

"...Not really."

"What about Applejack?"

"What *about* Applejack?"

"You haven't talked to her yet?"

"Why should I?" Rainbow Dash asked bluntly. "She said she didn't do it. Why would she lie? And besides, if she knew anything, she'd have told me by now. Secrets kill her. Plus, Mare Do Well might be trying to cover up her voice, but if she had some kind of country accent, I think I'd have noticed."

"I dunno, Dashie," Pinkie drawled. "Applejack's pretty good at changing her voice."

"Really?" Rainbow Dash felt her ears prick up. "How would you know?"

"Don't ask how Pinkie knows her secrets!" came the cryptic reply, sending a chill down Rainbow's spine. "But go ahead and ask her to try dropping her accent. It's crazy, she sounds like a totally different pony!"

Rainbow Dash frowned.

She had never once doubted the credibility of Applejack's alibi for the sole reason that Applejack was the Element of Honesty and couldn't lie if her life depended on it. The thought that Applejack could be deceptive in any way, even if it was in something as minor as the way she spoke, was deeply unsettling. Revelations like these were causing Rainbow Dash to consider all of her friends in new lights, something that had been happening a lot lately.

So many things were changing now. Perceptions that she'd held close for so long that they'd almost become a part of her were growing so distorted that they were barely recognizable.

"It's not Applejack," Dash muttered, once again slumping forward to rest her head on the table.

"Well, you should at least *talk* to her, to make things all even-Stevens for everypony," Pinkie said firmly, as if equality between the ponies being interrogated was all that mattered. "But you should probably talk to Rarity again too, just to see if you can find out anything else. And also to see if we can find her sales files."

"We can't do that!"

"Why not?" Pinkie asked, batting her eyelashes, once again all wide-eyed innocence.

*Why not? What do you mean, why not?* Dash wanted to shout, grabbing Pinkie's shoulders and shaking her. "Because as much as I love pranks, I draw the line at getting arrested, you doofus. We can't break into Carousel Boutique to steal private papers, that's totally illegal."

"We don't have to *break in*!" Pinkie said quickly with a dismissive little wave of her hoof, as if the *breaking in* part of her plan had been the only troublesome aspect. "All we gotta do is go visit for a teeny-tiny bit and distract her. Then while you keep her busy, I'll go look for them!"

Rainbow Dash considered.

She had no doubt whatsoever that Pinkie Pie was fully capable of doing what she said without getting caught, and Dash *had* told Mare Do Well that she didn't play fair, but it seemed wrong to drag Rarity into this whole mess, especially since it would involve breaking the law. That was going a little too far.

Then again, what *was* Rainbow Dash if not extreme? Risks made life... fun.

"Okay," Rainbow finally agreed. "So how do we distract her? We'd probably just need to throw a bucket of mud on her stairs and she'd spend a couple of hours going nuts scrubbing them."

"Nope! Distracting her will be easy-peasy. We'll just bring her some cookies, and you two eat them while Pinkie does her stuff!"

After that, another silence fell over the two of them. Rainbow Dash kept her head on the table, her eyelids falling shut against her will again and again as her body threatened to fall asleep on her. Pinkie Pie returned to bustling about the kitchen of the bakery, poking around the many cupboards and rummaging amongst the pots and pans.

At last there came a *ding* from the oven. With a delighted cry, Pinkie leapt to her hooves and zipped over to it to yank open the door, peering within at the cookies laid out before her.

The smell of Pinkie Pie's famous triple-chocolate fudge cookies soon filled the bakery, and although she hadn't been hungry before, Rainbow Dash found herself smiling and accepting when Pinkie bounced over to offer the tray.

• • •

They stood on the steps of Carousel Boutique, Rainbow Dash trying to convince herself that coming with Pinkie *hadn't* been a terrible idea, Pinkie jumping from hoof to hoof as she carried the handle for a basket of sweet-smelling cookies in her mouth. Rainbow Dash almost wanted to reach in for another one, they smelled so warm and delicious, but if they were to be diversion cookies, it would probably be best to save them.

When Rarity answered the door, her normally flawless hair was in disarray; a tape measure hung around her neck and a pair of red spectacles balanced on her nose. She was wild-eyed, but managed to twist her mouth into a strained smile when she saw her guests.

"Oh, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie! Hello!" the unicorn cried in her fake-cheerful way, but she kept the door as tightly closed as possible, barely allowing enough room for her to squeeze her own head through in order to speak to them.

"Are you okay?" Rainbow Dash blurted. "You look like you're gonna explode."

"Ha! Ha!" Rarity laughed in a forced tone, squeezing the door shut a little tighter and gritting her teeth when she smiled. "Not explode, I would think, but *burst* certainly seems more like it. I am *very* busy right now, so I must ask you to two to leave. I have a *massive* order due tomorrow, and –"

There was an enormous crash. Rarity flinched. A high, sweet voice came from somewhere inside, asking, "Rarity? I dropped the –"

"Just leave it!" Rarity snapped, whipping around to shout at whoever was in the boutique. "I'll get it later!" Then she turned back to Rainbow and Pinkie with another strained, borderline manic smile. "Ah, as you can see, I have dear Sweetie Belle with me today. It seems mother and father have decided to take another little holiday. My hooves are rather full –"

Another crash, followed by a metallic clatter, as if somepony had knocked over a stack of pots.

"Rarity?" the voice called.

"I told you not to touch that!" Rarity shrieked, and slammed the door shut in Pinkie and Rainbow's faces.

They exchanged a glance, Rainbow looking doubtful and Pinkie shrugging amiably before knocking again. This time when the door swung open and the haggard Rarity answered, she proudly stuck out her head to display the basket of cookies she carried.

"Ta-da! We brought cookies!" Pinkie announced, her words slightly muffled by the handle in her mouth.

Rarity stared at Pinkie. Her gaze flicked over to the basket before straying back to the pink pony. She blinked.

"They smell heavenly..." the unicorn finally murmured, looking unsure. "But... I'm so busy right now. Although... I suppose I could use a break. Come on in, then. Wipe your hooves off first!"

She stepped aside and the door swept open. Pinkie Pie hopped inside, leaving Rainbow Dash to eye her with mingled awe and respect.

The boutique itself was a disaster zone of scattered material and accessories. Mannequins were toppled over from left to right. Opalescence was perched atop a pile of expensive looking fabric that had been shredded to pieces, presumably by her very own claws, looking quite content. Rarity stoically walked through the war zone that her normally orderly shop had become, leading Pinkie and Rainbow into the kitchen, where they found her sister Sweetie Belle balanced on a pile of dishes as she tried to reach for a mixing bowl on the counter.

"Look, Sweetie!" Rarity sang in a loud, false-perky way. "Guests! And they've *brought* something tasty, so you don't have to make me anything!"

"Aw," Sweetie cried, hanging her head in disappointment as she remained precariously balanced atop the pile of plates and pans. "I was gonna make you a tasty treat all by myself!"

"Oh, I *know*, Sweetie," the frazzled Rarity gushed. "But now you don't have to! See? Now you can run along and play with your friends. Maybe the three of you can bake something together for some *other* time over at, at, *Apple Bloom's* house, while *I* get back to work?"

Sweetie Belle pouted, but she seemed to brighten at this suggestion from her sister. "Okay!" she sang, and just like that she'd zipped out of the kitchen – but not before stopping to give Rarity a quick nuzzle.

As soon as she left, the stack of plates tipped over and crashed onto the floor, sending countless pieces of broken crockery scattering everywhere.

Rarity winced.

"Well, ah –" the unicorn began, taking care to step over the shards as she approached her friend, who'd watched the entire spectacle in silence from the doorway. "Now that *that's* taken care of, I suppose I could take a little break before getting back to work. I *do* apologize, though. I tend to get a bit stressed when Sweetie is staying over, especially since I have so much to do. But one should always make *oneself* a priority first, as I always say."



"That's funny! I've never heard you say that before!" Pinkie said curiously, setting the cookies down on a spot on the counter that Rarity had cleared with her magic. "Do you say that a lot?"

"If not, I should start. Now, darlings, what can I do for you?" Rarity asked. She removed the red glasses, which she only tended to wear while pushing a deadline and always removed when seeing company, and carefully began to pat her mane back in place.

Rainbow Dash found herself closely observing Rarity's every move, waiting for her to do something questionable or suspicious, before privately chastising herself for such paranoia.

"We just wanted to bring you some yummy cookies to try, that's all!" Pinkie said in her bubbly way, sticking her head into the basket and coming up with a mouthful of chocolate cookie. "Dashie helped me make them!"

"Really?" Rarity asked, sounding disbelieving.

"Hey, I was the taste tester," Dash joked.

"*That* sounds more like it," Rarity acknowledged with a small nod and a wry smile. "But I would've imagined that there wouldn't have been any left to share, what with the appetite between the two of you."

"Rarity, you're so silly!" Pinkie giggled, clapping her hooves at Rarity's little joke. Rainbow Dash felt a sharp kick in her side and almost jumped, but Pinkie showed no sign at all of noticing her reaction. "We have plenty left! But..." and here she leaned forward, glancing into the basket, before gasping an enormous, exaggerated gasp. "We don't have any left in the *basket*! Oh, no, we brought them just to share, and we already ran out? I gotta go and get more! Don't worry, I'll be right back!"

With a huge, obvious wink at Dash, Pinkie was suddenly upright; and then she was off, basket handle in her mouth as she hopped out of the boutique.

*Subtle*, Rainbow Dash thought, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. Rarity, however, didn't seem to notice that anything was up, shaking her head.

"I'll never understand where that one gets all her energy," she sighed. "I'm almost envious. I could certainly use it more than her."

An awkward silence fell over them.

Rainbow Dash suddenly felt uncomfortable. She and Rarity, though they got along, weren't especially close within their little circle of friends. She was supposed to keep Rarity distracted while Pinkie did whatever criminal activity she had planned, but she had no idea what to actually *do*. Her mind was blank.

That was probably why she said what she said next.

"Can you tell me about carnations?" Rainbow Dash blurted.

Rarity blinked, looking a little taken aback.

"Carnations?" the unicorn repeated. "Why, whatever for, darling?"

"It's just..." The pegasus could feel her cheeks burn. "Somepony sent me some, and apparently they mean something big, but I couldn't be bothered to look it up. Twilight said that you or Fluttershy might know."

All at once, Rarity's attitude changed, her face breaking out into an enormous smile.

"Somepony sent you *flowers*?" Rarity cried, sounding delighted. "Oh, my, that's simply *wonderful*! Who was it? Was it anypony I know? Or, *oh*, was it a secret admirer? Imagine, *our Rainbow* having a secret admirer! How utterly splendid! I'm almost *jealous*, darling – it's been so long since anypony's sent *me* flowers," she sniffed, suddenly haughty.

"They're just dumb flowers!" Rainbow Dash protested weakly. "I don't even like them that much! What am I gonna do with flowers? They're stupid."

"They're not *stupid*! They're a token of the utmost admiration! You were asking what they mean? Let me see, let me see, I know I have something somewhere..."

Rarity rose from her seat to rummage through a nearby mound of junk, finally pulling out a slim red book with an aura of magic. She began to eagerly flip through the pages, chattering excitedly to herself, something about knowing that it was *in here somewhere*.

"Ah-ha!" Rarity declared in triumph, and thrust the book towards Rainbow so that she could see the page she'd stopped on. "An entire chapter on carnations alone! But of course I must know the specifics. What color? What size? What shape? Were they striped? Oh, I hope not – striped carnations mean *refusal*. Rather *uncouth* of a secret admirer, if you ask me."

"They have *books* on stuff like this?" Rainbow Dash asked, disbelieving, reaching forward to grab the book again, but Rarity yanked it out of her reach so that she could continue to flip through it herself.

"Well?" Rarity prompted, glancing over at the flustered pegasus. "Tell me all about them! *I must know!* Please?"

"They're not from a secret admirer or anything, they're just stupid flowers somepony sent for a stupid reason!" Rainbow Dash retorted heatedly. "I don't even *know* if they meant anything by them. Maybe they just thought carnations were pretty."

"Even so, it means they wanted to give you something pretty..."

"And that's *dumb!*"

"It's better than roses, at least," Rarity added, with a trace of disapproval. "Roses are so overdone. Rather gauche now, if you ask me. Of course, roses are standard during a typical courtship, but although they're fairly lovely and admittedly rather elegant, *everypony* sends them. There's nothing special about them. Carnations, though, mean all *sorts of things*." The book rose to her eye level so that she could skim the page. "Fascination, devotion... and then of course there are individual meanings for each color."

Although Rainbow Dash was honestly trying to listen, it felt like she could only catch the occasional stray word as Rarity babbled away. She was *far* too excited over Rainbow Dash's supposed admirer.

*Token. Admiration. Courtship.* For a second, Rainbow shuddered at Rarity's non-ironic usage of such an embarrassingly archaic term.

*Fascination. Devotion.*

"What about red?" she asked, interrupting Rarity's little spiel on the fascinating language of flowers. "Like, dark red."

"Red?" Rarity repeated, glancing back down at the book. "*My heart aches for you, alas for my poor heart, admiration, friendship...* those are all rather lovely, aren't they?"

Rarity sighed, setting herself back down on her seat at the table. She dropped the book in order to bring her hooves to her chest, placing them over her heart. "So romantic," she

sighed dreamily, batting her eyelashes. "I can't believe that somepony would send *you* a bouquet, though!"

*My heart aches for you.*

There was something so sad, almost poetic, about the phrasing of those words. If Mare Do Well had sent her roses – boring, overdone, gauche – Dash might have been able to laugh them off as insipid and cheesy, and as a sign of trying way too hard. But the carnations; if that was really what Mare Do Well had intended by giving them to her, then suddenly they seemed almost tragic, and all at once she couldn't help but feel guilty for having thrown them out.

No. No guilt. No tragedy. Rainbow Dash wouldn't let herself derive any shame or flattery from the gesture. She was here for one purpose and one purpose only – to find out what Rarity was hiding.

Just then, Pinkie Pie sprung in.

"Dashie!" she cried. "There's an emergency and I need you right away! Sorry, Rarity, we gotta run, but we'll bring you a cake next time to apologize!"

Rainbow Dash at once bolted upright.

"Sorry, Rare!" she shouted. "Ponyville's number one hero needs to fly!"

Rarity was too busy sighing and fantasizing over her book on flowers to pay any attention as they left.

• • •

"Find anything?" Rainbow Dash hissed eagerly.

"No," Pinkie admitted, looking sad.

"Then what did you *do* the whole time?!"

"Well, first I looked for a while and then I found a tape measure in a drawer and I was all, *I can think of a million things to do with this, yessir!* So I –"

"No. Never mind." Rainbow Dash sighed and closed her eyes. "I should've figured something like that was gonna happen. It's okay."

"Oh, but don't worry!" Pinkie cried, eyes once again gleaming with seriousness, though she was out of her trench coat and fedora for now. "Detective Pinkie Pie is still on the case! I'll find a way to help you, don't you worry! But first I gotta go bake Rarity an apology cake. Bye!"

She spoke and moved so fast, like a whirlwind. Rainbow Dash might've been the fastest pegasus to have ever come out of Cloudsdale, but Pinkie Pie was certainly the fastest earth pony to have ever come out of a rock farm.

Rainbow Dash had been tired enough from the beginning, but being with Pinkie Pie for longer than ten minutes only seemed to make it worse.

The plus side was that now they couldn't get arrested, or sued, or whatever would've happened if Rarity had found out what they'd been planning. The downside was that now Dash was back to square one. Pinkie Pie hadn't helped at all, and Rainbow Dash hadn't been able to get any new information from Rarity, all thoughts of attempting to interrogate her having fled when she'd found herself asking about the carnations.

*My heart aches for you.*

Just remembering those words, those words that carried such a sad weight, made her feel a funny little twinge in her stomach. It wasn't fear and it wasn't anger, but it was far from the satisfaction she'd seen in Rarity earlier.

Rainbow Dash didn't really know *what* it was, actually. Only that it wasn't wholly unpleasant, and she found herself repeating those words to herself again and again throughout the day. Always a soft little whisper in the corner of her mind, barely audible, but a repetition nonetheless.

• • •

"Maybe we need to go over the rules sometime, then. Tomorrow, same time, same place?" Mare Do Well had said in that chatty way of hers the night before.

And the truth was, Rainbow Dash had no reason not to go. She wasn't going to sleep that night – she already knew that. She was too restless to manage it. Besides, a part of her was curious about whether Mare Do Well herself would bother showing up. After all, she'd obviously been upset last time, and they hadn't exactly left on what many would call *good terms*.

They'd *never* left each other on good terms, actually, but usually, Mare Do Well had been the one disappearing into the night. Last night had been the first time that their little dance had been altered in any way.

Midnight in the cul-de-sac, the streets lit only by the glow cast by Luna's moon. The now-familiar dumpster and the feeling of waiting. Before, Rainbow Dash would seek out Mare Do Well primed to fight, convinced every time that they were finally going to have their confrontation, but now she was finding herself waiting to meet the mare just for the sake of talking. Dash knew now that they were never going to have any kind of epic battle where they duked it out to determine just who Ponyville's true hero was, but what they *were* going to do, she couldn't say.

*Go over the rules, I guess,* Rainbow thought sleepily, stifling a yawn. *Stupid rules. Stupid game. Stupid Mare Do Well. This is all stupid.*

She felt so tired. She had never been this tired before. When had she last genuinely slept, without the constant waking and dreaming?

The air was cool, just like it had been the night before, but where it had felt fantastic to fly against last night, it now felt bitterly unpleasant, especially since Dash wasn't flying. Especially since it was all she could do just to resist the urge to shiver, and a sturdy weather pegasus was supposed to be strong enough to handle a little chill.

Especially since Rainbow Dash was leaning against a wall of brick, tucked into the expanse between the building on one side and the dumpster where Mare Do Well had hung from before, and her eyelids were so heavy and her body so sore that she didn't know how much longer she'd be able to stay awake, waiting to see if anypony was ever going to show up.

• • •

Something was on top of Rainbow Dash, and for a moment she wasn't quite alert enough to tell what it was – but then the initial grogginess that she always felt upon waking started to fade, and her mind began to clear.

The first thing that registered was whatever it was, it was very warm. The next thing was that she must have moved around a lot in her sleep, as it was now tangled around her legs rather uncomfortably. It felt soft and thick beneath her hooves.

Rainbow's eyes flew open with a start, and she glanced down at the fabric that she had wrapped around her. It was a cape, the exact same color of the sky at midnight.

Somepony had covered her with it as a makeshift blanket.

Rainbow Dash sat up with a moan. Her back ached, and just doing this much was a struggle. Rubbing her eyes, she squinted, to let them adjust to the bright light of the dawn, but... it *wasn't* bright. She blinked, gazing around her surroundings in a daze, and only then did she see where she was. She was still in the alley, and gradually, it dawned on her that she must have fallen asleep.

*I must not have slept very long*, Dash thought, stifling another yawn. *It's still night out.*

With a sigh, she shook off the cape; she didn't have the energy to put up a fuss about what it might mean. She just wanted to go find a comfy cloud to snuggle in. The hard ground was in no way a suitable replacement for a bed.

As Rainbow Dash crouched and flexed her wings, preparing to take off, she heard a hoofstep behind her. She turned to look and saw Mare Do Well, having seemingly slipped out of the shadows of the alley itself, quietly stepping forward to retrieve her cape from the street. She looked surprisingly small without it.

What Rainbow Dash *should* have done was just fly off. Instead, she found herself pausing and folding back her wings.

"Weren't we going to discuss the whole *rules* and *cheating* thing?"

"You looked cold. And tired, obviously, since you'd fallen asleep in the street. I didn't want to bother you," Mare Do Well explained, sounding complacent. Her voice carried no hint of the instability or anger from before. Instead, she sounded completely back to normal – calm and reserved, strangely formal diction, yet conceited attitude.

"I would've been fine," Dash found herself boasting, purely out of habit. "Pegasi are built to be sturdy, *especially* pegasi on the weather team. I can handle pretty much anything. A little cold doesn't bother me."

"Did you *want* to talk about the rules?" Mare Do Well offered, politely ignoring Rainbow Dash's comment. "I mostly wanted to make it clear that we shouldn't be allowed to seek guidance from third parties, but I was also thinking we should have it officially stated that we aren't allowed to interfere in one another's plans."

Rainbow Dash struggled to find an argument that she could make in protest, for the sole purpose of being difficult, but found herself drawing a blank. "Fine," she grudgingly agreed.

"And of course amendments may be made later."

"Whatever."

"Do you want to go up on the roof with me?"

*That* got her attention. "What?" Rainbow Dash asked, snapping her head up to see Mare Do Well gesturing upwards, indicating the roof of the shop they stood by. The shop that Rainbow Dash had fallen asleep against.

"I wanted to show you something."

"Show me *what?*" Dash snapped. "I'm not going up there with you!"

"You're not supposed to interfere with my plans," Mare Do Well said innocently. "My plan for the night involves showing you something that can only be seen from up high."

"I have *wings*."

"I d... that's fine. You can fly there. That's not the important thing. The important thing is what's on top."

"What's on top?" Rainbow Dash asked carefully, eying her warily. "It'd better not be anything really dorky like a candlelit dinner or something, because that would just be *really* pathetic."

"Yes, it would be," Mare Do Well agreed with a little nod, her mask as carefully blank as ever. "That's not what it is, though. Although I thought that was what you believed a proper pursuit would entail. I believe your exact words were *flowers and moonlight*."

"I didn't mean it!"

"Would you have *accepted* if I'd initially made my proposal in the form of a dinner invitation?"

"No," Rainbow Dash answered immediately.

"Well, then, I guess I've had to resort to more unorthodox means," Mare Do Well replied contentedly. Again, she pointed a hoof to the roof of the building they stood beside. "Come on."



With a nimble leap she sprung onto the dumpster, then from there to a balcony overlooking the alley, before turning back to see if Rainbow Dash was following. She wasn't. Instead she'd been watching Mare Do Well's agile jumps with something like mingled jealousy and awe before finding herself taking off, following the mare to the roof.

The roof itself was empty, save for some stray pieces of litter and a puddle leftover from the last rainfall, now frozen over due to the chill in the air. Mare Do Well stood at the edge, overlooking the city as she waited for Rainbow Dash. When Rainbow Dash touched down, the mare turned to face her, and beckoned with a hoof.

And again, for a reason she couldn't quite explain, the pegasus found herself silently obeying, going over to join her on the edge.

"Look," Mare Do Well said softly, gesturing with an outstretched hoof towards the horizon. The sun was just beginning to rise.

*I must have slept longer than I'd thought.*

*How long had she been there? Just waiting for me to wake up?*

*I don't care*, Dash suddenly told herself, just to be obstinate. And then, yet again, she heard the echo of Rarity's words.

*My heart aches for you.*

She could feel a blush spreading across her cheeks, similar to the way the rose colored sunrise was spreading across the sky.

"It's just a sunrise," Rainbow Dash found herself saying. "So what?"

"Have you ever gotten up early enough to watch one from this high before?"

"Well –" No, she hadn't. "It wouldn't be that hard."

"But you haven't. It's worth it, though, isn't it? Doesn't Ponyville look beautiful like this?"

Her cheeks were burning even hotter.

"So?"

"So... this is romantic, isn't it?"

"It's corny."

"There's a reason those romantic traditions become clichés," Mare Do Well said, sounding amused. "It's because they work. Don't you feel overwhelmed by passion now?"

"No."

"Oh well. I'll just have to think of something else, then."

They were standing side by side on the roof, overlooking the village as it was painted by the colors of the rising sun, and even though Rainbow Dash could've flown away any time she wanted, she stayed put.

She felt something warm and soft press against her side, and her breath hitched.

When she looked down, she saw that Mare Do Well had moved even closer, resting against her slightly.

It was such a simple gesture, to lean on somepony, but it was one of such innocent affection that Rainbow Dash honestly didn't know what to do in that moment.

The Mare Do Well who had nuzzled her and who had been jealous and who leaned on her now all seemed to be incredibly different from the idea of the smug and hateful Mare Do Well that Rainbow had created in her head, and although Rainbow Dash should've been pulling away, or at least flinching, or rejecting her *somehow*, she found that she couldn't. Instead they stayed like that, two ponies side by side in the cool morning air as the village gradually shifted, rising to meet the day.

"This doesn't count," Rainbow Dash finally managed to say. "It's not working."

She could almost hear Mare Do Well smile as she replied, again sounding amused, "Then I guess I'll just try again."

The pastel colors of the sunrise that initially flooded the sky gradually faded in favor of the blue of the coming day. It was only then that Rainbow Dash was able to bring herself to pull away from Mare Do Well's touch.

"Are you going to be all right?" the mare asked, seemingly unbothered by the sudden way Rainbow Dash jerked back, as though burned. "You were really tired."

"I'll be fine," Rainbow Dash answered in a clipped voice. "I'm going now."

"Don't push yourself."

"Oh, yeah, like I'll do what *you* tell me to."

"You're probably planning to go talk to Applejack, aren't you?"

Rainbow had been crouched down again, wings flared as she once more prepared to take off, just like before, but Mare Do Well's question caught her attention, and she found herself turning back to face the other mare. "So? No rule against that, is there?" Dash asked sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"Do what you like. I just don't see why you're doing it at all."

"Because of the game *you* thought up, remember?" Rainbow retorted, with a sharp snap of her wings for emphasis.

Mare Do Well was silent for a moment before answering – but when she did, the response was an unexpected one. "You'd be surprised at how many ponies out there fall in love without ever really *seeing* whom they claim to love," she said. "There's a dissonance. Between what a pony is, and what everypony else perceives of them. A literal mask might be easier to work around than a figurative one."

The contrast between her philosophical tone, formal wording and her ridiculous costume was a little jarring, especially considering where they were right then. A roof.

Rainbow Dash waited for Mare Do Well to continue and explain herself, but no such explanation came, prompting the pegasus to say, "You're weird. I don't even know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about perception," Mare Do Well replied smoothly without missing a beat. "You've shaped these ideas about your friends based on your experiences with them, but they have a life outside of you that impacts them just as much, if not more – yet you refuse to allow for change. That's why you don't see any of them in me, and why you likely won't be able to uncover me. Because you refuse to accept that there might be something deeper to my character, or that one of your friends might have been hiding an aspect of themselves from you. You're so used to your *ideas* of them that you reject everything else."

"You know, saying stuff like that isn't really making me warm up to you," Rainbow Dash managed to answer.

"I'm not trying to insult you. I'm just saying that it might be easier for you to let it go and avoid the potential unpleasantness your investigation may bring."

"Yeah, not gonna happen," Rainbow Dash cut in, equally smoothly. "You're just trying to psyche me out so that I back down before I've even really started. You can't pull one over me; I know all the tricks."

"Do you?" the mare asked lightly, sounding amused again; so instead of saying anything more, Dash took off, flying into the new day and not looking back, no matter how much she found herself wanting to.

• • •

When Mare Do Well had spoken earlier, she'd spoken for herself, too. Perception and dissonance... the concepts rung especially strongly with her, especially now, and for obvious reasons.

There was a gap between who she knew she really was and the way she displayed herself, but whether that gap grew larger or smaller as Mare Do Well, she had no idea. All she knew was that no matter what Rainbow Dash said to the contrary, she knew now that the pegasus was starting to warm up to her, however gradually. That alone made her happy enough to practically erase any doubts that she may have had.

The sunrise they'd watched together was far from a genuine victory, but she was much closer now than she'd been before. It was progress, and if she somehow managed to continue along this track, then it wouldn't be much longer.

Plus, she'd gotten to spend a morning close to the pony she loved, and that in itself seemed to make everything worth it. No matter what happened now.

• • •

The first thing Rainbow Dash did upon returning home was go to sleep, and she was pleased to discover that she had, in fact, been correct. Clouds *were* much more comfortable for napping than the street.

But that comfort didn't stop her from dreaming.

Lately, Rainbow's sleep had been of the restless sort, but she had never once woken up with any kind of recollection of the nightly visions that kept her tossing and turning. This time, though, her dreams were vivid, sharp against her memory. Not that this unexplained clarity did much to tell her what they meant.

Although her dreams seemed brighter, somehow, and more detailed, they were as surreal and nonsensical as dreams could be expected to be, a collection of interwoven symbols and half-remembered memories from the day. A mare without a face, a maze where she caught glimpses of a black cape fluttering at every corner and over every wall, a border of blood-red flowers seeming to edge her thoughts, all tinged with a darkness that pressed against her, closer and closer, almost suffocating Dash with its presence.

And finally she woke up in a cold sweat, breathing heavily with her heart pounding, as if she'd just woken from a nightmare, and her mind flashed back to the mental image of the red flowers and the black against the black.

Rainbow Dash groaned in frustration and shoved her head deep into the tuft of cloud she'd been using as a pillow, hoping to muffle the thrumming of her heart that sounded so loudly in her ears, and maybe even to drown out all thought. It was only then that Rainbow could fall asleep again. This time without dreaming.

• • •

Upon waking for the third time that day, Rainbow Dash at last decided to give up on trying to sleep – but before she was ready to head back out into the world, she had some things that she needed to think very seriously about for a while.

This whole challenge was a race, basically, and Rainbow Dash was good at races. She just needed to keep telling herself that and soon she would believe it.

These were the basics, as far as she knew.

Rainbow Dash wanted Mare Do Well to go away, and Mare Do Well wanted to convince Rainbow Dash to want otherwise. This had led them to make a bet to see which of them would accomplish their goal first. If Rainbow Dash could figure out Mare Do Well's true identity, then Mare Do Well would finally step out of the picture and leave her alone. But like any other contest, there were rules.

The first rule: force of any kind was forbidden. Rainbow Dash couldn't tackle and unmask Mare Do Well against her will, and Mare Do Well couldn't try and slip Rainbow Dash some kind of black market love potion. Not that Rainbow would've eaten or drunk anything the mare had offered her anyway.

The second rule: neither of them were supposed to seek outside assistance, although Rainbow Dash had already recruited Pinkie to her cause and didn't really plan on telling her to go away. Dash privately resolved to compromise by not asking anypony *else* to help her. She could do that much, at least.

The third rule: neither of them were allowed to interfere with one another. Apparently this meant that Rainbow Dash was supposed to go along with whatever Mare Do Well suggested they do, and in return, Mare Do Well wasn't going to actively try and halt her progress. It wasn't exactly a fair bargain – it was one that Rainbow Dash doubted she'd be able to hold up, actually – but she'd agreed anyway, just to get Mare Do Well off her back.

And of course amendments could be made later.

The game itself seemed easy enough from the outside, and might have actually *been* as simple as it first appeared if it had been taking place inside a comic book or something. The clues would've been obvious, and the list of suspects much shorter. But as it was, Rainbow Dash had nothing to go but presumptions that she had no way of guaranteeing.

Although Rainbow Dash was at least 90% sure that Mare Do Well really *was* one of her friends in disguise, she had no idea *who*. They were all simultaneously equally likely and unlikely, and she just kept finding new reasons to either further question them or pass one over as a potential suspect. The only pony that Dash was now sure about was Twilight – because of the party, when her sudden appearance had prompted Mare Do Well's flight.

At first, Rainbow Dash had thought that *Applejack* was a sure thing, too, but then Pinkie Pie had planted the seeds of doubt in her mind with her casual mention of Applejack's apparent ability to disguise her voice.

All Rainbow Dash wanted was for Mare Do Well to disappear. If not that, then to at least stop bothering her. Dash didn't even *care* anymore if Mare Do Well still hung around Ponyville and did her superhero stuff or whatever; she just didn't want the mare to seek her out any further.

But after watching the sunrise together, Rainbow had found herself calling all of her preconceptions of Mare Do Well into question. The morning they'd shared, willingly or not, had been so *different* from any of their previous, tension-charged encounters. It had been so simple, so *innocent*, and for that little while, Mare Do Well had seemed more like a lovesick filly than the malicious deviant that she'd appeared to be before. It was only later, when Rainbow Dash had prepared to leave, that Mare Do Well had resumed the taunting, dignified air that was so characteristic of her. But until then, it had almost been easy for Rainbow to believe it really was one of her friends underneath the mask.

How much of Rainbow's initial impression of Mare Do Well had been due to prejudice, and how much to reality? Had she just been against the other mare from the beginning because she'd felt threatened by a potential rival?

On the first night, Mare Do Well had scared off a wannabe thief for her, but Rainbow Dash had lashed out – more out of embarrassment over the circumstances under which they'd met than out of any real hostility. It was a similar situation the second time; Dash had been an idiot and had gotten herself hurt, and Mare Do Well had been there to help her. And then, in response to Rainbow Dash's impulsive anger, she'd nuzzled Dash before disappearing. On the third meeting they'd spoken for the first time, and Mare Do Well had gotten way too close – but, as creepy as it had been, if she really was one of Rainbow's friends, that changed things. For instance, if it had been Pinkie Pie getting all in her face like that, it would've seemed playful and good-natured. Instead, Rainbow Dash had interpreted it as some kind of veiled threat.

And Rainbow Dash couldn't help but remember what Mare Do Well had said before she'd left, about perceptions. It was all about perception and interpretation, and those were such easy things to change.

• • •

Pinkie came to greet her first thing in the morning. Or afternoon. Whatever. It was morning for her, since she'd slept in so late. The point was, the first pony Rainbow Dash saw that day was Pinkie Pie, who was as bubbly as ever.

"What are you doing, Pinks?" Rainbow asked, bleary-eyed and mane mussed. She looked as though she'd just gotten out of bed, which she had. It was like her sleep cycles were gradually shifting so that she was becoming nocturnal. Dark, bruise-like circles were under her eyes, making Dash look almost fragile for once.

Maybe it was Rainbow Dash's obvious disorientation that caused Pinkie to considerably refrain from bellowing her reply the way she normally did. "Detective Pinkie Pie, at your service!" she announced gaily, but quieter than what was typical for her. "And we're gonna solve the Mystery of the Masked Mare some more, remember?"

"Yeah, because that went *so* well last time," Rainbow Dash yawned. "Remember how we went to Rarity's and found *nothing*?"

When Rainbow had first gotten up, she hadn't fully understood why Pinkie was waiting for her under her cloud house, sitting patiently on the road and waving excitedly when the pegasus first looked outside, but as soon as she'd spotted the pink pony, Dash had flown down to see what she wanted, knowing that Pinkie Pie would likely spend the entire day pestering her until Rainbow Dash finally gave in. It was easier to give in right from the start.

Her mind flickered back to the way Mare Do Well had been waiting so patiently for her to wake up when she'd fallen asleep in the alley, but decided not to dwell on it.

"Well, today we're gonna go to *Sweet Apple Acres* and find nothing!" Pinkie cried, throwing her arms wide open in excitement. Rainbow Dash half expected a burst of confetti to rain down on them as she did so, and was mildly surprised when it didn't happen. "You need to give Applejack a turn at being the suspect pony, and I'll come with you to investigate and then we can come back and make Rarity's apology cake together!"

"You're seriously doing that?" Dash asked incredulously, but she already knew that the answer would be a resounding yes. Pinkie Pie *never* missed an opportunity for unnecessary baking.

"I know, I know," Pinkie said with an apologetic giggle and shrug of her shoulders. "I'm a lazy pony for not doing it yesterday, but I *tried* to, I just couldn't *finish*! It just looked so good that I kept sneaking little nibbles, and the next thing I knew, it was all gone! But this way we can do it together and that's *double* the fun, right?"

"Um, sure. I guess."

"Great! C'mon!"



Before Rainbow Dash could protest, Pinkie Pie hooked a foreleg around her neck and began to half-walk, half-drag her down the road to Applejack's place.

• • •

The orchard looked bare, but that's because it was. The trees were utterly barren of any leaves or fruit. The last of the summer apples had been harvested long ago, put into storage for the winter in preparation of the snow that was taking so long in coming.

At some point, Pinkie Pie had released her iron grip on Rainbow Dash, but Dash still trotted along beside her, only half listening to the way Pinkie chattered on inanely about whatever caught her attention. Although the pegasus wasn't really listening, there was something soothing about the sound of her rambling. It was a familiar sound.

It felt strange to be walking through Applejack's fields when they were empty. With every step there was a crunch of dead leaves and dried grass that littered the ground in anticipation of the turn of the year. Their breaths came out in little white puffs that hovered alongside them as they walked.

One tree in particular, though, caught Rainbow Dash's attention. It was the only tree left with any life about it, but that was because of the tree house set in its branches and the laughter of fillies that emanated from it.

"Rainbow Dash!" somepony shouted from within, and a scrappy orange pegasus came tumbling out of one of the windows before darting forward to sit eagerly before her idol. "We were just talking about you!"

"We were *not*," retorted a voice with a familiar southern twang to it. Apple Bloom popped her head out the window, accompanied by Sweetie Belle. "*You* were. *We* were talkin' bout tryin' to get fire-eatin' cutie marks."

"Yeah, but then Sweetie Belle said that sounded dangerous and I said that sounded perfect, and *that* reminded me of Rainbow Dash, because they don't call her Rainbow *Danger* Dash for nothing! Right?" Scootaloo chirped.

Pinkie had sidled up to them surprisingly quietly, and when Scootaloo noticed the way the pink pony mildly took her place by Rainbow Dash's side, her eyes narrowed slightly. But Pinkie Pie only responded to her expression of distaste by breaking out into an enormous grin.

"Oh, hi, girls!" the pink pony cried, jumping up and down and waving. "Whatcha doin'? Can we help? Wait, no, we can't, we gotta go find Applejack. Sorry! Maybe next time! Bye!"

"Huh?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"Yer lookin' fer Applejack?" Apple Bloom asked. Her head ducked out of sight, then reappeared again in the doorway as she began to descend the stairs, once more followed by Sweetie. "She's over in th' apple cellar."

"Why are you looking for Applejack?" Scootaloo interrupted, eyes shining with barely repressed excitement. "Is Ponyville in danger? Are you guys putting together a crack team to fight evil?"

"Nah," Rainbow Dash answered coolly. She always tried her best to look good in front of the kid, and coupled this response with a proud toss of her mane and a cocky smile. "Not today, squirt. We're just looking for her to talk about stuff. *Important* stuff."

"I thought we were gonna ask her if she knew anything about Mare Do Well," Pinkie Pie asked, looking at Rainbow in confusion. It was all Rainbow Dash could do to restrain herself from kicking Pinkie right then and there.

By this point, both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle had joined Scootaloo in standing before the older ponies, though neither of them had quite the same expression of worshipful adoration that Scootaloo had. The mention of Mare Do Well seemed to catch their interest, though.

"Mare Do Well? What about her?" Apple Bloom asked curiously.

"Ooh, yeah, Mare Do Well!" Pinkie explained eagerly. "Dashie wants to find out who she is because she's been showing up all mysteriously lately and trying to make kissy faces with her and we're gonna talk to Applejack because Dashie hasn't done that yet and *then* we're gonna make *cake*!" And she gasped for air, having said all of that in one breath.

"Mare Do Well?" repeated Sweetie Belle.

"Cake?" asked Apple Bloom.

"*Kissy faces*?" cried Scootaloo, looking horror-struck.

"Pinkie, you can stop talking now," Dash cut in.

"Yeah-huh, cake!" Pinkie continued, ignoring her. "A ginormous chocolate one! But first we gotta talk to Applejack."

The three crusaders exchanged sly grins. At least, they *would* have, if Scootaloo hadn't been so busy looking stricken.

"Y'know," Apple Bloom said slowly. "Fire-eatin' sounds awful dangerous."

"What would a fire-eating cutie mark even look like, anyway?" Sweetie Belle chimed in.

"Yeah!" Scootaloo added, getting into the swing of things. "You know what this calls for?"

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADER MYSTERY SOLVERS! YAY!" the three of them shrieked in unison, causing Rainbow Dash to jump, before racing off. Only Scootaloo remained behind.

"Don't worry!" the orange pegasus vowed, a deadly serious expression on her face. "We'll find out who Mare Do Well is! No criminal's safe when the Cutie Mark Crusader Mystery Solvers are on their trail!"

And then she was gone, too.

"They got that right. *No pony's* safe with them around," Rainbow Dash said dryly. "C'mon, Apple Bloom said she was over at the cellar."

She turned to go, but stopped when Pinkie Pie didn't immediately follow.

"I should go help them!" Pinkie cried, looking inspired. "Detective Pinkie Pie *always* helps those in need, and they can't do it alone! They might need my magic question ball!"

"Your... what?" Rainbow Dash asked, halting in her tracks and looking dumbfounded.

"Yeah!" Pinkie Pie ducked her head down and whipped it back up, yanking a black and white plastic orb out of nowhere. She managed to carry it in her mouth in spite of the huge smile she wore. "Shee?" she mumbled through the plastic before setting it down on the ground and giving it a little tap, rolling it over to Dash. "Ya just gotta ask it a question and it answers. *It knows everything*," she added in a conspiratorial whisper, leaning close with wide, almost fearful eyes.

Rainbow Dash nudged the orb with a hoof, looking at it oddly as she sent it rolling back to Pinkie Pie. *Why did I ever think she could help me?* Dash thought, sighing inwardly –

but she *hadn't*, she reminded herself. She'd only recruited Pinkie Pie to get on Mare Do Well's nerves.

"Watch!" Pinkie continued obliviously. "Dear magic question ball, will I get to eat a whole pie for dinner?"

She bent over and picked it up in her mouth before shaking her head furiously and dropping it back on the ground. The two of them simultaneously leaned forward to read the answer. *Signs point to yes.*

"See?" Pinkie Pie declared in triumph. "But now I gotta go, though. Bye!"

And then *she* was gone, too, leaving Rainbow Dash standing alone among the bare trees in confusion.

"Pinkie Pie, you are *so* random," Dash muttered out loud to herself. It was like a mantra, one that she could repeat whenever Pinkie got just a little too weird for her, to find instant comfort. Now she had to find Applejack on her own.

• • •

Apple Bloom had said that she thought her sister was in the apple cellar, and she was right. As Rainbow Dash descended, she was a little surprised by how dark it was. A musty smell pervaded the air. The only light came from the soft glow of the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling on a long, frayed string, illuminating the crates of apples that filled the tiny room. The darkness was oppressive; it reminded her of her dream. Rainbow Dash felt almost claustrophobic down there.

"Oh, hey, Rainbow!" Applejack greeted in her friendly way from within the black. "Just lookin' over the stores fer the winter. You guys ever plannin' on gettin' round to that?" she joked.

"Whenever I feel like it," Rainbow Dash shot back, swooping over to hover beside the workhorse. Who, she now noticed, looked absolutely exhausted, despite the cheerful manner in which she'd spoken.

"What brings you down here?" Applejack asked with a wan smile that Rainbow could barely see in the gloom. It looked ominous in the dim lighting.

"Can you really change your voice?" Rainbow Dash asked automatically. Best to cut right to the chase. Skip all the small talk. "I've never heard you do it, but Pinkie said it was awesome."

Applejack blinked, looking a little taken aback, before smiling. "Aw, shucks, it's been so long, I reckon I don't know if I *can* anymore," she chuckled. "I was just a li'l filly when I used to do it. But lemme see –" She paused to clear her throat.

"Ah, yes, is this what you were thinking of?" Applejack suddenly asked, her voice taking on the accent of a posh Manehattanite without even the slightest hint of her familiar Southern drawl.

With a yelp, Rainbow Dash drew back, and Applejack started to guffaw.

"Lookit you!" she hooted, voice back to normal. "Like you just saw a ghost."

But Rainbow Dash didn't laugh. In the dark, hearing such an unfamiliar voice come out of her friend was terrifying, like suddenly realizing that she was alone with a stranger. Especially when she could barely see Applejack as it was. "It's not funny!" Dash shouted, suddenly angry without knowing why. "Don't laugh at me!"

"Can't help it," Applejack retorted. "An' *you* laugh at *me* every chance you get. You dish it but can't take it?"

But it *wasn't* funny, not at all, because that meant that one of the only constants Rainbow Dash had been able to hold onto as an undeniable truth – that Applejack was incapable of deception of any kind – was wrong. Because for that moment, however brief, the workhorse had become somepony else.

Rainbow Dash wanted to demand an explanation, but was lost as to what to say; so instead, she came out with the first thing that popped into her head.

"Why are you so tired?"

"Been workin' all day. Runnin' a farm's hard work, y'know. Not that that's anything a lazybones like yerself has had much experience with." Another chuckle.

*Why is she in such a good mood?*

"Up late?" Rainbow asked, making no effort to disguise the challenge in her voice – but Applejack either didn't hear it or chose to ignore it.

"Yeah, I guess so. Up early, too. Crack o' dawn."

*Have you ever gotten up early enough...*

Before she really knew what she was doing, Rainbow Dash's hooves shot out, slamming into Applejack. The push caught the earth pony off guard, causing her to stumble backwards, but she'd never lost her balance before, and when she caught herself, she glared at Rainbow Dash.

"What in the hay didja do that for?" Applejack demanded angrily.

"*Why were you up so early?*" Rainbow Dash screamed. She couldn't have explained why she was so angry all of a sudden, but she *was*, and she wanted to hurt somepony because of it. "*What were you doing?*"

"Rainbow Dash, what –"

"*Answer me!*"

"*Apples!*" Applejack shouted, equally loudly. "*Apples*, Rainbow Dash! That's what I *do!* Remember? What *else* would I be doin'?"

"Hmm, I dunno, moonlighting as Mare Do Well just to freak me out, maybe?!" Rainbow Dash shouted back. Her throat burned from the sudden screeching argument that she'd found herself in, and her heart was slamming against her ribcage, it was pounding so hard. Her chest was constricting, and she felt like she was either going to explode or cry, but *why* she was so upset, she didn't even know.

"I... *what?*"

Applejack had looked primed to buck Rainbow Dash right out of the air, but now she pulled back, looking genuinely confused.

"Mare Do Well?" Applejack repeated. "What're you talkin' about? I thought that nonsense got sorted out."

"What? No! That's, like, all I've been *doing* lately! How did you not notice?"

But Rainbow Dash could feel her anger fading, her resolve faltering. For a moment, she'd been so consumed by panic that she'd worked herself up into a frenzy – but now she saw

the pure bewilderment in Applejack's eyes, like she really had no idea what Rainbow Dash was talking about, and Dash could feel herself begin to come down off her outburst.

"Well, I dunno. You never talked 'bout it after it first came up, so I guess I just assumed it worked itself out somehow. I was busy, y'know. I had to finish harvestin' before the cold snap. I didn't have a lotta time to worry 'bout somethin' like that – and I'd think *you'd* be too busy, too, with winter comin' an' all."

It sounded so reasonable.

The doubts had been pressing against Rainbow Dash from all sides, and the suspicions and darkness and fear had suddenly been overwhelming, but now she could see how ridiculous she'd been. Applejack *was* honesty and integrity, and although that could drive Rainbow Dash nuts sometimes, she knew that it meant Applejack was a pony that she could always count on.

Rainbow Dash touched down onto the ground so that she was face level with Applejack. And she told her everything.

• • •

Applejack looked disgusted.

"Why'd somepony go an' do somethin' like that?" she asked, seeming completely uncomprehending. "It's downright dishonest, goin' around pretendin' to be somepony else just to... to... I don't even know what!"

Rainbow Dash had no answer.

They were both sitting, side by side, propped up against a wall of the cellar. Dash kept thinking back to that night after Pinkie's party, when she'd been sitting against the wall of the bakery and Mare Do Well had come to sit with her.

Why had she ever, even for a moment, suspected Applejack? She was reacting exactly the way Rainbow Dash would've expected her to, and it seemed so illogical to imagine Applejack being capable of pulling off such a scheme without even once slipping up. It was downright impossible.

"So what're you doin' now?" Applejack finally asked, glancing at the pegasus. Her hat cast strange shadows over her face, reminiscent of the eerie lighting from before that had preluded their argument.

"I dunno," Rainbow Dash replied truthfully. "I know it's stupid, but I kind of feel like I need to actually *do* this and win. Because if I don't, then... I don't know. I just have to."

"Yeah," Applejack said slowly, with a thoughtful nod. "Yeah, I can understand that. But... an' I'm just sayin', here... maybe yer goin' about this the wrong way?"

Rainbow Dash's ears pricked up.

"What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"Yer tryin' to figure out who Mare Do Well is, but maybe you should do it backwards. Like, try and figure out who'd wanna *be* Mare Do Well. Is there anypony out there that fancies you that might wanna tell you in such a... a dramatic way?"

"Oh, you know me," Rainbow Dash answered breezily, trying to hide the sudden heat she felt in her cheeks. "I got ponies falling for me left and right. Can't hold me back. *Everypony* wants a piece of the Dash."

"Yeah, yeah, we know. Yer a heartbreaker." Applejack grinned. "But seriously, now. D'you know anypony that might wanna go that far fer you?"

Rainbow Dash thought.

"No," she said.

"Huh."

A silence fell over the two of them. It was strange, sitting with Applejack in the dark. Since Rainbow couldn't see the other pony, it was almost like she was alone and talking to herself.

"Y'know, speakin' of breakin' hearts..." Applejack began casually, probably trying her very best to be subtle.

"I was kidding," Dash was quick to leap in.

"I know, I know. But I think you know who I'm talkin' about."

Another silence.

"Who?" Rainbow Dash finally asked.



"C'mon!" Applejack said, nudging her playfully. "You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

She could feel Applejack stare at her, even though she couldn't see it in the darkness, and when the earth pony spoke, her voice carried that pitying tone that ponies usually saved for when they were speaking to somepony of much lower intelligence than them. "Shucks, Rainbow Dash, I dunno what we're gonna do with you," Applejack said fondly with a hint of sadness. "How can you be so bright one moment and so dense the next? You mean to say you *really* don't know?"

"Know *what*?" Rainbow Dash repeated stubbornly. "Are you coming on to me?"

She could only joke about it because she knew now that that definitely wasn't the case. If she'd still suspected Applejack was Mare Do Well, she would've taken wing right then and there, getting away as fast as possible.

Applejack snorted. "Celestia, no," she giggled. "I know better than that, you heartbreaker you. I'm talkin' 'bout – you know what?" she said suddenly, changing course. "Never mind. I'll let you figure it out yerself."

• • •

When Rainbow Dash left Sweet Apple Acres, it was already sunset. She'd slept so late and long and had ended up spending so much time at the orchard talking with Applejack in that comfortable way that friends were able to talk about things that the day had disappeared before she'd even noticed.

*Same time, same place*, Mare Do Well had said earlier. Did that apply to tonight as well? If Rainbow Dash headed to the cul-de-sac, would she find the mare in black waiting for her? If that was the case, did she *want* to go? What would happen if she did?

She was so lost in thought that she almost didn't notice when she passed over Pinkie Pie.

"Oh, hi, Pinks," Dash said lightly, swooping down low to meet the pink pony. "I just finished talking to Applejack, and I'm pretty sure now that –"

"Where are you going?" Pinkie Pie interrupted.

"Uh, home?" Rainbow Dash answered with a careful smile.

"No, you're not. Don't lie. You're going back there, aren't you?"

Rainbow Dash blinked, and found herself drawing back a little.

Pinkie Pie looked dead serious for once. Not a hint of laughter in those blue eyes that usually shone with it.

"Pinkie, I don't think –"

"I don't want you to go!" Pinkie blurted, and she took a quick step back so that she stood before Rainbow Dash, forelegs outstretched as if to block her path, even though Rainbow Dash could fly.

"Pinkie?"

"Don't go," Pinkie Pie repeated. "I don't want you to go see Mare Do Well. We, we have to bake Rarity's cake, remember? You should come to Sugarcube Corner with me and spend the night. We'll bake the cake and eat tasty snacks and watch a movie or something, and it'll be totally fun! Right?"

Her voice had an edge of desperation to it.

With a nervous laugh, Rainbow Dash started to fly ahead anyway.

"Pinkie, relax. I'm just going –"

"No!" Pinkie said quickly, again stepping backwards so that she stood before Rainbow Dash, gazing up at the pegasus pleadingly. "Please don't. Please. I'm your best friend. That's enough of a reason, right?"

"Pinkie, ha-ha, very funny, but –"

*"I'm not being funny!* Not everything's a joke, you know! I don't want you to go, isn't that enough?"

Rainbow Dash could feel herself beginning to grow tense. "Pinkie," she began. "If you're worried about me, don't be. I can handle myself. Nothing's gonna happen. So just leave me alone, and let me do what I want, okay?"

"Why would you want to go spend time with *her* instead of *me*?" Pinkie Pie asked feebly.

She looked so pathetic. Nothing at all like the happy-go-lucky hyperactive ball of joy that had been trailing Rainbow Dash for so long. She looked forlorn and utterly lost and very, very tiny from Dash's perspective in the air, but still Pinkie stood there, trying to block her way from the ground.

Only then did Rainbow Dash realize what she was looking at.

For the first time, she was seeing Pinkie Pie with all pretensions of endless frivolity stripped away, baring the vulnerable, easily-wounded pony beneath: a pony that was desperate to keep a hold on her best friend, to the point that she would forcibly prevent her from leaving if she could.

And it frightened her.

*Pinkie Pie isn't supposed to be sad or scared of anything*, Rainbow Dash found herself thinking, but that only summoned the memory of Mare Do Well's words to her from their last conversation.

*You're so used to your idea of them that you reject anything else.*

She had caught a glimpse of this Pinkie before, on the birthday when the pink pony had thought all of her friends had rejected her. But rather than help Pinkie deal with whatever baggage she had that had made her that way, her friends had quietly forced her back into place, restoring the status quo and laughing it off as no big deal. It had been selfish of them, but it had been easier than trying to bend their perceptions to accept a Pinkie Pie that wasn't constantly joyful.

Even now, all Rainbow Dash could think was that she didn't want to deal with this. She didn't want to see Pinkie this way. Even as she thought it, she *knew* it was wrong, but she couldn't help it.

"Why would you want to go spend time with her instead of me?" Pinkie repeated, a little more insistent this time.

She was asking Rainbow Dash to choose. Rainbow's Element was Loyalty, and Pinkie wanted proof: would Dash remain loyal to her best friend, despite the startling revelation that there was more to her than meets the eye, or would she be abandoned the way she'd been abandoned once before?

The answer was obvious. Rainbow Dash was supposed to say, "I don't. Of course I'll hang out with you, Pinkie." She was supposed to choose Pinkie, and then Pinkie would smile

again and they'd go have a fun, happy sleepover, and then everything would be okay, and that was all Dash wanted. For things to go back to normal and be okay again.

"Pinkie Pie," Rainbow Dash said carefully, and she saw the pink pony's ears prick up hopefully. "Pinkie, that sounds fun, but I want to do *this*, too. I don't really know *why* yet, but... I do. I think I *should*, at least. So I know you don't want me to, but... I'm gonna go. And then... afterwards... maybe I'll drop by Sugarcube Corner, and *then* we can hang out?"

Pinkie Pie stared at her blankly, before giving Rainbow a smile, but it wasn't the patented gigantic Pinkie smile. It was small. It faltered. It was fake. A mask to disguise the hurt.

"That sounds good, Dashie, but I dunno. Sugarcube Corner isn't open forever, you know. It might be closed when you get there," she said lightly, and she turned her back on the pegasus.

Pinkie walked away. A quick, meaningful step, slowly building into a trot and then into a run, and Rainbow Dash was left hovering, once again alone, suddenly feeling oddly hollow inside and wondering if she'd given the wrong answer.

At first, Rainbow Dash had considered going after Pinkie, only to remember the way she herself so often became frustrated when she craved solitude and couldn't find it. But Pinkie Pie was normally such a social pony, and she was upset because Rainbow Dash had turned her down; so, would following her make things better or worse?

Maybe it would be better for Rainbow Dash to just go, and...

*What? No! That's crazy!*

Whether Pinkie was overreacting or not – and she *did* seem rather inordinately hurt, actually – wasn't the important thing. If she was this distressed about Rainbow going to find Mare Do Well, then there must be a *reason*, something that Rainbow Dash just wasn't thinking of. Which meant that logically, it was Rainbow's job to go ensure that Pinkie Pie was okay and find out why she'd been so panicked. Besides, that was what a friend did, and no matter what else happened, no matter what kind of disagreements or annoyances passed between them, Pinkie would always be Rainbow's friend.

The pink pony was out of sight now, but Rainbow Dash had been heading to town anyway, and Sugarcube Corner wasn't that far away. Especially not since she could fly. There was no reason why Dash couldn't stop by and check up on her. Just to make sure.

• • •

When Rainbow arrived at the bakery, she thought for a moment that she could see somepony watch her fly up to the door from Pinkie Pie's window. Specifically, she thought she caught a glimpse of a head poking out from behind the curtains before twitching them shut and ducking out of sight. It happened too quickly for Dash to know whether it had actually happened or not. Maybe it had been in her mind.

The bakery was still open, much to Rainbow Dash's relief, but in retrospect, it was ridiculous for her to have worried that the Cakes might have actually closed shop early just to keep Dash out. Even *if* their favorite employee had requested it of them, they still had a business to run. Pinkie wasn't working the counter, though. Instead, Mrs. Cake stood there, smiling and chatting easily with a unicorn purchasing a lavishly decorated birthday cake.

As soon as the unicorn left, Rainbow Dash rushed forward and asked, "Is Pinkie Pie here?"

Mrs. Cake didn't seem unfriendly, exactly, but there was a definite coolness in her voice when she spoke.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash," she answered stiffly, and the pegasus almost winced at how distant Mrs. Cake sounded. "She isn't feeling well."

*Figures.* "But –"

"I think you should go," Mrs. Cake said firmly, casting a meaningful glance at the door. Rainbow's heart sunk a little.

"Oh, man, she totally hates me," Dash muttered, wilting. Even her wings drooped.

Mrs. Cake's expression softened. "I'm sure that's not it. She could never hate you," she said gently, with a sympathetic smile. "But maybe it *would* be better if you left the poor dear alone for a little bit, just until she gets back to her old self."

Pinkie Pie had told Rainbow Dash once that she'd grown up on a rock farm before running away from home. Her *old self* was a lonely, friendless little filly that had been trapped in some kind of spiral of depression. At the time, Rainbow Dash had laughed it off, thinking that Pinkie Pie was exaggerating, and Pinkie Pie had laughed as well, seemingly confirming Rainbow's suspicions that the whole story had been some kind of twisted joke. But that evening, for the second time in their friendship that she could remember, Dash had seen that supposed *old self* resurface in Pinkie, no matter how briefly.

Maybe the Cakes didn't know – but if they didn't, it would be better for Pinkie Pie to talk to them herself. For now, Rainbow Dash had done everything she could. She felt uneasy about it, but if Pinkie Pie was going to refuse to see her, then short of breaking Pinkie's bedroom window and forcing her way in, Dash was out of options. She would just have to let it go for once. Or at least, for *now*.

• • •

Mare Do Well was already in their cul-de-sac when Rainbow Dash arrived, and for some reason, that only served to annoy Rainbow more. It meant that Mare Do Well had assumed her coming was a sure thing, either because Dash was getting predictable or because Mare Do Well was getting overconfident. Both options left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Why are you here?" Rainbow asked as soon as she was within speaking distance. She swooped forward to perch on the edge of the dumpster. It was closed, thankfully; the dramatic impact of her appearance would've been lessened somewhat if she'd had to perch next to a steaming pile of garbage. She wanted to maintain a relatively decent distance between the two of them, so that Mare Do Well couldn't try pulling any of that touchy-feely nonsense; and besides, Dash felt better about herself when she got to look down on Mare Do Well from up high. It made her feel in charge.

"I knew *you'd* be here," Mare Do Well answered peacefully, watching Rainbow from her place in the street. She made no effort to approach the pegasus. That was good, too. As long as they weren't standing beside each other or anything. As long as they weren't touching. "After all, you've been coming almost every night. I had no reason to expect otherwise from you."

"You don't know that I meant to come here at all. Maybe I was just taking a night-time flight and noticed you, and figured that I had nothing better to do."

"So you saw me and came to talk. I'm okay with that. Besides, I know you're lying; you *hate* flying at night."

"Stop talking like you know everything about me!" Rainbow Dash snapped.

"But I do."

"Seriously, cut it out! I'm not in the mood for your messed-up mind games tonight! In case you can't tell, I'm *kind* of mad at you!"

"Why?" Mare Do Well asked curiously, cocking her head as though she genuinely wanted to know. As if it wasn't completely obvious. But Dash knew that this was just another trick – everything Mare Do Well did was part of an intentional, concentrated effort to drive Rainbow Dash nuts. Nothing the mare did was accidental. She was far too precise for that.

"Because of you, my best friend totally hates me! *That's* why – gah!"

Halfway through her tirade, Rainbow Dash forgot that she was perched on the very edge of the dumpster and made the mistake of trying to gesture with a leg for emphasis, only to lose her balance and fall forward, face-planting on the ground.

"You're much more graceful when you fly," Mare Do Well observed quietly. "On land, you seem to have a little trouble."

Rainbow Dash lifted her head, scowling, and saw that Mare Do Well was offering a hoof in assistance. She roughly pushed it away. For some reason, it irritated her that Mare Do Well had just let her fall like that – but Dash knew that she probably would've been even angrier if the other mare had leapt forward to catch her or something.

"Why blame me for that?" Mare Do Well asked innocently, seemingly unfazed.

"Because... she wanted me to stay with her and I said no because I figured you'd show up again. So we had a fight and now she's mad at me. Because of *you*."

And Mare Do Well swept forward with a rush of her cape so that she was suddenly standing by Rainbow Dash, side by side, pressing uncomfortably close. It wasn't like when they'd watched the sunrise from the roof, when the mare's touch had seemed hesitant but genuinely affectionate; this was deliberate, and caught Dash off guard, eliciting a completely uncool squeak of surprise.

*This is what I didn't want!*

"So you chose me over her? I'm flattered," Mare Do Well whispered in that husky voice, face and mouth uncomfortably close to Rainbow's ear as the masked mare leaned in to speak, and Rainbow Dash yanked her head back.

"No!" Rainbow Dash shouted. "No, that's not what happened at *all*! Geez, can't I say *anything* to you without you twisting it around so that it's all creepy and weird?"

"But that's what happened, isn't it? You and Pinkie had a little spat and you chose me over her. Deny it all you want, but I think you're starting to like me." There it was, that hateful smugness and unwavering certainty. That overconfidence.

"No! That's –" Wait. "I never said that *Pinkie* was the one who was mad at me."

"You said your *best friend*. She *is* your best friend, isn't she?"

Rainbow Dash felt a sudden chill run down her spine. "How did you know that?"

"Come *on*, we've been over this!" Mare Do Well chastised playfully, gesturing to herself with a foreleg, bringing another furious blush to Dash's cheeks. Why did Rainbow turn so red whenever she lost her temper around Mare Do Well? "I thought you'd been making progress, but maybe I was mistaken. Haven't you narrowed me down to one of your five friends? Wouldn't you *expect* one of them to know something like that about you? And besides, I make it my *business* to know these things."



"Oh, right," Rainbow Dash cut in sarcastically. Her body had seized up again from the borderline intimate proximity they'd shared, but now that she'd managed to force a little space between them, she could relax. "I forgot. You're jealous of Pinkie, right? You probably already knew all about our fight and just thought it was so funny."

Rainbow Dash was starting to understand why Fluttershy had so much trouble flying. Fear did strange things to a pegasus; when her body was flooded with panic or anger, it was like she was paralyzed, and for a pegasus with such crippling shyness, it was no wonder that Fluttershy found it difficult. She was *scared* all the time. It was a wonder she could ever open her wings. Even just being around Mare Do Well was enough to make Rainbow Dash's stomach knot and wings freeze from how nervous she felt.

Not that Rainbow Dash actually feared her or anything. Dash wasn't afraid of anything. She was just *uncomfortable* because of how creepy Mare Do Well could get. It was natural to feel unsure around a pony as mysterious as this. Right? A pony that she knew absolutely nothing about as of yet, try as Rainbow might to learn something new. A pony that was now approaching her again. Once more, Rainbow Dash found that she couldn't seem to react quite fast enough.

"Even if I *did* already know about all it, it still wouldn't be my fault. I didn't *force* you to choose me over her. That was done all on your own. If I knew how to do that, I'd probably make better use of it. I wouldn't mind seeing you more often, and parties can get tiresome. It would be nice to be able to lure you away from them every once in a while."

Mare Do Well kept her tone nice and easy, but her words were sharp, like a foal who wasn't getting their way and had decided to be petulant about it, which only served to confirm Rainbow Dash's suspicions, not that she'd make the mistake of saying anything out loud. If she did, Mare Do Well would just find a new way to twist her words. Instead, Rainbow Dash took comfort in the small victory that Mare Do Well had unknowingly offered her – the knowledge that yes, she was annoyed about how Dash had gone to Pinkie. And upsetting Mare Do Well in any way was always enjoyable for Rainbow Dash. It helped to even things out a little.

Instead Rainbow Dash said, "If you were really one of my friends, I wouldn't expect you to be such a jerk. It's like you think it's fun to mess with ponies for no reason."

"It's that perceptions thing again. You don't see any of them in me, and you don't see *me* in any of *them* either; yet you can't stop wondering who's under the mask, can you?"

Mare Do Well was circling her like a predator surveying its prey, every step she took solid and deliberate, and it was all Rainbow Dash could do just to keep her eyes focused enough to watch the mare in black as she did so. "Because in your heart, all you can think is, *what if it's sweet little Fluttershy, so timid and innocent that she jumps at her own shadow; would she be able to pull this off? Or maybe it's honest Applejack, who turned out to be not-so-honest after all! Would Rarity ever stoop to this, flouncing about in such a garish costume? Or –*"

"Stop it."

"Ponies are more than just the basic archetypes that you can fit into little boxes for your own convenience, Rainbow Dash," Mare Do Well murmured, ceasing her circling and leaning in. "If you're going about this by comparing what I do and what I say to what you think your *friends* would do and say, then you're making a mistake. The purpose of being in this costume is to take advantage of an opportunity to become somepony else entirely. I've told you that. You won't get anywhere this way."

"Shut *up!*" Rainbow Dash screamed.

She had closed her eyes, as if trying to shrink into herself to block out what Mare Do Well was saying, so she didn't see where her foreleg connected when it shot out. She hadn't actually intended to hit her, believe it or not, but suddenly Dash hadn't been able to take hearing any more and had just wanted Mare Do Well to stop talking. Before she could really control herself, she'd found her hoof go flying, and then Rainbow dropped it in shock, opening her eyes when she felt it make contact.

Applejack had been knocked down when Rainbow Dash had shoved her in the cellar, but Mare Do Well was still standing. For a moment Rainbow Dash actually felt a flash of fear. She hadn't meant to hit her. As annoying as she could be, Dash didn't actually want to get in a fight with Mare Do Well.

But the other mare didn't strike back or run away or do *any* of those things that Rainbow Dash was suddenly afraid that she might do. Instead, Mare Do Well pressed a hoof to her face, tilting her head a little as she watched Rainbow Dash.

"Huh," Mare Do Well said, a touch of admiration in her voice. "I was wondering when you'd do that. You let me go a lot further than I thought you would."

"A lot... *what?*" Rainbow Dash sputtered, suddenly indignant. "You were *expecting* me to punch you? Then why the hay did you keep *going?*!"

"I didn't mean tonight specifically. That time I caught you after the lightning storm, you almost bucked me right in the head, and when you found me in the alley afterwards I half expected you to try it again. I think I wanted to see how far I could push you before you'd finally just do it."

"I don't remember bucking you in the head," was all Rainbow Dash could think to say.

"You probably forgot. You passed out soon afterwards. But while you were falling, you started kicking and shouting and telling me to drop you. So my curiosity on *that* matter is satisfied. How can I make it up to you now?"

For a pony that had just been hit in the face by an angry pegasus, she seemed surprisingly easygoing about it, as if she hadn't felt a thing. It was almost offensive, like Mare Do Well was trying to make Rainbow Dash think that her strikes packed such little punch that they did nothing at all. That, or she was made of tough stuff after all. Tougher than Applejack? It was unsettling to think about.

"You can make it up to me by getting lost. I'm sick of you," Rainbow Dash snarled.

"That's no fun. How about... here."

And Mare Do Well knelt, falling to her knees on the street before Rainbow, black cape pooling on the ground around her. She even bowed her head a little, and suddenly Rainbow Dash felt so incredibly embarrassed that all she could do was stand and watch, gaping, eyes wide. "I humbly beg your forgiveness for any offense you may have taken. I fully deserved that, and if you so wish, you may strike me again."

"Get *up*, weirdo!"

"I'll stay like this until you say you forgive me."

"Holy *Celestia*, you're a freak," Dash muttered, rubbing her head. "Okay, fine, I forgive you or whatever. Get up now. You're really creeping me out."

"All right, then." Mare Do Well stood up again in another fluid motion, and they were once again eye-to-eye; at least, they *were* until Rainbow Dash yanked back into the air, hovering so as to avoid standing too close to her.

"I meant everything I said, by the way, but I suppose I could've been gentler when I said it. And don't worry about Pinkie," Mare Do Well added. "She's hurt, because she'd started to seep out of her mold and had hoped you'd accept her anyway. But she adores you, so

even if she's upset *now*, she'll probably put on her best sunshiney smile and go looking for you tomorrow to make amends."

She sounded a little sad when she said that, her voice becoming a little softer. But when Mare Do Well spoke again, she'd switched back to teasing mode.

"Believe it or not, I *did* have a reason for coming here, actually. I have a new idea. You don't seem to be especially fond of the flowers and moonlight approach, so I can either continue showering you with blossoms and hope for the best, or try a new tactic."

"Oh, really," Rainbow Dash said in a bored tone, staring at Mare Do Well through heavily lidded eyes to emphasize how little she cared, but the bristling of her wings betrayed the spark of intrigue she felt when the mare spoke.

"How would you like to spend a night on the town with me?"

"No," Dash replied instantly.

"Not like *that*. I meant, how would you like to join me on one of my nightly patrols? Adventure is your thing, isn't it, and *Danger* your middle name? You might enjoy it."

"Nightly patrols? I thought you weren't actually a superhero. I thought this was all some kind of lame excuse to run around in a mask."

"Well, that's how it *started*," Mare Do Well explained breezily, with a dismissive little wave of her front hoof. "Having a Mare Do Well costume lying around without anypony actually playing the part of Mare Do Well certainly seemed to indicate a convenient time to take on a new identity, I'll admit. But after a while I figured that if I was going to be going by this name, I might as well go all the way, so on those nights where I have nothing better to do, I like to walk the streets and see what I come across. It's surprisingly fun, you know."

As a filly, when Rainbow Dash hadn't spent her time obsessing over the Wonderbolts and perfecting her roster of tricks for the day they'd come for her, she'd spent her time obsessing over comic books, poring over them religiously. They'd presented her with a world where flashy costumes, outrageous stunts and a cocky attitude earned you a sea of glorious victories and triumphs over trickster villains that were always defeated either through wits or their own folly. It was a world where Rainbow would've fit in perfectly, unlike the one she'd been born in.

There had even been a point when Rainbow Dash would tell anypony who'd listen that if she never became a Wonderbolt (not that that would ever happen) she wanted to be a superhero instead. In the end, she'd finally grown out of that phase, because comic books were actually pretty dorky, but even though she'd eventually matured – slightly – the affection Dash held for those comics still lingered, and every once in a while, she'd pull out her old collection for another read-through. That was why Rainbow Dash so liked to refer to herself as Ponyville's number one hero. Even if she never actually gained any inequine abilities outside of being able to fly super fast, just *pretending* to be the hero she'd always wanted to be was enough to make Rainbow Dash feel pretty good about herself.

The chance to follow in the hoofsteps of one of the heroes of her foalhood was definitely an appealing one, even if it *was* just some kind of twisted game.

The catch was, it was Mare Do Well doing the offering.

"C'mon," Mare Do Well said in a persuading way when she saw the hesitance on Rainbow Dash's face. "It'll be fun, I promise. From rooftop to rooftop and crossing the shadowy streets in pursuit of the everyday villains that litter the streets? Doesn't that sound like something straight out of a superhero comic? You'll like it. You'll be good at it. I'll let you call yourself my sidekick."

"I'm nopony's *sidekick*!" Rainbow Dash barked. "If I go on some kind of nightly patrol thingy, then I'll do it as *myself*. On my *own*. Because I'm *awesome*."

"Okay, you don't have to be the sidekick. You can be my partner. We'll be a team. Just say you'll consider it. We can spend a night administering justice and it'll be romantic. *Please?*"

That last word was said in a soft, wheedling voice, so different from the way Mare Do Well usually spoke, and although Rainbow knew it was just another carefully calculated move in their game, that Mare Do Well was probably *very intentionally* trying to sound alluring just to entice Rainbow Dash into agreeing, she still felt her wings begin to stiffen, forcing her to land. A sudden burst of warmth sprung from somewhere deep inside of Dash, instantly spreading throughout her body and fully extending them.

"You liked that?" Mare Do Well asked with something like a laugh. Actually, it was more of a giggle. Like the breathy, seductive tone from before, it was a surprisingly girly sound to hear coming from such an imposing figure. "I was under the impression that you were into bravado and daring, but if cutesy-wutsey ponies are more to your liking, I can do

that, no problem. Although I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, given the kind of company you seem to keep."

"Don't act like you know me! Y-you don't know anything about me!" Rainbow Dash managed to retort as feistily as she could, but her voice shook, and the heat flooding into her cheeks and wings implied otherwise, and she knew it.

"Silly filly. You can say whatever you like, but your wings don't lie."

"My wings?" Dash stammered, glancing down at the appendages, which were now fully outstretched at her sides.

"Yes. Your wings. The most sensitive part of the pegasus anatomy, the movements of which are often indicative of the mood of the bearer," the mare recited like a school filly answering a question for her teacher. "They beat when frustrated, snap down when irritated, bristle when primed to fight, and spread when excited. I've been taking my cues from you, you know. Your wings let me know when I've managed to arouse some sort of feeling from you, and I've just been working from there."

*Oh, Celestia.* Rainbow Dash whirled her head around on the pretense of trying to push down her now incredibly stiff wings, attempting to force them back into closed position, ignoring the way she felt Mare Do Well's eyes on her.

"Relax, *Dashie*," the masked mare cooed, and Rainbow Dash cried out, a sound halfway between a squeak and a gasp, as she felt Mare Do Well's snout brush against her cheek in another overly affectionate gesture. The sound was what some ponies might have referred to as a whimper, but only when associated with ponies much less cool than Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash was too awesome to ever make a sound like that.

She wanted to turn and face Mare Do Well to properly size her up and bawl her out, but Rainbow was suddenly terrified of what would happen if she *did*, with their faces pressed so close together; so instead she froze, remaining still as the mare took her place beside the pegasus.

Mare Do Well was almost purring, as content as Opalescence after catching a mouse that she was now free to bat about with her paws like a toy. "You can deny it all you want," she continued in that horrifically self-satisfied way. "But we both know that I'm making more progress than you... even if you won't admit it."

"Nuh-uh," Rainbow Dash choked, ignoring how immature it sounded when compared to the eloquence with which Mare Do Well spoke. This brought on another soft, *too girly too cute NO NOT CUTE AT ALL* giggle.

"It's okay. I can wait until you're ready to concede defeat. You'll find that I'm very patient, and I *am* exceedingly fond of you, so I think it'll be worth it."

Rainbow Dash still wasn't looking at Mare Do Well, refusing to budge even the slightest inch that would allow her to see what the masked mare was doing, so she couldn't say for sure, but after a moment she felt Mare Do Well's looming presence at her side disappear, and assumed that it meant she'd finally backed off. Only to turn and suddenly find herself face-to-face with her, their snouts practically touching, inasmuch as one could be face-to-face with a mask.

"Gah! What the –"

Mare Do Well leaned in and gave Rainbow Dash's face another quick nuzzle, silencing her with a touch lighter than what Dash had even thought possible; like a feather brushing her skin. It was as if Mare Do Well hadn't even actually touched her, just hovered impossibly close as Rainbow's fur prickled in anticipation.

"At least *consider* my idea," Mare Do Well murmured. "It'll be fun. And besides, you're not supposed to interfere with my plans, remember?"

And then she turned her back and sauntered away, cape trailing behind her. No flashy gestures or theatrical leaps as she melted into the darkness this time; just a slow, deliberate walk, which somehow seemed a million times worse.

• • •

Rainbow Dash had no idea what time it was when she finally found her way back to Sugarcube Corner, but just as she'd feared, the bakery wasn't open. The "closed" sign hung on the door and no lights shone from any of the windows, not even Pinkie's. The building, normally the friendliest looking spot in town and Rainbow's favorite place to hang out, looked cold and unwelcoming.

*Sugarcube Corner isn't open forever, you know. It might be closed when you get there.*

There was nothing she could do but leave. But as Dash flew away, she found herself remembering what Mare Do Well had said for some reason, even though the masked mare was the last pony she wanted to think about right then.

*She'll probably put on her best sunshiney smile and go looking for you tomorrow to make amends.*

*I hope...* Rainbow started to think; then shook her head to clear her thoughts, trying to ignore the sinking feeling she felt in the pit of her stomach.



Ponyville stood on the border between seasons – on the verge of shifting to full-on winter, yet held back by some unseen force. It wouldn't have taken very much to tip the weather either way, not while nature itself stood on the brink like that, just barely overlooking the precipice, but it remained inert. Not for much longer, though. The issue with the stray weather in the Everfree Forest had finally been sorted out, and everypony on the weather team had received the same message – that they would finally be able to bring in the first snow that weekend, so be prepared.

The weather team was something that Rainbow Dash took incredibly seriously. More seriously than pretty much anything else she spent her free time on, aside from training for the Wonderbolts, despite her tendency to slack off occasionally. For the most part, Dash saw the weather she crafted as a reflection of her physical prowess and an extension of herself. After all, clearing the sky and raising storms was hard work, and she took great pride in it.

But now, the news of the coming snow was the furthest thing from her mind. She had more important stuff to worry about; stuff like how Rainbow Dash was going to see Pinkie Pie that afternoon when the six of them gathered for their weekly Pony Pet Playdate. Dash hadn't seen her at all since their confrontation, and she didn't know what to expect when they saw each other for this first time. She didn't know how to prepare.

But as it turned out, Rainbow Dash didn't have to do *anything*, because Pinkie just ignored her, refusing to do as much as look her in the eye. From an outsider's perspective, Pinkie Pie seemed to be completely back to normal, laughing and chatting as merrily as ever while she played with Gummy and the other pets, but not even once did she look at Rainbow Dash, no matter how much the pegasus tried to get her attention. Rainbow Dash almost felt cheated, remembering what Mare Do Well had said – but of course Mare Do Well wouldn't actually have had any way of knowing what Pinkie Pie would do next. No pony did. Pinkie was inexplicable.

Even Tank somehow managed to hold more of Pinkie Pie's attention than Rainbow Dash did. At one point, the pink pony attempted to force him and Gummy into some kind of pseudo-wrestling match, and still, Pinkie refused to even acknowledge Rainbow.

A few times, Rainbow Dash almost thought she saw the others exchange looks of worry or shoot her a glance with an odd expression in their eye, but no pony actually said anything until Twilight Sparkle finally pulled Dash aside to voice her concerns.

"Did something happen between you two?" Twilight asked, Owloysius perched on her shoulder and staring blankly ahead in an unsettling way. "Are you guys fighting?"

"No," Rainbow Dash found herself saying. A part of her wanted to spill her guts and confess everything to everypony there so that they could all swarm her with comfort the way they always did. Not just about what had happened between her and Pinkie, but about the huge mess her life had become lately – but she couldn't shake the sense of privacy these worries had hanging about them. Besides, Dash didn't know *how* she'd explain these feelings, even if she tried. There were layers of meanings and subtleties here, both in what was happening with Mare Do Well and what was happening with Pinkie, layers that Rainbow hadn't quite picked up on yet and would only feel comfortable sharing once she herself could understand them. How she was supposed to do *that*, though, she had no idea.

Twilight looked at her somewhat suspiciously, as if she could tell that Rainbow Dash wasn't telling the full truth, but for whatever reason she dropped it and didn't press any further, much to Rainbow's relief.

Although there still wasn't any snow, Rarity seemed determined to dress the pets for the weather *and* in style, bravely attempting to tug a miniature wool sweater over Opal's head, but Opalescence valiantly resisted her efforts, clawing and hissing at the unicorn. Applejack and Winona were playing fetch over the hill, both of them good-naturedly ignoring the way both of them were trembling in the chilly air. Fluttershy, however, also seemed to be noticing the way Pinkie Pie was uncharacteristically avoiding Rainbow Dash. At least, that's the impression she gave, what with the way she kept switching her gaze between them nervously. She didn't say anything, though, likely because she had her hooves full with Angel. Due to the season, he was more subdued than usual, as he was conserving his energy for the winter, but he was still cranky.

After the failed wrestling match, Gummy and Tank ended up left placidly staring at each other, as if testing to see who could go the longest without blinking.

An hour passed of Rainbow Dash's half-hearted attempts to maintain enthusiasm in the face of Pinkie's snubbing, and at last they all agreed to pack up and part ways.

Rainbow Dash was a pony of action, not quiet deliberation, so when she saw Pinkie Pie heading down the path back to Sugarcube Corner, alone except for Gummy in tow, she immediately took the opportunity to speak to the pink pony alone.

"Hey, Pinks!" Rainbow called out, swooping alongside her as Tank buzzed by her side, propeller whirring.

"Oh, hi, Dashie!" Pinkie called back with feigned cheerfulness. Rainbow Dash felt a pang. If she hadn't known that Pinkie was upset from the chilly reception she'd initially received, she might not have been able to tell at all; any sadness or anger Pinkie may have felt was undetectable, aside from the slight strain in her enormous smile.

"So, um, I tried stopping by Sugarcube Corner yesterday, and –"

"Well, duh, I told you, Dashie. It's not open forever," Pinkie Pie interrupted. "You were probably too late."

*Too late.* There was something ominous about those words. Rainbow Dash resisted the urge to shudder. "No, before that. I stopped by and Mrs. Cake said you weren't feeling well." Here, Rainbow paused, unsure how to continue before finally settling on, "So, uh, you okay?"

"Oh, yeah, just fine! Pinkie's okie-dokie!" Pinkie Pie laughed. Sounding way too perky. And then she added, a little sharper, "Of course, *you* wouldn't know, since you just ran away."

Her words stung as much as a slap in the face, taking Rainbow Dash by surprise; but she wasted no time in her retort. "Hey, I *tried* checking up on you, but I got sent away!" Dash shot back.

"Well, you didn't try very *hard*, huh?" All pretense of sunshine was gone, leaving nothing behind but Pinkie's obvious bitterness as she stormed forward, staring straight ahead and refusing to look at Dash. "I kinda thought you would, you know. Thought, *Dashie wouldn't really leave me, Dashie is loyal, she wouldn't choose some stranger over her best friend.* But, oopsies! I guess I was wrong!" A short, hysterical laugh broke free.

"It's okay, though. *Totally* fine," Pinkie Pie hastened to add, words spilling free in a rush and leaving Rainbow Dash no time to respond. "Mare Do Well's new and interesting and Pinkie Pie's boring and crazy. Who'd pick poor li'l Pinkie over an awesome, mysterious superhero, right? Who even *cares* about Pinkamena Pie, when there're so many other more interesting ponies to care about instead? You'll just like her best, I guess, and Pinkie'll just go ahead and disappear. No biggie."

It had happened so gradually that Rainbow Dash almost didn't notice it, but Pinkie Pie was slowly deflating, hair and body steadily drooping more and more with each passing

second. Pinkie's mane was now like a perfectly straight sheet of glass, framing her face on either side. Rainbow was just about to mention it when Pinkie Pie stopped and whirled around, terror in her eyes.

"*Promise you won't tell!*" Pinkie hissed. She was smiling again, but it was wide and manic and desperate. She practically threw herself at Rainbow Dash, grabbing Dash's front hooves and yanking her down to her level. "Promise! Pinkie Swear it!"

"Tell what?"

"That, that I'm acting like this! Pinkie is happy. Pinkie is happy," Pinkie Pie muttered, releasing her grip on Rainbow to cover her eyes. She rocked slightly, back and forth, repeating those words like a mantra. "Pinkie is happy. Happy. Smile, smile, smile."

She sighed, a heartbreakingly watery sigh, before uncovering her eyes and giving Rainbow Dash an impossibly sad smile.

"I'm sorry, Dashie," Pinkie said softly. "I guess I'm just sad because I feel like Mare Do Well's stealing you away. I'm sorry for being such a grumpy Pinkie. I'm just being a big ol' jealous, judgmental jealousy pants again."

Rainbow Dash could only stare in alarm, but Pinkie Pie was asking her to forget that this had ever happened, and a part of her wanted to agree.

She took hold of Pinkie's shoulders as gently as she could in what she hoped was a comforting gesture, and spoke in what she prayed was a reassuring way.

"No pony's gonna steal me away, Pinks," Rainbow Dash said gently, trying to will Pinkie to finally meet her eyes. She did, and they were huge and wet and scared, like a lost foal. "I don't even *like* Mare Do Well. She bugs me so much it's not even funny. And that's *all*."

Pinkie Pie looked at her with a strange expression. It was still sad, but it seemed a little pained as well as she gave Dash a funny looking grin. A grin that said, *Yeah, right*.

• • •

The rest of the day passed in a blur. At some point, Twilight called Rainbow Dash to the library; she was working on a new elemental spell and had questions about different kinds of weather conditions. At another point, Rarity managed to get Dash to agree to model some kind of cloak jacket thing that the unicorn was designing for the winter season. Later that evening, Fluttershy stopped by Rainbow's cloud home and tried, in her

very best attempt at being subtle, to pry and find out what exactly had happened between Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie.

All in all, it was a perfectly normal day, but Rainbow Dash was antsy. Restless. More so than usual, even for her, the pegasus who could never sit still and was constantly in motion. It felt like she was just waiting for night to fall so that she could see if Mare Do Well would come back.

Rainbow knew that it was irrational, because she didn't even *want* to see Mare Do Well, but she couldn't shake this feeling of anticipation. Not that Rainbow Dash actually *wanted* to meet her that night. She wasn't looking forward to it. At all.

"Rainbow Dash, is something wrong?" Fluttershy asked. She had spent most of her visit fussing in that motherly way she had of doing whenever she was concerned, tidying up bits of Rainbow Dash's mess and asking gently probing questions. The sun had set ages ago and Rainbow Dash was jumpy, constantly glancing out the window as she waited for Fluttershy to leave; it was obvious, even to the gentle yellow pegasus, that she was getting impatient.

"No," Rainbow lied. No point in making Fluttershy worry more than usual over something so complicated. And idiotic. Especially when it had nothing to do with her, as far as Rainbow knew.

And, to an extent, hoped. Rainbow Dash hadn't yet completely gotten over the suspicions she had begun to view her friends with, but the thought of *Fluttershy* being so, ah, aggressive, was downright disturbing.

Fluttershy didn't push it, although Rainbow Dash could tell that she wanted to. After all, she hadn't quite gotten the hang of assertiveness yet. Rainbow Dash was taking advantage of that and they both knew it.

So all Fluttershy said was, "Well, okay," before quietly making an excuse to leave, much to Rainbow's relief.

Shortly afterwards, she, too, bolted.

...

Maybe Rainbow should've been alarmed by how easy it was to get herself to the alley, or at least by how little she cared when she saw that Mare Do Well already there. It wasn't that she was excited to see her, and it certainly wasn't that Dash was *happy* to see her, but

it also wasn't that Mare Do Well's appearance annoyed her or made her want to dash off. It was something in between. Maybe by this point, it was purely the familiarity that came with the routine the two of them shared. Even though Rainbow Dash was still angry about the night before, she couldn't help but feel a flutter in her stomach at the sight of the cape and cowl that wasn't wholly unpleasant.

"I knew you'd come back," Mare Do Well said once Rainbow Dash had descended. "You always have, no matter how much I tease you. I wonder why."

That was all it took for a sensation of overwhelming irritation to replace that not-unpleasant flutter.

"Desire for the last word, maybe?" Mare Do Well continued, oblivious to the scowl now lighting Rainbow Dash's face. "Or to finally get the better of me, perhaps?"

"Shut up," Dash muttered. She suddenly wanted to punch her again. On purpose, this time. "That's not why."

"Then why?"

"You're acting nastier than usual. You mad at me?" Rainbow Dash asked for some reason. She hadn't even realized that she'd been thinking it until the words flew out of her mouth, but they had the ring of truth to them.

"Oh, Celestia forbid," Mare Do Well answered sarcastically. "What reason could I possibly have to be upset with you?"

"Maybe you're sulking because you've gotten nowhere with me," Rainbow Dash challenged with a proud toss of her mane. "Maybe you're throwing a tantrum because you got rejected."

"Taking things slowly doesn't equate with getting rejected," Mare Do Well said lightly. "I told you that I'm patient. I don't mind waiting. And no matter what you say to the contrary, I *saw* how you responded to me yesterday."

"The wing thing?" Rainbow Dash clarified, trying to look apathetic, as though the answer didn't matter in the least and it didn't bother her to know that she was so easy to read.

She had asked Twilight about pegasus wings, since Fluttershy was the only other pegasus in Ponyville that Rainbow was especially close to and she'd been too embarrassed to answer. Rainbow Dash had gotten a long, boring lecture about something called

erogenous zones as a reward. Although she'd sort of intuitively figured that her wings were probably especially sensitive, Dash hadn't realized the full extent of which *or* how different movements could mean anything deep aside from instinctive and automatic reactions. But the long and short of it, according to Twilight, was that Mare Do Well had been right in her interpretations of what they meant.

"The wing thing," Mare Do Well agreed. "I believe a less sophisticated pony would refer to it as a wingbo... but no," she caught herself. She gave an artistic little twirl, sending her cape swirling around her before stopping and giving something like a curtsy. "I am a classy mare, as you have undoubtedly picked up from my manner of speaking and dress. I won't stoop to such crude terminology, not for something as natural and beautiful as what your wings do when you're not paying attention."

Mare Do Well paused, and her hooves flew to her chest, clasping somewhere over her heart. "Oh, my!" she cried in mock terror. "Sophistication? Class? *Crude*? Who does *that* sound like?"

Ignoring the implication behind the mare's words – (*just messing with me...*) – Rainbow Dash cut to the chase. "You asked if I wanted to spend the night with you. What would that mean, exactly?"

At once, a sudden shift in Mare Do Well's attitude. All traces of sarcasm vanished, and she seemed to straighten, becoming more serious. It had been a casual question, but judging from Mare Do Well's reaction, it meant more than Rainbow Dash had initially thought.

"It would mean agreeing to let me show you a glimpse of the world I've created for myself," she answered in her poetic way. A way that anypony else would've referred to as *pretentious*. "Trusting me to guide you through –"

"So..." Rainbow Dash cut in, waving her hoof in a small circular motion as a way of saying *get on with it*.

"You'd follow me while I do my patrol and help me beat up any criminals we find. If you want to, that is."

Dash frowned. She had that restless feeling again, tail swishing nervously in reflection of her uneasiness.

"No touching," Rainbow Dash said after a moment's consideration. "No invading my personal space, and no flirting. No innuendos. And if you get all weird on me, I'm outta here."

"Got it. Nothing too forward. Just bonding of the emotional variety."

"That's so cheesy," Dash couldn't help but point out.

"Well, what would *you* call it, *Dashie*?" Mare Do Well challenged.

Rainbow Dash flinched at the casual use of the nickname. Only Pinkie Pie called her that, but she didn't want to say anything that would let Mare Do Well know how it made her squirm. If Rainbow let on just how much it bothered her, the mare would probably revel in using it as often as possible. But it sounded surprisingly intimate coming from Mare Do Well; it undid something in the pegasus, loosening something tight and knotted in her chest.

"I'm not asking this because I want to hang out with you or because I'm starting to like you or anything," Rainbow Dash felt the need to clarify. "I was just thinking that it would be pretty cool to go fight crime and stuff. I mean, most of the time, I just stop accidents or whatever. I've never battled actual criminals before."

"I'm honored," Mare Do Well said sweetly, this time with a little bow. "Is that a yes, then? You want to come with me?"

There was a note of urgency as she spoke.

"...I... guess so." Rainbow Dash said at last, still hesitant. "Just this one time, though. And if it turns out to be lame, or if you start creeping on me, I'm gone."

"Of course."

"Promise not to be weird about this. Swear it."

"You have my word –"

"No." Rainbow Dash interrupted in a flash of inspiration. "*Pinkie* Swear it."

Mare Do Well stared at her.

"You can't be serious," she finally said. "You don't actually expect me to –"



"What, are you chicken?" Rainbow challenged in her very best double-dare voice.

"No!" Mare Do Well snapped back, a little defensively. "I just don't want to."

"Suck it up or I leave right now."

Mare Do Well was silent, but eventually heaved a deep, put-upon sigh. "Cross my heart and hope to fly..." she began.

"Do the motions too," Dash cut in.

There was another beat of silence.

"Why are you making me do this?"

"Just do it."

"C-cross my heart and hope to fly..." Mare Do Well began again, voice shaking a little with obvious distaste. Her mask betrayed no emotion, but her grimace was almost audible; yet she obediently complied, complete with the little hoof motions, crossing her chest and gesturing towards her eye. "Stick a cupcake in my eye."

"Heh," Rainbow Dash said with a satisfied grin. She felt a little giddy with her successful display of power. "And *what* is it that you swear?"

"To not creep on you while we're patrolling," Mare Do Well promised reluctantly, only to add, "but that might be difficult."

"Stop!" Rainbow Dash shouted, hooves flying to her ears to block out the sound of her voice. "Don't even start! I said *yes*, don't make me turn tail *now*!"

"I only swore to leave you alone *while we patrol*. Can't I have a *little* fun until then?"

"No! We're starting now. *No more*."

"All right," Mare Do Well said instantly. "Follow me."

• • •

Mare Do Well moved fast. Not so fast that Rainbow Dash couldn't maintain her flying speed, of course, but she was still unsettlingly quick. Agile, too. Rainbow had admired this before, but now this agility was on full display for her. She was like a cat, lithe and

nimble and always able to manage a perfect landing. It wasn't grace, exactly, but there was something fluid about her every step. She never seemed to tire, didn't once pause to pant and catch her breath. Rainbow Dash wasn't flying even close to her full speed, but she was still going pretty fast – yet Mare Do Well had no trouble keeping up the pace.

Mare Do Well didn't speak. She just ran, jumping across rooftops and balconies, cape spreading wide every time she sprung into the air, like a pair of outstretched wings. Every once in a while she turned to glance behind her, as if to ensure that Rainbow Dash was still following. She was.

Finally, Mare Do Well stopped.

"Okay," the mare said with barely contained excitement. Was this really such a big deal to her? "So, from what I can tell, this place is being used as some kind of hideout for a small-time crime ring or something. All kinds of sketchy characters come and go during the night. I've been watching it for a while now, and pretty much every week these guys make plans to pull some kind of major heist. They have one planned for tonight again."

"Where?"

"Quills and Sofas."

"A major heist at *Quills and Sofas*?" Rainbow Dash asked, disbelieving.

"Don't laugh. Quills are a lucrative business in a town where somepony like Twilight Sparkle is librarian. Can't say for sure about the sofas, though."

Rainbow Dash snorted in spite of herself. Mare Do Well flashed her a look. It might've been a grin, and probably *was*, but the pegasus had no way of knowing.

"Ready?"

"Yeah!" Rainbow shouted, again despite herself. She could feel that rush of adrenaline that always came before performing a new stunt. Whatever they were about to do, she was getting pumped for it.

They had stopped on the edge of a roof overlooking the road; across the street was a small, rundown, warehouse-like shack that looked deserted, with all the windows in sight boarded up. Rainbow Dash had never been in this part of Ponyville before. It was right on the outskirts, and had an air of spookiness hanging about.

Mare Do Well's cape was fluttering in the wind that had just picked up. "They'll leave any minute. It's always right around now," she mumbled, more to herself than Rainbow Dash. "Then –"

But the masked mare didn't get a chance to finish her thought. A cart had pulled out of the warehouse, led by a pegasus and carrying two unicorn passengers. Their heads were bowed as they leaned in to whisper together about something, but Rainbow Dash couldn't make out what they were saying. Their voices were too low.

"So you think they're gonna try and rob that sofa place?" Rainbow Dash asked, still a little doubtful, even as she folded her wings in preparation of imminent flight.

"Don't *think*. *Know*. Like I said, they do this almost every week and they aren't that sneaky about it. They've already been arrested a couple of times, but this one is personal. I'm friends with the manager and I'm not about to let anything happen to his business on *my* watch."

"Friends with – ?"

Before she could finish her question, Mare Do Well had sprung, catching Dash off guard. Immediately afterward, Rainbow Dash followed, propelling herself into the air and diving after the mare.

Mare Do Well came down hard on the wagon, prompting angry cries of surprise from the passengers.

"What the hay?!" one of them shouted. "Who..."

"It's Mare Do Well!" his quicker-thinking friend yelped.

"*Who?*"

The stallion pulling the cart came to an abrupt halt, giving the wagon itself a jolt and sending the passengers flying along with the contents of the wagon: a collection of empty burlap sacks. *Oh, wow*, Rainbow Dash thought. *They probably couldn't be more obvious if they tried.*

"We weren't doin' nothing!" one of the unicorns cried, already cowering. "Honest! J-just going for a midnight ride, ha ha!"

"What about the sofa place?" the slower one asked, earning himself a swat on the head from his companion. "Ow," he grumbled.

Despite the sudden shift in the wagon, Mare Do Well had kept steady, unlike the riders who had been thrown so unceremoniously forward. As the two unicorns scrambled upright, she sprung.

Rainbow Dash half wanted to leap into the fray herself. After all, that was why she'd wanted to come in the first place. Living the dream and all that.

But she couldn't seem to find a way to jump in.

It wasn't that she was scared or uncertain. After all, she was completely confident in her ability to kick the flanks of these guys. It was just that... it would've felt like an interruption.

Whatever else Mare Do Well was, she *did* have a strange kind of grace in her movements, no matter what Rainbow had thought before. Every motion was smooth, like a practiced dancer performing a choreographed routine.

So instead, Rainbow watched from the side with mingled awe and jealousy. *How is she so much better than me?* she screamed internally, face burning as she observed from above.

She was too busy watching to notice that the pegasus who had been pulling the cart had left the group.

There were thumps and thuds and angry shouts as the ponies below fought. No matter what Mare Do Well had said about the whole superhero thing being an act, at this moment, Mare Do Well sure *looked* the part, like somepony straight out of one of the comic books Rainbow Dash used to read.

There was a sickening crack as one of the unicorns was roughly bucked into the side of the wagon and he slumped against the edge, groaning as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. The other unicorn lunged forward while Mare Do Well's back was turned, tackling her, but she easily kicked him off, sending him slamming into the side as well.

Rainbow Dash was about to swoop down and join the mare when she felt somepony yank on her wings. With a cry of pain Dash whirled around, and saw the pegasus – huge and growling angrily from somewhere deep in his throat – as he slammed his hooves into her side, trying to knock Rainbow out of the air.

"What the hay?" Rainbow Dash shouted, bracing herself. "Back off, buddy!"

But he lunged forward again, gripping her shoulders and trying to wrestle her down. Dash wasted no time in swinging her hoof forward, albeit blindly, cracking against his skull in the most satisfying way. She might've been a lightweight in one sense of the word, but she was scrappy and utterly confident in her capabilities. With another animalistic growl he threw himself forward, but Rainbow slipped out of his grasp, shooting straight into the air. By the time he'd realized that she'd moved, Rainbow Dash was already behind him, legs aimed squarely at the back of his head as she charged forward.

He fell out of the air and landed on the ground with a thud. He didn't rise, his only movement being the twitching of his wings.

Three unconscious stallions and an overturned wagon littered the ground, and Mare Do Well silently eyed the spectacle laid before her. She lifted her head only when Rainbow Dash was before her.

"That was *so awesome!*" Rainbow Dash shrieked, eyes alight and forelegs thrown open in excitement. "That was, like, the coolest thing ever! Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh, *ohmygosh!* Do you seriously do that every week? Why not *every day?*"

"Did, did you really think that was cool?" Mare Do Well asked, sounding uncertain, but a little excited as well.

"*Heck yes*, that was cool!" Rainbow shouted, swooping forward, all the resentment that she held towards Mare Do Well temporarily forgotten. "How do –"

"Hey!" a voice rasped, and both Rainbow Dash and Mare Do Well simultaneously turned to face the source. One of the unicorns that they'd presumed unconscious was staggering towards them, horn illuminated with an orange glow.

"I remember you," he said with a mean grin. "Wonderbolts fan. Haven't seen you in a while, rainbow. Wouldn't forget a mane like that. Bit unusual."

In a flash Rainbow Dash was back in the alley on the night that she'd first seen Mare Do Well, alone with the unicorn who'd tried snatching her saddlebags. She knew that he had no way of knowing her name and probably only called her "rainbow" because of her hair, but still, her eyes automatically widened, and she felt a thrill of panic that she hadn't felt even when fighting off the pegasus and didn't completely know why she felt now.

Mare Do Well stepped between them, and the stallion chuckled darkly.

"I remember you, too, now that I think about it," he added, nodding to the mare. "You two together now? That's adorable."

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to speak, but there was a rush of orange light and a horrible crack, and then everything was hideous, blinding pain. She thought she heard a scream, but the pain was so horrific that she couldn't tell if it came from her or somepony else, and then she was on the ground and everything was black.

• • •

Somepony was speaking.

"I'm sorry," they were saying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Rainbow Dash opened her eyes, slowly and reluctantly.

She was on her back, lying in the street. The road felt gritty, and her wings were stiff. She tried to fold them, to test them, but little crackles of pain kept her from moving them more than an inch or so.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the voice continued to say. No, not say. Cry? "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

With a groan, Rainbow forced herself upright. Only now did she notice the way her wings hung limply at her sides, sloppily bandaged with strips of white cloth. Mare Do Well was huddled beside her, seemingly attempting to shrink into her costume with the way her cape was pooling around her.

*She* was the one crying.

"Rainbow Dash!" Mare Do Well sobbed when the pegasus sat up. "Y-you're okay!"

"What..." Rainbow Dash began, and then she felt somepony fly into her. Mare Do Well grabbed her in a fierce hug, forelegs wrapping tightly around her middle.

"I'm so sorry!" she gasped. "It's my fault, I'm so –"

"Sorry for what?" Dash asked.

For some reason, she wasn't pushing the mare away.

When Rainbow had heard Mare Do Well drop the huskier voice that she usually affected, it had immediately sounded familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. Now, the shape of her body against her own again immediately felt familiar in that old nagging way, although Dash still couldn't figure out how.

"H-he went right for your wings. I wasn't expecting that. He just used his magic to twist them and t-they just *broke* and I could *hear* it happen! I, I tried to wrap them, but I..." Mare Do Well's voice trailed off and she pulled herself off Rainbow Dash enough to gesture helplessly at the poorly bandaged blue wings. "I don't really know a lot about things like that, and I didn't do a great job."

It took a moment for the mare's words to sink in, but by the time they did, Mare Do Well was crying again.

"I'm so stupid!" Mare Do Well whimpered. "I w-wanted to look cool for you, but I didn't even *think* about how you could get hurt. I just messed everything up like always," she added miserably.

The reality of what had happened that night was gradually beginning to dawn on Rainbow Dash.

"Whoa!" Rainbow shouted. "We, we just... we totally beat the hay out of those guys! Can't *we* get arrested for that? And, and, my *wings*... *what?*!"

"They won't go to the police about us," Mare Do Well mumbled. "I told you. They do that a lot and have already gotten arrested a few times, and besides, it's embarrassing for them. Rainbow Dash, I'm so sorry," she continued weakly. "W-what if you can't fly properly anymore? Or what if you can't help bring in winter, and, and –"

"Hey, calm down," Rainbow Dash broke in. "I get banged up all the time. No biggie. Just wait, in a week I'll be back in the air."

Mare Do Well sniffed.

"And who even cares if I can't help with winter this year? It was late enough already. I'll just work extra hard at Winter Wrap-Up for once to make up for it. And don't keep apologizing. It's not like *you* did it."

"I should've protected you," Mare Do Well said softly. "I'm supposed to be acting like an awesome superhero and I just keep messing up."

"How've you been messing up?" Rainbow slowly asked, curious.

Rainbow Dash was referring to the way the mare had been fighting before, because at the time, Mare Do Well had seemed like a genuine vigilante, despite what she'd said about it all being an act – but the mare seemed to misunderstand.

"Like yesterday. I went too far, I always do. But you... you're being so *nice* right now! You hate me, why are you being so *nice*?" Mare Do Well wailed.

"Went too far?" Dash repeated. "I thought you were *trying* to make me mad."

Mare Do Well shook her head, and another muffled sob escaped. "N-no. Well, not most of the time. It's complicated and I was upset, but... but I don't *want* you to hate me. I don't think, I just *act*. I have no idea what I'm doing," she confessed.

"Yes you do," Rainbow Dash said stupidly. She was still on the ground, propped up on her elbows as the trembling and tearful Mare Do Well leered over her. "You've... you've been doing it on purpose. To mess with me."

"No!" Mare Do Well practically shouted. "I mean, no, not on *purpose*! I just... I've been making it all up as I go. It's all spur of the moment. I've been trying to keep you interested so that you'll come back and I'll get to see you because I'm s-scared that you'll get bored and I'll lose you."

If Mare Do Well was telling the truth, then she *didn't* come to the alley every night because she knew Dash would show up. She came because she *prayed* Dash would.

Rainbow Dash had never, for even one moment, suspected that Mare Do Well had been genuine in her repeated declarations of love. She'd been flirtatious – and had admittedly been very, very good at turning Dash on against her will – but Rainbow had never thought that Mare Do Well might have actually meant anything she said. Now, though, the mare was speaking with such raw feeling that Rainbow Dash could feel a surge of something indefinable rising in her chest. Pity, maybe, or at least sympathy.

"I –" Rainbow Dash began, and her words caught in her throat. She tried again. "I –"

"I don't want to lose you," Mare Do Well said quietly. "I really like you."



Maybe it was an instinctual reaction due to her guilt, but the mare absently reached forward, tenderly stroking one of Rainbow Dash's broken wings. Her touch sent a wave of convulsions through Rainbow's entire body, causing her to shudder in a bizarre mix of pain and ecstasy.

"I'm sorry," Mare Do Well quickly apologized, yanking back her hoof like a foal who'd accidentally touched a hot stove. "Did I hurt you?"

*Yes and no.* Rainbow Dash could only pant. The caress had hurt like a million shards of glass, but at the same time, had also felt like... like...

Her mind flashed back to the library, and Twilight's explanation of the wing thing. *An area of the pegasus anatomy with heightened sensitivity, the stimulation of which...*

Yes.

"I really like you," Mare Do Well repeated, with none of the coyness from their earlier meetings. Just absolute, heartfelt sincerity. Just softness. Just gentle coaxing. Wait, *coaxing*? Why was she trying to be coaxing?

A leg hooked around Rainbow's waist. Mare Do Well slid into position, straddling Rainbow Dash's hips and leaning forward.

"I know that I've given you a million reasons to hate me, but I want to give you just as many reasons to love me. That's all I've ever wanted," the mare whispered. A hoof garbed in black found its way to Rainbow Dash's rough, shaggy mane, stroking it as gently as one would pet a beloved cat. "Do you think you could ever do that?"

"...Maybe?" Dash squeaked.

She didn't know what she was saying. All she knew was that the hooves were so gentle, and were touching all the right places, reducing her to a quivering mess.

"If I was gonna, I dunno, let you kiss me or something, how would that work?" Rainbow Dash managed to stutter. "Cuz, cuz you don't want me to know who you are, and you'd have to take off your mask-hood thing."

"I'd figure something out."

"M-maybe..." Dash began.

Then she stopped.

"No!" Rainbow shouted, suddenly struggling, writhing beneath Mare Do Well. "No, get *off* me! What's wrong with you? You promised no creeping!"

"But you liked it," Mare Do Well protested, a trace of that old slyness finding its way back into her voice.

"Oh, for – you've been making fun of me this whole time!" Rainbow Dash exploded. For the first time she noticed a smear of something dark on Mare Do Well's violet suit. Blood? From who? Oh, no. Not – "I can't believe I actually felt sorry for you! I was right, you're just a freaking pervert or something! You've been faking it this whole time! I, I bet you weren't even really *crying*! Maybe *you* broke my wings, just so I'd be all vulnerable and feel bad for you and how *guilty* you felt, *boo-hoo*!"

"I wouldn't do that," Mare Do Well answered stiffly. "For any reason."

"How do I even *know*?" Rainbow Dash barked. She'd freed herself from Mare Do Well's hold and was now standing, but Mare Do Well remained sitting on her haunches on the ground, quietly looking up at her.

"Because I love you."

There it was. That word again. The word that had the power to completely destroy any rational thought Rainbow Dash may have possessed, but only when it fell from certain mouths.

"I just... *why*?" Rainbow Dash asked, rubbing her forehead in frustration. "Why do you even like me in the first place?"

"I don't know," Mare Do Well replied humbly. "I just do. And I want to be with you, so I'll use any excuse I can find to spend time with you. I'm not just trying to seduce you; it's not like that. But I like holding you, too. I like knowing that I have that effect on you and that I have the power to make you feel that way."

"Well, *I* hate it," the pegasus snarled. "And you're just... just... just *unbelievably* obnoxious, you know that? I won't lie, it's kinda hot when you're pushy, but it's also *annoying*. I like being the one in charge, and I *hate* feeling like somepony else can control me so easily. And I *know* it's not even real! You've told me so over and over again, that you're playing this dumb part because you feel safer pretending to be somepony else. But maybe I'd *like* the real you, ever think of that?"

"You *don't* like me, though," Mare Do Well said softly. "You *don't*. That's why I wanted to try being somepony new for a while."

"Well, you don't know that for sure, do you?"

"I do."

The firmness of the response caught Rainbow Dash off guard, and she remembered Applejack's advice – to try and figure out who would *want* to be Mare Do Well, rather than who Mare Do Well could possibly be. If Mare Do Well wanted to keep her identity a secret so badly, there must be a reason, but it seemed like this was much more than the simple bashfulness that came with a crush.

"Did I... did I reject you, or something?" Rainbow Dash asked carefully.

She liked to joke about being a heartbreaker, but she *had* heard quite a few confessions and gone out with quite a few ponies. She'd never dated anypony seriously, though, never letting the relationship go beyond playing. It was always just fooling around, and Rainbow had always made it clear that it was just for fun, and to not expect any kind of long-term commitment. Dash had never stopped to consider whether anypony had ever been seriously hurt when she moved on.

But Rainbow Dash had never done so with a friend before, and if Mare Do Well was really some pathetically heartbroken stalker, then that meant Dash been going about this wrong the whole time. And suddenly everything that had happened between them took on a much more disturbing tone.

"No," Mare Do Well said, interrupting Rainbow's train of thought. "You've never specifically turned me down. But trust me. You would."

"Whatever," Rainbow Dash muttered. She was exhausted all of a sudden, and didn't want to deal with any more craziness that night. She just wanted to go home – only if she couldn't fly, then how was she supposed to get home? Where was she supposed to *sleep*? Not here in the street. That had *bad idea* written all over it.

"I'm going," Rainbow said icily. "I'll go to Fluttershy's or something. Don't follow me. Don't try and help me any more, either. And for the record, when you act normal – like when you get excited or happy or sad for whatever reason – *that's* when I start to feel like I could like you. Like when we watched the sunrise? I kind of liked that. Just a tip."

Rainbow Dash left, picking up speed from a trot to a run just to get out of there as fast as possible. Mare Do Well made no response, made no attempt to follow her. When Rainbow turned back just once, just to see, the mare was already gone.

The sleepover was Twilight Sparkle's idea, even though Rarity was the one who ended up hosting it, the logic being that there was nothing that couldn't be solved with the magic of friendship. Twilight seemed convinced that all it would take to lift her friend's spirits would be a night of girly bonding, something that she'd most likely read in that slumber party handbook of hers, and since everypony she knew seemed a little off lately, the unicorn naturally wanted to try and do her part to help things.

They'd gathered at Carousel Boutique. Twilight's library had naturally been the first choice for a location, since Spike was still in Canterlot on some sort of ambiguous *royal business* that the unicorn refused to elaborate on, leaving it empty for their use, but Twilight was insistent that they go somewhere *other* than the library for once to make things fair. Rainbow Dash's cloud house was out of the question for obvious reasons, since Twilight couldn't really be expected to spend an hour performing the cloud-walking charm on each and every one of them for something as mundane as a sleepover. The Cakes were adamant that Pinkie Pie was not to have free reign over the bakery and its stock anymore after what had happened *last time*, but refused to go into detail. Pinkie, however, acquiesced that they were probably right. Rarity firmly refused to sleep in a barn or among Fluttershy's pets, since many of the animals had to be taken in for the winter and she wouldn't be able to relax among so many critters, at last graciously offering the use of her store.

Twilight hadn't quite gotten the hang of slumber parties yet and still needed her old manual on how to have fun before she felt comfortable with them doing anything, but with the guidance provided by said instructions and the patience of her friends, they managed to get through s'mores, ghost stories, and makeovers without any major disasters.

Like the Pony Pet Playdate the day before, Rainbow Dash wasn't really focused on what she was doing. Her mind was elsewhere, and even though she faked enthusiasm and participated as eagerly as she could in all the activities the purple unicorn goaded them into, Dash still fumed quietly.

It was like she needed to do everything possible to keep busy. If she didn't, if she stopped moving for even a moment, her mind would wander to less pleasant thoughts. And then Rainbow would find herself remembering the thrill in her stomach that had come, unbidden, when a certain somepony had straddled her waist. Or the shiver that had crawled up her spine at the oddly intimate-feeling caress on her wings. Or the unexpected rush of sympathy Rainbow Dash had felt when Mare Do Well's voice broke,

thick with tears shed for her sake alone. All feelings that Rainbow Dash didn't want to feel and memories that she didn't want to have, if only because of the way the anger she'd later felt wanted to overshadow them; so the pegasus did her best to ignore them, hoping they'd go away.

Rainbow Dash submitted to the makeovers Rarity forced on them all, even succumbing to having her mane combed for once, but flinched at every touch. As the brush ran through her hair, all she could think of was the way it had felt to have those gentle hooves stroking it, more lovingly than she'd ever been touched before in her entire life.

If Dash was being uncharacteristically still, nopony mentioned it. They were all being unusually understanding, most likely because they were chalking up any changes in her attitude to the fact that Rainbow was still recovering. Rainbow Dash had managed to avoid all questions about her wings by attributing the injury to some vague accident, and although Dash had never actually *broken* them before, she'd been hurt in some way or another often enough for her story to seem plausible, and Fluttershy had dutifully tended to them the way Rainbow Dash had known she would.

Immediately after leaving Mare Do Well, she'd gone to Fluttershy's, just as promised. Fluttershy had been all business, immediately removing the sloppy bandages from before and setting her wings properly, giving them fresh dressings. Rainbow Dash had almost been sick when she'd first seen her poor, twisted, mangled blue wings without the protective cover of the white strips, but Fluttershy didn't even flinch.

After that, the weekend came and went, and Dash was grounded the whole time. It was horrible.

The first snow had arrived, blanketing the ground in a carpet of white, and Rainbow Dash had had no part in it. She couldn't fly among the swirling flakes the way she so longed to. But *that* wasn't the worst part.

Despite what she'd said to Mare Do Well, Rainbow had actually gone *back*. She didn't know why, but the very next night, right on schedule, Dash had made her way back to the empty alley and waited. But not even *that*, the utter destruction of what little self-respect Rainbow Dash had left, was the worst part.

The worst part was that even though Rainbow had waited, pacing impatiently all night long, Mare Do Well never came. The next day, when the mail arrived, there was nothing unexpected in it. No explanatory notes or cryptic messages like Rainbow Dash had

expected to receive by way of apology. No red carnations. And that night, yet again, Mare Do Well still didn't come.

It was funny, the things your mind could do to you. Rainbow Dash had been convinced that all she'd wanted was to be left alone, but now that Mare Do Well had actually disappeared, she felt unexpectedly lost. Maybe because she'd gotten so used to the nightly meetings that any interruption to routine was seen as unwanted. Maybe because there was no explanation offered – the mare had just up and gone, leaving a very confused pegasus in her wake. It was inconsiderate, really, to play with somepony and lead them along for so long, and then to just take off without even a farewell. Who did Mare Do Well think she was?

After the third night Rainbow stopped waiting, and that was when Twilight had the idea for the sleepover.

Dash had told Mare Do Well not to follow her and not to try and help her, but she'd never told her to go away. She might have said it *before*, in one of their *other* meetings, but she hadn't really *meant* it. And since when had Mare Do Well ever done what Rainbow Dash wanted, anyway? Rainbow had told her dozens of times to leave her alone and not to creep, and the mare still groped her every chance she got. Well, she *had*, back when she'd bothered to show her face. Or... mask. Whatever.

*Because I love you*, Mare Do Well had said. Well, fine. That was just fine and dandy, and *totally logical*, considering her behavior. Because you *always* ran away and hid from the pony you claimed to love. You *always* ditched them for no reason at all, leaving them waiting in some random back street where they'd probably get murdered any second because criminals were always wandering around there apparently and they couldn't even fly away from any potential threats.

But Rainbow Dash had no reason to miss or sympathize with Mare Do Well, she had to remind herself again and again. Mare Do Well was obviously obsessive and unstable, and her absence was a blessing. Rainbow didn't want to see her, and she wasn't going to go back, ever. Life could finally get back to normal, the way she'd wanted it to for so long.

"Are you sure?" somepony asked.

"No," Rainbow Dash blurted.

"Huh?" Applejack asked, and suddenly Rainbow Dash snapped back to the present, to the slumber party where the six of them were seated in a makeshift circle. The room was

dark except for the flickering candlelight offered to them. Everypony was giving her odd looks.

"Oh, sorry. I zoned out," Rainbow Dash said quickly. "What's going on?"

"We're doing Truth or Dare, and Fluttershy chose Dare," Twilight explained helpfully. "So I was just asking if she was sure."

"Honestly, RD, how d'you miss that much? Have you been napping this whole time?" Applejack asked, sounding amused.

"Kinda. Heh."

"I told you. I'm trying to learn how to be more bold," Fluttershy said firmly, voice betraying none of the anxiety apparent on her face. "I want to be braver."

"Oh, *do* go easy on her, Twilight," Rarity stage-whispered with an urgent hiss.

"I have an idea!" Pinkie Pie screamed, jumping up and down. "Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! Choose me! Me! I've got a good one!"

"Um, I guess Pinkie can have my turn. I can't think of anything," Twilight offered. Fluttershy, though, looked visibly more panicked.

"Okay! I dare you –" And here, Pinkie Pie leapt onto her hind legs and waved a hoof, pointing at Fluttershy as she paused for dramatic effect. "To eat a *whole cupcake!*"

There was a beat.

"That's it?" Rainbow Dash couldn't help but ask. Fluttershy now looked relieved.

"At *once!*" Pinkie clarified. "In one big gulp."

"I, I, I don't know if I can..." the butter-yellow pegasus began to stammer.

"It's easy! You just gotta do *this!*"

Pinkie Pie then proceeded to give an extremely graphic and disturbingly improbable demonstration, earning cries of disgust from everypony present.

After Fluttershy almost choked in her valiant effort to follow suit, it was *her* turn, but she shook her head. "I pass," she said softly, face crimson.



Twilight Sparkle began to flip through the pages of her slumber party guide. "Can you do that?" she cried, alarmed. "Can you pass on turns? I know that I gave Pinkie mine, but, but I don't think you can just *skip*, can you?" She lifted her head and looked at each of her friends in turn as if to discern the answer from one of their faces.

"I reckon you can," Applejack offered.

"I GO NEXT!" Pinkie Pie shrieked. "Dare me! Truth me!"

"Pinkie can go," Fluttershy volunteered.

"It needs to be worded as a dare," Twilight said with a decisive nod. "*That* should be okay."

"I d-dare Pinkie Pie to take my turn."

"I must say, I don't believe this is how the game is played," Rarity interrupted. "Aren't you supposed to –"

"MY TURN!" Pinkie announced, still screeching. "And, hm, hm, hm... I choose... *Dashie!*"

Abruptly all eyes were on Rainbow Dash, who shrank a little beneath their gaze. "Dare," she said immediately. Rainbow always chose Dare in games like this. Truth was never a safe option, especially not for a pony with as many uncomfortable secrets as she seemed to have. Besides, she *never* backed away from a challenge, or a chance to show off. But Pinkie frowned, as if she didn't like that answer.

"Okay..." the pink pony said slowly, brow furrowing slightly. Then she grinned. "Okie dokie lokie, I dare you to *truthfully* answer *one* question!"

"No fair!" Rainbow Dash protested. "You can't do that!"

"You have to. The rules don't specifically cite dares like that as violations," Twilight said pointedly.

"Okay, fine, whatever," Rainbow sulked, crossing her forelegs over her chest as she pouted. "But you just missed a chance to watch the Dash in action as I performed *awesome* stunts for you. Your loss."

Bluster and blunder, that's all it was, just an act to hide how uncomfortable she suddenly felt. Pinkie's eyes always managed to take Rainbow Dash by surprise with how huge and

blue and sparkling they seemed, even though logically the pegasus knew that there was nothing distinctive about them from anypony else's eyes. But now, with them turned on her, Rainbow Dash felt incredibly tiny. Pinkie Pie had a way of knowing things. If she wanted to, it would be very, very easy for her to ask something Rainbow Dash didn't want to share, but would be pressured to reveal.

Pinkie leaned forward from her place in the circle where she was seated on the floor on her haunches, pulling herself closer by her front legs as she leered at the pegasus. "Who do you have a *cruuuuush* on?" she singsonged, batting her eyelashes.

Applejack snorted a laugh, which she failed to hide by covering her mouth with a hoof. Fluttershy looked even more embarrassed than before. Rarity looked intrigued, and Twilight a little confused, but they were all looking right at her, waiting for an answer.

"Nopony," Rainbow Dash said automatically. For the first time, she actually felt grateful that her wings were currently useless. If they hadn't been wrapped at her sides, she knew, just *knew*, that they would've betrayed her embarrassment by flaring open.

"Aww, that's not true!" Pinkie Pie teased, prodding Rainbow Dash's side meaningfully. "C'mon, Dashie, you gotta tell the *Truth*, remember?"

"Nopony!" Rainbow Dash repeated, a little louder this time, ignoring the heat she felt in her cheeks. "What kind of question is that, anyway?"

"If she won't answer truthfully, you have to give her a Dare as an alternative, or else she loses," Twilight reported, ignoring Rainbow Dash's feeble protests. Apparently the fact that this had all started with Rainbow Dash choosing Dare in the first place had been forgotten.

Pinkie sighed in an exaggeratedly put-upon way, before giggling and rolling her eyes. "Okay, fine. Um, um, um..." Her hooves flew to her chin, cupping her face. She swayed from side to side in rhythmic thought before declaring, "I dare you to kiss somepony in the room *right now*!"

"Oooh!" Twilight chimed in. Applejack was openly snickering now, making no attempt to hide it. Fluttershy was hiding behind Rarity, who looked simultaneously scandalized and delighted by the shocking turn of events.

Rainbow Dash never turned down a challenge. For any reason. And she wasn't going to throw away a potential victory, no matter how small, over something as inconsequential as her *pride*.

*Who would this be the least weird for?* she thought, sweating, gaze sweeping over her friends.

Fluttershy. Fluttershy was physically closest, and they'd been friends the longest. So Dash ducked forward, eyes screwed shut, and gave the yellow pegasus a quick peck on the cheek. Fluttershy gasped.

"Thanks for fixing up my wings," Rainbow Dash mumbled. Just to make it clear that there was nothing deep behind it. The kiss was completely platonic.

"It's fine," Fluttershy squeaked in response, but her hooves were over her face, hiding the expression she wore. "Friends, um, do that. For friends."

Rainbow Dash could hear giggling from the others, but she kept her gaze fixed on the floor. She didn't want to look at anypony, least of all Pinkie. She could feel their stares and that was enough.

"Okay, Applesmack!" Rainbow said loudly. "You think that's so funny? Well, you're next! Truth or Dare?"

After they'd finished their game, which had climaxed in a series of Dares with escalating levels of ridiculousness, the Truth option all but forgotten, Rarity finally insisted that they blow out the lights so that she could get her much-needed beauty sleep.

They ended up scattered across the boutique. Rarity had generously offered the use of her bed, but since nopony wanted to take it while the others were on the floor, they all ended up sleeping somewhere in her work room. It felt odd to sleep so close to the ground. Rainbow Dash was used to the feel of the pleasant vertigo that came with looking down and realizing how far up she was when she drifted off to sleep.

Although the others seemed to fall asleep easily, Rainbow Dash stayed wide awake, growing more and more alert as time went by. Her body was used to this disrupted cycle by now and was expecting her to get up and head across town any moment now. But she wouldn't. Not tonight. Tonight, Dash would stay put. Because even if she wanted to, there wouldn't be anypony there.

• • •

The storm came quickly, taking everypony by surprise. The initial Ponyville snowfall had been late for this exact reason; a wild storm had been spotted in the Everfree Forest, where natural magic ran rampant, and the weather pegasi had wanted to dispose of the

stray clouds before they could drift over to Ponyville and cause any trouble. But although the weather team managed to hold off most of the clouds, there were always exceptions, always a possibility for error, and this was one of those times.

The remaining clouds went unnoticed at first, and later on, most of the blame had fallen on the grey, cross-eyed mare who'd first spotted them. She wasn't a member of the weather team – she delivered mail, or something like that – but all the same, she'd dutifully reported the clouds upon first seeing them, just like she was supposed to. Yet her loopy flight pattern, unintelligible directions, and just plain bizarre way of speaking had confused them all, delaying the crew by quite some time.

It began like any other snow. A sudden chill to the air, a crisp wind sending the swirling flakes dancing, the gradual coating of the ground in an even thicker carpet of white. Most of the villagers had just assumed that the weather pegasi had gotten the schedule mixed up somehow and quietly began to make preparations, digging out their boots and scarves and stocking their fireplaces. It wasn't a big deal; many of the ponies had suspected that the weather team was going to throw together a big storm sometime soon to make up for how late the first fall had been, and came to the understandable conclusion that this was it.

But this wasn't just another storm – something nopony realized at first. It was a *wild* storm, out of control and unpredictable. As hard as the weather team tried to hold it back, the stray clouds were too heavy with snow, the winds too strong, and in the end, they came to an agreement – it was too late, and the storm couldn't be pushed away. All they could do was warn the village to prepare for the upcoming blizzard as they themselves began to prepare for the cleanup that would come afterwards.

The cold became more and more bitter, the wind grew sharper than a knife, and the snow continued to fall, so thick that the streets were soon laid with deep, cumbersome drifts that were almost impossible to walk through without sinking to your haunches. Most of the pegasi took to the skies, returning to Cloudsdale where they would be safe from the coming storm. Those without wings merely retreated to their individual homes, blocking the doors and choosing to forget the weather as they settled in by the warm glows of their fireplaces. Most of the weather patrol returned to Cloudsdale as well so that they could begin to organize the massive cleanup job that would be needed once the skies were cleared, but there were a few that stayed behind, descending to the village to make sure nopony ended up trapped in the steadily worsening blizzard.

One of the pegasi who stayed behind happened to be Equestria's best young flier, a sky-blue pegasus with a technicolor mane who would never leave Ponyville hanging, no

matter what. Who would never have let a storm like this grow on her watch, but for whom a recent injury meant that she had no say in the matter and no choice as to where she would be when the storm broke. Which may have had something to do with how Rainbow Dash ended up stranded alone in a snow bank while the winds howled all around her.

Rainbow Dash was not one to abandon a pony in need, and returning to Cloudsdale with the others had only seemed like cowardice. If that had been an option for her, she would have refused it. But since she couldn't fly at the moment and hadn't been able to help with the storm itself, she went for the next best thing, heading into the fray with the others who'd stayed behind.

Ignoring the shrieking winds and flurries had been easy as long as Dash had known that there might have been somepony *else* out there who still needed help finding shelter to wait out the freezing weather in. But once the streets were finally empty, save for her, the reality of the situation hit Rainbow Dash like a sharp slap in the face.

It was cold. Very, very cold.

She'd been so focused on making sure that nopony was trapped or injured that she hadn't once given thought to where *she* would go once she was through. And now, here Rainbow was in a snowdrift, trying to ignore the painful chill as the wind buffeted her face and the snow blew across the ground like fast-moving clouds. Sharp, stinging bits of ice hurled by the gusts slapped at her sides.

It was almost impossible to see through the blinding whiteness of it all. All Rainbow Dash could hear was the howling of the frigid wind and the muffled crunch of her hooves that sent little clods flying with every step as she trudged through the snow, fighting that damned frigid wind every step of the way.

*This probably wasn't the best idea I've ever had*, Rainbow thought grudgingly. She'd had this idea of being hailed as some sort of hero, courageously facing the blizzard head on and coming to everypony's salvation, but although she'd managed to guide a handful of lost ponies to shelter, Dash had been stupid enough to completely forget about finding somewhere to go herself, and now, here she was.

The possibility of frostbite crossed her mind, but Rainbow Dash immediately shrugged it off. There was no point in worrying about it. What she needed to do was get inside before she became some kind of Rainbow Popsicle. And besides, even if she'd been able

to use her wings, she doubted that she'd have been able to see well enough to make much use of them.

Weather pegasi were typically sturdier than most ponies, with the possible exception of workhorses, since they needed to be able to withstand all kinds of weather, but the truth was, Rainbow Dash didn't exactly fit into that mold. She was tough, sure – but in a sleek, agile kind of way. She was built for flying, not for braving a storm like this, and although Dash hated thinking of herself as somepony who would back down just because the odds were seemingly against her, she was finding herself doubting whether or not she'd be able to make it through this.

Rainbow Dash remembered the way she'd fallen asleep in the chilly alley before, only to wake up with Mare Do Well's cloak wrapped around her, but shook her head to clear her mind of such thoughts. If Mare Do Well was trying so hard to be a hero, then where was she *now*? If she was so determined to protect Rainbow Dash against her will, shouldn't she have been mysteriously appearing out of nowhere right about now to get the pegasus to safety? Not that Rainbow Dash needed help.

*I'm gonna die, I'm totally gonna die, I'm gonna freeze to death in the snow somewhere and it will be the least awesome death ever...*

She saw a light. Then, just as quickly, it was gone.

Rainbow's ears prickled slightly. For a moment, she'd thought she'd heard a voice, but it had fallen silent when the light vanished.

"–shie!"

There it was again.

Then she saw it. By stretching her neck and peering forward, Rainbow Dash managed to find the light again, even with the snow blustering all around. Just a bit further ahead, she was able to make out what appeared to be the looming grey silhouette of a house, and suddenly realized what the light must have been. A window.

Without stopping to think, Rainbow Dash broke into a run, ignoring the sharp stabbing pain that shot through her legs as she did so.

"Get your butt over here, Dashie!"

Although the sound was muffled by the wind, Rainbow Dash could now distinctly recognize the familiar high-pitched shriek for what it was, but that didn't make a difference, and Dash barreled forward, running as fast as her legs could carry her.

Rainbow Dash had misjudged her distance from the building that she could now positively identify as Sugarcube Corner, and would have charged smack into the door if somepony from inside hadn't anticipated this and thrown it open seconds before Dash made contact. Instead, the pegasus shot straight into the bakery itself like a lightning bolt, headfirst into a table with an enormous crash.

Normally, Rainbow would've immediately risen from embarrassment before trying to find a way to save face, but Rainbow Dash couldn't bring herself to care at the moment. Her entire body ached, chilled to the very bone as she was, and she'd suddenly been seized with uncontrollable shuddering, her teeth clattering like mad. Her frosted mane gleamed white at the tips, and her wings actually made sharp cracking noises when she tried to move them despite the bandages just to break the layer of frost that had settled on the feathers.

Still lying on the floor, Rainbow Dash curled as tightly as she could into herself amidst various cutlery, pots, and pieces of table, trying to regain some semblance of warmth.

"Oh, poor Dashie!" Pinkie Pie squealed, and suddenly Rainbow Dash was caught up in a fierce hug. She gasped in pain. "Poor, poor, poor Dashie, you're so cold, and you were stuck outside for so long, and now you're even bluer than you normally are! You're like a Rainbow Popsicle!"

Rainbow Dash's teeth were chattering too hard for her to mention that she'd thought that exact same thing, and the next thing she knew, Pinkie Pie had wrapped her in a thick quilt that she'd pulled out of nowhere and was herding her into a room somewhere in the back of the bakery.

"There!" Pinkie said happily, forcing Rainbow Dash onto the floor by the stove in the kitchen. "You stay here and get all roasty-toasty, and your Auntie Pinkie Pie will get you something hot and tasty to put in your belly!"

"J-j-j-just bec-c-c-ause y-y-you're older than me," Rainbow Dash stammered, teeth still chattering, even as the warmth of the stove began to envelop her. "D-d-d-doesn't mean y-y-y-you get t-t-t-o c-call yourself my *Auntie*."

But Pinkie Pie ignored her. She was busy fussing with something in another part of the kitchen where Rainbow Dash couldn't see, and Dash had no desire to move her head and look. The heat on her face felt way too good to turn away for even a second, and Rainbow found herself wrapping the quilt even tighter, snuggling deep into the folds.

Gradually, the chill began to seep away and the shuddering began to subside. Soon Rainbow Dash was nothing but a bundle of warmth. She sighed, deeply and contentedly.

*This is exactly what I needed.*

"Wow, I can't believe it's snowing this much," Dash muttered, glancing outside. The window in the kitchen had been sealed shut before the storm, preventing any of the chill from bleeding into the bakery, but she could still see way the snow and ice was coming down in sheets. She'd never seen a storm so crazy before; normally, the snow cooked up by the weather team was a delicate thing, each flake painstakingly hoofmade and crafted to utter perfection before being sprinkled across the land like diamond dust. What was happening outside the window was just a... mess.

"I know, isn't it great? We can make snow angels and snowponies and have snowball fights and catch snowflakes on our tongues and go sledding and skating and everything, and we don't even have to wait! Everything's so much cooler in winter..."

Pinkie sighed contentedly, and when the cyan pegasus turned to glance at her, she caught a glimpse of something rare: Pinkie Pie looking peaceful. Somehow the pink pony had sidled up beside Rainbow Dash without the pegasus even noticing. She wore an oddly serene smile on her lips as they watched the snow fall together, lapsing into silence.

Pinkie was so close. How had she gotten so close?

This moment of quiet, the two of them huddled together and basking in the glow of the stove, only lasted a few seconds before Pinkie Pie sprung to her hooves again.

"*OhmygoshIforgot!*" she gasped, jumping into the air like she'd just had one of her heart-stopping party ideas. "Oh, I'm such a silly filly Pinkie, how could I forget the most important part?!"

She was gone in a flash, and then, just as suddenly as she'd disappeared, Pinkie was back at Rainbow Dash's side, but this time with a steaming, sweet-smelling mug of hot chocolate balanced on her snout. She somehow managed to set it on the ground without spilling a drop before she slid it across the floor with a hoof.



"Thanks, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash said gratefully, eyeing the drink greedily before taking a deep, deep sip. It was delicious, and she could feel the warmth of the drink instantly begin to spread throughout her body, all the way to the bottom of her hooves and the very tips of her feathers.

While she drank, Pinkie sat beside her, uncharacteristically silent and staring up at her with an expectant look in her eyes, but once the mug of chocolate was empty, the pink pony leapt upright and clapped her hooves together in excitement.

"Oh, yay, I was so worried, Dashie! Because you were so cold and looked all sad and lonely out in the snow, but you'll be okay now, because what you just drank was the Pie Family's Super-Secret Best-Hot-Chocolate-In-The-World recipe that's *guaranteed* to bring a smile to your tummy!" Pinkie Pie sang, happily doing a funny little dance in circles around Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash grinned. Pinkie always managed to surprise her with how absolutely full of life she was. She was like a rocket of pure, unbridled pink energy, and was probably the only pony in all of Equestria that could keep up with the pegasus on any level, physical or otherwise.

Choosing to ignore the sudden sharp pain she felt in her chest, Rainbow Dash instead opted to focus on the mug that had once held hot chocolate sitting so tantalizingly before her.

"It'll bring a *smile* to my tummy?" Rainbow Dash repeated, smiling and trying to ignore the twist in her gut. "How does *that* work?"

"Why, you just gotta use the Super-Secret Best-Hot-Chocolate-In-The-World *ingredients*, of course! My Granny Pie taught me everything I *know* about making deliciously yummy hot chocolate, so I'm like the world expert, except for maybe my Granny Pie, who'd probably be the *first* world expert since she taught me after all, but I'm like expert number two, and two is more than one, so that means that I'm the very, very best at making hot chocolate and you're super-duper lucky to get to taste it!"

Pinkie Pie's words shot out at such a rapid, energetic pace that it almost made Rainbow Dash dizzy to listen. Normally Dash would've thought of something funny to say in response, or at least have made a joke about how random the pink pony could be, or *something*, but at the moment she was too drained to even try and fake it. So instead, Rainbow Dash snuggled deeper into the folds of the quilt, wondering why she suddenly felt so tired.

"Are you sleepy? Do you wanna go get all comfy on a nice big soft bed instead of on the bad hard floor?" Pinkie suddenly asked, popping into Rainbow Dash's sight from out of nowhere, her every curl bouncing about wildly as she hopped in place.

Rainbow couldn't be bothered to answer. The warmth of the stove felt so absolutely delicious that she could feel her eyelids growing heavier and heavier by the second. It didn't even matter anymore that she was sitting on the flour-covered floor of the Sugarcube Corner kitchen.

She couldn't say she minded very much. It was much, much better than dying of hypothermia, after all. And so, Dash found herself falling asleep.

• • •

When Rainbow Dash woke up, she was lying in bed. The bed was warm and soft – incredibly so, fluffy and squishy and almost as comfortable as a cloud. She was practically sinking into it, and groaned in pleasure, eyes still shut, as she burrowed deeper into the comforter draped over her.

She could feel somepony's warm breath as they leaned over her.

"Dashie? You awake yet?"

"Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash shrieked, her voice cracking into a shamefully high pitch. Suddenly she was fully conscious, quilt dropping unceremoniously onto the floor as she bolted upright. "What are you doing?!"

"I took you upstairs, duh, so you could sleep somewhere nice like in a bed all roasty-toasty until you felt better. Don't worry your pretty little rainbow head about it, Dashie, I'll take good care of you! And Gummy will, too, except that he's an alligator and alligators aren't very good doctors, *but don't tell him I said that*," the pink pony answered, the last bit added in a conspiratorial stage-whisper, even going so far as to cup her mouth with a hoof.

Rainbow Dash flushed and glanced away, choosing to sweep her gaze over the room instead of answering. It was exactly the same as always – candy patterned bedspread, party supplies scattered everywhere, an enormous stuffed teddy bear propped in a corner. She'd been in Pinkie's room countless times before, usually to plan pranks or to watch movies or just talk, but she'd never before been dragged up there while asleep after practically freezing to death.

"Um, yeah, thanks, but I don't need a doctor," Rainbow said quickly, feeling nervous. "I just needed to get warmed up somewhere, and I'm totally doing awesome now, so I'll just be going, okay?"

"But the doors are all snowed in," Pinkie said pointedly. "We can't open them."

Rainbow Dash hated it when Pinkie Pie was lucid. It was much easier to handle her when she wasn't being logical.

"I have a pegasus door, but it's all snowy and windy and shivery outside. And you can't even fly, right?" Pinkie continued pressingly. "But it's okay, you can stay here with me! The Cakes went home before the storm, and me and Gummy had the place all to ourselves and we were *sooo* totally lonely and sad, and Gummy was all *what are we gonna do?* and I was all *I don't even know!* But it'll be okay if you're here, because we can have a Yay-It's-Finally-Winter-And-Santa-Hooves-Is-Coming-Soon party, just for the two of us!"

"Um..." *Why does Pinkie even need a pegasus door in the first place?!* Rainbow Dash found herself wondering, unsure as to why it bothered her so much.

"Oh, *please* say yes!"

And then Pinkie Pie was looking up at Rainbow Dash with those enormous bright blue eyes of hers, the ones that Dash could never say no to and could probably have rivalled Fluttershy's infamous Stare. Before she knew it, Rainbow Dash was unwillingly sitting down, folding her legs beneath her so that she could sit on the covers.

"Heh... I, I guess I don't really have much of a choice. I mean, it's not like I have anywhere else to go, right?" Dash asked, trying to sound light-hearted about it, but the tightness in her chest remained, even as Pinkie's eyes shone at her, huge and happy.

"That makes me really, really happy, Dashie," Pinkie Pie said softly. She was still sitting on the bed with Rainbow Dash.

"That's... cool."

"Because... Dashie, I wanted to tell you something."

*Oh, no. Not now. Please don't do this. Not now.*

Pinkie Pie looked up at her through heavily-lidded eyes, grinning in a sultry way.

*Is she trying to look... sexy?*

The instant the thought entered her head, Rainbow Dash felt that familiar tingling warmth surge through her, and for a second time, she was grateful that her wings were bound.

Rainbow Dash was a growing pony, and like any healthy young mare, she had needs. So it wasn't *completely* unexpected that she would occasionally... *think* about her friends. She couldn't help it. It was only natural, when a pony had friends like those. But it was something Dash preferred to keep to herself, since things would almost certainly become awkward between them if any of them knew the way the pegasus checked them out when they weren't paying attention.

Twilight had the whole hot librarian thing going on, but although she made for nice eye candy, she was kind of boring. Serious and studious and never up for any fun. As for Rarity, Spike was right about her – she was gorgeous – but her haughty personality and obsessive need for control was a major turn-off. When Rainbow Dash had first met Applejack, she'd felt the *slightest* spark of interest, but upon actually getting to *know* the workhorse, any potential romantic feelings she might have felt quickly gave way to the heated rivalry the two of them now share – and Rainbow doubted that she really wanted to change that.

Fluttershy just plain terrified her. She was like some kind of living manifestation of purity and the very thought of sullying her with such lewd thoughts was unspeakable.

Pinkie Pie was something else entirely. She was like the embodiment of naive innocence, and like Fluttershy, it seemed dirty and wrong to think of her in that way – but she differed from Fluttershy in her love of fun and zany personality. Still, she was undeniably childish, like a filly in a grown mare's body.

"You're my best friend, Dashie," Pinkie Pie said. Her voice was all gentleness and sweetness, and Rainbow Dash couldn't move, even as Pinkie leaned in closer and closer. "And I really, really like you."

"Hey, I like you too, Pinks. I mean, you're *my* best friend too, right?" Dash answered, trying to laugh it off.

*Don't do this*, Rainbow Dash prayed. *Please don't. Just stop.*

"Not *that* kind of like, silly filly," Pinkie answered with a giggle.

*Oh, no.*

"You mean *K-I-S-S-I-N-G*?" Rainbow Dash squeaked. "The kissy face *smoochies* kind of like?"

And Pinkie Pie kissed her.

It was surprisingly chaste. She just leaned forward, eyes shut, and brushed her mouth against Rainbow's. When Dash didn't immediately push her away, Pinkie lingered, leaning forward a tiny bit more, pressing her lips a little firmer, with a little more intensity.

Rainbow Dash had sometimes wondered what Pinkie Pie would taste like. She'd always figured that after spending so much of her life eating sugar and baked goods, she'd probably taste sweet – and she did, in a way, but not the way Dash had expected. Rainbow had been picturing a solid, specific taste, like bubblegum or cotton candy, but there was no such discernible flavor when it actually happened.

Every instinct in Rainbow's body was screaming for her to get away *now now now*, but she couldn't. She was immobile. It had been unfair of Pinkie to do this to her now, when Dash was weak, unable to fly away and disoriented from having only just woken up. It was only when Rainbow Dash could feel Pinkie's forelegs sliding around her neck, to pull her closer, that the pegasus could move.

"Pinkie, please," Rainbow gasped, wrenching her mouth away. "Don't do this."

"Do what?" Pinkie Pie asked, still in that teasing way.

"Pinkie, I mean it. Stop."

Pinkie let go. She looked surprised. "What's wrong?" she asked, all innocence.

"I don't want it to be like this between us," Rainbow Dash answered. She spoke in a rush, to get the words out as fast as possible before she started to second guess them. She couldn't let herself hesitate. She needed to make it as clear as possible as *soon* as possible.

"Like..." Pinkie Pie began, then trailed off. "What do you mean?"

"Pinkie, I'm not an *idiot*. I knew, okay? I figured it out. I just thought that if I didn't say anything, you'd get over it."

Saying these words were causing Dash physical pain. Her heart felt like somepony had stuck a knife through it when she saw Pinkie's mouth open in a little O of shock.

"I don't want things to be like that for us. You're my best friend and I really *do* like you, but I don't want things to change like that for us. You don't know what it's like. No matter what happens, you lose your friend forever. If things don't work out between you, then you can never go back to the way things were, and even if they *do* work out, then you lose your best friend anyway and get a marefriend or whatever instead. *And that's not the same.*"

"It doesn't have to be that way," Pinkie Pie said weakly, but her voice faltered.

"It *does* because that's how it *works!*" Rainbow Dash practically shouted, before catching herself and lowering her voice. "Did... did I ever tell you what happened with Gilda?"

"I was *there*, silly. You don't have to tell me anything."

Pinkie Pie was trying to smile, trying to make it a joke, but the hurt in her eyes was palpable.

"No," Rainbow Dash said. "I meant what happened *after*. I didn't tell you?"

Pinkie slowly shook her head.

"I wouldn't totally ditch a friend just because of one fight. She was mean to you, but she was *always* prickly; it wasn't a new thing, and it didn't surprise me. So I was mad at her, but it wasn't like that was the final straw or anything. We could've stayed friends. It was just that..."

Rainbow paused. Her words were caught in her throat, blocked by the sudden lump she felt there, and she wasn't sure if she would be able to continue or not. But she *had* to, because Pinkie Pie was looking at her so expectantly with those horrible blue eyes of hers.

"It was just that, after we had the fight at the party, she stopped by my place. And she apologized. And she told me that the reason she was being such a pill was because she liked me, and she was jealous that you seemed so close to me. And... and I told her that I didn't feel the same way. So she asked if I would ever change my mind, and I told her that I didn't think I could. So she left. And she never came to see me and or write to me again, even though we used to write letters all the time. You don't know what it's like to have that happen to you, Pinkie, to lose a friend because you couldn't bring yourself to like them enough."

"That's not what happened," Pinkie Pie said softly. "You liked her, it was just in a different way. It's not the same as not liking her enough."

"Well, then, I lost her because I couldn't like her the *right way*. What difference does it make?" Rainbow Dash snapped. She was going to cry, she just knew it. She could feel the sting of tears in her eyes. "You're my best friend and I don't want to mess everything up between us if things don't work out. I don't want that to happen again."

"You wouldn't lose me, Dashie. No matter what."

"*You're missing the point!* I said no, okay? I don't want to do this with you!"

It was incredibly difficult to imagine anything that could've hurt Rainbow Dash more than the look of shock and betrayal in Pinkie's eyes that greeted her outburst, but there was. It was the hollow, obviously fake-sounding laugh that immediately followed it as Pinkie Pie tried to smile.

"Okay, Dashie. I understand. Don't worry."

She slid off the bed.

"I guess that wasn't very smart of me, huh? I mean, you're not a dummy, after all. I guess... I guess I thought that I was being sneaky, and that maybe you just didn't know how I felt, but I'm not a very clever pony, so I guess I wasn't as good at hiding it as I thought I was. Of course you always knew. And how dumb was it for me to tell you *now*?"

Another short, hysterical laugh. Pinkie turned her back on Rainbow, so that the pegasus couldn't see her face.

"Now you're stuck here, and things are going to be weird. And... and if I just hadn't said anything, then we could've had a fun time, just laughing and playing, but, well, I messed that up. Um, can you do me a favor, Dashie?"

"Okay," Rainbow Dash said after a moment. "What?"

Pinkie Pie turned back to smile at her, but it was another one of those bleak, empty smiles. "Don't tell anypony about this, okay? Let's just pretend this didn't happen. We'll go back to being best friends, and it'll be like I never said anything."

That was what Rainbow Dash wanted.

Right?

"...Okay..."

"Okay!" Pinkie immediately agreed with an emphatic nod of her head. "So, so, um, you... you just stay here. You can sleep in here, because you were really cold and need a nice bed. And... and I'll just... go," she finished lamely, before practically running from the room.

Rainbow Dash lay in the bed – Pinkie's bed – and stared up at the ceiling.

She had managed not to cry. That was good.

She could still taste the sweetness from Pinkie's kiss.



Rainbow Dash couldn't stay. What had just passed between them was exactly what she'd feared ever since she'd first noticed the way that Pinkie Pie's gaze tended to linger on her, or the way Dash always tended to be the target of Pinkie's tackle-hugs, or the way she was the only one of Pinkie's friends to have received a pet name from the pink pony. No matter what she'd promised Pinkie, there was no way Rainbow could just take a nap up in Pinkie's bed while Pinkie Pie totally fell apart in the kitchen below.

She almost wanted to go downstairs and comfort Pinkie, but that was a bad idea for obvious reasons.

Rainbow Dash had nowhere to go – not while the doors were sealed. But there *was* that pegasus door that Pinkie Pie had in her room for some mysterious, unknown reason. Best not to think about it. Dash might not have been able to fly at the moment, but she was good at falling, and with all the snow, her landing would probably be fairly cushioned; she would just have to wait until the wind died down enough for her to at least walk.

Would it be wrong for Rainbow to just disappear? Would that make things worse, or would Pinkie Pie be relieved? If Rainbow Dash were in Pinkie's place, she would feel much, much better if the object of contention just happened to slip away when she wasn't looking. Or... wait. Wasn't that what had happened with Mare Do Well? And wasn't Rainbow still mad about that?

Oh, *WHO EVEN CARES?!* Rainbow Dash needed to get out of there, so what did it *matter*? All Rainbow knew was that if she spent even one more second in Sugarcube Corner, she was going to explode, maybe even twice, and that being anywhere else in the world at all would be better than being here.

Rainbow Dash shrugged off the blankets, shedding the comforting, enticing warmth they offered in favor of heading for the window, or pegasus door, or whatever it was. It looked more like a window than a door, although Pinkie had referred to it as otherwise in the past.

The storm was dying down. How long had Dash been asleep in Pinkie's bed? It looked windy still, and the snow was still falling, but softly, now. She could see ponies wandering the streets again, dressed in their hats and scarves.

The most dangerous part of the blizzard was over, and Pinkie Pie would probably feel better if Rainbow Dash was gone. So it was for the best, really, that Dash opened the window, or door, or *whatever* it was, and jumped.

• • •

Snow did *not* make a good cushion; something to remember. When Rainbow Dash landed, she sank deep into the snow bank and the shock of the cold upon impact almost made her screech. Luckily, she managed to hold it in, and instead stood up and shook off the snow.

"Rainbow Dash?"

*Oh, damn.*

She froze. Which might have struck Rainbow Dash as funny at any other time – *froze, snow, winter* – but the strange thing was, her mind itself seemed to freeze as well, keeping Dash from being able to think of anything witty to say on the spur of the moment.

All she could do was turn and flash Pinkie Pie a nervous grin.

Pinkie Pie was standing in the doorway. Only the top half of the door was open, so that the pink pony could poke her head through and stare at Rainbow Dash in puzzlement. The snow was still too high on the step for Pinkie to open it all the way. Rainbow Dash actually felt grateful that Pinkie wouldn't be able to come outside, although it was obviously terrible to feel relieved that your so-called best friend was unable to leave her house and come see you.

"Where are you going?" Pinkie Pie asked, leaning her head out the door a little as if to get a better look at the pegasus. She didn't look angry, like Rainbow had been expecting, or even especially surprised, like Rainbow *also* would've been prepared for. Her voice betrayed no real curiosity. It was like she was only asking because Pinkie knew that was what she was supposed to do next, like she was reading her lines from a script. A script that Rainbow Dash had no access to and would've desperately liked to see, just so she could've had some idea of what she was supposed to do now.

"I thought..." the pegasus began before trailing off.

Pinkie Pie's eyes had no sparkle. They were dull. She wasn't scowling or frowning or crying, but she wasn't smiling, either, her mouth a straight line. Her mane hung limp and flat.

*How did she do that?* Rainbow Dash wondered. It was a good question, one that many ponies before her had asked. How could Pinkie's hair so perfectly reflect her mood? Surely that was impossible; Rainbow Dash didn't know anypony else whose mane could do that, not even Princess Celestia.

"I thought it would be better if I just left," Dash finished weakly. "Because... I don't know."

"It's okay," Pinkie said, and her mouth curved into something that *resembled* one of her usual grins, but lacked the joy they usually carried. Honestly, how many times was Rainbow Dash going to have to *see* that horrible not-smile? It felt like Rainbow had been subjected to it at least three hundred times in the past month alone, and forced to acknowledge that it was completely her fault *every single time*. Was Pinkie Pie *ever* happy anymore, or was she just perpetually falling apart?

"Seriously, it's okay. Go. I mean, what am I gonna do, right? Lock you in the basement or something? You can go if you want." And Pinkie gave a nervous laugh, one that Rainbow Dash responded to with a nervous laugh of her own.

"Are you sure?" Dash asked, even as she lifted a hoof in anticipation of trotting away. "I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings."

"It's fine. It's fine! I'll see you tomorrow, though, right?"

And Pinkie's voice lifted with pathetic hopefulness.

"Yeah... yeah!" Rainbow Dash agreed, nodding quickly. "Right, I'll see you tomorrow. We'll hang out and do something fun, like we always do. It'll be cool."

"Right!" Pinkie Pie agreed, nodding equally quickly. "Right. Okay, then. Bye, Rainbow Dash."

She shut the door.

Rainbow Dash felt a tiny bit better, for some reason, even though she was still out in the snow with nowhere to go and no idea whether or not things were ever going to be okay ever again. Pinkie Pie wanted to see her tomorrow; that meant she didn't completely despise Dash yet. It meant she at least wanted to *try* and get things back to the way they were. That was good. That was what Rainbow wanted.

It wasn't until much, much later that she realized Pinkie hadn't once called her *Dashie*.

• • •

Pinkie Pie watched from her bedroom window as Rainbow Dash trotted away, kicking up little clouds of snow, her mane tousled by the wind.

The way she felt... was hard to describe. If anypony had asked her, she wouldn't have been able to tell them. It was the purest kind of feeling, the truest kind of sadness and love, the kind that words alone were not enough to explain and could only be understood when felt for yourself.

A part of her felt relieved; she'd finally done it, finally told Rainbow Dash how she felt. It was out. Pinkie was a master at keeping secrets, but keeping her *own* secrets, about and *from* the pony she loved, were much, much harder. It was like a weight had been lifted, like it would be easier to breathe from now on.

But at the same time, Pinkie Pie felt more restricted than ever – maybe because of the revelation that Rainbow Dash had already known all along. It was like Pinkie had been sitting on these frantic, wriggling feelings for so long that they'd built up more and more until she'd finally burst, releasing them; but the anticlimactic follow-up – the knowledge that Rainbow Dash already knew and just wasn't interested – meant that all that pent-up energy had nowhere to go.

So instead of feeling free and light, Pinkie just felt disappointed, like she'd been expecting something incredible to happen and had been let down instead.

She should've known better. The truth of her feelings had been a secret, a secret that she'd promised herself to keep, and nothing good ever came out of breaking promises and betraying secrets.

It would've been easier if Pinkie had never said anything at all. At least they'd both agreed to pretend it had never happened. If they could really do that, then they could still go back to being friends, and Pinkie Pie didn't want to lose her. Even if Dashie didn't like her the way Pinkie *wanted* her to, at least she didn't outright hate her, either. That would have to be good enough.

Gummy wasn't the most comforting pet in the world, but Pinkie was all alone right then and he would have to do. So although he wasn't nearly as fluffy or soft as she would've liked, the pink pony lifted him up from his place at her side and gave him a great big hug; the tightest she'd ever given.

"Poor Gummy," Pinkie cooed, even though she knew that he didn't understand her. "Now what'll we do? It's just us two – oh, hey, I rhymed."

He didn't answer. Just stared at her with those big, expressionless eyes. They looked pink in this light. Pinkie Pie knew somepony *else* with rose-colored eyes, too, but *hers* were never so empty. They were always crackling with energy and feeling. And they were never quite so reptilian, either.

"That's a good idea, Gummy," Pinkie said aloud, pretending that he'd answered and pretending that she had a reason to want to smile right then. She had to be happy. She had to be peppy and bouncy or else they would hate her. Rainbow Dash wouldn't want to go back to being friends if she thought that Pinkie was sad about what had happened, and Pinkie needed to at least still be friends.

They only liked Pinkie. They didn't want Pinkamena.

"You're the smartest alligator in the world, even if you *aren't* a doctor."

Gummy blinked in response.

• • •

Where would Rainbow Dash go? It was late, and it was getting chilly again. Even if the actual storm was over, it wasn't especially fun to be stuck outside at night in winter. Dash couldn't fly home, and she couldn't very well turn back and ask Pinkie Pie to let her back inside. Sweet Apple Acres was too far out of town to even consider; same with Fluttershy's cottage.

Whose brilliant idea had it been to leave in the first place? Pinkie's bed had been *warm*.

She could either go to Carousel Boutique or the library. Preferably the boutique. If Rainbow Dash went to see Twilight, the unicorn would probably find some way to twist everything that had happened into some kind of friendship lesson about how it's important to always remember to brush your teeth or something.

*My life sucks*, Rainbow Dash thought bitterly. She seemed to have a knack for getting everypony mad at her, especially the few ponies that she genuinely wanted to spend time with.

Because Rainbow *did* like Pinkie. A *lot*. She wasn't exactly sure if it was the kind of like that Pinkie had been talking about, because Dash didn't really know a lot about things

like that; all she knew about were those shallow, meaningless flings you had to kill time. But she *did* know that Pinkie was her friend. If she *hadn't* liked Pinkie Pie so much, then the confession wouldn't have been such a big deal. Rainbow Dash would've kissed her back, they would've messed around for a bit and had their fun, and then Rainbow would've eventually grown bored and dumped her. Pinkie would've been left heartbroken and Dash would've moved on to the next mare in line. But since Pinkie Pie was a pony she was actually *fond* of, Rainbow didn't want to hurt her that way. She didn't even want to risk it.

But Rainbow Dash *had* hurt her, intentionally or not. That look of pain in Pinkie's last smile, and the knowledge that *she* had been the one to break the pink pony that much, almost killed Dash. How could she have better handled it, though? Was there anything Rainbow could've said that *wouldn't* have totally destroyed Pinkie Pie?

*How about 'I like you too?'* a small voice in the back of her head chimed in.

Yet that would've been wrong. Not a lie, perhaps, but it still would've been misleading, especially since Rainbow Dash didn't actually know how she felt yet. The line between friendship and genuine love was a very, very thin one.

No. Now was not the time to be having an existential crisis. Rainbow needed to figure out what, exactly, she was going to do, and in the meantime, maybe figure out why she was so bad at planning ahead. And until then, she was going to be doing a lot of walking.

• • •

Mare Do Well was sitting. It was a strange position for her to be in. When in costume, she liked to perch, usually on the nearest available tall building. It looked cool – and since wind speed increased along with altitude, it usually meant that the higher she was, the more her cape would flap or swirl in the breeze, making for a very nice dramatic effect.

Now, though, she just sat. She was still up high; she liked being atop things. But she wasn't posing. Just... sitting. On the edge of the rooftop, legs hanging over the edge the way that green unicorn in town sometimes sat. It was slightly uncomfortable, but she liked the way it left her free to swing her legs in boredom.

If anypony had seen her, they wouldn't have mistaken her for a superhero. They would've just thought that she was a very odd pony with an affinity for being up high. That was okay, though, because she didn't especially feel like a superhero at the moment. She just felt lonely.

Part of her had hoped that Rainbow Dash would've come back, despite what the pegasus had said when they'd last parted, but Mare Do Well had known all along that it was unlikely. So at the last minute, she'd held back and managed to stop herself from heading out. She would've only been disappointed. She'd *wanted* to go, but she had to accept that she'd screwed up, big time, and that this was her punishment.

For a moment, when they'd last been together, her in her mask and Rainbow Dash actually letting her touch her, she'd actually felt the pegasus start to warm up to her. It wasn't the same as the love she so craved, but still – Rainbow had been friendly, which was more than the mare had any right to expect. When Mare Do Well had cried, Rainbow Dash had tried to comfort her.

And just like before, Mare Do Well had pushed it *just* far enough to ruin everything. She'd been so, so close to earning just the tiniest bit of Rainbow Dash's trust – so rare, so valuable. And she'd botched it by being unable to control herself. She'd been too forward and had pushed Rainbow away yet again, completely unintentionally.

It was too much for her to expect Rainbow Dash to fall for her immediately, but at the very least, she wanted to know that there was the slightest possibility of Rainbow Dash someday *not* totally despising her. Even if they had to start again as friends, that would be better than nothing.

A time machine would've been perfect right then. Mare Do Well could've gone back to the day of the very first meeting between Rainbow Dash and herself; only this time, she'd...

Do *what*? How would she have changed things? Would she have just stood by and watched while some punk tried to mug Rainbow because she didn't want to give herself away? Would she have formally introduced herself? *What*?

Mare Do Well sighed, and continued to kick her legs fitfully. She was filled with so much nervous energy. She wanted to run, to jump, to burn it off through any means necessary, but she didn't. Instead she sat on the edge of the building, ignoring the vertigo she felt every time she made the mistake of looking down. It was easy to ignore the dizziness when she was running and leaping, because she was never still long enough for the reality of what she was doing to sink in, but she *deserved* to feel that way right then. It was another self-inflicted punishment. It may have been masochistic of her, but she felt better knowing that she wasn't allowing herself even the smallest of comforts. She didn't deserve it.

She hated this dumb costume. She hated the way she acted when she wore it. She hated Mare Do Well. She hated herself. She hated everything and everypony except Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash, she loved; but somehow that was worse. It would've been so much easier if she could've just shut off her feelings like a valve. If only there was some kind of magic switch that could regulate emotions. Then, once she'd realized how unlikely it was that Rainbow Dash would ever reciprocate, she could've just said *oh well* and shut it off, and she'd have been able to move on.

As it was, it was like she was trapped, unable to go back to the way things were and terrified to move forward.

It was like she was determined to sabotage herself. The moment she started to get anywhere with Rainbow Dash, she did something stupid that ruined it all. That way, their relationship was kept in perpetual stasis. She would never go back because she'd gone so far already, had already done such extreme things, but some subconscious aspect of her personality was intentionally keeping Mare Do Well from ever getting anywhere else but here.

• • •

Mare Do Well was on the roof.

She was on. The freaking. *Roof*.

It was so unbelievably contrived and ridiculous that Rainbow Dash half wanted to laugh and half wanted to scream in frustration. How? How could this have happened? Why? Why *now*?

At first, Rainbow Dash hadn't been sure – she'd thought that it was a trick of the light somehow. But there was no mistaking it. After having totally vanished for nearly a week, Mare Do Well had reappeared somehow. And *now*, of all times.

Mare Do Well didn't appear to be looking for Dash, though; she was just... standing on the roof.

Or, wait, no – not standing. Sitting?

Whatever. It didn't matter. What mattered was that *SHE WAS ON THE ROOF*. How *dare* she? After having just vanished, no goodbye, no explanation at all? How *dare* Mare Do Well just mysteriously appear out of nowhere, *just* when Rainbow Dash least wanted to see her? Mare Do Well had said before that it wasn't intentional, the way she seemed



to be so good at messing with Rainbow, but honestly, how could she possibly have pulled off something like this *accidentally*?

There was no way. *No. Way.*

Rainbow Dash wanted to fly up there right then and chew Mare Do Well out, but at the same time, she didn't. Besides, she couldn't fly, so how was she supposed to get up there?

*Well, how does Mare Do Well do it?*

Now that Rainbow thought about it, she had no idea if Mare Do Well could fly or not. She had no idea what she actually *was* – unicorn, pegasus, or earth pony. Mare Do Well had never removed her hat or cape, so Rainbow Dash had no way of knowing.

But... wait.

*Dammit dammit dammit!*

She *had*. That time Mare Do Well had lent Dash the cape as a blanket.

Of course Rainbow Dash hadn't even thought to check.

Rainbow had never seen Mare Do Well fly, though; the mare just climbed and jumped everywhere, like a monkey. And if she *wasn't* a pegasus, then that meant that was her only means of travel, so naturally she would've had to become especially good at it. If Mare Do Well could manage it, then surely Rainbow Dash could do the same; she wasn't about to let herself be shown up by some damn mystery mare who thought she was *all that* just because she was a pretty awesome fighter.

Rainbow Dash's hooves were sinking in the snow, and she was shivering slightly. Maybe a little exercise would do her good. Warm her up a bit. And it wasn't like Dash had anywhere to be, right? The only reason she'd been wandering the streets in the first place was to try and find somewhere to go, and she had yet to figure out what her best option would be. Rainbow Dash had been leaning towards Rarity's place, but she had no idea how to get there on land; usually she just circled Ponyville from the air until she spotted it and dived.

So how would she do this?

Rainbow's eyes roamed. There was a dumpster. The lid was closed; she could use that. It wasn't too high, so she could jump. And then... a balcony, on the building opposite. Would she be able to reach it? Sure, why not. And once Dash reached the balcony...

Her mind was whirring like a clockwork. The gears were turning.

• • •

"Hey!"

Mare Do Well turned, and her breath hitched.

She saw a sky-blue pegasus, her brilliant rainbow mane in disarray and dusted with snow, chest heaving as she panted. She was glaring at her, magenta eyes flashing. But even if Rainbow Dash was angry, she was *there*, right in front of her and looking at her and *talking to her*, which was more than what Mare Do Well had even dared to hope for after what had happened last time.

"What is your *problem*?" Rainbow Dash snarled, charging forward. Mare Do Well felt a pang of guilt when she saw how her wings were bandaged. *My fault*, she thought. *It's my fault*.

"Seriously, what's your deal? You just vanish off the face of the planet and think that's okay? You can't *do* that, you know!"

But Mare Do Well couldn't speak, because all she could think about was how Rainbow Dash was doing that adorable thing that she *always* did when she was mad, when her nose crinkled and her face went all scrunchy, and how badly she wanted to grab Rainbow Dash right then and there, and...

"I'm talking to you!" the pegasus barked.

"How did you get up here?" Mare Do Well managed to ask.

"I jumped. Not too hard. You do it all the time, right?"

"Why are you talking to me?"

"Because I want an *explanation*!" Rainbow Dash shot back. "I spent, like, three nights in a row *waiting*, and you never even gave me a reason why you couldn't be bothered to show up! What am I *supposed* to think?"

"I thought you wanted me to go away. So I did."

It was amazingly hard to keep her voice indifferent, especially when she felt like crying. But she didn't want to let herself reveal any emotion, because she just *knew* that if she let any feeling slip through at all, she would totally break down. She had to stay stoic. She had to stay strong.

And then she sniffed.

She didn't mean to. It just happened. But it was to be expected, she supposed; after all, she'd spent so much time crying, there were undoubtedly still some tears left that needed to be shed.

• • •

Mare Do Well sniffed, and Rainbow Dash froze.

It was easy to forget that Mare Do Well was a pony beneath the mask, a pony who could logically get hurt like anypony else. She would be able to laugh and feel happy and cry and be sad. But it hadn't really occurred to Rainbow Dash that there might be more to her than a desire to manipulate Dash, and now here Mare Do Well was, sitting before her and crying, and Rainbow didn't know what to do.

"You're not allowed to cry," Rainbow Dash said automatically. "*You're* not the one who got hurt. *You're* not allowed to cry."

"I know. I'm sorry. But I don't feel like being Mare Do Well right now," the mare mumbled in response. "I don't know why you're here. I don't want to see you."

"You... you... you think you can just *do* that?" Rainbow Dash shouted, but she could feel her resolve fading. She'd come here prepared to fight, to yell, to vent and take out all of her frustrations on the one pony she'd thought to be the ideal candidate to take it, and instead she'd found *this*.

It was worse than not seeing the mare at all. If Mare Do Well had vanished, Rainbow could let herself believe that it was because Mare Do Well was holding back for some reason. Now, though, Dash had found her, but as a miserable wreck. This wasn't Mare Do Well holding *back*, this was Mare Do Well giving *up*.

And Rainbow Dash didn't know why she cared so much.

She was losing everything she cared about, piece by piece. Because of what had happened to her wings, Rainbow couldn't fly or do her job on the weather team. Her friendships were beyond strained, especially with Pinkie. She didn't want to lose anything else, even if it *was* something that she hated. Even *if* Dash resented Mare Do Well and what her reappearance was doing to her life, she didn't want to lose *this*, too. Whatever it was.

"You can't just back out now, without even telling me," Rainbow Dash finally declared.

"Back out of what?" Mare Do Well asked, sounding bewildered.

"We had a game, remember? A game *you* thought of? You can't just forfeit! That's not how it works – we have to play it through."

"You... *want* to keep doing that," Mare Do Well said. It was more of a statement than a question, although she was asking for clarification. "Even though you despise me, and even though you've told me in no uncertain terms to stay out of your life."

"Well, since when have you ever listened to me before?" Rainbow Dash challenged. "Are you seriously letting that stop you? What happened to how confident you were before? You seemed pretty sure you had this in the bag, and now you're quitting at the first sign of trouble? That's not how you get things done! You gotta keep going no matter what, and if something doesn't work, then try something *else*!"

Mare Do Well was swinging her legs over the edge of the building in a restless way. Her shoulders and hat were dusted with snow. How long had she just been sitting here? It was making Rainbow Dash uncomfortable; she didn't know if Mare Do Well could fly or not, and it was making her nervous to see the masked mare sitting so close to the edge, like she could fall off at any moment.

"The game was dumb," Mare Do Well mumbled. "It was just something I made up to keep you interested. I know you like challenges, so I thought if I made this into one, you'd have a reason to come back."

"Well, I'm *back*, aren't I?"

Mare Do Well didn't answer, and with a sigh, Rainbow Dash plopped down on her haunches beside her. In the back of her mind, she remembered the way Mare Do Well had come to sit with her that time outside Pinkie's party. It was strange to think that now she was doing almost the exact same thing.

"I don't hate you."

Mare Do Well didn't answer.

"Did you hear me?" Rainbow Dash asked. "I said I don't hate you, okay? I don't *like* you very much, either, but... but I don't *hate* you."

"You asked me before why I liked you," Mare Do Well said softly after another moment of silence. "And I wasn't sure at the time... but I've thought about it for a while, and I think I have a better answer, now."

Rainbow said nothing, but she cocked her head a little, looking at Mare Do Well, to show that she was listening.

"I like you because you don't give up on anypony. Even if you don't think things will end up working out in your favor, you still try. Like with me. You don't even like me, but you haven't given up on me. You keep coming back, giving me millions of chances to... to not be an idiot. It's a kind of loyalty – twisted, but still. So... I guess I should've expected it from you. But I think that's what I like best about you. You're giving me as many opportunities as I need to get this right."

"I don't know *why*," Rainbow Dash retorted, fighting the blush the words brought on. "You don't deserve it. And that's not true, anyway. I'm a chicken. I give up all the time."

"Like when?"

"Like today."

Dash paused, then fidgeted, debating internally over whether or not to tell the mare. She had no reason to explain herself to Mare Do Well, but kind of wanted to. Maybe because in the absence of her *actual* friends, Mare Do Well was the next best thing. She was close enough, anyway, especially since Rainbow Dash strongly suspected that she actually *was* one of them. So that meant it was okay to think of her like that. Right?

Rainbow Dash snuck a glance at her companion. Mare Do Well wasn't looking at her, but instead off to the horizon somewhere, still kicking her legs like a little filly who just couldn't sit still for some reason. She looked small.

It was odd, how perspective had such an impact on the way you viewed somepony. When Mare Do Well was standing, there was something impressive about the way she carried herself that made her seem tall. When Rainbow Dash stood beside her, she appeared to be the same size, since they technically *were* about the same height – but she still seemed bigger, somehow. But now, when Mare Do Well was sitting, she looked very tiny, maybe

because of the way her costume almost swallowed her; or maybe it was because Rainbow Dash was, in fact, kind of small, and if Mare Do Well was the same height as her, then she would naturally appear to be so as well.

Whatever it was, there was something about Mare Do Well right then that made her seem less like the imposing figure that haunted Rainbow Dash's every waking thought and more like a pitiful little foal.

"Today, Pinkie told me she liked me, and I rejected her," Rainbow Dash confessed. "I keep thinking that there must have been a better way to handle it, but... I panicked. I didn't know what to say."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you reject her?"

That hadn't been what Dash been expecting to hear at all. She'd been expecting a snide comment of some sort. Some kind of bitter joke about saying good riddance to a nuisance or whatever. Something that would've better fit the jealous way Mare Do Well had reacted to any mention of Pinkie in the past.

"I didn't want things between us to change. But I guess... they already have. Just the fact that she said anything at all, and that I responded... just *that* was what changed everything."

"Things are always going to change, and sometimes you can't do anything to stop it, no matter how much you want to," Mare Do Well said wistfully. "The only reason I put this costume on in the first place was so that I wouldn't feel afraid to pursue you, but I'm still scared. I thought it would help give me courage, but it didn't. Besides," she added, like an afterthought. "That's not *all* I like about you, so it doesn't really matter whether or not you accept that about yourself. I like that you're funny and smart, even though a lot of ponies don't really see that in you. And you're also brave and strong and willing to try anything. And you're beautiful."

"Don't even start."

"Start what?"

"I'm not pretty. That's a stupid thing to say."

"I never said you were *pretty*," Mare Do Well corrected. "I said you were *beautiful*. There's a difference. nopony would call lightning *pretty*, but I've heard plenty call it *beautiful*. And it is, in a wild and fierce way."

There was a beat; yet another moment of silence passing over them. But it didn't feel strained or uncomfortable. Rainbow Dash had previously been reeling over what had happened with Pinkie Pie, but she was at last starting to calm down. Mare Do Well seemed more relaxed, too, and had stopped kicking her legs in that nervous-twitch way, as though the tension she'd carried was beginning to fade. It was the same for Dash.

Maybe Rainbow Dash was imagining it, but there really *was* something soothing about just sitting and talking, no matter who it was with. It reminded her of the way it felt to just sit and chat with her friends on a normal day, when she didn't have all these secrets and troubling thoughts looming over her head. It was peaceful.

"Okay, your turn," Mare Do Well prompted.

"For what?" Rainbow Dash asked, pretending she didn't know what the other mare was talking about.

"I told you why *I* like *you*. Now it's your turn. Go ahead."

"I never said I liked you, I just said I didn't hate you."

"So tell me why you don't hate me."

Rainbow Dash tilted back her head, looking up at the sky. The clean-up crew had done a good job with the storm, she mused. The sky was clear, barely a cloud in sight, leaving the stars and moon free to shine.

She wasn't imagining it; Rainbow really *did* feel better having somepony to talk to, even if it *was* the last pony in the world that she would've seen as a source of comfort. Strange, how she couldn't seem to talk to Pinkie anymore, her supposed best friend, without feeling like her entire world was crumbling – and yet she could sit and chat with her current biggest enemy and immediately feel better.

"Sometimes you make me laugh," Rainbow Dash admitted, rather grudgingly. "I'm not sure if you ever mean to, but sometimes you make these comments that sound like jokes and are actually pretty funny."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Hmm."

There was another silence.

"You still have flaws, though," Mare Do Well added as an afterthought. There was none of that sulkiness from before in her voice. She sounded completely back to normal – formal diction and a manner that was both easygoing and in-control. It was amazing, how the tone of a conversation could shift so easily. From teasing banter to a heated confrontation to some sort of weepy hurt-comfort thing and then back again, around and around and around in circles. "Don't get me wrong. There's plenty that I like about you, but I *also* know that you can be brash and stubborn, and that you charge into things without thinking. You can also be rude and tactless."

"Gee, thanks."

"But despite all of that, I like you anyway. Liking a pony isn't about ignoring their flaws in favor of their more positive traits. Love doesn't blind you to somepony's problems, it helps you accept them. If you truly love somepony, you want them as a whole in *spite* of those flaws. I don't look past them, I work *with* them, because you're worth it to me."

"So what now?" Rainbow Dash interrupted to change the subject. The conversation was veering dangerously close to sentimentality, something that Dash wanted to avoid at all costs. Even if she'd admitted that she didn't *completely* despise Mare Do Well anymore, they were far from friends, and Rainbow certainly didn't trust her yet.

"I don't know. If you really want to play so badly, I guess the game's back on."

"Fine."

"You don't like the sensitive romantic approach. You don't like cutesy behavior. You don't like it when I get aggressive. What *do* you like?" Mare Do Well asked. She sounded genuinely curious. "You said you like it when I act normal, but... I'm not entirely sure how to do that."

"It's not something you *try* to do. It's just what happens. That's why they call it being normal."

"So just sitting and talking is all right? You haven't hit me or yelled at me yet. Is this good?"



"This is all right," Rainbow Dash acknowledged.

"It's not about sex, you know," Mare Do Well said next, rather unexpectedly, causing Rainbow Dash to almost choke.

"*What?*"

"You called me a pervert before, but I *meant* it when I said that I wasn't just trying to seduce you. I want more than just the physical aspect of a relationship with you. But I admit that I can be a little forward, and... and I apologize for that."

"Are you apologizing for practically molesting me?" Rainbow interjected.

"It's just – and I know this will offend you, so I apologize again, this time pre-emptively, for objectifying you – it's just that when you see something you want or like very, very much, isn't it hard to resist the impulse to touch it?" Mare Do Well continued, ignoring Rainbow Dash's question. She spoke in such a reasonable way, as though she fully expected Rainbow to understand what she meant, even though what she was saying was ludicrous.

"Well, *yeah*, if you're Rarity and talking about a shiny new diamond or something, doofus. You can't do that for another pony. And you know what? I'm starting to think that you're not actually an evil mastermind after all. Just a total idiot."

"That might be it," Mare Do Well agreed thoughtfully. But she sounded pleased, like she was proud of herself for something that Rainbow Dash couldn't quite discern. "Where are you going to go now?"

"I was heading to Rarity's. I don't think I have many other options, and it's getting late."

"Want an escort?"

"No."

"I thought you'd say that. Oh well. It was nice seeing you again, though. I've missed you."

The words were right there, on the tip of Rainbow's tongue. *I missed you too.*

Mare Do Well rose to go and paused, as if waiting to see whether or not Rainbow Dash would actually say the words. But she didn't, instead swallowing them, shoving them

down somewhere deep, deep, deep in the pit of her stomach. If you ignored something long enough, it went away.

The mare sounded a little hesitant when she spoke again.

"Do, do you want to do this again?" Mare Do Well asked. Even though Rainbow Dash couldn't see her face, she bowed her head a little as if to hide a blush she didn't want the pegasus to see. "Like, do you want to meet in the cul-de-sac again? Say, tomorrow night? Like before?"

If it wasn't intentional, it was okay to think Mare Do Well was being cute. That much was fine. Right? As long as Mare Do Well wasn't acting that way on purpose to gain Rainbow Dash's sympathy, then there was absolutely nothing wrong with just *thinking* it. And the way she was kind of squirming about in embarrassment *was* sort of cute, in a weird way, although the costume had the added effect of making it seem somewhat menacing as well.

"If we're still doing the game, then I have to, right?" Rainbow Dash ended up saying. "It's part of the rules. We need to meet regularly to... to compare our progress."

"Ah. Right. Well, then, I'll see you tomorrow."

Rainbow Dash was still sitting on the edge of the building when Mare Do Well jumped.

This time, Dash made sure to watch her, leaning over the side and not even blinking, to see where the mare went. She landed on the balcony that Rainbow Dash had used to climb the building before leaping off that into the street somewhere, and then the mare was just a shadow flitting along the alley until suddenly, she was gone. Bizarre, how it could be so simple for somepony to completely vanish like that and later reappear again at will. It was something Dash envied.

Because now that Mare Do Well was gone, Rainbow Dash was suddenly alone and afraid once more, with no idea how to fix things or even where she was going to sleep that night. It would make things much, much easier if she could just make herself disappear until she knew what to do.

She just needed to get through the next day, and then the next, and the next after that, and if she could just do that, then, well, she was golden. She needed to take it slow for a while, no matter how unappealing an idea that may be. It was simply a matter of putting one hoof in front of the other. Taking life step by step, rather than rushing into it the way she was inclined to.

Having a goal made things easier. For the time being, all Rainbow Dash needed to do was get to Rarity's, and then hopefully she'd be invited in.

Not *hopefully*; it was practically guaranteed. Rarity would never make her sleep in the street. It was unthinkable.

So. That was it. All she had to do. And then she'd work from there. But first, Dash needed to figure out the best way to get down from here.

"Uh, I'm really sorry about this, Rare."

"Oh, no no *no*, it's *fine*!" Rarity insisted. "I couldn't possibly have let you spend the night on the streets, could I? I've said it before and I'll say it again: my boutique is *always* open to you girls!"

"I don't think I've ever heard you say that before, actually, but thanks. That's really cool of you."

"It's no trouble at all! And you'll let me know if you need anything else, won't you, darling?"

Rarity smiled at her. Her voice was perky enough, but she looked utterly exhausted. Flyaway strands of hair were escaping from her normally expertly-coiffed mane, and although Rainbow Dash knew better than to mention them, she had dark bags under her eyes. She wasn't cranky, though, the way Rarity usually got when somepony interrupted her beauty sleep. Rainbow suspected that it was because the unicorn hadn't actually gone to bed yet. The lights in the store had still been on when she'd first approached the building, and when Rarity had answered the door, she'd had a tape measure hanging over her shoulders and was wearing those red spectacles that she was so superstitious about.

Rarity seemed to labor under the delusion that if she didn't wear the glasses, she wouldn't be able to sew, since she always did her best work with them on, but since she refused to sew *without* them, there was no way of knowing whether or not she was right about that.

That was the kind of work ethic that Rainbow Dash just couldn't get behind. To a certain extent, she appreciated Rarity's passion for her career, but that appreciation was limited to mere admiration, rather than a desire to imitate. Dash would never bother trying to be like Rarity, working all hours of the night. She just didn't understand it. If she was going to be gradually evolving into some kind of nocturnal creature, then she could at least spend those midnight hours doing something mildly enjoyable.

Not that she considered whatever she was doing with Mare Do Well enjoyable in any way. That was pure business. Just... a different *kind* of business.

Rarity had insisted on taking Rainbow Dash straight to the bedroom. Normally Dash would've been the kind of pony to jump at such an offer, but this time, she'd been reluctant to accept, either because she was somehow changing or because Rarity was kind of scary when sleep-deprived.

Rarity's personal bedroom was much more elaborate than Rainbow Dash had been expecting, maybe because Dash was only just now realizing that she'd never actually seen Rarity's room before. She'd seen her work space and so-called *inspiration room*, but Dash had never seen her bed, and had been half-expecting to see something exactly like the rest of the boutique – with the added bonus of a bed shoved in a corner. But it was perfectly in-character for Rarity, filled with luxurious furniture that was decorated accordingly with all kinds of expensive adornments. The bed itself was vast and kind of intimidating.

Rarity asked no questions, which was a little disturbing. Weren't you supposed to be a *little* concerned when a friend showed up on your doorstep in the middle of the night, disheveled and asking for a place to sleep?

Yet Rarity hadn't seemed to be the slightest bit bothered. Then again, Rainbow Dash had been doing a *lot* of stuff like this lately, now that she thought about it. Maybe word had gotten around that she wasn't exactly sleeping anymore and her friends were on perpetual high alert, just in case Dash should choose to come seek one of them out for aid that night. That would explain why Fluttershy always seemed ready to take her in on short notice lately; she was just getting used to Rainbow coming over to crash.

"Seriously, though, are you sure it's okay? You look like you could use the bed yourself," Dash ventured, taking one last stab at being a good pony. If Rarity *still* refused to take it herself, then all bets were off. As intimidating as it was in terms of size, that bed looked pretty damn welcoming right then.

"*Of course* it's okay! I would *never* make a friend of mine sleep on a... *sofa*." And Rarity shuddered slightly at the very thought. "That would be simply *awful* of me; and besides, I highly doubt I'll be getting any sleep tonight," she added, urging Rainbow Dash to the bed with a little magical shove. "I have far too much work to do, so I'll worry about sleeping later. And if *I'm* not using it, then, well, what reason is there for me to refuse to lend *you* the use of my bed?"

"Okay, okay," Rainbow Dash finally agreed. But although her voice indicated uncertainty, she jumped onto the covers, seemingly without a second thought, bouncing slightly on the mattress as she wormed her way under the quilt.

Rarity opened her mouth. She looked like she was on the verge of saying something about the way Rainbow Dash was ruining her carefully arranged blankets, but she stopped herself as she seemed to think better of it, as if considering how Rainbow Dash

was injured and still deserving of sympathy for a little while longer. "Will you be all right on your own?" she asked instead.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine. Turn off the lights," came Dash's reply. She had already formed a nest of sorts out of the numerous sheets and comforters that Rarity owned, which Rainbow Dash was now apparently burrowing into. It was all Rarity could do to avoid lecturing her, but she was trying to be more agreeable by not forcing her perfectionism on her friends anymore, so the unicorn held her tongue, even though it practically killed her to do so.

Rarity obediently turned off the lights before stealing a glance back at her friend. From the looks of things, Rainbow Dash was already asleep, her breathing slow and steady, and Rarity sighed. She missed the days when she could sleep so easily.

• • •

Rainbow Dash waited for Rarity to shut the door before flopping over onto her back. Her hooves gripped the mattress beneath her as she stared at the ceiling. She felt tense, like a coiled spring, ready to burst at any moment.

Now that she was alone, Dash felt free to organize her thoughts: to reflect on what had happened, and to review both what she already knew and what she'd recently learned.

For a moment, it occurred to her that *now* would be the perfect opportunity to go looking for those sales files of Rarity's. But if the unicorn was going to be up working all night, then the chances of Rainbow Dash getting caught were obviously much, much higher.

Actually, Rainbow didn't even know if the files had ever existed, and if they had, whether they still *did*. At the time, she'd been suspicious of Pinkie's claim that she hadn't found anything, but now that Pinkie Pie's crush was out in the open, she was starting to wonder if the pink pony had been lying. Maybe she'd stolen them, or even destroyed them, only to claim that she hadn't found anything so that Dash wouldn't question her.

For a long time, Rainbow Dash had had a vague sort of idea that Pinkie had a crush on her, but she hadn't realized how big it was, either because she'd been in denial or because Pinkie had been better at hiding it than Rainbow would've expected of the party pony. She'd been afraid of something like this happening, but hadn't really been prepared for it when it did. And even though Dash had *sort* of noticed the jealousy Pinkie seemed to feel

whenever Rainbow Dash told her about Mare Do Well, it hadn't occurred to Rainbow that it was anything truly serious. Holy *Celestia*, she was dumb.

But Pinkie Pie still wanted to be friends, and still wanted to hang out the next day, so that meant that things were cool between them. There was no point in worrying about her. Instead, Rainbow Dash should worry about Mare Do Well.

Rainbow Dash was loathe to admit it, but it had been kind of a relief to talk to the mare again. She'd been worried that Mare Do Well had decided to fade away after all, and if the whole incident had been resolved without any kind of closure, Dash probably would've snapped.

Closure. Yes. *That* was what she wanted. She wanted *answers* before the alleged superhero finally left town. So if the game was back on, then that meant it was time for Rainbow Dash to get back to investigating.

What did she know so far?

Not a whole lot, actually.

Rainbow Dash didn't know if Mare Do Well was a unicorn, pegasus, or earth pony, but she was inclined to think the mare was an earth pony, since Dash had never seen her fly or use magic. That might have been intentional, though, as Mare Do Well might have been purposefully hiding her abilities around Rainbow to further protect her secret identity.

Mare Do Well *probably* wasn't Twilight, since Twilight's appearance after Pinkie's party had actually prompted one of the masked mare's sudden departures. Unless Twilight Sparkle knew some kind of complicated duplication spell, signs pointed to *not even possible*. Rainbow Dash couldn't completely rule the unicorn out, though, because Twilight *was* a pretty awesome magician and could theoretically find a way to pull it off if she had to.

Mare Do Well *also* probably wasn't Fluttershy, since Mare Do Well had openly admitted that she didn't know anything about healing and had really botched the whole "bandaging broken wings" thing before. Fluttershy was a professional and would never have let a friend suffer an improperly-tended injury for any reason, even *if* it would've given her away.

Applejack was highly unlikely, if only because of the Honesty thing. Rainbow Dash hadn't really seen a lot of her lately, now that she thought about it, but that was because

the pegasus had chosen to take the earth pony's word for it – Applejack said it wasn't her, so it wasn't her, simple as that.

Pinkie Pie would have no reason to be resentful of Mare Do Well if she *was* Mare Do Well, but Rainbow Dash still didn't completely trust her. Pinkie had wanted to help Dash uncover Mare Do Well's identity, but then there was the jealousy thing – why would she be trying to foil herself and keep her identity safe at the same time? It made no sense, even for Pinkie, whom Rainbow Dash was reluctantly starting to admit probably had a lot more going on beneath the bubbly surface than Dash had ever paid attention to before.

Rarity still hadn't given Rainbow an explanation for the costume purchase, and had known what red carnations meant. But other than that, Rainbow Dash didn't really have any evidence either way, vilifying the unicorn *or* clearing her name. Maybe she needed to look into that.

There was always the possibility that Mare Do Well *wasn't* one of Rainbow Dash's friends, but that was growing increasingly unlikely. In all honesty, Rainbow would feel a lot better about things if Mare Do Well *was* secretly one of them. As threatening or predatory as the mare could be at times, Dash would be a lot more forgiving of those traits if the mare ended up being Fluttershy or whoever.

And besides, Mare Do Well wasn't all that bad, really. Rainbow Dash had meant what she'd told her earlier: the mare sometimes made Dash smile against her will, and she *did* seem to have a sweet side that she was trying really hard to repress for some reason. And she had a nice laugh.

*Oh, Celestia, why did I think that?*

With a groan, Rainbow Dash rolled over and shoved her head into her mountain of pillows. She was lucky that Rarity had so many, and of such good quality. They were soft and squishy, ideal for burying heads into. She didn't know why she was hiding her face, since it was dark and she was alone, but Dash could feel a blush coming and didn't want to chance anypony throwing open the doors and flicking on the lights only to see the shame on her cheeks.

Mare Do Well did *not* have a nice laugh. Rainbow Dash barely remembered what her laugh even sounded like. She'd only heard it, what, twice? Three times, maybe? The last time would've been that coy, girlish giggle that had...



With another groan, Rainbow grabbed a nearby pillow and tugged it over her head, pressing it against her ears as tightly as she could to see if it was possible to block out any further thought.

If Dash stayed in bed any longer she was going to go nuts. Maybe her need to get away from Pinkie Pie's room hadn't so much been a need to get away from Pinkie, as a need to *not* be lying down. There was no way Rainbow Dash was going to sleep, even though that had been all she'd been able to think of earlier; what she needed to do was *fly*, to stretch her wings and go soaring and be *free* and get away from all this craziness. But she couldn't even do that.

How did unicorns and earth ponies stand it? Didn't they ever get claustrophobic, trapped here on all this ground, gravity pressing against them and holding them down from every corner?

Rainbow Dash squirmed further into the makeshift nest that she'd formed out of blankets and pillows to resemble a cloud as much as possible, squeezing her eyes shut and covering her ears. Any sleep that she got was sure to be unpleasant and full of bitter dreams, but Rainbow didn't especially want to be awake right then, so she'd take what she could get.

• • •

In the morning, Rainbow Dash expected to walk into Rarity's workroom only to find everything in disarray, materials scattered and mannequins on the floor and Rarity herself on the verge of meltdown. Instead she walked in to find it in perfect order, with not a single thing out of place, Rarity herself looking as fresh as ever and ready to face the new day.

"You look good," Rainbow Dash said immediately. "Aren't you tired?"

"Oh, heavens, no," Rarity laughed. It was that noblemare's laugh she had, silvery and fake. A sure sign that whatever she was saying wasn't even remotely true. "I had to stay up all night to do it, but the dresses are *finally* done and ready to be shipped to Canterlot! I almost thought I wouldn't make it, but, well..." The unicorn stopped and yawned. "Mm. Excuse me. I suppose I *am* the teeniest bit sleepy, now that I think of it. But what sort of hostess would I be if I didn't see to the needs of my guest first? Do you want breakfast?"

"Sure!" Dash answered without thinking, and then hastened to correct herself. "I mean, nah, I'm good. You should probably... I dunno. Go take a nap or something. I bet you've been awake for like three days."

"No, no, I'm fine," Rarity insisted with a wan smile. "I do it all the time. This *is* my life's work, you know – I'm used to it by now. Are you *sure* you don't need anything?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Rainbow Dash was already heading for the door. Rarity followed from behind to see her out.

"Do you have anywhere to stay tonight?" the unicorn asked, sounding curious. "If you need to, you can spend the night here again. I know that you're in a bit of a tricky situation right now, what with your..." She trailed off and gestured vaguely to her sides with her hooves, as if to indicate a pair of imaginary wings.

"Thanks, Rare, that's totally awesome of you."

"No trouble at all, I promise! Oh, but, before you go, Rainbow Dash, there's something I wanted to ask you about."

"Huh?" Rainbow Dash turned, ears pricking up in interest.

"You asked me about flowers before. Did you ever find out who your secret admirer was?" Rarity asked.

Rarity's smile was all innocence, her voice all friendly curiosity, like she was just any other pony looking for gossip, but Rainbow Dash's heart practically stopped. "Oh," Dash began stupidly, and her eyes flitted away, avoiding Rarity's probing gaze. "Oh. Um, yeah. Flowers. Secret admirer. Uh, no, that, I... no."

"Don't be like that!" Rarity cooed, all playful teasing. "I know you're lying; tell me! I want to know *everything*!"

"It's complicated." Rainbow Dash took a step back.

There was a flash of hurt on Rarity's face, just for the briefest moment, but Rainbow Dash still saw it; and then the unicorn smiled again, nodding. "I understand, darling," Rarity assured her. "It's a personal matter, of course. But promise that you'll share all of the juicy details with your friends when you're ready to talk about it, okay?"

"Okay," Rainbow Dash agreed. She was halfway out the door by then and only wanted to leave. "I promise. As soon as I get it figured out, I'll tell you everything. Don't worry."

Rainbow Dash felt the teensiest bit guilty as she left, but told herself not to dwell on it. Rarity was cool. She wasn't going to hold a grudge just because the pegasus hadn't really felt one hundred percent comfortable telling her about the whole Mare Do Well thing yet. And Rainbow *would* tell her – she'd tell them *all*. It wasn't like Dash was trying to hide anything from them – she just wanted to wait until she had the mystery solved herself before she got any them involved, since she didn't know yet if any of them were *already* involved. Any of them would've done the same in her place. There was no reason for her to feel bad.

She felt bad anyway.

Rainbow Dash's special talent was supposed to be raw speed, so she liked to tell ponies that she was called Rainbow *Dash* for a reason. But maybe she'd made a mistake, and the reason she was called that was actually because she was great at dashing *off* and ditching others. Some Element of Loyalty she was.

• • •

When Pinkie Pie had said that she would see Rainbow Dash tomorrow, she'd apparently been referring to seeing her along with everypony else, since the only time Dash saw her all day was when the six of them were gathered at Sugarcube Corner for hot chocolate later that afternoon. Rarity didn't mention how she'd slept over, and although Rainbow Dash hadn't explicitly asked her not to tell anypony, she felt grateful all the same. It was the kind of thing that felt like it needed to be kept secret, Celestia knows why.

Pinkie didn't say anything about what had happened, and didn't act at all differently with Rainbow; her hair was curly, her eyes were twinkling, and her voice was filled with joy, the way it was meant to be. She betrayed no sign that she was still bothered by what had passed between them.

Aside from dodging Fluttershy's questions about how her wings were healing, it was like a perfectly normal day. Just what Rainbow had been craving.

They were gathered in the warmth of the bakery, sipping their drinks – Pinkie's Super-Secret Best-Hot-Chocolate-In-The-World, Rainbow Dash guessed – and talking and laughing about nothing at all. About little, pointless things – like how relieved Rarity was to have finished that massive dress order she'd been working on, or how Applejack was

trying a new recipe for apple cinnamon cake that she wanted them to try later (Pinkie Pie called dibs) or the details of Twilight Sparkle's latest letter to the princess. Apparently it was about how when a friend does you a favor, it was a good idea to be equally generous in return, whether with your actual material possessions or something as simple as your time.

"Wait, what? Where did *that* come from?" Rainbow Dash asked when Twilight finished telling them about it. "I don't remember you learning anything about sharing."

"You probably missed it," Twilight answered dismissively. "A lot can happen when you're not around, you know, and you *have* been pretty distant lately."

"Shucks, that happened to me once," Applejack chuckled. "I spent a couple o' weeks buckin' apples on the farm, came back and Twi was goin' on about all *kinds* of crazy adventures I missed."

"Ooh, that reminds me!" Pinkie shouted, suddenly slamming her hooves on the table and causing everypony to jump. She was working that day, only stopping by their table occasionally to top off their hot chocolate or shower them with more baked goods, free of charge. The rest of the time she was bustling about, either working the counter and beaming at the customers in line, or back in the kitchen, her beruffled apron visible through the open door. But now, she apparently had an important declaration to make. "What are we gonna do for Hearth's Warming this year? Because I know we gotta go to Canterlot again to perform in the pageant, but that's only on Hearth's Warming *Eve*. So we totally gotta have a big ol' Hearth's Warming *Day* party, with presents and stuff!"

"We'll probably still be in Canterlot, Pinkie," Twilight Sparkle said gently, sipping her hot chocolate. "I don't know if we'll be back in time for Hearth's Warming Day. But I'm sure the princess will be hosting an event in the palace, so we'll still get a party."

"Well, fine," Pinkie Pie conceded with a blustery sigh. "But I don't really like those fancypants parties, so we gotta plan one for *after* so we don't miss out on the fun! And besides, we still gotta have presents, right? We should do a present exchange! We'll pick names out of a hat and do secret gift-giving! Ohmygosh that's a *great* idea, let's do that!"

Pinkie bounced and the others laughed softly, *wow Pinkie Pie how are you so happy all the time*, and Rainbow Dash drank long and deeply from her mug. Her magenta eyes followed Pinkie as she hopped from table to table, seeing to it that nopony wanted for anything. The pegasus was trying to ignore the unpleasant, swirling thoughts that kept

rising up unbidden while she drank; the hot chocolate was too good for her to allow the memory of the kiss to ruin it.

When they'd all finished their drinks, the five of them prepared to leave, with Pinkie alone staying behind. Rainbow Dash was last to go. For some reason she lingered, and even then, as she was finally ready to head out, she felt something tug on her tail, holding her back, and she actually felt relieved.

Rainbow turned to see who it was, only to find herself face-to-face with Pinkie Pie.

"Dashie?" Pinkie said. "I wanted to talk to you for a sec."

"Sure. What's up, Pinks?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Are you doing okay?"

Pinkie Pie spoke in a hushed tone that brimmed with concern, and it made Rainbow's temper flare. Why was *Pinkie* the one being concerned about *her*?

"Yeah, I'm doing pretty awesome," Rainbow Dash answered loudly. "How 'bout you? You cool?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine! I'm doing okie-dokie!" Pinkie was quick to answer, her voice bright and her smile wide and natural-looking. "So, whatcha doing this afternoon?"

"I dunno," Dash said truthfully. "I hadn't really thought about it. Sleep, I guess."

"Dashie, you're silly," Pinkie giggled, covering her mouth with a flour-stained hoof. "You sleep all the time, goofball. Are you really gonna sleep some *more*?"

Rainbow's mind instantly flitted back to her restless night of tossing and turning.

"You know me. I use up so much energy during the day, it takes *forever* to get it all back," she boasted. Although she was playing along, Rainbow Dash couldn't let herself be fooled into thinking that things were back to normal yet. She'd made that mistake before. Just because the pink pony was *acting* fine, it didn't mean she actually *was*; Pinkie was a master at hiding her feelings, with a habit of letting them simmer until they finally exploded.

Then, to Dash's surprise, Pinkie wordlessly moved in for a hug.

It wasn't the kind of fierce, tackling, borderline violent hug that Rainbow Dash was used to getting from the pink pony. This was quiet and tender, forelegs wrapping around Dash and drawing her closer, and even though every instinct she possessed was warning her not to, Rainbow Dash found herself returning it, wrapping her own legs around Pinkie as well.

For a moment the two of them stood like that, the rest of the world forgotten as their breathing synchronised, oblivious to the staring eyes of the other customers present in the bakery.

"You're going back, aren't you?" Pinkie Pie asked softly, whispering into Dash's ear and breaking the silence they had temporarily shared.

There was no point in pretending she didn't know what Pinkie was talking about.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash admitted. Then, for Celestia knows what reason, she asked, "Do you want me to stay?"

Rainbow didn't know what possessed her to ask that; all she knew was that if Pinkie Pie had said yes, she might have actually agreed.

But instead, Pinkie smiled and released her, stepping back and saying, "Do what you want, Dashie. I won't stop you."

The answer was both a relief and a stab in the heart, but the only response Dash could offer was a smile of her own before turning and trotting away.

• • •

The rest of the day passed in a confusing, drowsy mess. Rainbow Dash was either asleep or half-asleep for most of it, dozing on a park bench only to be woken up occasionally, either by the snow or by curious foals wondering what she was doing there.

At one point, Rainbow Dash woke up hungry and thought to get food, only to return after grabbing lunch to find that her bench had been stolen by Lyra for her afternoon concert. After that, she found a bush to nap in instead; bushes were kind of like clouds, Dash told herself. Only wet and cold, and kind of scratchy and not actually all that great for napping in after all now that she thought about it.

If she stopped to think about it for too long she started to feel bitter about the whole situation, so Rainbow chose not to, instead opting to ignore the way that sleeping in a

bush might have made her look homeless and pathetic. She was too busy sleeping in a bush to worry about that.

Eventually she was woken by Derpy Hooves with the mail. Derpy had been nice enough to deliver it by hoof every day during the entire time Dash had been grounded so far, a favor the cyan pegasus appreciated. Still, Rainbow Dash almost never got any actual *letters*. In fact, she rarely got anything more exciting than the weather team's newsletter with the updated schedule, which was useless to her now but that she received like clockwork anyway because she was still on the mailing list.

Today, though, Derpy had a flower for her. Not a bouquet – just a single carnation, without even a note accompanying it.

*My heart aches for you*, Rainbow Dash thought as she stared at the flower.

"It took me forever to find you," Derpy said, cheery as ever. "You were in a bush!"

"I sure was, Derpy," Dash grumbled. "Hey, is there any way to find out who's sending me these?"

"You can check the return address!" the mailmare offered helpfully.

Rainbow Dash decided there was no need to point out that the flower didn't actually have an address at all, instead saying, "Okay. Thanks." She closed her eyes, nestling back into her bush as the gray pegasus flapped her wings and flew off, humming in a tuneless sort of way.

Rainbow had only thought to ask because you couldn't exactly mail flowers the usual way, for obvious reasons. Only a moron would try shoving a bouquet of real flowers into a mailbox and expect one of the carrier ponies to deliver it. If Mare Do Well was sending her these, then the mare must have arranged some kind of delivery service with the florist, but there was probably a way to do so anonymously. And even if there wasn't, it had been too much for Dash to expect *Derpy* of all ponies to know. If Rainbow tried to ask somepony else, they probably would've spewed that *customer confidentiality* nonsense again, completely unsympathetic to the way it was affecting her life.

Rainbow Dash didn't throw it out, though. She didn't do anything idiotic like clasp it to her chest over her heart as she sighed melodramatically, either, and she didn't even eat it, despite the fact that Rainbow was starting to feel the rumbles of hunger once more. Instead, she kept it, just to look at it. The crimson petals were soft to the touch, and unlike a rose, it had no thorns. It smelled sweetly indescribable, the fragrance so faint

that it was almost unnoticeable, except for when the blossom was pressed directly to your face. But who would do that?

All in all, though, it wasn't that bad, for just another dumb flower. It was okay, really.

Mare Do Well was *not* her friend, and Rainbow Dash couldn't let herself make the mistake of thinking that way. But that didn't necessarily mean she had to be Dash's *enemy*, either. She could be obnoxious at times, sure, and a little too touchy-feely, but, well, who wasn't? Dash herself had flaws, just as the mare had pointed out, and so did her friends. So *what* if Mare Do Well was kind of annoying? And *plenty* of ponies could be a little overly affectionate at times; just look at Pinkie Pie on a good day, hugging and kissing like nopony's business. The only difference, really, was that Rainbow wasn't entirely sure who...

No. She couldn't think like that. That was bad. If Rainbow Dash didn't even know who Mare Do Well *was*, but the mare kept harassing her, that in itself was wrong enough, even *if* Mare Do Well seemed to actually be kind of shy and sweet on the inside.

The flower was okay.

• • •

Night fell, the day came to a close, and soon, it was that time again. After a day of dozing, Rainbow Dash felt awake and alert and brimming with energy for once, ready to charge ahead to the cul-de-sac and... and she didn't know what, because Dash knew now that they were never going to get to that epic battle and she hadn't actually made any progress in her investigation.

Still, Rainbow felt pumped. *Ready*.

It took her longer than usual to get there, even though she ran, simply because her legs couldn't carry her quite as fast as she would've liked.

When Rainbow Dash got there, Mare Do Well was standing on the dumpster. She must have gotten bored with how long it had taken the pegasus to finally appear, since she wasn't posing in anticipation of Rainbow's arrival the way she usually did; instead the mare was carefully walking along the very edge of the dumpster itself, her legs shaking slightly as she strove to keep her balance.



"Yo," Rainbow Dash shouted, to get her attention. She was severely tempted to kick the side of the receptacle to knock Mare Do Well off balance and make her fall, but by the time the idea occurred to Dash, Mare Do Well had already jumped off.

"Are you ready to discuss our progress?" Mare Do Well asked, catching Rainbow Dash off guard by cutting right to the chase.

"Huh?" Rainbow asked, before remembering what she'd said the other night. "Oh, yeah. Right. Uh, you go first."

"I think *you'd* have a better idea of how well I'm doing than I would," Mare Do Well said playfully. "Care to share?"

"I still hate you," Dash retorted immediately.

"That's not what you said yesterday."

"I was tired. I wasn't thinking straight."

"Aw. That's too bad. I thought I was doing better."

"What were you doing up on there?" Rainbow Dash asked to change the subject, nodding to the dumpster that the mare had been balancing on earlier.

"Oh," the mare said, before pausing and glancing behind her. "Um, I was..."

"You were what?"

"I was trying to hide it from you before, and I'm only telling you now because you want me to be more normal," Mare Do Well said quickly, words spilling out in a rush. "But, uh, I'm actually a little... afraid of heights."

Rainbow Dash raised her eyebrows. Maybe she shouldn't have been surprised, because plenty of ponies were afraid of heights – it was perfectly rational. But she hadn't expected to hear such an admission from *Mare Do Well*, whose entire gimmick revolved around standing atop tall buildings and jumping from incredible heights. "Really?" Dash asked, dumbfounded. "Are you kidding me?"

"I... I like being up high because I feel like it's impressive and makes for a good dramatic entrance. But I can't look down, because if I do, I freeze up," Mare Do Well admitted. "As long as I keep moving it doesn't bother me as much, though, and it honestly doesn't

come up a lot in my everyday life. I wanted to see if I could balance without getting dizzy."

Normally, the idea of an acrophobic pegasus was laughable. A creature born to fly couldn't be afraid of using their wings; it was just ridiculous. Fluttershy was an exception, though, so this confession, as surprising as it was, didn't actually tell Rainbow anything. If Mare Do Well *was* one of her friends, it was still within the realm of possibility that she was the pegasus.

Actually, this knowledge made it even *more* likely, since Fluttershy was the only one of Rainbow Dash's friends that she knew for sure had a fear of heights. Huh.

She tried to imagine tearing off the mask only to find Fluttershy's blushing face underneath, but it didn't work. It was too weird.

"It's okay that I told you, right?" Mare Do Well asked. "That's what you meant by being normal, isn't it?"

"It's a start," Rainbow Dash allowed graciously. "I mean, *everypony* gets scared sometimes. Except me, of course."

"That's not true. I've told you before, I know a lot about you, and you're scared of plenty of things."

Rainbow snorted. "Like what?"

"Like change."

"No I'm not," Dash said immediately. That was somewhere she didn't want to go. Didn't even want to think about. *Ignore something long enough and it goes away.*

"Okay, fine," Mare Do Well allowed, equally gracious. "That's not important, anyway. I don't feel like getting into any philosophical debates with you tonight. What I *meant* to say was, you can go ahead and discuss your findings now. Any fascinating new insights into my identity yet?"

If Mare Do Well had said something like that during any of their other previous meetings, Rainbow Dash might have immediately assumed that she was being mocked and bristled accordingly in response. As it was, Dash could only look at Mare Do Well and think about how the other mare was apparently afraid of heights, which didn't stop her from bounding across rooftops and springing into battle from the air.

When Rainbow Dash was scared of something, she ran from it and prayed that it would stay away as long as she hid. Mare Do Well charged straight through, pushing past the fear. Rainbow didn't know whether this revelation was supposed to make her jealous or further infuriate her.

"Nothing yet," Rainbow Dash grudgingly admitted. "I keep thinking I'm on the right track, only to find something new that totally throws me off."

"Have you considered just *asking* me who I am?" Mare Do Well prompted, her head tilted as she looked at Dash.

Rising to the bait, Rainbow Dash immediately asked, "Who are you?"

"Not telling," Mare Do Well shot back.

The pegasus scowled and rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah, *very* mature," Rainbow muttered, kicking her hoof and sending up a little cloud of snow.

"You're going to Canterlot soon," Mare Do Well said suddenly, her voice taking on a mournful tone.

"So?"

"So, what am I going to do without you?" the masked mare asked with a practically audible pout. "How will I get through a *whole week* without seeing you?"

"You're going, too, though," Rainbow Dash began before narrowing her eyes. "Aren't you?" If Mare Do Well was one of Rainbow's friends, then she'd obviously be in Canterlot for the pageant as well – so it wouldn't be like they'd be apart, exactly.

"Well, yes. *Technically* I'll be in Canterlot too, of course," Mare Do Well agreed. "But it won't be the *same* as if we were having our nightly meetings. For one thing, I won't be in costume, so I won't be able to say what I like in front of you. I'll have to watch everything I say and do so as not to give anything away. *That* won't be very fun."

She pressed her hooves to her face, cocking her head the other way as if she'd just had a brilliant idea. "How about I make it up to you, though? I'm sure you'll miss me just as much when you're gone, so I promise to have a surprise for you next time. A Hearth's Warming present."

"A surprise?" Rainbow Dash repeated doubtfully. "Is it gonna be something stupid, or is it gonna be something awesome?"

"It'll be something *meaningful*, and it'll be very heart-warming when I give it to you. Don't worry, though, you don't have to get me anything in return."

"I wasn't planning to."

"Good!" Mare Do Well said happily, with a little clap of her hooves. "That's settled, then. And don't worry, I'm sure some more clues will turn up sooner or later, and then, well, you'll sure show me. But until then we can keep seeing each other, right?"

"Why did you send me the flower?" Rainbow Dash asked instead of answering. This seemed to catch Mare Do Well off guard, as the other mare didn't answer right away.

"Because I wanted to," she said simply, after a moment's consideration.

"But why?" Rainbow pressed.

"I have no reason. I wanted to send you something because I like you and like giving you things. I thought the flower was beautiful and wanted to share it with you. That's all. I only sent you one because I didn't feel like wasting my time sending a full bouquet when you'd just throw it out, but I wanted to send you *something*."

"I didn't throw it out."

"You didn't?"

Mare Do Well sounded surprised, and waited, as if to allow Rainbow Dash time to continue or explain herself. Rainbow didn't, though. Instead, the pegasus feigned a yawn, saying, "Wow, it's late. I guess it's about time I headed back."

"It's not late," Mare Do Well said quickly, taking an urgent step forward. "And you already slept *all day*. In a *bush*."

"How do you know that?" Rainbow Dash asked, suddenly feeling offended for some reason, even though what Mare Do Well had said was undeniably true.

"I *saw* you! Please, you don't have to go. I'll stop teasing you. We've barely talked at all."

She sounded so pleading that Rainbow Dash almost wanted to give in. Why did she have to have such a soft spot for patheticness? It was the same with Fluttershy's whimpering or Pinkie Pie's puppydog-eyed stare; Dash could never refuse either of them when they directed those assets on her. She was supposed to be the toughest pegasus to ever come out of Cloudsdale, and her weakness was *weakness*.

"Don't get all clingy and desperate," Rainbow Dash lectured, trying not to listen to the voice in the back of her mind that was urging her to give in and stay. "That's a big turnoff. Besides, I'll see you again tomorrow, so you don't have to get all freaked out."

Mare Do Well bowed her head, pawing at the ground with a hoof.

"What's wrong?" Dash asked, a little nervously. She didn't know why she cared, or why she was even bothering to ask, since it was probably just Mare Do Well setting up some dumb pickup line somehow.

"I promised that I wouldn't creep on you anymore," Mare Do Well answered, a little apologetically. "But right now, I want to hold you. I won't, because you don't like it; but right now, that's what I'm thinking about. I'd really like to."

Rainbow Dash flushed, and when she opened her mouth to respond, her mouth was dry, her words getting lost along the way somewhere on the way to her throat.

"You said before you'd figure something out if I was, um, gonna let you kiss me," Rainbow managed to say after a moment of standing there like an idiot, staring at Mare Do Well with her face burning and mouth hanging open. "Did, did you think of anything?"

"Not yet," Mare Do Well mused thoughtfully. "A blindfold, perhaps?"

Rainbow Dash found herself grinning against her will. She'd told Mare Do Well before that the mare had a way of making her smile without her permission, and that was exactly what was happening now. "Wow," Dash joked. "Kinky. But no thanks, I'm not into that. It was just a hypothetical question, anyway."

*It's just that when you see something you want or like very, very much, isn't it hard to resist the impulse to touch it?*

The thought flashed through Rainbow's mind, and she remembered the way Mare Do Well had looked so small and had sounded so innocent when she had spoken those words, and suddenly Rainbow Dash felt the urge to reach out and...

No. No. She wasn't going to fall into that trap. Mare Do Well wasn't a friend, and Rainbow Dash couldn't let herself make that mistake. The mare *wasn't* a friend, and *definitely* wasn't anything else. Even if Dash had decided that she wasn't necessarily an enemy, Mare Do Well was still a... rival? Was that the word Rainbow was looking for?

"Well, if you're going to go, you'd best be going now," Mare Do Well said dismissively, whirling around with a whoosh of her cape before Rainbow Dash could make a move. It was like her anxiety from before was completely forgotten and she no longer cared if Rainbow stayed or went. Dash's inner contrarian almost made her want to declare her intention to stay after all, just to spite the masked mare, but that was probably what Mare Do Well wanted. Reverse psychology and all that.

"I will, then!" Rainbow Dash declared loudly, to reflect the strength of her resolve. "And you'd *better* be here tomorrow. Don't you dare pull another disappearing stunt, either. Just because I'm leaving soon, doesn't mean you have the right to do that again and make me wait up all night for no reason."

"Of course," Mare Do Well answered smoothly. "Let us both continue to pretend *that* is why my temporary absence bothered you, rather than have you honestly admit that you missed me. At least *I* know the truth."

"Shut up!"

"If my teasing *really* bothered you, you'd just hit me again."

"Sometimes I *want* to," Dash muttered. "This whole night was pointless. I'm leaving."

"It wasn't *pointless*!" Mare Do Well cried with mock offense. "We got to spend *time* together! Isn't that enough for you?"

That time, Rainbow Dash let it go. There was no point in trying to get the last word in a conversation with Mare Do Well, because no matter what was said, the mare always managed to think of some last-minute retort that never failed to leave Rainbow's mind empty of any possible comeback.

"You're weird," was all she said.

"Are your wings doing any better?" Mare Do Well called out to Rainbow, voice faltering slightly. Rainbow Dash was already walking away, but stopped when she heard this.

"Yeah," Dash called back. "They're doing okay. I should be able to fly again really soon."

"That's good."

Mare Do Well's relief was palpable, but there was nothing Rainbow Dash could say to this, so she didn't even try. Instead she walked away, just as she'd promised, letting her hooves sink deeply into the snow as she shivered lightly in the chilly air.

Rainbow briefly wondered whether Mare Do Well was warm in her costume, and considered turning back one last time to ask, but when she did, Mare Do Well was nowhere to be seen.

*How does she do that?* Rainbow Dash thought, annoyed. But it didn't matter, really, because even though Mare Do Well seemed so talented at disappearing and appearing at will, she'd said she'd be sure to return the next night. Who cared if the mare was gone for now? She was going to be back.

Rainbow Dash felt a growl of frustration building in her throat. She hadn't learned a single freaking thing, and their conversation together had essentially been entirely meaningless. If her life had been a comic book, that night would've been pure filler.

Well, no. Rainbow *had* learned *something*. Apparently, Mare Do Well was afraid of heights.

If that was true, then as soon as her wings were better, Rainbow Dash was going to take her flying, just to freak her out. As payback for everything the mare put her through. It would be nice to see Mare Do Well scared out of her mind for once – provided that she hadn't been lying for some reason.

Rainbow Dash snickered. A private sound, subdued and kept to herself, but a snicker nonetheless. She was mean, it was true, but Mare Do Well deserved it.

Rarity had again offered the use of her boutique as a place to crash, and that was where Dash was now headed. Starting tomorrow, though, she *really* needed to get down to business.

Rarity had been the first pony she'd talked to when this mess had started, but Rainbow had dismissed her as a suspect pretty quickly. Yet Rainbow Dash had managed to find some reason to cross everypony off her list *except* the unicorn.

First, she needed to find out whether or not those sales files had ever existed, and then, she needed to talk to Rarity herself.

When Rainbow Dash arrived at Carousel Boutique, she was welcomed in by Rarity, just as she'd expected. Like the night before, Rarity made no effort to question Rainbow Dash about her unkempt appearance or why, exactly, she was out wandering the streets so late, for which Dash was grateful. Instead, the unicorn ushered Rainbow Dash inside, prodding her instead with questions about whether or not Rainbow wanted anything to eat and whether or not she would be comfortable in Rarity's bed, to which the pegasus answered *no* and *yes*, respectively.

"Well, if you're all settled in, I'll just be heading back to my workroom," Rarity said lightly. She didn't look *quite* as frazzled as she had the night before, but she still looked exhausted, as if her night was already shaping up to be a long one. "Please, *do* let me know if there's anything else I can do, dear."

Ignoring the *dear*, Rainbow Dash asked, "Why are you so busy? I thought you'd finished your big order thing."

"Oh, yes," Rarity said absently, fiddling with a stray violet curl hanging by her face. "Well, *technically* I did, but I'm working on a little project on the side, you see. It's a surprise, so no questions!" she added in a playfully warning tone. "I promise that you'll know all about it soon enough, so you'll just have to wait! But for now, if there's nothing else you need...?"

"Yeah, I'm cool."

"Wonderful! Pleasant dreams, then. I'll just be going. Getting your beauty sleep is vital for good health, you know."

Rainbow Dash waited for Rarity to leave, shutting the door behind her, before hopping out of bed and fumbling with the lamp on the bedside table. She had to be careful. Since she wasn't a unicorn, she couldn't just magically turn them on or off, and had to use her hooves. She was worried about jostling it too much and breaking it, which Rarity would certainly hear. After a moment of clumsy groping, Dash managed to flick the lights back on, illuminating her surroundings once more.

Her gaze swept the room.

A large four poster bed – too large for one pony, actually – covered with an elegant crimson quilt and a mountain of fancy pillows. Small tables on either side, bearing identical antique lamps. One corner seemed dedicated to business; it held a work desk,



which, at a glance, looked to be as organized and tidy and uninteresting as anything else Rarity owned. Beside it was a large bookshelf, filled with binders and magazines and notebooks – probably research. Rarity's own personal fashion library. Another corner seemed dedicated to pleasure; it held an enormous wardrobe and a vanity table that was decorated with makeup and elegant bottles of perfume – and beside it, a chest of some sort. There was even one of those folding curtains for changing behind and a set of huge, full-length three-way mirrors, probably for admiring when the unicorn wished to admire herself. Next to the window there was a literal drawing board, presumably for when inspiration struck in the middle of the night.

It was a very *Rarity* room, sort of like how Pinkie Pie had a very *Pinkie* room. Now that she thought about it, Rainbow Dash had never been in Applejack or Fluttershy's, and she wondered whether *everypony* had bedrooms that suited their personalities so well. Applejack probably had barrels of apples in hers, as well as trophies from all the rodeos she's won. Fluttershy probably slept in her chicken coop or rabbit hutch or something so that her animals didn't get lonely at night.

Rainbow Dash snickered, but her hoof immediately flew to cover her mouth to muffle the sound; she couldn't let Rarity hear. She needed to be careful not to do anything that would attract the unicorn's attention, and that didn't leave her with much freedom. Rarity was notoriously fastidious, and if she suspected anything at all was out of place, she'd come rushing to fix it in a matter of seconds – regardless of whether or not Dash was supposed to be asleep. Rainbow couldn't afford to make a sound.

*We gotta be sneaky, Dashie. Sneaky!* she imagined Pinkie Pie hissing, and Rainbow Dash sighed inwardly. When Pinkie had first proposed that they investigate together, she'd thought it was just Pinkie looking for another excuse to hang out, and hadn't expected her to take it seriously at all. Rainbow had been envisioning ridiculous stealth missions like this that the earth pony would have to force her to take part in, but now she was wondering whether Pinkie had been taking it seriously after all, only in her own way, with something slightly more sinister in mind.

*She's not stupid, you know. You underestimate her. She did that on purpose. She knows exactly what I'm doing and she's trying to send me a message. She wants me to know that she doesn't like it, so she approached you. Flaunting it.*

Mare Do Well had told Rainbow Dash this rather bluntly at one of their earlier meetings, when the mare had lost her temper about Pinkie Pie helping Rainbow Dash. It was getting easier for the pegasus to believe that might be true. She *had* sometimes wondered if Pinkie was smarter than she looked – or smarter than she acted, at least. She *did* seem

to have a way of always finding out or getting what she wanted, no matter the circumstances, and it really wasn't that much of a stretch to believe that Pinkie Pie was secretly some kind of puppet master who pulled the strings from behind the scenes.

She wasn't cruel, though. That was unthinkable. If Pinkie *was* some kind of master manipulator, she'd likely only use her skills to bring about a variety of happy coincidences for those she was close to.

Mare Do Well had accused Rainbow of being afraid of change, but that wasn't true. She didn't *like* change, sure, but there was a *reason* for that. The way things were before had been *fine*. Rainbow Dash had been happy with her friends. They'd had fun adventures every day, she'd had a good life, and then Mare Do Well had disrupted all that. If the mare had never reappeared, things would've stayed the way they'd always been. *Awesome*.

And Rainbow Dash would've been okay with that. She'd had no reason to want things to be any different. It was hypocritical, anyway – Mare Do Well had told Dash that the reason she'd chosen to wear the mask was because she'd wanted to become somepony who wasn't afraid of change. So how *dare* she accuse Rainbow Dash of doing the same?

This, right now, was probably the very best chance Rainbow was ever going to get to search Rarity's home for those sales files. *If* they existed. It was unlikely that Rarity would keep something like that in her room – they would probably be kept under lock and key in her office, or something – but it was still worth a shot. Even if Rainbow Dash didn't find them, Rarity might have something else of interest lying around that could theoretically help her, like a diary. A diary might mention what had happened to the Mare Do Well costume she'd had in stock.

Then, in the morning, Rainbow Dash would talk to Rarity and maybe *finally* get some insight into whether or not she could be a suspect. It's not like it hadn't crossed Rainbow's mind – Mare Do Well had a way of speaking that reminded Dash of Rarity, full of flowery language and long words. Plus, the mare seemed to have a flair for the dramatic.

None of the actual evidence she'd seen or clues she'd picked up seemed to really incriminate Rarity, though. Mare Do Well had even told Rainbow off before for making assumptions based on her behavior, given that the whole point of this charade was to seize an opportunity to act like somepony else, but seriously. That was all Rainbow Dash had to go on at the moment.

Her idea of Mare Do Well had changed a lot in the past month or so.

Rainbow Dash had no idea how long it had been, actually, but a month seemed about right.

At first, the mare had just been an annoyance – always popping up whenever Rainbow Dash least wanted her, always doing what she wasn't supposed to do and saying things just to wind Dash up. But if *that* was the *real* mask Mare Do Well wore, then it was rapidly falling apart, peeling away to reveal whatever she was trying to hide underneath.

Beneath that smug behavior from the beginning, Mare Do Well seemed genuinely insecure; shy, almost sweet, and maybe more than a little vulnerable. The carnation had been proof of that. Whatever else she was, Mare Do Well was trying very, very hard to be likeable in some way – she just didn't seem to really know how to do that.

That alone was enough to make Rainbow Dash almost feel sorry for her. But then she'd revert back to the conceited Mare Do Well of before, and although she could be funny and shrewd, she was also arrogant and cunning in the worst possible way, leading Rainbow to dislike her again.

Mare Do Well had confessed before that she had no idea what she was doing, and that was getting a lot easier for Rainbow to believe with time, what with the way the other mare was constantly flip-flopping between such contrasting aspects of her personality. If the masked mare would just settle on one, it would be a lot easier for Rainbow Dash to decide whether she liked her or not.

As a *friend*, of course.

The *normal* Mare Do Well, the awkward, but somewhat goofy, one, was endearing in her own way, Dash had to admit. The superhero Mare Do Well that was trying to be impressive at any cost succeeded in the sense that she *was* pretty impressive, but she was also insufferable, what with that attitude of hers.

But now was not the time for internal debate. Now was the time to search Rarity's room for any potential evidence.

Rainbow Dash started by opening all the drawers of the bedside tables, since they were closest to where she was standing. Both were empty, and she slammed them shut in annoyance.

Next, Rainbow Dash wandered over to the desk. She wanted to rummage through everything she found – to dig through the drawers and shuffle through the papers – but she had to be exceptionally careful. Rarity was obsessive about order and would notice the instant something was out of place, and Dash didn't want to leave any evidence that she'd been going through the unicorn's things. It went against her very nature, but she had to be slow and wary for once.

There was nothing of any real interest on the desk. Just textbooks about design and the history of fashion. Rainbow Dash flipped through one of them out of curiosity, and to her surprise found that several passages of text were highlighted, and notes were scribbled in the margins. Given how similar Twilight and Rarity were and how Twilight could get about treating books with reverence, Rainbow had expected that any books owned by Rarity would still be in pristine condition. Aside from the defiled textbooks, there were a few sketchpads, but another quick flip through those revealed nothing especially intriguing, except for countless drawings of dresses that all looked exactly the same.

Rainbow Dash tried experimentally opening the drawers of the desk, only to find them locked when she jiggled them. She frowned. Given her luck, the clues she was looking for were almost certainly going to turn out to be in those very drawers.

With another inward sigh, Rainbow gave up, heading to the bookshelf next, but a quick scan of the titles on the spines indicated nothing but even *more* books on fashion. It was pretty weird to think that there were actually ponies out there who had thought it necessary to make a record of the clothes they wore when ninety percent of the population went around naked all the time. It was even weirder to think that somepony Dash was so close to actually thought it necessary to *collect* them. And they were definitely read; these books were *loved*. They were treated well, that was clear, but from the fraying of the spines, it was obvious that they'd been opened quite a bit by their owner.

The drawing board had absolutely nothing on it that Rainbow Dash wanted to look at for any longer than about two seconds. It was the same with the vanity table. Dash threw open the chest only to find a mound of scarves and sashes, and shut the lid again in disgust. The lid slammed down, but she didn't even flinch, gradually forgetting about being careful. After all, Rainbow wasn't finding anything useful.

When she opened the wardrobe, Rainbow Dash groaned. This time audibly, making no effort to restrain herself. Dresses. Nothing but dresses. Oh, wait, no, there was a jacket there, and a bathrobe, too, but for the most part, just *dresses* and *dresses* and *dresses*. She

started to look through them, shoving the hangers aside just in case there was something of interest hidden in the back, behind the clothes, but saw nothing.

Was there anywhere else that Rainbow Dash hadn't checked out yet? Did she dare risk venturing *outside* the room? It sounded like a bad idea, even to Rainbow, but she was starting to get desperate. There was nothing at all that she could use or that told her anything she didn't already know.

She considered.

Rarity would likely still be in her workroom, so if Rainbow Dash just avoided it, she could probably sneak into Rarity's private office. But that would probably be locked, so where would the keys be?

Unless Rarity was in her *inspiration room* instead. That was a possibility. Rainbow Dash didn't even know what the unicorn was working on, actually. After all, Rarity had just called it a surprise. She wasn't necessarily sewing. Maybe the surprise was that she'd decided to take up tapdancing, and was perfecting her routine for when she gave an impromptu performance at the Canterlot pageant.

That was unlikely, though.

And for some reason, that made Rainbow Dash remember. Mare Do Well was going to give her a surprise.

It was purely a coincidence that Mare Do Well had promised her something like that, only for Rarity to later imply that *she* was working on something secret as well. If Rarity really *was* Mare Do Well, she'd done a good job of hiding it so far, and certainly didn't lack for subtlety. She wouldn't have given herself away so easily. Over something so minor. Right?

Her inner foal was starting to get worked up over the possibility of an early Hearth's Warming present, and it was very hard for Rainbow Dash not to feel slightly excited. No matter who they came from, she wasn't one to deny presents; she liked stuff too much. But what would Mare Do Well get her?

Or *do* for her, Rainbow supposed. It was probably going to be one of those *grand gesture* presents that were supposedly very meaningful, but were actually kind of disappointing in the long run. But if that was it, then at least Rainbow Dash wouldn't have to feel guilty about being mean about it afterwards. If it turned out to actually be something kind of cool, then Dash would feel *obligated* to be grateful, which she didn't really want to do.

Rainbow Dash was starting to feel restless. It was that itchy feeling that seemed to come from somewhere inside, from the very core of her being, that meant she needed to fly. It was like the four walls of this otherwise elegant bedroom were starting to close in on her. Her wings were healing, much faster than everypony except Rainbow Dash had expected, and Fluttershy would remove the bandages soon so that Dash could get back into the habit of flying. She could hardly wait, though. Her body ached for the sky.

And then, she heard a scratching sound. *Scratch, scratch, scratch.*

In a flash Rainbow was back in bed, hooves clumsily fumbling with the lamp to try and shut off the lights.

From somewhere out in the hall, she heard a piercing hiss, and with a sharp intake of breath, Rainbow Dash felt her heart stop.

A hoof knocked against the lamp, sending it wobbling dangerously close to the edge, and her forelegs shot out to steady it, but they just knocked into it, giving it the slightest nudge needed to fall.

"Opalescence!" came Rarity's chiding voice from out in the hall. "Give that back, you naughty girl... and stop scratching that door! Ow, no, don't bite mummy –"

It somehow seemed to happen in two different speeds at once, both in slow motion and too fast for her to stop. All Rainbow Dash could do was watch, helpless, as the lamp tipped over the edge of the table before hitting the ground with a distinctive, high-pitched *crack*.

The door opened.

"Rainbow Dash, darling! What *was* that? Are you okay?" Rarity asked, peering into the room. Behind her floated Opalescence, who seemed simultaneously bitter about her entrapment in the magical aura Rarity held her in and satisfied that she was now free to chew on the tape measure she'd apparently run off with.

Rainbow Dash froze, and so did Rarity. Their eyes met. *It's not what it looks like*, Rainbow wanted to say, except she couldn't honestly say what it must have looked like to the unicorn. She tried to see herself from Rarity's perspective: a pegasus with broken and bandaged wings standing by a considerably rumpled bed, looking over a broken lamp, with shards of glass littering the floor, wardrobe wide open and clearly rifled through. It might've looked like a break-in robbery, except that Rainbow Dash was a friend and had been invited to spend the night.

"Rainbow Dash," Rarity ventured, eyeing the broken lamp. "What in Equestria are you doing?"

"I was sleepwalking," Rainbow Dash said automatically.

Rarity dropped the cat (who immediately scampered off with the tape in her mouth) and entered the room, her gaze slowly shifting from the broken lamp to the open wardrobe.

"Were you going through my things?" she asked suddenly, her sharp tone a direct contrast to the friendly but concerned voice that she'd spoken to Rainbow with before.

"No," Rainbow Dash lied.

"Why is my wardrobe open? And, and... my desk!" Rarity wailed, flying to it. "You went through my personal papers?! Rainbow, how *could* you?"

"How can you even tell?" Rainbow Dash asked, temporarily forgetting her previous denial. "I put everything back!"

"Everything's been *moved*! Why were you touching any of this? Why... I only put you in here because I thought I could *trust* you, Rainbow Dash!" Rarity cried, oblivious to Rainbow's complaint. "If I'd known you would do this, I would've... I would've... oh, everything's all messed up, now! Just *look* at this! I had everything *perfect* before!"

"Rarity, I'm really sorry –"

"What were you *doing*?"

"Looking for clues?" Rainbow Dash offered nervously.

"Clues?" Rarity repeated, looking surprised. "Clues for what?"

"I..." Rainbow Dash looked down at the pool of lamp shards surrounding her on the carpet. Where was she supposed to begin? She'd been panicked *before*, but now her throat tightened with a new, even more horrible kind of fear. When she'd confessed everything to Pinkie Pie and Twilight Sparkle and Applejack, it had been because she'd felt comfortable telling them – but now she just felt pressured.

But if she didn't give Rarity some sort of reason, then...

"Do you remember how about a month ago, I told you guys about how I saw somepony dressed like Mare Do Well, and then later I came to talk to you and asked you who bought the costume but you wouldn't tell me because of customer confidentiality?" Rainbow Dash asked in a rush.

Rarity blinked, her anger apparently forgotten for a moment, as if that hadn't been what she'd been expecting Rainbow Dash to say at all. "Of course I do," she finally said. "But why..."

"Mare Do Well's still following me. And it's not just me seeing things, it's really somepony dressing like her and looking for me. Like, me specifically. I know because we've actually been talking. And *she's* the one who sent those flowers."

Rainbow Dash exhaled deeply. It was nice to get it off her chest. With each of her friends that she told, she felt a little lighter, and even though she hadn't thought that she'd been ready to tell Rarity of her secret shame, it felt good all the same.

"Mare Do Well?" Rarity repeated, looking even more confused than before. "I thought... I thought that was over. You hadn't said anything about it for a while, and she hasn't been in the paper since that one time, but... *she's* the secret admirer?"

"I... I guess. I *think* so. I mean, I *think* she likes me, but the thing is, I don't actually know who it *is*. I thought if I could find your sales files, there'd be a record of who bought the costume from you or something."

"Rainbow Dash!" Rarity interrupted firmly. Rainbow Dash had been focusing on a spot somewhere on the ground, but at the sharp tone Rarity spoke with, she lifted her head and found herself staring into the unicorn's eyes. They were brimming with concern, her mouth curved into a worried smile. "I can't believe a friend of mine would be so foalish! If you'd just *told* me that it had gone that far, of *course* I would've helped you. Do you really think me so hard-hearted that I'd let a friend of mine suffer because of something as silly as *business*?"

"No," Rainbow Dash answered, and she felt a wave of relief wash over her. She gave Rarity an uneasy smile in return. "No, I guess not. I'm, I'm sorry... and does that mean you'll show me the records?"

"I won't *show* you," Rarity answered primly. "But I'll *tell* you, provided that you swear not to tell anypony else."

"Right!" Rainbow Dash said quickly. "I swear! Cross my heart, hope to fly –"



"You don't have to do that," Rarity cut in. "Your word is enough. I don't even have to check my ledgers, though. It was Spike. I remember because he wanted me to make it over for his stature, and that was a bit tricky."

What.

"If you'd just come to see me sooner, then I could've told you that earlier and set your mind at ease; because I'm certain the Mare Do Well you've been seeing couldn't possibly be him. For one thing, he's in Canterlot, and for another, I *highly* doubt you'd confuse a male baby dragon for a full grown mare. You'll have to look somewhere else."

What.

"Rainbow Dash?"

WHAT.

"Are you all right, darling?"

"*WHAT DO YOU MEAN SPIKE?!*" Rainbow Dash screamed. She threw herself at Rarity, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her.

She felt like her mind had exploded. Not once, not even twice, but at *least* three times. For the briefest second of pure, unadulterated shock, Dash had thought that she must have somehow misheard the unicorn, but then Rarity had gone on, and *of course* it wasn't Spike, but Rainbow had been *so absolutely sure* that whoever her Mare Do Well was, she must have gotten the costume from Rarity. And if she *hadn't*, then what was Rainbow Dash supposed to do *now*?

Rarity looked startled, then annoyed, magically pushing Rainbow Dash away. "Please do not treat me so roughly, Rainbow Dash," she said stiffly. "I'm trying to *help* you. Twilight gave me her old costume in case I wanted to make it over, but shortly after that, Spike stopped by and asked to buy it back. I asked him why, and he said that he thought the costume was, and I quote, *really cool*."

There was a beat where Rainbow Dash could do nothing but stare at Rarity, eyes huge, chest heaving.

"And if I may say so, it looked *adorable* on little Spikey-Wikey," Rarity added, smiling as if at a fond memory. "If you wanted to ask him about it, we'll see him in Canterlot soon enough. I'm sure he won't mind that I told you, considering the circumstances, but be a

dear and don't mention it to anypony else, will you? I believe he said something about saving it for next year's Nightmare Night and surprising everypony."

Rainbow Dash turned and went back to bed.

"Rainbow Dash, what are you doing?" Rarity asked, sounding amused. but Rainbow Dash ignored her, shoving her head further into her mound of pillows.

There was a moment of silence while Rarity waited for her to answer. The unicorn sighed when she didn't.

"Well, it's certainly rather late," Rarity said softly, half to the pegasus who was now trying to will herself into unconsciousness and half to herself. "I supposed retiring now wouldn't be such a bad idea. We can talk more in the morning, if you'd like. But for now, I think I ought to be turning in myself."

• • •

Spike. Freaking Spike. Spike, who wasn't even *here* right now and had been gone for the past two weeks. And now Rainbow's biggest lead was *gone*, just like that. Maybe the reason Pinkie had lied about the files was to spare Rainbow Dash's pride.

Her Mare Do Well obviously couldn't be Spike. Only an idiot would think that. But Rainbow Dash had been convinced that all she needed to do to figure out Mare Do Well's identity was to find out who'd bought the costume from Rarity, and now she had no idea how to go on or where to start over.

Maybe it would be easier if Rainbow didn't even try anymore, since this whole ordeal just kept leading to dead ends. Maybe Rainbow Dash could forfeit their game and give herself a concussion so that she completely forgot about Mare Do Well. Then she'd be able to relax and get on with her life.

Twilight's costume was gone, then, and Pinkie seemed determined to stick to her own dubious alibi. That left Applejack or Fluttershy's costumes. But they'd promised that they weren't using them, so if it was one of the others, then they must have lent them out or had them go missing. Wouldn't they have told Dash, though? They both knew that Rainbow Dash was trying to figure it out and needed as much help as possible; they both knew what she was going through. Or at least, they *should* have known what she was going through, since it had been so long and Rainbow had barely been able to do so much as *think* about anything else. Wouldn't they have told her if something like that had happened?

Unless *they* didn't even know. Maybe they'd put their costumes away and weren't aware that they'd gone missing. That was a definite possibility.

Rainbow desperately wanted her mind to shut down for a few hours. For once, she *wanted* to sleep. The dreams that would come, as unbidden as they may have been, would be a welcome respite.

• • •

Rainbow Dash didn't talk to Rarity the next morning. The unicorn wasn't awake when she got up, so she left without saying goodbye. Dash didn't want to hear whatever Rarity had to tell her. She felt more like brooding. She wasn't in the mood for sitting down and thinking logical, rational thoughts. Instead, she wanted to kick things. Unfortunately, Rainbow *couldn't*, because she needed her legs for walking and couldn't spare any of them for breaking the things she so wanted to break in order to vent her overwhelming frustration.

Time passes surprisingly quickly when you're angry beyond belief for reasons you don't fully understand. There was no mail that day – no flowers – and nopony dared to approach Rainbow Dash when they saw the way her eyes flashed and her face twisted into a vicious scowl whenever they came too close. Normally, she'd get over a mood like this by flying as hard and fast and long as she could until her anger evaporated, leaving her with nothing but a feeling of calm as pure and blue as the sky. But today, she couldn't even do that.

Everypony avoided her and Rainbow Dash avoided everypony in return. Instead, she hid in her bush, which she'd decided to adopt as her second home while she was grounded. At one point Pinkie passed by on a stroll and hopped over, sniffing and nudging the bush like a puppy while Rainbow glared at her from the leaves in bitter silence.

"Dashie, what are you doing?" Pinkie Pie finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Brooding."

"Why?"

"Because Mare Do Well isn't Spike."

Pinkie giggled. "Well, duh. *I* could've told you that, you silly filly."

"I don't know what to do now," Rainbow Dash admitted helplessly, fidgeting and causing the leaves of her second home to rustle. "So I'm going to hide in a bush until it's night and I can go talk to her."

It was only after she said it that Rainbow Dash found herself questioning the wisdom of talking about Mare Do Well so easily with Pinkie, but the pink pony didn't seem bothered. The trouble was, Rainbow Dash had no idea if that was because she truly didn't mind, or if this was one of those situations where Pinkie was just being very, very good at hiding her real feelings.

"You can talk to *me*," Pinkie said softly. And then, in a brighter tone, "Or you can talk to Twilight! Spike *lives* with her, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

Pinkie Pie cocked her head, examining Rainbow Dash very carefully before springing away. Rainbow Dash spent the rest of the day sulking in her new house.

• • •

That night, Rainbow Dash reached the cul-de-sac only to find Mare Do Well standing on the dumpster again. This time, the mare's back was to the pegasus as she carefully walked along the edge of the bin. The cape she wore draped over her shoulders partially hid her legs, but Rainbow Dash knew that they shook because of the unsteady way with which the mare walked.

"Boo!" she shouted.

She expected Mare Do Well to screech in surprise, or even just fall off, but instead the mare froze before turning to face Dash. When their eyes met – or rather, when Rainbow Dash's magenta eyes met the blank eyes of the hood – the mare gave a little bow before leaping off and approaching Rainbow Dash.

"Are you all right?" Mare Do Well asked unexpectedly.

"Oh, yeah, I'm *fine*," Rainbow Dash snapped. "Totally hunky-dory. Never been better."

Mare Do Well simply stared. For some reason, that felt worse than if she'd made some sort of witty comeback that left Rainbow Dash feeling like nothing.

Why had Dash bothered coming? She didn't like Mare Do Well, and she didn't want to be here. It wasn't even personal this time; she just didn't want to talk to *anypony*. After all, Rainbow Dash had been in a bad mood all day – one of those moods where it would've been better if she'd just stayed in bed and not ventured out of her house. Only she couldn't even *get* to her house.

"Did, did I do something?" Mare Do Well asked, sounding nervous. "I've been trying really hard. Please, if there's something I've done wrong, just –"

"It's not about *you*," Rainbow Dash interrupted. And it wasn't, for once. Well, in a roundabout way, it *could* have been seen as such, but the reason for her mood was more because Dash was frustrated with life in general than with Mare Do Well. The one advantage Rainbow had thought she'd had in their little game had turned out to be useless, and even if it was a minor thing in the long run, she was still boiling over it.

But it wasn't like that was Mare Do Well's fault, really.

"It's not?"

"No."

"Oh." Mare Do Well paused. "Then... what's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's stupid. I didn't even feel like coming tonight, but I did anyway, because I don't *totally ditch* ponies expecting me the way *some* ponies might."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't *apologize!*" Rainbow Dash shouted. "You don't even... I just... *argh!*"

With a long, shuddering sigh, Rainbow sank down onto her haunches in the snow, screwing her eyes shut as she cradled her head in her hooves. Now, more than ever, she felt like screaming and crying and throwing a full-blown tantrum – because Dash had actually dared to let herself think for even a moment that she was getting closer to the solutions she needed, only to have any potential answers yanked out of reach by an unforeseen twist.

The game was silly and immature, yet Rainbow Dash still felt compelled to play.

She wanted to win, but had no idea what she was supposed to do now.

*Why do I care so much?* Rainbow wanted to ask herself – but the intelligent, reasonable Rainbow Dash who might have actually known the answer apparently wasn't in today. Instead there was only the *abrasive* Dash, who seemed to be especially skilled at making everypony mad at her.

Rainbow Dash sat very, very still, curling as tightly as she could into herself, wishing she could just disappear.

She was terrified because if she couldn't figure out who Mare Do Well was *soon*, she was going to lose, and she knew it. Because even though Rainbow Dash was being loud and hateful, Mare Do Well wasn't leaving the way anypony else with a brain would've left.

Instead, she was coming closer, and...

*She'd better not do it not now if she does I'll kill her.*

A pair of gentle forelegs wrapped around her neck, and Rainbow was so startled that she couldn't think to protest or struggle.

By the time she realized what was happening, Rainbow Dash was already thoroughly wrapped in the embrace – warm and soft and strong and all of those wonderful things, all at once, and even then, she didn't fight it. Instead, she felt herself deflate, anger forgotten as she melted against Mare Do Well.

They were both on their knees on the street in the snow, Mare Do Well holding Dash as tenderly as she'd ever been held, and Rainbow Dash, who felt very frail all of a sudden, actually leaning into the hug. Willingly. Her eyes stung with the tears that she'd been holding in for so long, and she still didn't know why she wanted to cry so badly.

"I hate you," Rainbow Dash whispered, her voice muffled from the way her face was buried in Mare Do Well's neck.

"Then why did you come back?"

"I don't know," and she *didn't* know. She really didn't. "I don't know."

Rainbow wanted to win, but *why*? The game was ridiculous.

Because she didn't want to lose, maybe?

But the way they'd set up the rules, the only way she'd lose was if Mare Do Well won instead. Why was Rainbow Dash being so frantic about winning as fast as possible? There was no time limit. If Rainbow just refused to play and went on with her life, then she wouldn't have to worry about it at all.

At that point, some unknown supernatural force spontaneously seized control of Rainbow Dash's limbs, forcing her to raise her forelegs and wrap them around Mare Do Well's neck.

She heard the mare's breath hitch, maybe from surprise that Dash had reacted in a way that didn't involve violence.

"What's wrong?" Mare Do Well asked gently. She didn't let go. She was still there, still kneeling in that cold snow and offering the comfort that Rainbow Dash had sought for so long, and she wasn't leaving.

"You're not Spike," Rainbow Dash choked, voice thick with tears that she was still desperately trying to hold in.

Mare Do Well didn't answer for a moment. And then Rainbow Dash felt her shoulders begin to tremble.

"Don't laugh at me!" Rainbow snapped, but she didn't pull away. Her voice was fierce, yet she stayed put, forelegs still pulling Mare Do Well close to her.

"I'm sorry," Mare Do Well said in a voice that was dangerously close to a giggle. "I'm not... I just... *what?*"

"You're not Spike," Rainbow Dash repeated. This time, she could feel her mouth beginning to twitch into that unwilling smile that Mare Do Well was so good at dragging out of her. "I found out before that Rarity had sold one of the Mare Do Well costumes, and I thought that you were the one who'd bought it. I kept thinking that if I found out who it was – like, in her sales records or something – then I'd know who *you* were. Easy peasy. But then I found out that *Spike* bought it, and I'm pretty sure you're not Spike."

Mare Do Well was still shaking with silent, repressed laughter.

"No. No, you're right about that," she agreed, a single giggle escaping. "I'm not Spike. You can cross him off your list; I'll give you that one. Is *that* why you were upset?"

"I dunno," Rainbow Dash muttered, and she sighed deeply. But she was slowly beginning to realize what she'd done, and all at once, the full understanding hit her like a slap in the face.

She abruptly let go, roughly shoving Mare Do Well away as she scooted backwards, out of Mare Do Well's reach, her eyes widening in horror.

"I-I-I can't believe..." Rainbow stammered. "I just... why... n-no, you can't... you..."

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Mare Do Well said softly, voice enticing.

"No!" Rainbow Dash shouted, rising upright. "No, I... don't do that! *Ever* again!"

"You clung to me."

"I didn't mean to! Y-you tricked me!"

"How?"

Mare Do Well wasn't taking Rainbow Dash seriously at all. She sounded amused, like she was playing along with a petulant young filly that was being difficult for the sake of being difficult when she, of course, knew better.

"Never mind," Rainbow Dash said quickly, ignoring the way her cheeks were burning. There was a heat in the very pit of her stomach that would've caused her wings to extend on any other day. Luckily, they were still bound and wouldn't give her away, but her wings were healing, and soon they would be strong and untied, and then she wouldn't have anything to hide behind. "Forget it. Forget that ever happened. *That didn't happen.*"

"Is that just what you *do* when you're afraid that you might like somepony more than you want to?" Mare Do Well asked, sounding a little sad. She stood up, brushing the snow off the knees of her costume. "You just ignore it and pretend it never happened?"

"No!" Rainbow Dash snapped without thinking. But that *was* what she did, wasn't it? She'd done it before. Over and over. She ran away and ignored things; that was how she kept them from hurting her. She was speedy, not tough. The best Dash could hope for when things went wrong was to run away and pray that she escaped unscathed.

"I won't push it," Mare Do Well said softly. "I won't talk about this after tonight. But I just want to remind you that *you* held me back."



"That doesn't count!" Rainbow cried desperately. Her voice was filled with such *fear*, even though she didn't understand what was happening that scared her so much. "It doesn't! This doesn't mean you won!"

"Of course not," Mare Do Well replied graciously. "I only win if you're willing to acknowledge it. Until then, I'll keep trying."

*It.* Such a small word, with such a huge, terrifying meaning. Rainbow's heart was thudding like a drum, hard and fast and frightening in how uncontrollable it was.

"I, I'm only here because you said you would have a surprise for me," Rainbow said finally, voice shaking, but she ignored it. It didn't mean anything. It *didn't*. "So what is it?"

"Do you want it right now?"

"Yeah, I like presents. Getting stuff is pretty cool. So...?"

Rainbow Dash was slowly regaining her composure. Her voice was steady now, her heartbeat slowing to a more reasonable pace. She just needed to stand straight and look Mare Do Well in the eye, sort of, and show her who was boss. She just needed to stay strong.

"You'll have to come with me," Mare Do Well said. The husky tone she used to disguise her voice couldn't disguise the undeniable excitement it held.

"Go with you?" Rainbow Dash repeated. "Where? Is this one of those *grand gesture* gifts that are all symbolic and stuff?"

"What? No," Mare Do Well answered, sounding disgusted. "Of course not. Those are terrible. It's just not *here*. It's somewhere else. I can take you right now, though, if you want."

"Where is it?"

"It's outside of Ponyville. Right on the outskirts, though, so it's not *too far*."

Rainbow Dash considered. The thought process was a reasonably calm one, compared to how Dash had been acting before. She was cool. She was smooth and collected, and no longer wanted to cry or scream. She was relaxed.

Mare Do Well, on the other hand, suddenly looked antsy, sort of hopping from hoof to hoof as if she could barely stand still. It was unusual to see her, usually so stoic, acting so restless, but maybe this was another attempt on the mare's part to be *normal*.

"You have to promise the same thing as before," Rainbow Dash said after a moment. "No creeping. And there'd better not be anything that'll bust my wings up this time. Okay?"

Rainbow could've sworn she saw the mare flinch, but she made no protest. "Right," Mare Do Well nodded. "I swear. I won't touch you, and to my knowledge, there isn't anything out there that will harm you in any way. Not under my watch, at least."

Mare Do Well paused.

"Are you going to make me Pinkie Swear?" she asked, a little hesitantly.

Against her will, Rainbow Dash found herself relenting. She'd been about to insist on that very thing, but Mare Do Well looked so excited about whatever the surprise was supposed to be that Rainbow couldn't bring herself to do it.

Wow, she was getting soft.

"Okay, fine," Rainbow Dash said, albeit a little grudgingly. "But only because I really like getting stuff. So it'd better be good. Got it?"

"Yes. Yes!" Mare Do Well agreed. "I'm sure you'll like it. Just follow me."

Without even waiting to see if Rainbow Dash would obey or not, the mare began to run, her cape fluttering behind her, and Rainbow Dash, for whatever reason, unquestioningly followed.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

It was Mare Do Well who spoke.

She sounded nervous, and stopped in her tracks in the snow.

The two of them – the masked mare and Rainbow Dash – had only left Ponyville a few minutes ago, and were now apparently making their way over to the cliffs by Whitetail Woods. Actually, Rainbow Dash wasn't exactly sure where they were headed, but Dash figured that since the mare *appeared* to be guiding her to the cliffs, it was probably a safe bet to assume that the cliffs were, in fact, their destination.

When Mare Do Well had first started running, Rainbow Dash couldn't help but recall the autumn when she'd first faced off against Applejack in the Running of the Leaves. Dash might have been the fastest flier to ever come out of Cloudsdale, but on ground, she was nothing special – a natural athlete, but nothing phenomenal. Mare Do Well, though, was downright *scary* in how quick her reflexes were and in how easily she seemed to make those jumps. Rainbow Dash felt that familiar rush of competitive spirit wash over her, forcing her to pick up speed as she followed the vigilante, suddenly wanting to be able to outrun her opponent at any cost.

Once they'd reached the outskirts of town, though, Mare Do Well's gallop slowed to a trot and finally to a lazy stroll. They still hugged the edge of the forest, bordered by the shadows that the trees cast in the moonlight, as if Mare Do Well was afraid to leave the cover of darkness for even a moment.

Rainbow Dash fell into step beside her, allowing herself to be led by the mare. Then, and only then, did Dash allow herself to speak up. Before, when her thoughts had been occupied by their imaginary, one-sided race, she hadn't wanted to let herself get distracted by idle chitchat. Once they'd slowed down, though, Rainbow Dash had to admit to herself that she was curious; yet when questioned, Mare Do Well's responses were either intentionally vague or just plain nonexistent.

"You'll see," was all she'd say. And rather cryptically, as well.

After she'd told Rainbow Dash this three or four times, she began to bring up the Spike thing every time Rainbow Dash spoke, prodding Rainbow Dash with questions about what, exactly, she'd been doing that led her to that conclusion. Eventually, after she'd

reluctantly confessed to 'investigating' Rarity's room only to get caught, Rainbow Dash just gave up and stopped trying to talk.

It was only when the cliffs were in sight that Mare Do Well had paused. Dash took a dark sort of satisfaction in noting how uneasy Mare Do Well sounded when she voiced her concerns, but only said, "You can't change your mind *now*."

Mare Do Well pawed at the snow with a hoof before saying, rather hesitantly, "Well, there are *two* things I want to show you, really. I'm just taking you to the first one, now, but – I don't know if you're going to like it."

*Two*? Rainbow Dash thought – but out loud, she said, "Even if I hate it, what's the big deal? C'mon, just go get it, or do it, or whatever. I'm gonna go nuts if you just drop the whole thing now without even telling me what it is."

"The first one isn't a thing I can *give* you, exactly. It's more like something you *use*? And I sort of cheated, too, because it wasn't initially supposed to be a Hearth's Warming present. It was something I wanted to *share* with you, but I was just saving it for a good time, and I thought *now* might be a good time, but..."

Her voice trailed off.

"But what?" Rainbow Dash asked. She was quickly losing patience. Her internal brat wanted to run ahead, search for and tear open the supposed present, shredding the paper with her teeth the way she always used to on Hearth's Warming mornings back home in Cloudsdale, but from the way Mare Do Well was almost trying to apologize for the gift pre-emptively, she was starting to wonder if it was going to turn out to be a terrible *grand gesture* thing after all. It felt like Mare Do Well was trying to prepare her for a letdown of some sort.

"Maybe this was a bad idea –"

"Okay, *seriously*. Don't get all whiny and self-doubting. I don't feel like being your shoulder to cry on. *You* dragged me all the way out here, so go ahead and... do whatever it is you were going to do, or say whatever it is you were going to say," Rainbow Dash interrupted, knowing full well that she was being rude – but not really caring, mostly due to how she was still reeling from the way that Mare Do Well had tricked Rainbow into hugging her. Talk about a dirty, scheming, underhooved move.

"I'm not *whiny*," Mare Do Well said with mock offense. "How dare you?"

"Is it gonna be awesome or not?" Rainbow Dash shot back. "The only reason I walked all this way was because I like getting stuff and I'm supposed to get a present here. If I'm not, then I'm heading back right now."

"Well, *I* think that you'll like it. At least, I *hope* you will."

"If *you* like it, it's probably gonna turn out to be... uh... dumb," Rainbow Dash retorted weakly, unable to think of a witty reply. Much to her irritation, she just *knew* that she'd probably only come up with a clever response at a really bad time, like in the middle of breakfast when there was nothing at all she could do about it and she'd be forced to sit and stew on it until she finally forgot what it was.

At some point Mare Do Well had begun walking again, and Rainbow Dash had automatically begun to follow, despite the heated exchange they'd just shared. Although maybe that heat had only been in Rainbow's imagination. Mare Do Well certainly didn't seem very angry, just unsure.

"Look," Rainbow Dash finally cut in, breaking the silence that had fallen over them. "Whatever it is, it's not like I'm going to –"

"We're here!"

Mare Do Well almost gave a little skip, running forward a bit before stopping and skidding slightly in the snow. She had her head tilted upwards, looking at something that Rainbow Dash couldn't quite see, and was doing that antsy little dance from before, jumping restlessly from hoof to hoof. Rainbow Dash almost wanted to chuckle when she saw her, if only because it was so out-of-character to see Mare Do Well act so undignified, but it was probably safe to assume that such behavior was due to her spontaneous burst of anxiety from before.

Rainbow Dash went to join her, and lifted her head as well, trying to find what Mare Do Well was looking at.

And then she saw it: a platform built into a tree.

Once she spotted the platform, her eyes slowly began to follow the line that led from it, hanging low over the gap between Whitetail Cliffs and connecting to a tree on the opposite side.

"Is that a –" Rainbow began, then stopped herself. Instead of continuing, she ran forward, fueled by a sudden burst of excitement, to get a better look, her jaw hanging open. "Oh my gosh... oh my gosh! Is this *seriously* the surprise? Like, for real? *Seriously?*"

Rainbow Dash didn't really know what she'd been expecting from Mare Do Well, but she could say with certainty that she *hadn't* been expecting a zip-line.

"I didn't *make* it," Mare Do Well said quickly. "I didn't even buy the equipment or set it up. Somepony else did, and I just asked if I could use it. I, I thought that maybe you might have fun with it, because I know you can't fly right now, and... I thought it might kind of *feel* like flying? Maybe? So I wanted to bring you here, just to show it to you. That's all."

"Oh my *gosh!*" the pegasus squealed, oblivious to the apprehension in Mare Do Well's voice. "I've always wanted to try one of these things! They're just so awesome, but I mean, when would I have ever gotten the chance to, right? And besides, it probably wouldn't be as fun with wings, but still, oh my *gosh*, this is so cool! Who do you even know that would *have* something like this?"

"Um, I'm not sure where they got it, but the equipment belongs to Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Apple Bloom. Apparently their special talents weren't in zip-lining, so they had no further use for it."

"Man, I *gotta* try it out. *Right now*," Rainbow Dash declared decisively, preparing to bolt forward and climb the ladder built into the side of the tree, so that she could grab the harness and go sailing, even if she had no idea how to actually use the thing and wouldn't be able to fly away if she lost control.

"You probably shouldn't," Mare Do Well interrupted. "It's too dark. I wanted to show it to you myself, so I brought you here tonight, but you should wait until tomorrow before you actually use it, so that you can see better. Besides, this isn't the gift I had in mind when I mentioned a present before – it was just something I wanted to show you."

Rainbow Dash stared longingly at the device. It was tempting her with the promise of the speed and freedom she so craved. Still, she'd get herself killed on the thing no matter what, so it would probably be better for her to do it during daylight hours, when she'd at least be able to *see* what killed her before it happened.

"Okay, I'll admit it," Rainbow Dash said, changing the subject rather than concede that Mare Do Well had a point. "I was kind of expecting something lame. But this? This is pretty awesome."

"Really?" Mare Do Well asked after a beat of silence.

The answer was *yes*, of course, but Rainbow didn't especially feel like having to reassure her. So instead she shrugged and asked, "If that wasn't the main present, then what *is*?"

"Ah... it should be hidden here somewhere."

There was a cluster of trees surrounding the tree with the platform built into it, and that was where Mare Do Well headed, using her hooves to dig through the bushes and snow until she found whatever it was that she was looking for.

The mask she wore covered Mare Do Well's mouth, so she wasn't able to lift the package with her mouth like anypony else might have. She didn't use magic, either, but that could've been because she was still trying to be careful about revealing too much of herself around Rainbow Dash. Instead, she reached into the tangled mass of leaves and pulled a package out with her front hooves, awkwardly dropping it on the ground before her. She leaned forward and nudged it with her snout, pushing it towards Rainbow Dash.

The package was dusted with flakes of snow, like everything else in this part of the woods. It was small and tidy, neatly wrapped with crimson paper that was dotted with tiny damp stains in spots where the snow had melted.

"I hid it here beforehoof because I knew that I was going to bring you here anyway," Mare Do Well explained. "It just made things easier to have it all set up before we came. And apparently *somepony* has a habit of ransacking the rooms of her friends, now. It's a good thing I didn't hide it anywhere that you might have dug through for fun."

Rainbow Dash awkwardly nudged the present with her hoof, uncertain whether to rip into it or what. Now that she was actually being confronted with the reality of the gift itself, she felt nervous, possibly more nervous than Mare Do Well had been about bringing her here in the first place. Maybe because, rather than worrying that it would be terrible, she was worrying that it would turn out to be really cool after all, and *then* she'd be in a fix, all right. She'd have to be all polite and grateful when she didn't actually want to accept anything Mare Do Well had to offer; yet the allure of a potentially awesome present kept her from turning and leaving right then and there.

"I wasn't *ransacking* anypony's room!" Rainbow retorted. "I was searching for clues. There's a *difference*."

"And the difference is...?"

"The difference is... well, I've been spending a lot of time in bushes lately, so you never know. I might have camped out here one night and found it totally by accident."

"Mm-hmm."

Again, Rainbow Dash nudged the box. Nothing about the shape gave away what might have been inside, and the wrapping seemed harmless enough. It didn't squeal or hiss when she poked it. Another good sign. In fact, it felt pretty light, like if she tapped it any harder it would tip over. Was it empty? Was this some weird joke?

Mare Do Well was still watching, making her reluctant to actually open it. Rainbow Dash felt weirdly self-conscious under her gaze, the knowledge that the mare was still there causing her stomach to flutter unpleasantly.

"I probably didn't need to wrap it," Mare Do Well said after a moment. "It's nothing big, really. I was joking when I said it would be meaningful and heart-warming."

It occurred to Rainbow Dash that Mare Do Well was trying to cover for herself. She was probably mistaking Rainbow Dash's hesitance for disinterest, and was trying to convince one – or both – of them that she didn't actually care, just in case it turned out that Rainbow Dash didn't, either. It was the kind of thing Rainbow Dash did all the time, making it easy for her to recognize it in others as well.

This moment passing between them, this awkwardness and uneasy silence, felt so natural and so understandable, so *relatable*, that Rainbow Dash felt another unexpected surge of sympathy rising against her will. It was her weakness for weakness, that protective *big sister* instinct that made her want to be able to take care of others and be a hero for them, even though she didn't actually have a little sister. Scootaloo didn't count.

She almost wanted to go over and pat Mare Do Well's head, to say, *Hey, it's okay, you don't have to be so scared. Calm down. No pony's going to hate you.* Except that Rainbow herself was firmly convinced that *she* hated Mare Do Well, so any words of reassurance that she might have offered would've been meaningless, even though she, too, knew what it was like to live your life trying as hard as you could to be somepony strong when, in reality, you felt anything *but* strong.



The very least she could do was open the present.

Rainbow Dash took a few steps forward, approaching the gift set on the ground – pointedly ignoring the way Mare Do Well was fidgeting – and leaned forward. As a pegasus, she had no choice but to tear open the box with her teeth, but that didn't especially bother her, aside from the fact that the paper tasted a little gross. Once she tore it off, she spat it on the ground with a "blech" sound, and gripped the lid of the box with her teeth to remove it.

Inside was a rectangle of paper.

"What is this?" Rainbow bluntly asked, but she didn't wait for an answer before leaning forward to examine it more closely.

It wasn't just a piece of paper; it was a ticket. A ticket of shining silver with a sky-blue border, the words "VIP Pass" clearly written across it in bold blue font. And Rainbow Dash, being Rainbow Dash, immediately recognized it for what it was.

"*Oh my gosh!*" she shrieked for the fifth time that night, and if she'd been able to think clearly, that might have bothered her, that she was being so open about her excitement. But how could she be expected to control herself when she'd just opened a box holding a *VIP pass for the upcoming Wonderbolts Derby in Canterlot?*

"*How?*" Rainbow Dash cried, holding the pass before her eyes like the most precious of treasures. "These are impossible to find! Like, *anywhere!* Even *Princess Celestia* wouldn't be able to get her hooves on one!"

"Ooh, blasphemous."

"*How?!*" Rainbow Dash repeated, ignoring the mare's snide interruption. "How did you get one? And... oh, *sweet*, if it's VIP, then that means I get to sit in the guest enclosure and everything! I'll get to actually *meet* them! *I'll get to talk to Spitfire!*"

"I called in a few favors, that's all," Mare Do Well answered, and although her tone wasn't smug, exactly, she certainly sounded pleased with herself. "You'll be in Canterlot then for the pageant anyway, so getting there won't be an issue. I thought you'd want to attend, just for the sake of seeing the show, but I also thought that it would be good for you to have a guaranteed opportunity to talk to them while you're in the city. The Wonderbolts are going to be at the holiday party in the palace as well, but they'll likely be too busy to hang out then – there will probably be photographers and such keeping them occupied, the way it was at the Gala."

It wasn't a grand gesture. It wasn't sentimental or heart-warming in the least. It couldn't even *vaguely* be interpreted as any kind of romantic overture, but *this*, somehow, was the first thing Mare Do Well had ever done for her that actually made Rainbow Dash feel even the slightest traces of gratitude towards her. It was faint and flickering and disappeared almost instantly, but for a brief moment, it had been there – something like fondness. She didn't know what the word would be, exactly; she wasn't Twilight, and didn't just happen to have an enormous repertoire of appropriate synonyms available at the drop of a hat for every possible occasion. All Rainbow knew was that although she'd felt pity for Mare Do Well, as well as appreciation for her sense of humor, she'd never felt anything akin to genuine liking before.

And then, in a flash, it was gone, when something occurred to her.

"Is this you trying to ask me out?" Rainbow Dash asked warily, now eyeing the pass with apprehension. "Am I supposed to go *with* you, or something?"

"No. There's only one, isn't there? And besides, I wouldn't do that to you. I only gave you the ticket because I knew it was something that would make you happy; I wouldn't try to turn it into something for me. That would be selfish and manipulative," Mare Do Well answered primly, as if she hadn't been selfish and manipulative countless times in the past throughout their relationship.

*Relationship.* Rainbow Dash had to find a better word to describe what the two of them had. The word *relationship* never ceased to make her cringe each time she thought it.

"Well," she began. The wariness had replaced any of the temporary elation that she'd felt upon opening the box, only to find the completely unexpected yet totally welcome VIP pass within. "I guess this wasn't *too* bad. For a present, I mean. It's pretty cool, I guess. And the zip-line thing is pretty awesome, too. But... why did you want to show me that, anyway?"

"I told you," Mare Do Well explained, turning her head to look back at the device. "I feel guilty. It's my fault that you hurt your wings, after all, so it's almost like a substitute. I know that you love flying; you must miss it terribly."

She did, that was true. It wasn't even that flying was obviously far superior to walking, in terms of travelling; it was that Rainbow Dash missed the rush of adrenaline that she got from spreading her wings and taking off into the rushing wind. It was that she missed how easy it used to be to satisfy the itch she had, the itch to move and soar and return to the sky from whence all pegasi came.

"It's an apology, I suppose," Mare Do Well continued, still with her back turned to Rainbow Dash as she observed the line. "If I broke my leg, it would be inconvenient, but hardly a tragedy. Your wings, though... your wings are *you*. It's not right that you can't use them. You should never be trapped on the ground; you're meant to fly."

"They're getting better," Rainbow Dash said weakly, casting a backwards glance at her still-bandaged wings. They *were* getting better. She was actually going to get Fluttershy to remove the gauze soon, so that they'd be free before she went to Canterlot.

"*Anyway*. My answer is no. No, I have no hidden intentions. However, if you *wanted* me to accompany you..."

"No," came the immediate response, without Rainbow Dash even stopping to listen to the rest of Mare Do Well's sentence. Any fondness she may have felt before was gone now, and any innocence there may have been in Mare Do Well's voice had been replaced with that lilting, enticing tone she only used when trying to coax Rainbow Dash into doing something she didn't want to do.

Mare Do Well's warm breath on her neck. A seductive, breathy whisper. *Please?*

Well, *most* of the time it was something she didn't want to do. But whether Rainbow Dash might have secretly wanted it or not was irrelevant – if she said no and pushed somepony away, that should be enough for them to butt out of her life.

"That's all right," Mare Do Well said graciously. "I was just kidding, anyway. Besides, I couldn't very well head out in public like this, could I?"

"You *could*," Rainbow Dash challenged, then wanted to kick herself. It was her inner contrarian busting out. That, or Mare Do Well was some kind of master at reverse psychology. Whatever it was, she hadn't meant to say it, but once it had slipped out, she found herself continuing despite herself. "Nopony would know who you were. You have a mask, remember? It's not like you'd be revealing your identity or embarrassing yourself or anything. And everypony thinks you're a hero, so they'd be happy to see you. It's not like you're a criminal on the run."

Mare Do Well tilted her head, listening, and Rainbow Dash forced herself to shut up.

She expected Mare Do Well to respond to her outburst by saying something idiotic like *so you DO want me to come?* but the mare did nothing like that. Instead, she quietly began to approach the edge of the cliff, her steps slow and easy and deliberate.

"I know I said that you didn't have to get me anything in return, but if you wanted to properly thank me, I know what you can do for me," she said, glancing back, and Rainbow Dash felt her cheeks flare with an unwanted blush. Even though Mare Do Well hadn't explicitly said anything creepy, she was getting used to having to leap to conclusions with her, and her mind had immediately gone to something disgusting.

"Get your head out of the gutter," Mare Do Well chided, and Dash could once again practically hear the smile in her voice. "It's nothing inappropriate. It's just... I don't feel like saying goodbye to you yet, and I know that you'll want to leave soon."

"So?" Rainbow Dash asked, voice almost catching in her throat.

"Would you stay? Just this once? We're not going to see each other for a while, after all. We don't have to play – we can call off the game for tonight. We'll talk about something else for once. Just don't leave."

It was a simple enough request, but Rainbow Dash didn't owe Mare Do Well anything, and didn't have to feel compelled to agree – and yet she did. This had been exactly what she'd feared when Mare Do Well had first told her that she had a gift for her; Dash had been afraid that it would turn out to actually be pretty good, and then she'd feel as if she now owed Mare Do Well a favor in exchange. Had that been Mare Do Well's plan all along? Had she intentionally tried to garner sympathy with her vulnerable act, just to make Rainbow Dash feel trapped afterwards when she made her request?

She didn't have to say yes. She didn't have to respond at all. If she wanted to, it would be so, so easy for Rainbow Dash to leave.

Except... she didn't have anywhere else to go.

And she kind of wanted to stay.

*What's wrong with me?* It was cold and it was dark, and they were right on the edge of the woods. If she stayed, she'd basically be camping out with her current worst enemy. Why the hay would *anypony* agree?

"Uh..."

"I swear I won't touch you."

Dash gulped. She hadn't been thinking about that. It hadn't even crossed her mind that Mare Do Well might have tried to take advantage of a situation like this, but maybe that

was because the pegasus couldn't actually picture her doing so. There was a difference between being overly affectionate and outright assaulting somepony, and it was difficult to imagine Mare Do Well doing the latter.

Rainbow Dash had no obligation to her. But Mare Do Well's request wasn't one of obligation. Despite the way she'd framed the question, she wasn't asking Rainbow Dash to stay because she truly felt that Dash owed her anything; she was asking as a means of testing the water – she wanted to know whether Rainbow Dash had grown to accept and trust her enough to be willing to stick by her. And the answer was *supposed* to be no.

"It doesn't have to be all night or anything. I'd just like to be in your company another hour or so, and then we can part ways."

"Okay," Rainbow Dash said, speaking quickly so as to get the answer out before her common sense could catch up with her and give her all the reasons why it was a bad idea. "But only if you promise there won't be any mind games or manipulating or anything. We're dropping the game. This is just gonna be like two ponies randomly hanging out. Nothing special. We'll talk about *normal* things."

Mare Do Well nodded solemnly, but she'd already taken a seat, having plopped down on her haunches like she'd anticipated Rainbow Dash's inevitable agreement.

Dash felt a prickle of annoyance, but brushed it away. She didn't go join the mare, even though she suspected that was what she was supposed to do. If she was the heroine of one of those sappy romance novels Fluttershy and Rarity were always reading, then this would probably be the point where she started looking at Mare Do Well in a new light, only to realize how wrong she'd been about her all along and how she actually wanted nothing more in the world than to be close to her.

But Rainbow Dash was stubborn. Not as stubborn as Applejack, maybe, but stubborn all the same, and she refused to give more than she had to. She'd given in to Mare Do Well's stupid request, but she wasn't about to start acting all buddy-buddy with her because of it, let alone all... lovey-dovey. Or *whatever* it was she wanted from Dash. What did Mare Do Well even want?

"What do you want?" Rainbow Dash blurted unthinkingly.

"Have I not been clear?" Mare Do Well asked, sounding surprised.

There was an expanse of maybe five or six feet between them. Rainbow Dash had taken up a position against a tree, leaning against it with her forelegs crossed in what she hoped

appeared to be a cool, unaffected stance, with Mare Do Well casually seated in the snow. She carried none of that stoic dignity that seemed to dictate her every move on any other ordinary night; it was like she'd meant what she'd agreed to and wanted to relax – to drop the pretense that she usually seemed to wear, if only for a little while.

"I like you," Mare Do Well said firmly. "I want to spend time with you and make you happy. In an ideal world, you'd return my feelings, and then we'd be together. That would make *me* happy. But for now, I'll settle for just getting to have these nights together, even if you spend most of them acting hostile."

"Hostile?" Rainbow Dash repeated, already bristling, preparing for the imminent confrontation that she knew in her heart would never, ever happen. "There's a *reason* for that, you know. It's not like I'm randomly being a jerk. It's because *you've* been screwing around with my life."

"I know," Mare Do Well humbly agreed. She drew her legs close to her chest, hugging her knees. Was she cold? "But I keep hoping that someday it'll all prove to be worth it and you'll forgive me. For now I'm just going to keep trying. Maybe someday I'll know what I should do to fix everything, but for now I only have my instincts to go on."

"And your instincts tell you to stalk me and invade my personal space?"

Mare Do Well didn't say anything for a moment, and then she sighed. "Let's talk about something ordinary. What would be something normal for us to talk about?"

Was she nervous?

This whole night, Mare Do Well had seemed jittery and insecure, first by apologizing again and again beforehoof for the surprises, then by the pathetic way she'd asked Rainbow Dash just to stay a little while longer, but Dash couldn't tell whether this was because Mare Do Well's mask was slipping, or if this was somehow intentional on the mare's part. Or maybe she was imagining it, and only thought so because there was something very wrong with Rainbow Dash right then that was causing her to be more emotional than usual. Whatever was causing it, she didn't like it. She hated the way her mood kept flipping between sympathetic and irritated. It would've been much easier if she could just settle on one definitive way to look at Mare Do Well. It would save a lot of time if Rainbow Dash could just know for sure whether she was willing to try warming up to the mare or not, but as it was, she was indecisive, her mind in turmoil and her stomach knotting whenever Mare Do Well spoke or drew too near.

She'd decided to stay. So what could they talk about to pass the time that was harmless and wouldn't just lead to another argument?

A small wind was rustling the leaves of the trees behind them, and Rainbow Dash shivered. Just a little. Not enough to mind the chill yet. Pegasi ponies were sturdy – she could handle worse than this. She was built for it. Well, maybe not *her* specifically; more like pegasi in general. Still, it applied to her, too.

With a sigh, she lifted her head, staring at the sky. Rainbow Dash was under the distinct impression that she'd spent a lot of time looking at the night sky lately.

Maybe she was imagining this, too, but the sky seemed especially bright in her eyes. There wasn't even a *trace* of those wispy gray clouds that usually haunted the night and hid the moon and stars; instead, the sky was clear and a brilliant deep blue. The air was clean and crisp, cool against her skin.

The world itself seemed to have come to a halt. It was utterly silent and still, the only disruption in this perfect night being Rainbow Dash and the mare who sat in the snow just a few feet away from her.

And suddenly, she felt impossibly lonely, standing by herself beneath the tree that she was propped against. For some reason, knowing that somepony was so close by – somepony that she was refusing to go near on a matter of principle – only made this sudden surge of loneliness that much worse.

"Wow," Rainbow Dash said stiffly. She was careful to monitor the volume so that although Mare Do Well would be able to hear, she could easily pass off what she was saying as her thinking aloud. "It's... it's getting kind of cold."

Mare Do Well didn't answer right away, but when she did, she turned to look at Rainbow Dash pointedly, and Dash flushed. It never failed. Even though she couldn't even see what color those eyes were, whenever she felt them on her, there was that *heat*.

"Would you like to borrow my cloak?" Mare Do Well asked, very deliberately.

Either she fully knew the implications of such an offer, or Mare Do Well was dumber than Rainbow had thought and hadn't yet gleaned that removing her cape would let Rainbow Dash know whether or not she was a pegasus. But Rainbow wasn't going to push it; for one thing, if she pointed it out and it just hadn't occurred to the mare, then she'd likely immediately retract her offer. And Rainbow Dash was genuinely a little chilly. It *was* winter, for Celestia's sake.

But believe it or not, Rainbow Dash still had her pride, so mustering as much dignity as she could, she haughtily sauntered over to where the mare sat, plopping down beside her. She watched carefully as Mare Do Well clumsily unclasped the brooch that kept her cape fastened around her shoulders, before shrugging it off and wordlessly holding it out to her.

There were no wings.

Their eyes met over the cloak, and Rainbow Dash might not have been able to see her expression, but she knew, right then and there, that Mare Do Well had done it on purpose, removing her cloak with the intention of giving her that vital clue. And she honestly couldn't say whether she was grateful or not. Instead of feeling smugly self-satisfied that she finally knew something for sure about her opponent, Rainbow Dash instead felt oddly hollow, like she'd been caught cheating.

"Do you want it?" Mare Do Well asked pressingly, indicating the cape she was holding out to Rainbow Dash.

"I'll feel bad if you sit and freeze. I don't want your death on my conscience," Rainbow Dash said after a moment. "*You* keep it."

"I don't want *you* to be cold, either."

"Uh..."

And wordlessly, without waiting for the flustered Rainbow Dash to organize her thoughts well enough to form a coherent reply, Mare Do Well swung the cape with a flourish, draping it over both of their shoulders.

"What are you, stupid?" Rainbow Dash snapped. "This won't work, it's too small."

"I know," Mare Do Well said sagely. "We'll have to huddle pretty close for both of us to fit."

The meaning behind her words wasn't lost to Rainbow Dash.

But it couldn't hurt to pretend.

Just for a little while.



Because they weren't enemies right then; they were two normal ponies, doing normal pony things. And if the mare beside her had been Twilight or Applejack or whoever, then this would've been perfectly fine. It wouldn't have meant anything that Rainbow Dash was now scooting closer, leaning against her as they huddled for warmth, and it wouldn't have meant anything that it seemed to work especially well, either, as her body heat inexplicably seemed to soar the moment she made physical contact. It didn't have to mean anything at all.

Mare Do Well, to her credit, didn't act coy. She didn't say anything about it at all, actually, instead letting Rainbow Dash pretend that she was still in control of herself and the situation. And Dash would never admit it, but she felt another twinge of something like gratitude towards her then. It was kind of her to not say anything.

When Mare Do Well *did* speak, she said something very unexpected.

"Can we be friends?" she asked.

"Friends?" Rainbow Dash repeated.

The proximity to Mare Do Well was more distracting than she ever would have willingly admitted.

"Friends," Mare Do Well confirmed. "I know that you hated me, and I know that you're far from genuinely liking me yet, but could we try at least being friends? Just to see what it's like?"

She sounded sleepy when she spoke. Something else unexpected. Rainbow Dash had never stopped to think that Mare Do Well would need sleep. Dash had only ever seen her at night, and had grown to assume that she just... didn't sleep. But that didn't make sense – Mare Do Well was just an identity held by a real pony, and *nopony* could survive without regular rest. Of course Mare Do Well would need to take a break every once in a while.

Now that she thought about it, Rainbow Dash was starting to feel tired, too.

"Friends," Rainbow Dash repeated for the second time.

*Friends? Yeah, we can be friends. Why not? I'm cool with that. Let's be friends.*

But she didn't say any of that out loud. Her eyelids were getting very heavy.

• • •

Something was on top of Rainbow Dash, and for a moment she wasn't quite alert enough to see what it was, but then the initial grogginess she always felt upon waking started to fade, and her mind began to clear. The first thing that registered with her was whatever it was, it was very warm. And that was all it took for her eyes to fly open with a start.

She was curled on her side like a foal, lying on the cape, using it like a makeshift bed to protect her from the cold ground, but it was also tangled around her legs like a blanket. The half she was lying on top of was now soaked through and chilly, but the half wrapped around her was still soft and comforting. Mare Do Well was curled up beside her, turned in towards her and apparently fast asleep, her breathing slow and even. Like a filly clutching a beloved teddy bear as she slept, a violet-clad foreleg was loosely wrapped around Rainbow Dash's waist, hugging her.

It didn't feel weird. It didn't feel unpleasant or unwanted. It was just... nice. Like when they'd watched the sunrise and Mare Do Well had leaned against her, it was a gesture of pure affection – and if she was asleep, then it was a purely unintentional one. No ulterior motives. Nothing to worry about. The sky was tinted pink, signaling the coming sunrise; so she would likely wake up on her own soon enough. There was no reason to wake her up now.

*If she's not doing it on purpose, it's okay to think she's being cute,* Rainbow Dash reminded herself. And it *was*. Since Mare Do Well was asleep, then obviously this was an unconscious act on her part, one that Rainbow didn't have to pick apart and analyze the meaning of before determining her next move.

It felt kind of nice, anyway.

The breeze blew past Rainbow Dash's ears, and she shut her eyes, just letting herself enjoy the warmth of another against her. It was a new and strange feeling, but it didn't feel unpleasant or frightening. It was kind of peaceful.

Rainbow Dash was thinking, and because her mind was still half-asleep, it was a confusing muddle of jumbled thoughts – thoughts that she'd later either forget or refuse to remember.

But then, right then, she was thinking that she wanted to know who Mare Do Well was, and how it would be so easy to just reach over and tear off the mask while she was asleep,

but that she didn't want to, not really, because if she did, then Mare Do Well might move, and she didn't want to lose this comfortable warmth. So instead, Rainbow Dash sighed.

She thought dreamily to herself that this had been the first restful sleep she'd enjoyed in what felt like, oh, a billion years. She thought how it would be wonderful to feel like this all the time. She thought about how whoever Mare Do Well might be, she wasn't that bad, really, and that if she'd just take off that mask...

And then she was drifting once more.

• • •

Mare Do Well had been awake for a while, now, but she wasn't going to let Rainbow Dash know that just yet. She wanted to stay like this for a little while longer, and if the pegasus knew that the mare was now awake, she'd likely shove her away. Besides, although she wasn't certain, she was starting to suspect that Rainbow Dash had fallen back asleep. That was okay, though. Rainbow Dash hadn't been sleeping very much, anyway, so she wasn't about to interrupt the first real rest the pegasus had gotten in what probably felt like, oh, a billion years to her.

When Mare Do Well had first felt her eyelids begin to flutter open behind the mask, she hadn't been sure if she was still dreaming or not. Everything about her current position had seemed to indicate that she was, so she'd stayed perfectly still, waiting to wake up, but time passed, and nothing changed.

Her heartbeat had quickened, a slow fuse lighting inside her, the heat spreading from the pit of Mare Do Well's stomach until her whole body was suffused with it. But still she didn't wake up, and only then had she finally begun to suspect that maybe, just maybe, this was real.

They'd agreed last night to temporarily drop the game and just act like two normal ponies. Maybe Dash didn't realize it yet, but that was exactly what Mare Do Well had wanted for so very, very long. She had made so many mistakes and had done so many terrible things as she'd subjected Rainbow Dash to Mare Do Well's strange and consuming need for her, and all she wanted at this point was to find a way to fix it all.

This, though... this was perfect. This was exactly what she'd been hoping to win from the very beginning. The two of them, bodies tangled together under the stars in a moment of peace, drifting off together and later waking up, greeted by the sunrise.

A temporary truce on Rainbow Dash's part, perhaps. Or maybe the pegasus wouldn't even remember when morning finally came for real. Maybe Rainbow would go into that funny state of denial again once she'd truly woken up, and then she'd insist that none of it had happened, that she'd never fallen asleep against Mare Do Well, before running off. But even if she *did*, Mare Do Well, at least, would remember.

As cliché as it may have been to think so, if this *was* a dream, she didn't want to wake up. Whatever it was, she wanted to stay like this as long as possible, closer than she'd ever thought they'd ever be, with Rainbow Dash not pulling away for once – just letting herself be loved.

It made her heart ache to know that it was going to have to end soon, and that no matter what she wanted, there would be a point where Rainbow Dash was lucid enough to realize what was happening, and then she would have to try again.

But until then, she would just let herself enjoy the moment.

It felt kind of nice, anyway.

Rainbow Dash running. Mare Do Well watching her go.

• • •

A lot of things happened the next day, and Rainbow Dash saw them as discrete fragments instead of parts of a continuous whole. Things came to her as disconnected snapshots – as muddled vignettes, interspersed with unwanted flashes of recollection, all of it regarding what had happened the night before.

But she shoved these memories aside, forcing them into the darkest recesses of her mind and instead focusing on the present, as Dash was naturally inclined to do.

Always the *now*. Never the *before* or the *later*.

If Rainbow Dash's thoughts ever began to stray, she'd find herself thinking about something she *definitely* didn't want to think about, like –

*Two ponies, cuddled together on the ground, forelegs wrapped around each other.*

And at that point, Rainbow would cut herself off, either with a sharp internal reproach or a smack of her own hoof against her temple in order to snap herself out of it.

There were plenty of other things to do, anyway, so keeping herself too busy to think wasn't actually that hard for Rainbow Dash.

The six of them were going to leave for Canterlot the next day, and preparations had to be made. Since Rainbow Dash couldn't actually reach her house at the moment, Fluttershy did her the kindness of offering to pack for her, and Rainbow accepted. Her wings were still bound, after all, and even though she was pretty sure that she was ready to have the bandages removed, they would've been too weak to fly right away.

While everypony else was busy finalizing their packing, Rainbow Dash was on the zip line, testing it out and pushing it to the limit in every way she knew how. It was strange, but the restriction of the line somehow seemed to simultaneously give her more and less freedom than if she were flying normally. Being on a line meant she couldn't control the way she flew down, meaning both that she didn't have to worry about movement, and also that she couldn't stop or change direction if she wanted to. It felt fantastic and terrifying all at once; just falling, having to trust that she wouldn't die without actually having any guarantee that it was true.

And she didn't think about how hilarious it would've been if somepony scared of heights had been there so that Dash could've forced her to go too. Not even once.

*A pony jolting upright, suddenly awake and shoving the other away.*

*"No!" she screams. "No! Let go of me!"*

*The other pony is confused, and sits up, bleary-eyed.*

*"Huh?" she begins. "But you..."*

*"No!"*

*"Why did you push me away?" the pony asks, sounding feeble, even to her own ears. "You were holding me."*

*"I shouldn't have done that – !"*

Around noon, Rainbow Dash made her way to her bush to take a nap, burrowing her way into the leaves and snow the way she was now accustomed to doing and ignoring the curious stares of the crowd. She didn't at all remember how it felt to be lying so close against somepony that you could feel their heartbeat, and the thought that she might have missed that kind of intimacy didn't cross her mind at any point.

And when Dash found her dreams haunted by a shadow, a shadow that drew closer and closer only to yank back and leave her breathless, she didn't think twice about it, because she knew that it didn't necessarily have to mean anything in particular after all. Sometimes dreams were only dreams, and nothing more.

Her nap wasn't especially restful that day. The bush left Rainbow Dash wanting for something. Something she couldn't put a name to.

When Derpy later shoved her gray head into the bush with an envelope addressed to Dash in her mouth, Rainbow took it with a grunt and waited for the mailmare to leave before tearing it open. There was no note; just the silver ticket from last night, which Rainbow Dash had somehow managed to completely forget about. Any excitement that she might have felt at getting to see the Wonderbolts live had waned.

Rainbow Dash would still go, of course. That wasn't the kind of opportunity one could just pass up. But it had dulled a little, maybe – overshadowed by the odd hollowness she now felt.

*"I can't do this. I can't. I thought I could, but... why did I do that? You're just going to leave! I can't take that!"*

*"I'm, I'm not going to leave –"*

*"You say that now, but I know you! You're going to leave, you always do! You're going to run away, and then I'll be all alone again!"*

That evening, they were all supposed to meet at Carousel Boutique in order to receive the surprise that Rarity had promised them. For once, Rainbow Dash was actually early; they were supposed to go once they'd finished packing, and since she didn't actually have any packing to *do*, there was nothing for her to procrastinate with. Rainbow couldn't really bring herself to care about whatever the surprise was supposed to be anymore, but she'd promised to be there, and she refused to let herself drift away so much that she'd let a friend down like that.

Gradually the others trailed in. First Fluttershy, then Pinkie Pie, both of them eager to be early – Fluttershy because Rarity was her best friend, and Pinkie because she probably suspected that the surprise would somehow be party related. Afterwards, Applejack and Twilight entered together, both of them perfectly on-the-dot punctual.

Rarity herself was the last to appear, busy doing something secretive in her back room while the rest of them clustered together outside the door to chat. Rainbow alone didn't join in the conversation, but nopony seemed to notice how listless she was acting – except for possibly Applejack, who gave her a funny look, but said nothing.

Pinkie's kiss had tasted of something indescribably sweet. In that vaguely sort of thoughtful way, Rainbow Dash wondered whether *everypony* tasted the same when they kissed, or whether each pony had a distinct flavor.

The only other time Rainbow had ever kissed anypony she wasn't just fooling around with had been that one night at flight camp. When she and Gilda hadn't been able to sleep, and Gilda had suggested messing around – just to try it out, she'd said. Just an

experiment. An experiment that Dash now regretted, especially since the griffon had brought it up first thing when she'd later cornered Rainbow Dash to pressure her to chose between her and Rainbow's new friends in Ponyville.

Twilight was standing closest to her at the moment, and Dash briefly contemplated testing her theory about kisses when Rarity interrupted her train of thought by finally making her appearance.

"Now, girls!" Rarity announced grandly, sweeping into the room and causing the other five to look up in perfectly synchronized surprise. "Sorry to keep you all waiting; I just had a few more touch-ups to do, but it's finally absolutely, one hundred percent *perfect!* I'm so glad you were all able to make it. I simply *cannot* wait any longer, or I think I may burst!"

"Can you just get to the point, then?" Applejack interrupted curtly, earning an annoyed glance from the unicorn.

But Rarity only smiled sweetly, saying, "Of course, Applejack," before continuing, "Now, as you all know, our Twilight Sparkle has finally received our official invitations to the holiday party the palace is hosting, and –"

"She did?" Rainbow Dash interrupted, mind racing to remember if at any point in the past week or so the purple unicorn had given her anything remotely resembling an invitation to the palace.

Twilight magically whipped the six shining invitations out of nowhere, fanning them before Dash's eyes and causing the pegasus to flinch. "Right here," she said proudly.

"Uh, yeah, silly!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "Have you just been dozing all week? She got them yesterday, don't you remember?"

*"Just go!" Mare Do Well shouted, and although the mask hid her face from the rest of the world, she still covered it with her hooves, like she couldn't handle seeing anypony right then. "Go! You're going to leave anyway, just go!"*

*"I'm not going to leave!" Rainbow Dash protested, and she didn't know why she felt so desperate to convince the mare. She had never wanted to stay with Mare Do Well before, but right then and there, nothing felt more important than her need to convince Mare Do Well that she wasn't going to abandon her.*



*"Why did I do this?" she wailed, ignoring Rainbow Dash entirely. "Why? This was wrong, this is all really bad! I don't want to!"*

*"Huh? Don't want to what?"*

*"You're going to leave!" Mare Do Well shouted, again ignoring Rainbow Dash. Her voice was cracking, coming dangerously close to slipping out of the voice she affected, but it never actually did. "Everypony does in the end! You'll leave and I'll be all alone, and if you actually come back later you'll just pretend that this never happened, that it didn't mean anything, and I'll have to play along like I don't care either, but I do! I can't just pretend this didn't matter, Rainbow Dash!"*

*This mattered, Rainbow Dash wanted to say. It mattered a lot. I don't want to leave.*

*The words were right there on the tip of her tongue, and it would've been so easy to speak them, but she didn't. She just couldn't. Although the reassurance was right there, primed to spill out of her, something was blocking her voice, and nothing came from her mouth but silence.*

She'd spent the previous day hiding from everypony, and then...

"No. Guess I forgot," Rainbow Dash said quickly.

"You've been a real loopy-doopy pony lately, Dashie," Pinkie said sweetly, apparently oblivious to the way her words were cutting.

"Okay, okay, whatever!" Dash loudly interrupted. "Let's drop it already!"

"Yes, let's," Rarity primly agreed. "As I was saying, now that Twilight has our official invitations, I've decided that it's time for me to finally reveal the project that I've been working on in secret lately. Brace yourselves – !"

With a dramatic burst of magic, she threw open the door behind her.

Inside was a row of blank white mannequins arranged to display the beautiful, floor-sweeping ball gowns they were decked out in, and the crowd Rarity had assembled released a collective gasp.

*Dresses, Rainbow Dash thought. I should've known.*

The dresses Rarity had made them for the Grand Galloping Gala had been elaborate, luxurious displays of splendor and finery, but these pieces were more subdued, with softer shades and more humble, simplistic designs – better fitting the gracious solemnity that pervaded the Hearth's Warming season, despite the holiday's overall message of love and cheer.

Rainbow Dash wasn't a pony who knew a whole lot about dressmaking, and although she appreciated all the work that must've gone into making clothes like these in theory, in *practice*, it was hard for Dash to do much more than smile and look appreciative as she tried to remember everything the others had drilled into her about tact. Her friends, though, immediately took to cooing and fawning over their respective new dresses.

Rainbow didn't know any of the technical terms for the articles being passed under such careful inspection by their new owners, and could only observe the basics. For example, Twilight's dress was a gown of deep violet upon shades of even deeper violet, creating a strange layered effect. Rarity herself had an ensemble made of indigo and lined with silver, complete with a festive little mantle. Fluttershy had a dress of the softest rose, edged in white and trimmed with delicate little ribbons, further enhancing her already angelic appearance. Applejack's gown could in no way be mistaken for work duds, but was instead a simple, honest gown of deep forest green and pale gray. Pinkie had a deep scarlet and white affair; except for the ruffles, it was far calmer than the other formal gown she'd received from Rarity, but it was still undeniably *Pinkie*.

Rainbow Dash herself had a stormcloud of a gown. Her previous Rarity original had been an explosion of color. It had reportedly been based off the traditional garb of the ancient pegasi tribes, as depicted by classical mythology. This, though, was something new and brilliant, with blending shades of hard steel gray and teal and navy blue. Like an ocean, or a stormy sky at night.

"Wow, Dashie!" Pinkie said as Rainbow Dash stroked the fabric of the dress. "That dress is so pretty!"

"It's all right," Rainbow Dash said casually, not looking at Pinkie. "It could be cooler, though."

"What do you think of mine?"

Rainbow Dash looked at Pinkie, and her voice caught in her throat. She'd already changed into her dress.

"Wow," Dash finally managed to squeak. "You look great, Pinks."

Pinkie giggled and gave a little spin, sending her skirt twirling. "I can't wait!" the pink pony said happily. "Twilight said that the *Princess* said that Hearth's Warming parties at the palace aren't all fancy and hoity-toity like the Gala was, and since we didn't even get to go last time I was really worried since I didn't know what it would be like when *we*, you know? But I bet it'll be *superiffic*, and we'll go and dance and eat all the cake it'll be the bestest fun time *ever!*"

And then she skipped away, humming to herself.

In the past, Pinkie might've tried to force Dash into *her* dress, as well, to get the pegasus into the spirit of things, or maybe she would've grabbed Rainbow in a hug and rubbed their cheeks together and squealed about how they were going to have more fun than they'd ever had before ever and how it was going to be the *best night ever, for real this time!*

But she didn't do any of that for once. Instead, Pinkie Pie left Rainbow Dash alone, only stopping to chat under the pretense of being friendly when in reality she was growing more and more distant, pushing the pegasus even further away.

*Liar*, Dash thought bitterly. Pinkie had told her that they would go back to the way things were, but if things had really gone back to normal, then they wouldn't have been afraid to speak to each other. They wouldn't have been afraid to touch one another or be alone together. Pinkie would've hugged her. She would've lingered.

But Pinkie wasn't leaving *now*, either. Instead, Pinkie Pie was pushing Rainbow Dash away, making *her* be the one to decide it wasn't worth it and finally, in the end, give up.

And the worst part was, she was doing it so quietly. Pinkie wasn't lashing out with violent gestures or angry, hurt-filled words; she was lashing out by silently withdrawing those small affections that Rainbow Dash had grown to depend on and had never realized she needed until they were missing.

Rainbow drew a sharp breath, and let it out slowly.

*"I love you," Mare Do Well said. "I love you and I don't want you to leave me. But you're going to run away, because that's what you do – that's what everypony does. So if you're going to leave, go now, while I can still keep myself together."*

*You don't look very together right now, Rainbow Dash wanted to retort. But her voice was still lost, and all she could do was rise unsteadily onto her legs.*

*When Rainbow Dash had woken up for the second time that morning, her vision had cleared only to find that she was tangled in Mare Do Well. A current had surged between them, through Rainbow Dash, tugging at her core; a pull so fierce that she hadn't wanted to fight it, had wanted to stay like that, bodies interlocked as their hearts had beat in time. Because Mare Do Well was close, so close, and although the air outside was cold, that wasn't what made Rainbow Dash tremble.*

*She hadn't wanted to go. She'd wanted to stay and throw herself at Mare Do Well, this insecure but affectionate and silly but tender mare, who probably had countless other facets to her personality that Rainbow Dash hadn't even begun to discover but desperately wanted to learn more about.*

*Maybe it had only been Rainbow's sleep-addled mind thinking such thoughts, thoughts that she'd likely regret once she was fully conscious, but all she could think was I don't love you, but maybe I can try, just for a little while.*

*But she hadn't said that, because Mare Do Well had told Dash to leave. What else could she have done but leave?*

*Rainbow Dash running. Mare Do Well watching her go.*

Mare Do Well was in her, in her blood, invading every cell in her body. And Rainbow Dash didn't even know what the mare looked like, let alone her real name.

She was teetering on the brink of a precipice. One false step and she'd plunge into the abyss.

But Rainbow didn't care. About *either* of them. Pinkie Pie was crazy and so was Mare Do Well. Who knew why they did the things they did? Pinkie was random and Mare Do Well was unstable, so if they acted random and unstable, well, why had Rainbow Dash expected any different?

Mare Do Well... Mare Do Well was...

What *was* Mare Do Well?

She was so many things. She was funny – clever and sarcastic, if a little mean at times. She was lithe, her every movement imbued with a kind of grace that Rainbow Dash would never be able imitate, except maybe when among the clouds. She was both as strong as iron and impossibly fragile, unfazed by anything that the rest of the world could throw her way, yet easily broken by the slightest mistake. She was desperate and strange and helpless, and yet somehow had the power to completely disrupt Rainbow Dash's life in every way possible.

And Rainbow Dash didn't care, she had remind herself. About any of that. About them. About *her*.

"Rainbow Dash?" Applejack asked. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Rainbow asked, jerking her head upright. The farm pony's voice had been the trigger to yank her out of her stupor. She'd been practically asleep on her hooves, eyes closed as Dash meditated on her musings.

"Shucks, I can't blame you," Applejack chuckled, shaking her head. "They're all babblin' on an' on about those dresses. I almost feel like gettin' a bit o' shuteye myself – I can barely stay awake as it is."

"Heh. Yeah. Dresses. Boring."

"It's just all so pointless, y'know?" the farm pony continued, not seeming to notice the blatant disinterest in Rainbow's voice. "The dresses are nice an' all, an' I know Rare worked awful hard on 'em, but..." she trailed off.

"But what?" Rainbow Dash found herself asking.

"Well, it's just that... nothin's gonna change who I *am*, y'know? I'm a farmer from Ponyville, and even if I get dressed up all fancy and go to Canterlot and try an' pretend to be somepony else fer a night, I'll still be *me* on the inside. No matter what I do, I can't change who I really am, even if I try my darndest to hide it. So, what's the point?" Applejack sighed, then scowled. "It's all a game they're playin', a game you can't win, but I don't think Rare'll ever realize that. She's gonna try *her* darndest to do whatever it takes to fit into those li'l boxes they make – but she's bigger'n that, too big to fit, and she don't even know it. And the sad thing is, *they'll* never know it, neither, because they're all too busy tryin' to make everypony fit where they're supposed to fer them to *ever* see it."

Rainbow Dash was staring at her in rapt attention, eyes huge and free of any of the snark that they usually held when talking to Applejack, catching the earth pony off guard.

"Y'all right, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, a little nervously.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash answered, her voice distant. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just... you were saying something that sounded important."

Rarity let them fondle their new dresses for a little while longer before sharply ordering them all out of the room so that she could put them into proper storage, refusing to let any of them even *look* at the gowns again until the night of the party itself.

"With the exception of maybe Twilight or Fluttershy, I doubt any of you could take proper care of them," the unicorn sniffed haughtily, and Rainbow Dash could offer no argument.

By the time the five friends finally left Carousel Boutique, it was sundown. On any other night Rainbow Dash might have been mentally preparing herself to go meet Mare Do Well, but tonight, whether the mare showed up or not, Rainbow had no desire to see her. Because *she didn't care*. Instead, she sought out Fluttershy.

"I don't wanna be all bandaged up in the play," Dash told the butter-yellow pegasus. "Can I crash at your place tonight and get them taken off?"

"Oh, I don't know," Fluttershy said nervously, eyeing the damaged wings. "It's hardly been long enough to –"

"They're fine!" Rainbow Dash interrupted. "They're great, I *know* they are, I always heal really quickly! All I gotta do is get them unwrapped and maybe stretch them for a bit and get back in the habit of flying, and then I'll be awesome! Please?"

"Well..."

"Please?"

Fluttershy frowned, squirming, and Rainbow Dash did her very, very best impersonation of Fluttershy's own Stare to try and compel her timid friend into agreeing. Finally Fluttershy squeaked a compliant squeak, prompting Rainbow Dash to cry out in delight and launch herself at her friend in a very Pinkie Pie-esque hug.

• • •

Back at Fluttershy's cottage, Fluttershy seemed to revert back into professional-business mode in contrast to her nervous, squeaking self of before, adamantly refusing to remove

the bandages until she could properly examine Rainbow's wings and refusing to do *that* until they'd both had a good night's rest.

Fluttershy slept on the couch, using the power of her Stare to force Rainbow into bed against her will. It usually only truly worked on the animals in Fluttershy's care, but there was something so impressive about those huge aqua eyes that they truly were a force to be reckoned with, even amongst other ponies.

Fluttershy *didn't* sleep in her chicken coop, it turned out. Rather, she had a very nice, quaint little bedroom in the back of her cottage. From Fluttershy's bed, Rainbow Dash had a perfect view of the window, and by extension, of the Everfree Forest. Rainbow Dash had never understood how Fluttershy could live so close to Everfree when she was so frightened of everything in it, but knew better than to question her mostly meek and occasionally terrifying friend.

Rainbow Dash lay in bed and her thoughts flitted about like birds, quick both to flash through her mind and then to fly away, fleeting and practically insubstantial. At last she sighed, screwing her eyes shut and trying to force her brain to be quiet.

*I need something to focus on*, Dash finally thought. What could she think about that would take her mind off of other, less desirable topics?

Going to Canterlot. They were leaving tomorrow, but it didn't seem like they really *were*. The pageant just didn't feel *important* right then. It was the last thing on Rainbow's mind.

Seeing the Wonderbolts. But if she thought about that, then her mind would invariably drift to those aforementioned other, less desirable topics.

The holiday shindig at the palace. Rainbow Dash groaned. She wasn't like Applejack; she didn't openly despise formal occasions that involved dressing up. She was just... indifferent to them. They weren't fun, sure, but she didn't hate them, either – because she knew that someday, when she was famous, she'd probably have to go to a lot of them. It was good to get used to them young, so that Rainbow wasn't caught off guard by how stifling they could be later on.

The Grand Galloping Gala had been kind of awful. But Twilight said that Princess Celestia had promised that the Hearth's Warming thing they had every year was less stuffy – so even if Rainbow was bored out of her mind, then at least the others would probably have an okay time. That was good.

Dancing wasn't something Rainbow Dash especially enjoyed, so naturally, dances weren't something she especially enjoyed, either. But some ponies seemed to have a knack for it, for rhythm and music and movement. And if you knew somepony like that, then dancing would probably become fun. They would have to lead you through it, but if your partner was somepony who really knew what they were doing, then it would be easy to fake that *you* knew what you were doing, too. Maybe you didn't even necessarily have to have a partner who was good, though. Maybe you just needed to be dancing with the *right* partner.

Rainbow Dash pondered – again in that vague, nonspecific way – over how sometimes you could meet a pony whom you just seemed to fit with. Not in an *emotional* way or anything sappy like that, but literally. Physically. Your bodies just sort of interlocked, melding, like you were *meant* to hold each other, and it felt so, so good when you finally did.

If you knew a pony like that, dancing would probably become more enjoyable for both of you. Because dancing was pretty much just an excuse to hold somepony, and if you knew somepony you really *fit* with, then there would be none of that awkwardness or discomfort that came with forcing yourself on the wrong pony.

The clock in the corner was ticking, and Dash cast a glance at it. It was just past midnight, and the pegasus was wide awake, staring at the ceiling and gripping the blankets so hard that she was a little surprised they hadn't torn yet. A part of her wanted to go and wake up Fluttershy, but what would Fluttershy have to offer?

*Comfort*, Rainbow Dash thought. *She's good at that.*

She slipped out of bed.

Her hoofsteps seemed painfully loud in the silence of the cottage. Rainbow paused, forcing herself to be quiet. It was strange that Fluttershy's home could be so still when it was so full of living things – things that made noise and moved and rustled.

With a sigh, Rainbow Dash glanced out the window.

The forest looked especially ominous that night. The branches of the naked trees looked dark and skeletal, shadows dripping from them like cobwebs.

For a moment Rainbow Dash was still, eyes flickering as she searched the woods. What she was looking for, she didn't know. Or maybe she knew, but didn't want to acknowledge it.



Dash slumped, settling against the window sill as she looked out into the woods.

And then she saw it.

The rustling of tree branches, sending a shower of snow falling to the ground as they shook, trembling from the movement taking place amongst them.

It was either a bear, or – no.

There it was. A shape in black and violet, peering out from the woods towards the cottage. And maybe it was Rainbow Dash's imagination, but she could've sworn it waved when it saw her looking.

The pegasus wasted no time. Like a bolt of lightning she was gone, out of the house and galloping towards the edge of the forest, ignoring the terror that struck her heart as she drew closer to Everfree.

Rainbow Dash stopped, panting slightly for breath; running through such thick snow was difficult.

She'd paused at the base of a tree, for Mare Do Well had settled herself in at the top, perched on a branch as she glanced down at the pegasus.

"Hello," Mare Do Well said lightly.

"What are you doing?" Rainbow Dash blurted.

"Sitting in a tree."

"No, I mean, why did you *come* here? ...And why are you sitting in a tree if you're afraid of heights?" she added as an afterthought.

Mare Do Well didn't answer right away.

"I wanted to apologize," the mare said at last. "Because what I did was... uncalled for. I overreacted and became emotional and took it out on you. But since you're leaving tomorrow, I wanted to beg forgiveness *now*, so that I don't have to wait a week wondering where we stand."

Rainbow Dash blinked.

She hadn't thought that Mare Do Well would want to apologize. Dash hadn't even fully understood why she'd been so mad about what had happened, and the apology startled her. What was Mare Do Well apologizing for, exactly? For flipping out over contact that *she* had initiated? It wasn't like Rainbow Dash was going to hold a grudge over that.

"Don't apologize," Rainbow finally answered. "If, if you hadn't done that, *I* probably would have. So, I mean, one of us was going to freak out. So if it was you, then at least *I* got to keep *my* cool, right?"

No response.

Mare Do Well was still perched in the tree, very pointedly not looking at her, instead looking somewhere over Rainbow Dash's head. Her legs swung in that nervous way again.

"Why did you come *here*?" Rainbow Dash asked after another uneasy beat. "You've never actually gone out of your way to find me before. Except for when you're, um, being all superhero-y and saving ponies and stuff."

"I thought that since you know now for sure that I can't be Fluttershy, it would be safe for me to come see you at her house," Mare Do Well explained. "And like I said before. I wanted to say I'm sorry. For pushing you away. I shouldn't have yelled at you for leaving when the only reason you were doing so was because I was forcing you to. It was unreasonable."

"I told you, don't apologize."

Rainbow Dash licked her lips. Her mouth was very dry.

She hadn't really thought out what she was going to say, but ever since her conversation with Applejack in the boutique, she'd been thinking about something and needed to get it off her chest. It was worth a shot, after all, and it just might work, but only if she could find the proper wording.

"I don't want to put you in a box," Rainbow said carefully.

A moment of awkward silence passed between them as Rainbow Dash struggled to find the words she needed to say.

"I want... I know that there's a lot to who you are. And it's the same with my friends, and, and with everypony in Ponyville, probably. There's a lot I don't know about other ponies,

and a lot I pretend I don't see, because it's easier to think of you all one way than it is to always be changing how I see you. And I know that you guys go along with it for the same reasons, and also probably because you do the same to me. So we all pretend to be things we're not, because it's easier than being completely open with each other."

Mare Do Well was staring directly at her then, and more than anything else, Rainbow Dash wanted to know what sort of expression was hidden under that mask: whether it was a smile, or a frown, or *what*. To give her some kind of clue as to whether or not she should continue, or if this was a terrible idea and Rainbow needed to shut up right then before she made a bigger fool of herself than she already had.

"Ponies are complicated, but most of the time I look at the world in a really narrow way, and I just ignore what I don't like or understand," Rainbow finally continued, albeit in a halting, nervous way. "And I think I understand why you did this, now. I mean, it's still crazy, and I'm *still* pretty sure that I could get you arrested if I felt like it, but... I *think* I get it. Sort of. You didn't want to have to try and fit into that box I put you in. You mentioned boxes before, but I didn't really listen to you then. You wanted to be what you really *are* and find out if I liked you anyway, even if it was unfamiliar and kind of scary for me to learn that one of my friends could be so different. That's why you used the disguise. Because if I knew who you were, then I'd just... I'd start thinking of you like *that*, and then all the restrictions would come back and you'd have to go back into that box, or else everything would get messed up."

"Very smart," Mare Do Well said smoothly. "Did you figure that out all on your own, or did you have help?"

Rainbow Dash could either give in to the flare of anger rising up within her chest, or she could take the high road and ignore the jibe. Or she could grin and say, "I had help. I'm not smart enough to think of something that good on my own."

There was another silence.

"Well, congratulations," the mare said at last. "You must feel quite clever now, and that was a very pretty speech, too. Your eloquence was somewhat lacking, since you seem given to stuttering and stumbling over your words. But perhaps that was done intentionally, to add to the realism. Overall, it was very nice. But it won't work."

"Huh?"

"I'm not trying to teach you any sort of grand lesson here," Mare Do Well said calmly. "I've been very open about what I've wanted, right from the very beginning. I love you. I would like you to love me. As myself, I didn't feel safe confessing, so I became somepony else so that I'd be free to behave how I wished. There's nothing deeper to my actions than that."

Rainbow Dash blinked, and her eyes narrowed as she took a step forward, approaching the base of the tree. Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought she saw Mare Do Well shrink back a little when she did, and it occurred to Dash that maybe she was sitting in the tree so that Rainbow Dash couldn't get too close. To maintain a safe distance between the two of them.

"Liar," Rainbow spat. Short and simple and brittle. Mare Do Well flinched.

"I see what you're doing," Mare Do Well continued, ignoring Dash's accusation. "You're trying to invoke the endgame, here. You think that if you impress me by making some elaborate speech about all that you've learned from our game, then I'll no longer see any need to play and I'll call it off, and then everypony will live happily ever after. I must congratulate you on the subtle direction of your latest move; rather than trying to find out who I am by removing the mask by force, you're trying to compel me to do so myself. Very sneaky. But I was never intending to teach you anything, so I don't actually care about what you've learned. And besides, I find the game fun. I'm not going to give it up. I want to win."

"But we *have* to care about all that! Because the way we're going, neither of us are going to win!" Rainbow Dash interrupted.

Mare Do Well cocked her head.

"Continue," she prompted.

"I'm never going to know who you actually are if I can't look past what I *think* you are, and *you're* never going to get me to like you if you can't drop the act and *show* me who you actually are. Neither of us can win unless we let go of all those ideas we have about ourselves and each other."

"Is that so?" Mare Do Well asked mildly.

She didn't say anything further, but instead chose that moment to lightly drop down from her perch atop the tree, landing with a soft *thump* in the snow before Rainbow Dash and leading the pegasus to assume that the mare had heard what she'd said. And

whether she'd fully understood her own words or not, Rainbow Dash couldn't help but feel the corners of her mouth turn up in a grin; a tiny display of triumph.

"I suppose this is goodbye for now," Mare Do Well said softly, almost mournfully.

Mare Do Well was standing perhaps two or three feet away from Rainbow, but even that distance wasn't enough to make Rainbow Dash forget that pull, that *urge*, the desire to draw closer to the mare and slip into place against her. The place that Dash had somehow fit into so well when they'd fallen asleep together.

"You look lovely in your dress. It's too bad," Mare Do Well continued with a sigh. "In an ideal world, I'd be able to tell you so in the open and maybe even dance *with* you at the party. But I doubt you'd ever let me close enough to ask."

*You don't know that*, Rainbow Dash almost said before catching herself. Instead, Dash said, "You *are* going to be there. Right?"

"Well, yes, I'll be there. But *I* won't be there. *Mare Do Well* won't be. And if I'm not hiding behind my mask, I'll be too afraid to act on my impulses, so likely I'll just be hiding in a corner, admiring you from afar."

"Impulses?" Rainbow Dash repeated, ignoring the compliment Mare Do Well had snuck in. Dash may have been the kind of pony who loved getting her ego stroked, but every time Mare Do Well managed to slip in a bit of flattery into her speech, she wanted to curl up in a ball and hide in a corner until the heat in her cheeks died down. "How is any of this just an *impulse*? You mean the whole costumed stalker thing was just a random, spur of the moment idea?"

"*That* wasn't an impulse," Mare Do Well corrected. "*That* was a carefully devised plan. By impulse, I mean the sort of impulse that drives me to do *this*."

Mare Do Well knelt slightly, and took one of Rainbow Dash's hooves in her own, bringing it to her mouth. The cloth of her mask covered her lips, barring any true contact and keeping it from being a genuine kiss, but from the way she pressed the hoof against the place where her mouth would've been, the intention of the gesture was clear.

"See?" she said lightly. "I'm out of control."

There were no words, just open-mouthed shock and that electric current that was coursing through Rainbow Dash's body, tingling, causing her fur to stand on end. She yanked her hoof back.

"Freak!" Dash barked. "You're lucky I don't... that I don't..."

"Don't what?"

"Get out!" Rainbow Dash exploded. "I mean, I mean, we're *already* outside, but... but get *lost!* Go away! Not seeing you for a week'll be *good!* It'll be *perfect!* Just go!"

Mare Do Well gave a little bow.

"I hope you have a Happy Hearth's Warming," she said graciously.

Rainbow Dash didn't stick around to watch her slip away the way she always did. Instead she ran, leaving once more, but this time of her own desire to get out of there. Heart thumping against her chest, shattering her ribcage into a thousand million pieces and scaring her more than anything else she'd ever felt before in her life.

Back in Fluttershy's cottage, Rainbow Dash was expecting to quietly slip back inside, but instead entered to find the lights on and Fluttershy waiting up for her.

She didn't look upset. Not angry, not hurt, not betrayed or any of those feelings that would've been so wrong for her but that Rainbow Dash had grown to expect from everypony she met nowadays.

"Are you all right?" Fluttershy asked with concern.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash lied. "I'm fine."

Fluttershy frowned slightly, and then her mouth curved into a smile.

"I believe you," she said sweetly. "Because if anything was wrong, I know you'd tell me."

"Y-yeah."

"After all, we've been friends all of our lives."

"Yeah."

"And if something was really bothering you, something really big and scary and important, you'd tell me, because you know that I'd do almost anything to help you fix it."

Rainbow Dash nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I would."

Fluttershy gave her a very pointed look before rising on all fours.

"It's very late," she said gravely. "I think we should go to sleep. We have to get up early in the morning, after all."

"That's a good idea," Rainbow Dash said weakly.

Another meaningful look, and Fluttershy turned and began to lead the way to her bedroom. She held open the door for Rainbow Dash, giving her a small, encouraging smile.

And then Rainbow Dash broke. She collapsed against her friend, sobbing.

To her credit, Fluttershy didn't give a knowing smirk the way Twilight or Applejack might have if Rainbow Dash had fallen apart in front of them. Instead, Fluttershy gently hugged Rainbow Dash, letting her cry into her chest, stroking her mane tenderly and whispering to her softly, the way she might have whispered reassurances to one of her injured animals. And Rainbow Dash let her, let Fluttershy protect her from something she didn't understand why she needed protection from, long into the night.

And the whole time, all Rainbow Dash could think was how although Fluttershy's embrace offered comfort and warmth, it wasn't the same.

• • •

Mare Do Well stared at herself in the mirror.

She had gone home and removed the costume, and still she felt like Mare Do Well. Not herself. A stranger in the mirror.

Raising a hoof, she touched her face.

Rainbow Dash was brilliant. She had come to this strange and powerful conclusion that had never even once crossed Mare Do Well's mind. At least, she didn't think so. But it made *sense*.

Who *was* she, anyway? What *was* her real self?

She wanted to be real for Rainbow Dash. She wanted to be normal. She wanted to do at least that much for the pegasus, but she didn't even know where to begin.

They were both so alike, she reflected. When confronted with emotions they didn't want, either because they just didn't like them or found them too confusing, they turned it into anger. The difference was, Rainbow Dash lashed out, growing violent and argumentative; Mare Do Well became bitter and snide, making sarcastic jabs and pointed insults that she never intended to wield as the weapons they were. She became mean, although she never *wanted* to be.

At first she'd been terrified that she'd gone about it all wrong, that Rainbow Dash hated her after all and was never going to change her mind. Then they'd woken up together that morning, and Rainbow Dash had been clinging to her as well.

Mare Do Well had been flustered, utterly bewildered by the idea that maybe Rainbow Dash actually *wanted* her to stay, because it was so far from her idea of the pegasus, but then, after spending a day contemplating it, she'd started to realize that maybe Rainbow Dash was more like her than she'd thought, and the hostility was because *she* was confused, too.

The kiss – or as close to a kiss as it could be with a mask – had been like an experiment; an experiment to test that theory. And sure enough, Dash had reacted with anger, even though Mare Do Well had seen in her eyes, in the blush on her cheeks and in the strange, goofy smile twitching on her mouth, that Rainbow Dash hadn't actually minded.



On the surface, Fluttershy was like a delicate little blossom, fragile and easily injured, with a sense of innocence that charmed those around her, but on the inside, she was a born nurturer and could easily be strong when she needed to be. Specifically, whenever somepony around her was hurting or vulnerable, she could always be counted on to put aside those insecurities and rise to the occasion to do what needed to be done.

Rainbow Dash was hurting and vulnerable.

They didn't actually go to sleep, instead staying awake with one another all throughout the night. "We'll get plenty of sleep on the train tomorrow," Fluttershy said in an unexpectedly firm tone, and Rainbow Dash nodded her agreement, not even bothering to think of an appropriate or clever response.

They spent the night huddled on Fluttershy's bed. It reminded Rainbow Dash of the way they used to stay up all night back in flight camp, after they'd become friends, back during her days as *Rainbow Crash*. Fluttershy had always been there with a welcome smile – always ready to listen and offer whatever comfort Dash may have needed, never asking anything in return. Fluttershy had been Rainbow's confidante, her keeper of secrets. The yellow pegasus had seen Rainbow Dash cry many times in the past, something nopony else knew, but she still kept it to herself, knowing what Rainbow Dash's pride meant to her.

In the end, Rainbow Dash was able to stop crying, but it took the potent combination of time and Fluttershy's endless patience. Even when the tears finally ceased, she was left a quivering, sniffing mess with red, puffy eyes. She felt empty, almost collapsible, like she'd just thrown up, but she also felt infinitely lighter, as if a weight that she'd been burdened with for far too long had finally been lifted.

Maybe crying had helped. There had been so many occasions lately when Rainbow had wanted to cry and had held it in for some reason. Maybe it had all been building up until she just couldn't hold it anymore. That would explain why the pressure had vanished. She'd finally released some of that compressed emotion.

"Don't tell anypony that I was acting so dumb," Rainbow Dash mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

"I won't," Fluttershy promised. The fact that she had made and kept identical promises countless times in their shared past went unsaid. She was so used to making that

promise, and Dash was so used to asking it of her, that neither of them felt any need to think about it or discuss it for very long.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Dash muttered. After crying, after having felt as if she was on the verge of bursting for so long, she was now left feeling just... limp. Worn out. Exhausted. Used up. One of those. Any of them. All of them worked.

"You know," Fluttershy said softly. She was still stroking Rainbow Dash's mane. They were both curled up on the bed, Rainbow Dash tucked against her like a little filly with her mother, a position that was deeply familiar to the two of them by now. "Most ponies think that when you cry, it's because you're sad. But that's not true."

Rainbow Dash sniffed.

"When you cry, it means you're full. You can't carry all of something, so it spills over. Some ponies cry when they're happy. Some ponies cry when they're angry or frustrated. Some ponies cry when they're in love. It doesn't matter, really," Fluttershy continued in a conversational way. "So if you cry, it doesn't mean anything bad. It doesn't mean you're being weak or silly. It means that you got *full* somehow. I think the reason you were crying is because you were full of something. Do you want to tell me what you were feeling?"

"You're treating me like a baby," Rainbow Dash mumbled, but she stayed put, letting Fluttershy stroke her hair as her eyes closed.

Fluttershy was silent.

She knew not to push. If she was quiet and waited, Rainbow Dash would come clean soon enough.

And she was right, because it only took a moment for Rainbow Dash to confess everything. About Mare Do Well, and her paranoia and her insomnia, and the kiss with Pinkie and how Mare Do Well had pushed her away and how she didn't know what to do anymore because nothing was working and everything she did made just seemed to make things so much worse.

"Poor dear," Fluttershy murmured when Rainbow had finished. "You've been through a lot."

Another sniff.

"I don't even know why I care," Rainbow Dash said in a low, gruff voice. "They all suck. Everypony's just a big jerk now and I hate them all."

"You don't mean that."

"I *do*."

"No, you don't," Fluttershy countered peacefully, her serene expression unruffled even as Rainbow Dash's face twisted into a scowl. "If you hated them you wouldn't care, and if you didn't care you wouldn't be hurting so much. You hurt *because* you care."

"Shy, you're older and wiser and stuff," Rainbow Dash mumbled, looking up to meet Fluttershy's clear, steady gaze. "What would *you* do if you were me?"

Fluttershy pursed her lips.

"Um," she began. "Well, I... I think I probably would... I don't know, actually," she admitted after a moment of stammering, face blushing pink. "I think I'd be too scared of Mare Do Well to do *anything* about her. But I kind of have an idea about what to do about Pinkie. Maybe. I mean, if you want me to tell you, that is."

"Tell me," Rainbow Dash ordered, voice fierce.

"Well, I think you're being selfish," came Fluttershy's startlingly blunt response. "*You're* not the one who lost something here. *She's* the one who was hurt, because *she's* the one who was rejected. You shouldn't expect her to comfort you. That's not very fair."

Rainbow Dash blinked, and Fluttershy shrank slightly behind her long, rose-colored hair.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean to –"

"No, no," Rainbow Dash reassured, equally quickly. "It's cool. I just... didn't think about it that way before. But I guess you're right. It *was* kind of... unfair of me."

She blinked again.

She had never stopped to think about Pinkie at all, really. All she'd thought was that she, Rainbow Dash, didn't want things to get messed up between them, and so, she'd expected Pinkie Pie to play along with her petty desires. She had very, very briefly wondered whether Pinkie was really capable of going back to normal, but then she'd pushed those worries aside, instead growing annoyed when Pinkie had gone on to prove that no, she

*wasn't* capable of going back. Dash herself hadn't really tried to fix things or make it right; she'd just waited for Pinkie to do it.

"So what should I do?" Rainbow Dash asked after a moment of pondering.

"Um, I think you should apologize to Pinkie, and I think you two should sit down and actually talk about what happened, instead of trying to ignore it."

"That's a good idea, I guess."

Rainbow Dash's eyes fell shut once more.

"Do you think..." she began, and her voice faltered.

Mare Do Well had kissed her.

Well, not *her*, exactly; just her hoof. And the mask had covered her mouth, so there had been no actual physical contact.

But still. She had kissed her.

Again, Rainbow Dash wondered at the taste of kisses: if, for example, Mare Do Well had kissed her on the mouth – would there have been a discernible difference, or would there have been the same vague sweetness as when Pinkie had kissed her?

"Do... do you think it's possible... to... I mean, without..."

And again her voice faltered, maybe because she wasn't quite sure what she was trying to say, or what she even wanted to ask.

"How well do you have to know somepony before you can tell if you like them or not?" Dash finally settled on asking, cheeks inflamed.

"Oh!" Fluttershy said. "Ah, well, I've, I've read about love at first sight before, but..."

"That's not it," Rainbow Dash interrupted with a sigh, eyes once again falling shut. At first sight, she had found Mare Do Well annoyingly persistent and just plain weird. It was only by the dozenth sight or so that she'd started to think that *maybe* there was even the slightest possibility that Dash could like her at all in any way. Platonically, though. It wasn't love, and the point was, it definitely hadn't been at first sight.

It was more like an obsession, and not a romantic one. A craving born from the need to solve this mystery, not from any kind of genuine attachment. After all, how could you grow emotionally attached to somepony whose face you've never seen?

Rainbow Dash fidgeted a little. There was a kind of nagging, squirming itch somewhere deep inside her, a need to do or say something, but she didn't know what or why.

"What do you call it if you can't stop thinking about somepony, and you always want to go see them and touch them and stuff?"

"...I *think* that's what a crush is..."

"Even if you hate them and fight with them all the time and sometimes just wanna *smack* 'em?" Rainbow Dash growled, sharply jabbing the air with a hoof to emphasize her point.

"Well, I don't think that's very healthy, but *sometimes* love can be like that," Fluttershy answered carefully. Then she leaned forward a little, concern written in her eyes. "Is this about Applejack?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"What? *No!* Why does everypony think I'm into her?" Rainbow snapped with another scowl.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Fluttershy said meekly, drawing back apologetically. "I think... that if you're not really used to feeling something that big, it can *seem* like anger, since it's so strong and scary, and it can make you feel sad," she said diplomatically.

"Have *you* ever been in love like that?" Rainbow Dash asked, a note of curiosity slipping into her voice.

"I've read a lot of romance novels," Fluttershy admitted, a little bashfully. "Rarity lets me borrow them. And in a lot of them, the heroine *thinks* she hates the hero, because she's afraid of what it means if she loves him. She thinks that it makes her weak. But she's not – you have to be very strong and brave to admit that you love somepony, and she becomes even stronger when she finally does it."

*I'm not afraid of anything*, Rainbow Dash thought, but she said nothing out loud, instead asking, "Do you know anypony like that in real life?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"I promised."

"Promised who?"

"I know somepony who has a crush on somepony that she fights with a lot," Fluttershy explained quietly. "But I can't say who, because she hasn't told anypony else yet, and it would be wrong of me to tell anypony myself before she's ready."

After that, neither of them spoke for a long while, and Rainbow Dash almost dozed off, curled into her friend. But then Fluttershy spoke up, voice once again a curious blend of sweetness and firmness.

"I think you should do two things," she said decisively, with a little nod. "You need to talk to Pinkie, to try and fix things between you two. You shouldn't leave it all up to her; if you still want to be friends, you *both* need to work on it. And I also think you should tell Mare Do Well how you really feel."

"I can't!" Rainbow Dash squeaked, voice cracking on the word *can't*.

"If she actually loves you, she won't want you to be unhappy. If she's *really* making you this upset, then I think you should tell her – but *calmly*. If you get mad, she might think it's part of, uh, the, the game." Fluttershy stuttered a little on the phrase, but her voice regained strength as she continued. "So if you're very, very serious when you tell her, then she'll know you mean it."

"Oh," was all Dash had to say, relief flooding her body as the fear dissolved. "I thought you meant –"

"Meant what?"

"Never mind."

Her stomach was twisting into anxious knots again.

Another gentle, perfectly timed stroke of her mane.

"Tell her *that* when you're ready," Fluttershy advised in a low voice. "Wait until you know for sure yourself."

Rainbow's face turned beet red, but Fluttershy only smiled down at her tenderly in a knowing way.

Luckily, Angel chose that exact moment to make his appearance, sparing Rainbow Dash the need to come up with a response. He stomped as much as a rabbit could stomp towards the bed before furiously pointing at the clock on the wall.

"Oh, Angel!" Fluttershy cried, swooping down to the rabbit's height and ignoring his gesturing. "Poor little baby! Did you have a bad dream? Do you need mama to come and tuck you back in?"

*I need you two to shut up so I can sleep*, his glare seemed to say, but he let the yellow pegasus scoop him up in her forelegs and flutter out of the room with him anyway.

Now that she was alone, Rainbow Dash found that she no longer felt sleepy, and sighed.

She did not want to reassure the pitiful, lost Mare Do Well who was so afraid of being hated and abandoned. She did not want to help the seriously messed up, no-social-skills Mare Do Well who had resorted to such a zany scheme just to be close to *her*, of all ponies. She did not admire the heroic Mare Do Well who moved so easily, with such fluidity and strength.

*I do not like Mare Do Well*, Rainbow Dash told herself. Nowadays, she needed plenty of reminders, and she had to reassure herself of these facts almost every night, now. *I do not want to kiss her. I do not have a crush on her.*

The speech she'd made earlier had been completely cribbed from what Applejack had said in the boutique. Dash had to admit it. She wasn't even sure how much of it she'd understood herself, but it had sounded good. She'd spent the rest of the day thinking it over before spontaneously deciding to share it with Mare Do Well.

For some reason, every problem the six of them seemed to encounter appeared to be best solved by figuring out which moral they were supposed to glean from it, likely an aftereffect of hanging around Twilight too much. And a good thing, too: this way, Twilight almost never fell back into that nervous insanity that she'd plunged into when she hadn't been able to find a good friendship lesson for the princess that one time. But now, Mare Do Well had specifically told Dash *nope, that won't work*. She'd been all proud of herself, too, thinking that she'd done what she was supposed to do, and this mostly-unpleasant episode of her life could come to a close. Now Rainbow felt something like mingled disappointment and relief, both of them due to the fact that the solution hadn't turned out to be nearly as simple as she'd suspected.

Rainbow Dash couldn't win through exploitation, and she'd already promised both Mare Do Well and herself that she wouldn't cheat by just ripping off the mask. So, unless she wanted to go to some kind of authority, thereby humiliating herself even further because she hadn't been able to handle the situation on her own, she had no choice but to find a new way to use her wits to win. What wits she had, at least; her investigation was leading nowhere, and apparently Mare Do Well was too smart to let her guard down or let herself be manipulated.

*I could just ignore her*, Rainbow Dash reminded herself. *I could just stop playing*.

But that wasn't an option. The pegasus already knew that it was too late for that. She wouldn't be able to live with herself at this point if she let everything drop *now*, of all times. Not when everything was changing, so much faster than she could keep up with. Imagine: her, *Rainbow Dash*, speedster of Equestria and the best flier to ever come out of Cloudsdale, unable to keep up with something. It was ridiculous.

Rainbow could hear Fluttershy cooing over Angel in the next room.

The sound reminded her of that velvet voice, so sleek and smooth in spite of the throaty, husky quality it had.

*I'll just be hiding in a corner, admiring you from afar*, she'd said.

Normally, a compliment like that would've made her feel pretty good. The cocky Rainbow Dash of yore would've basked in such attention without a second thought. Now it just felt like just another shove towards the precipice, and she knew that soon, very soon, she was going to reach that edge and fall.

• • •

"Are you ready?"

"Yes! Geez, I've been ready for, like, *ever*!"

"Okay... I'll be gentle."

"Don't bother, just hurry up and *do* it already!"

Fluttershy bit her lip, and her hooves trembled, but with a little nod of resolve, she began to undress the bandages binding Rainbow Dash's wings.



Her wings felt stiff and oddly tight from being bound for so long, and when she first experimentally tried to flap them, little crackles of pain made Rainbow Dash wince, but she *could* move them, they were *free*, and that was all that counted.

"Thanks, Fluttershy!" Dash cried, head turned to look at her beautiful blue wings. "You are *so* awesome! Like, *unbelievably* awesome! I totally owe you one, you know that?"

"No, it's fine," Fluttershy said, looking relieved as she watched Rainbow Dash's wings spread, stretch, and fold as she tested them out. "I'm just glad they're doing better. I was so worried."

"Oh, yeah, they're doing great," Rainbow Dash answered breezily. "Check 'em out!"

"You, you probably shouldn't use them too much for a little while," Fluttershy warned. "They'll be weak from lack of use. You'll need to break them back in gradually."

"Yeah, I know. And what better way to break them in than to go flying *right now*?"

"W-wait! Don't –"

Fluttershy's voice faltered. Rainbow Dash had already taken off, leaving her standing alone on the front steps of her cottage, watching as the streak of rainbow cut across the sky.

Oh, *Celestia*, how Rainbow Dash had missed flying. So, so much. The snowy ground, so cold and unwelcoming, suddenly seemed to become flittering and wonderful when viewed from the air. Her entire body had screamed in protest when she'd first spread her wings again, but those protests were forgotten the moment she was airborne, the wind cutting her face as she touched the sky.

It was still early, the world bathed in the pre-dawn light, but Rainbow Dash only had another hour or so of freedom before she was meeting the others at the station to board the train to Canterlot. What could she do until then?

Briefly, her mind flashed on that night – so long ago, it seemed – when Mare Do Well had revealed a fear of heights, and how Dash had almost wanted to take her flying just to freak her out. It didn't seem fair, exactly, that Mare Do Well could always come find her however and whenever she wanted when Rainbow Dash had no way of initiating contact herself. Then again, she'd never *wanted* to before, either.

Was that a bad sign? That she was wishing she knew how to find Mare Do Well, just so she could see her again?

No, it was fine. It didn't mean anything important. It just meant that she was, um...

Rainbow Dash closed her eyes, and found herself picking up speed. The feel of the cold morning air rushing against her was a wonderful distraction. This was *exactly* why she'd missed flying so much.

• • •

"Dashie?"

"*Guh!*"

With a sound like a snort of surprise, she was snapped out of her slumber. Rainbow Dash jerked upright, whipping her head around wildly, and froze when her eyes settled on the bright pink source of the disturbance. Instantly, she relaxed.

"Pinkie?" Rainbow mumbled, rubbing her eyes. "What're you doing here? ...Wait," she added, casting a glance around her surroundings.

*Oh, yeah.*

Somehow, Dash had completely forgotten about boarding the train, most likely because she'd passed out the moment she'd hit her bunk, but now that she was awake, her memory was gradually returning to her. She hadn't been able to fly very far or long before her wings threatened to give out, and so she'd reluctantly cut off her glorious flight much, much sooner than she would've liked. But at least she'd been able to go see her house before they'd left. Everything had been exactly the same as she'd left it, except... cleaner. Apparently, Fluttershy had felt the need to tidy up while she'd been there to pack for Rainbow, but the pegasus wasn't about to complain.

Now the six of them were on the train to Canterlot. Applejack was asleep as well, snoring in a surprisingly cute way on her own bunk. Rarity was happily gossiping with Twilight, although Twilight's attention occasionally seemed to drift back to the book she had open on the seat before her. Fluttershy was staring absently out the window at the scenery rolling past. Although she looked a little nervous, probably because this was only the second time she'd ever been on a train, she also wore a contented little smile, likely because they were all going together. And Pinkie was directly in front of her, bouncing on her haunches and shaking the bed.

"Pinkie, *stop it*," Rainbow Dash ordered, grabbing her shoulder to still the pink pony. Pinkie immediately froze, and Rainbow Dash jerked her hoof away.

*I didn't mean to*, she thought with a surge of panic. But what hadn't she meant to do? Touch Pinkie, or pull away?

Luckily, Pinkie seemed to recover instantly, but unfortunately, "recovery" included returning to her bouncing.

"I'm *bored*, Dashie!" Pinkie pouted. "And we have a whole big long day before we reach Canterlot! What should we *do* until then, huh?"

The old Rainbow Dash would suggest they maybe think up some kind of hilarious prank that they could pull on the others from a moving apparatus, or go check out the snack car and buy everything they could carry, or *something* like that. The *current* Rainbow Dash was terrified by the prospect of being alone with Pinkie, but from the meaningful way Pinkie Pie was looking at her, she knew that this was one of those *important* questions that would definitely come up later if they happened to ever fight again. And the truth was, frightened of her or not, Rainbow Dash missed the easy way they used to hang out.

Fluttershy had told Rainbow Dash that if she wanted to maintain her friendship with Pinkie, then *she* would have to work at it, too, and this was probably what she'd meant. Even when things made Dash uncomfortable or nervous, if she wanted to stay friends with Pinkie, then she had to look past those feelings of discomfort and do them anyway.

"Let's go explore the train!" she suggested in a falsely cheerful way. Because that's the kind of thing the old Rainbow Dash might've suggested.

Pinkie beamed. "Okie dokie lokie!" she agreed happily. "That sounds fun! Do you think we'll find a –"

"Wait."

"Huh?"

"Um, before we do that, there's something I kind of needed to talk to you about. In private."

Maybe it was Rainbow's imagination, but for a moment, she thought she saw a flicker of fear cross Pinkie's face. It made her stomach twist unpleasantly. She hated knowing that

*she* was the reason Pinkie was so unhappy, so anxious, but that only furthered her resolve to fix things between them.

"Um, okie dokie?" Pinkie said with a nervous laugh, but then her face brightened again, another enormous grin stretching across it. "Ooh, let's go to the snack car! We can talk in there, and get something really tasty to eat, too!"

"Okay," Dash agreed. "Sounds good. I'm hungry, anyway."

Pinkie bounded off down the corridor, surprisingly steady in spite of the shaking car, and Rainbow Dash fluttered after her. It felt amazing to do so after spending so much time unable to fly. Even the smallest movements of her wings seemed precious.

"What did you wanna look for?" she asked as she joined Pinkie, who immediately began to skip as she led her to the snack car.

"Look for what?"

"You started asking me if I thought we'd find something."

"I did?" Pinkie tilted her head, puzzled. "Maybe we will! I bet whatever we find will be *really* cool, if I don't even know what it is!"

A single chuckle escaped before Rainbow Dash could suppress it, and she briefly felt a wave of nostalgia for when they could talk like this all the time, without any of that awkwardness or unfamiliarity pervading the conversation.

"Pinkie Pie, you are so *random*."

• • •

The snack car of the train was empty when they arrived, and Pinkie promptly ordered a fudge brownie sundae, even though it was still early in the morning. Rainbow Dash thought it best not to ask. Although she'd said she was hungry, too, when they actually arrived, her stomach was back to knotting itself, and she doubted whether or not she'd be able to eat anything, so she ended up not ordering.

They sat down at one of the many empty tables, and Pinkie eyed her ice cream, which she'd doused in every kind of sauce imaginable, sighing in satisfaction before promptly beginning to stuff her face.

"So," Rainbow Dash began, unsure how to start, but Pinkie just continued to eat, oblivious to her uncertainty. Watching Pinkie eat was kind of a fascinating process. Unlike normal ponies, she never seemed to have to pause and catch her breath, and she never seemed to suffer from indigestion or brain freezes.

"Want some?" Pinkie offered, shoving her half-finished ice cream across the table, towards Rainbow Dash.

"No thanks," Dash said immediately, even though it *did* look pretty tempting. She took advantage of the lull by diving right in. "I wanted to talk about what happened."

Another flicker of fear. "What do you mean, Dashie?"

"You know."

A blank stare.

Either Pinkie was a fantastic actress or she really *was* insane. She couldn't have just *forgotten* something like that, not something that big, not something that had been making Rainbow Dash completely freak out ever since it had happened.

But then Pinkie said, "I thought we were going to pretend that didn't happen."

She spoke quietly, in an unnaturally serious way.

"I think that's a bad idea," Rainbow Dash said in a halting voice.

"We *both* wanted to pretend that it didn't happen, Rainbow Dash. We both agreed."

The pegasus flinched at Pinkie's use of her full name.

"I know we agreed, but maybe we shouldn't have. I know you've been trying really hard to make everything normal again, but things have still been really weird. For *me*, at least."

Pinkie wasn't looking at her, and instead of a smile, her mouth was a grim slit as she pursed her lips.

"I, I don't really know what I wanted to talk about, exactly," Rainbow Dash admitted. She just had to keep on plugging, even if Pinkie wasn't going to help. It wasn't fair of her to expect Pinkie to do this alone. "I just thought that if there was anything you might have wanted to say, then, I dunno. I miss just hanging out with you, when everything was cool."

I feel like I have to be careful all the time because I'm scared of making things worse, and even if *you're* trying to be normal, just my being scared all the time means things *aren't*."

"So what am I supposed to do now?" Pinkie snapped, eyes flashing as she suddenly yanked her head up to glare at Rainbow. "I've done everything I was supposed to! I've been smiley, happy Pinkie, so what more do you want? That's not *good* enough anymore?"

"No. No! I mean, I like it when you're being happy and smiling, but I want you to *mean* it. I don't want you to just be acting happy because you think that's what you're *supposed* to do. That *is* what you're supposed to do, but, but not because we'll all be disappointed if you don't. We *want* you to actually be happy all the time," she stammered, wings fluttering slightly in panic. "Not because we won't like you if you're not, but because we want you to be *happy*, for *you*. Because we care about you."

"We?" Pinkie repeated. "What about *you*?"

"What *about* me?"

"You keep saying *we*. You're avoiding making this personal by making it about the group."

It was chilling to hear such serious words coming from Pinkie's mouth, but there was something dark crossing her face, something that Rainbow Dash didn't want to see shrouding her friend.

"I want you to be happy," Rainbow Dash clarified. "That's what I mean by things being normal. Things are only normal if you can smile and mean it. If you're upset about something, then it means things *aren't* normal, and I can't relax."

Pinkie was no longer scowling, but the darkness was being replaced by some kind of strange sadness that broke Rainbow Dash's heart to see.

"I don't think I can do that right now," she said weakly.

"You don't *have* to," Rainbow Dash answered softly. "That's the point. But I'd like to know that you're happy enough to be *able* to. Am... am I making any sense?" she asked.

"Kind of."

Pinkie was slumped against her seat, looking depressed. Literally. Like someone had taken her buoyant mood from before and squashed it into an unrecognizable gloom. How could she fake being so happy all the time, if *this* is how she really felt?

And then Rainbow Dash had an idea. It was going to be a sacrifice, but it would be worth it if it meant she'd get to see Pinkie happy again.

"Did I tell you about the ticket?" she asked, voice hesitant.

Pinkie's ears seemed to perk up, indicating her interest. "What ticket?" she asked curiously.

"I got a present from... somepony. A VIP pass to this Wonderbolts thing in Canterlot. I was gonna go during one of our free days."

"Wow, Dashie," Pinkie said with a small smile. "That sounds really nice. I bet it'll be fun."

"Do you wanna come, too?"

"How? I don't even have a ticket, silly."

"The pass I have is probably worth a lot. I bet I could trade it in for a couple of normal ones. Probably not for everypony, but at least two, for us."

Pinkie stared at her, blinking rapidly. "Dashie, no!" she finally gasped, looking alarmed. "Don't you wanna go and meet the Wonderbolts? Remember *living the dream* and stuff? That's like the most important thing *ever* to you!"

"No, my *friends* are the most important thing ever to me," Dash corrected. "And it won't be as fun unless I have somepony there to get excited with. The other ponies in the VIP section will probably all be stuck-up snobs that don't have a clue about racing. I'd probably have more fun in the stands. And besides, the Wonderbolts already kind of know me, remember? Talking to them isn't that important anymore."

Everything she said was technically true, but it still pained her to say so. Even if she wasn't still desperate to make a good impression on them, Rainbow Dash would've loved to have another chance to talk to them, but she watched Pinkie carefully to gauge her reaction.

Pinkie gave her another blank stare, and then an uncharacteristically slow, hesitant smile. "You know what?" she said brightly after a moment. "That sounds super-duper fun, Dashie! I've never been to a derby before!"

"They're pretty sweet," Rainbow Dash answered, leaning back in her chair haughtily in an attempt to look blasé about it, to hide the fact that she'd never seen one live, either. "Don't worry, I'll tell you who to cheer for. The most important part is that you do it really, really loudly so they know you're rooting for them." She gestured casually, as if she knew what she was talking about.

"Ooh! I can do that!" Pinkie cried, slamming her hooves down on the table. "Like this!"

She took a deep breath, screwing her eyes shut in concentration, before whispering, "Yay."

Rainbow Dash groaned, but Pinkie started giggling, and soon, Dash was, too. And then they were both laughing, snorting and cackling over something that wasn't nearly as funny as they were making it out to be, and they knew it.

Everything seemed okay all of a sudden. Rainbow Dash was going to the city. She was going to be the star of the biggest Hearth's Warming pageant in Equestria, and there would be a huge crowd gathered there to watch her be awesome, just as she liked it. There was a big fancy party and a Wonderbolts Derby to look forward to, not to mention the presents, and right now, she was riding on a luxury train with her best friends in the whole world and an enormous pile of ice cream that Pinkie had just shoved her face back in, causing them both to burst out laughing again.

There really wasn't much more she wanted out of life.

At least, that's how it felt at the moment.

• • •

It had started with the original Mare Do Well scheme, which felt so long ago, now. That was how it began. There had been a kind of dangerous thrill that had come with watching Rainbow Dash without her knowledge, trailing behind her in the shadows. It had been wrong, it had been sick, but she had loved it – loved knowing that she was so close, and that the pegasus would never tell her to go away or leave her alone.



Mare Do Well had felt guilty, sure, guilty as all heck, because she *knew* how bizarre that was, to have a crush on somepony that you were too scared to approach, but had no problem stalking.

She had justified it at the time by telling herself, again and again, that she was just sticking to the plan. They had *all* followed her. That had been the point. As the collective identity of Mare Do Well, they were specifically acting with the sole intention of humbling Rainbow Dash, and *had* to know where she was at all times. How else were they to keep up with her? To always be ready to spring into action?

She alone had taken a more personal interest, because when she was behind the mask, she'd felt safe for the first time. Mare Do Well was a blank slate. She could do whatever she wanted without fear of judgment, and the sense of power that knowledge gave her had been dizzying. No pony knew who she was, so she didn't have to be anypony at all. And she'd *liked* that.

Now, though, was different. Every time she stepped back into the role of Mare Do Well, it got harder to stay in character. Every time she and Rainbow Dash saw each other, she felt herself lose a little more control, reveal a tiny bit more of her real self. The mask was cracking, and soon it would fall off, revealing the pathetic, frightened, love-struck pony hiding underneath. She was slipping. Before, she had *liked* having a new identity to protect her, but it had become a burden. Now it just felt like just another shove towards the precipice, and she knew that soon, very soon, she was going to reach that edge and fall.

Rainbow Dash was so bright and unique, like her namesake. She was blazing and glorious and absolutely terrified Mare Do Well. When they'd woken up together that morning, she'd shoved the pegasus away out of fear – fear at how strong and overpowering her feelings had suddenly become. She'd never felt something so huge before; it was like her emotions were an all-consuming wildfire, ravaging her.

Was that really what love *was*? How did other ponies cope? She had never known she was capable of *feeling* so much.

If it was pure obsession, surely Mare Do Well would've taken the stalking thing even further. She would've been taking secret photos and going through Rainbow's trash and collecting hair, or something else equally freaky, but she'd never even considered doing any of that. She'd just wanted to be close to Rainbow Dash.

If it was lust, surely physical contact wouldn't scare her so much, now. And besides, she knew all of Rainbow Dash's physical cues; if it had been about sex alone, she doubted it would've been very hard to get what she wanted. But just thinking that way made her feel sick. She hated herself for thinking that way, because that *wasn't who she was*. Only she didn't know who she was anymore.

It was more of a *need*, this longing. More than anything, she needed to be close to Rainbow Dash, to hear her voice and see her face. It didn't matter how or why. Even when Dash was angry, it was okay, because at least she was still paying attention to Mare Do Well. This greedy possessiveness, this burning desire, this hopeless frailty, all of it stemmed from the same selfish *need*.

The way they were right now – on the train, the pony Mare Do Well truly was absently following the oblivious Rainbow Dash with her eyes – this was okay. This was safe. As much as she could, she kept her distance, so as not to be overcome by Rainbow's presence. But it was difficult, both because Rainbow Dash didn't understand how she felt and because it was almost impossible for the mare to resist the impulse to reach out and touch her.

And Rainbow Dash was none the wiser, smiling at her and laughing like she didn't know.

There was no way Mare Do Well could keep it up for much longer.

That smile alone threatened to push her over the edge.

On a cold winter's day in Canterlot, six very close friends found themselves ensconced in a coach rolling down the road that lead to the royal palace – a great, looming building that somehow seemed to grow more and more impressive as they drew nearer. It was just as fantastic as any of them could remember; perhaps even more so, with the lack of gaudy decoration and sense of festivity that had pervaded the Gala. Back then, the majority of their attention had been drawn to the gathering crowds, rather than the castle itself. Now, though, their eyes were free to wander, allowing them to admire the elaborate architecture fully.

At least, they could in *theory*. The six friends were too busy chatting in the carriage to bother looking out the windows at the scenery passing them by, with the possible exception of a dreamy-eyed Fluttershy. The conversation was light and flowed like water, changing easily from topic to topic, never staying on one for very long.

"This is going to be so! Much! *Fun!*" Pinkie squealed, squirming and bouncing on her seat. "Do you remember when we came here *last* time, and how super *fantastic* the play was and how everypony sang along with us at the end? Wasn't that great? Do you think they'll do that again? Oh my gosh, I can't wait! And then there's gonna be the big fancy party after and it'll be *so cool*, and this time everypony will be dancing and stuff I bet, and –"

"I can't wait to see the princess again," Twilight interrupted happily. "There's so much I want to talk to her about. Do you think Luna will be there?"

"I still can't believe nopony thought to come and get me when she was in Ponyville last time," Rarity sniffed disdainfully. "I may have had a cold, but it was *royalty!* I missed my chance to make a good impression on one of the *princesses!*"

"You don't need to make no good impression," Applejack said with a grin. "Celestia knows *we* didn't, and we're still goin' to the palace, ain't we? If runnin' and screamin' from a princess ain't enough to make 'em banish us, there probably ain't nothin' you could do that'd make 'em mad at *you*."

"Well, if I'd been there, *I* wouldn't have run away," Rarity answered curtly. "And honestly, *we* were the ones who banished Nightmare Moon, so why in Equestria were you so afraid of Princess Luna? You should've known better. I never would've expected it of –"

"I wasn't afraid," Rainbow Dash boasted, even though she'd only been listening to about half of the conversation and couldn't have said for sure what they were talking about. "I didn't run away at *all*."

"Yes you did!" Pinkie cut in eagerly. "After you got your tushie zapped! You were outta there so fast that –"

"Hey, shut up! You weren't even there, how would you know?"

"Twilight told me about it!"

"Well, I didn't *run away*. I was just surprised."

Just then, the carriage rattled from a sudden sharp rush of wind somewhere outside.

"Windigos!" Pinkie shrieked, diving head-first into a pile of cushions that decorated the carriage seat.

"Windigos?" Fluttershy squeaked, eyes huge and frightened.

"Pinkie Pie, you *know* those aren't real. They're just a story," Twilight chided, sounding disapproving.

"Besides, dontcha got that no-fear song o' yers to protect you?" Applejack asked.

Pinkie Pie pulled her head out of the pile of pillows, giving Applejack an exasperated look. "That's my *ghostie* song," she explained, rolling her eyes dramatically. "I don't even *have* a Windigo song."

Now that she was sitting upright again, no longer burrowed among the pillows, Pinkie Pie threw herself at Rainbow Dash, wrapping her forelegs around her in a tight hug.

"No more fighting!" she said happily, "Kay?"

"Geez, Pinkie! Let go, you're crushing my lungs!"

Laughter, and then gradually the conversation drifted yet again. But Pinkie didn't let go, staying where she was. Her body felt warm and soft pressed against Rainbow Dash, and it brought a heat to her cheeks, but it was a pleasant kind of heat.

That feeling from the train – that this was everything she wanted, everything that she needed – was lingering. Even when they'd reached the station in Canterlot and had to disembark, that contentment remained, spreading from the very edge of her hooves to the very tips of her wings, until it was like she was filled with a sense of overwhelming satisfaction.

For the first time in a very, very long while, Rainbow Dash felt peaceful. Things were back to normal for *real*, with none of that horrible pretending and denial, and it felt fantastic. In the back of her mind she knew that the normalcy would only last for the next week or so, though. When they had to return to Ponyville after the holidays, she'd be returning to Mare Do Well, and she had no idea what to expect or how to prepare herself when that time came. For now, though, Dash could just focus on the present, on how easily her body welcomed Pinkie's weight as the earth pony leaned against the pegasus, and on how much she'd missed those hugs. More than she'd ever admit, even to herself.

Time passed, with Pinkie occasionally lifting her head from where it rested against Rainbow Dash's shoulder, either to laugh or offer her own opinion on whatever had just been said, but she always put it back, much to Dash's unspoken relief.

The carriage rolled to a stop at the steps of the palace, and the doors opened, allowing the six of them to disembark. Twilight went first, shoving past the others in an uncharacteristically rude way. Rainbow Dash and Applejack exchanged a puzzled glance when they heard her shout "Spike!"

"*Twilight!*" came the response.

A joyful laugh. Rainbow Dash shoved past Applejack, ignoring the "Hey!" that elicited from the farmer so that she could pop her head through the coach entrance and see what happened.

Twilight and Spike stood together on the steps leading to the palace, hugging fiercely as if they hadn't seen each other in years, instead of only a couple of weeks.

"Aw, man, I missed you guys!" Spike cried happily. "It feels like it's been *forever!*"

"I don't know how I managed to get by for so long without my number one assistant to help me!" Twilight answered as she nuzzled his cheek, sounding just as happy to be reunited as he was.

"Why was he even in Canterlot on his own for so long?" Applejack asked in a low voice.

"I dunno," Rainbow Dash whispered back. "Royal business. Does it even matter?"

"Wasn't there somethin' 'bout a dragon ambassador?"

"That sounds good."

"Whatcha guys talking about?" Pinkie interrupted, bounding in between them, but neither Applejack nor Rainbow Dash got a chance to answer, because they were now being ushered into the palace by the stone-faced guards who stood watch at the massive double doors of the spacious entrance.

"Where's the princess?" Rainbow could hear Twilight asking one of the guards, who was now leading them up a flight of beautifully tiled stairs and towards a long hall of suites, but she couldn't quite catch his response. Not that it really mattered, anyway.

The palace had an entire wing dedicated to housing guest suites, which was where they were taken now. There were six rooms allotted for their usage, one each, all of them furnished exquisitely. The guest wing almost gave the impression of being some kind of five-star hotel, an impression strengthened by the servant unicorns silently lurking in the background, bearing trays of food and baskets of linens.

They were led to these suites by one such a servant – a scrawny male unicorn dressed in the same uniform as the others, who carried half of their luggage with a weak magical light and the other half on his own back. If he stopped walking for even a moment, his legs shook almost violently, as if they'd give out any second, but the shaking stopped when they reached Rarity's room, and his burden was lessened considerably upon her taking her things back.

Rainbow Dash's own room was just like the others: huge and luxurious, with rich and elaborate decoration, but curiously gloomy in how impersonal it was. The unicorn servant set down her suitcase, the very last one, before sighing heavily in relief and scampering out the door. Ignoring his speedy exit, Dash approached the case, unlatching it with her mouth and tipping the contents on the floor, successfully ruining Fluttershy's painstaking packing.

The neatly folded clothes scattered, her wallet fell with a heavy *chink* from the bits contained inside, and a piece of folded paper came fluttering down, floating gracefully to the ground. Rainbow's heart stopped.

*You thought you could escape?* it seemed to say, mocking her. *You thought you could get away?*

It seemed like the right thing to do at the moment would be to classify that fluttering feeling in her stomach as *panic*. But actually, that panic was competing with a sense of something like relief. The truth was, Dash had found it very, very hard to believe Mare Do Well's claim that they would have no contact in Canterlot. She hadn't expected those nightly visits to continue or anything; that would've been too hard to hide, if Mare Do Well *was* one of her friends, since they were all staying in such close proximity.

Notes, though, made sense. The relief was because this note was like confirmation that she was right – that she was getting good at this, at knowing what to expect. And she'd known better than to truly believe she would be left alone for an entire week.

*Suck it up*, Rainbow Dash told herself. *Not afraid of anything, remember?*

It was just a piece of paper. It couldn't hurt her. Taking a deep breath, she bowed her head to pick up the note, setting it down on a nearby table and spreading it open on the polished wooden surface.

A simple missive. Short, in that same plain, solid writing as before. No signature and only one sentence.

*I miss you already.*

There. Rainbow Dash released the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. That hadn't been too bad. Nothing ominous or creepy there; just a note.

But how did it get in her suitcase?

Fluttershy had packed for her, but Mare Do Well had no wings, so although the yellow pegasus was the obvious suspect, it couldn't be her. Unless Fluttershy had placed the note in there as a favor for somepony. Could somepony have asked her to slip it in? Would Fluttershy have agreed? There was no name, no sign at all that it was from Mare Do Well, so somepony who didn't know better – somepony like Fluttershy – might have agreed to do it, not knowing what it would mean to Dash when she found it.

All she had to do was ask Fluttershy right out. Fluttershy knew the whole story now; she'd definitely want to help Rainbow Dash if she explained what the note was. Unless – had anypony else had access to her bag at any point?

It would be so much easier if Rainbow Dash at least had a way to write back to her.

That evening, the six of them joined the princesses for dinner, and although that may have been a cause for formality on any other occasion, this time, it was just like having dinner with old friends. It was difficult to maintain any semblance of dignity with somepony you'd once eaten donuts with after utterly ruining one of their parties.

Princess Celestia was warm and receptive, asking gentle questions and laughing easily with her pupil. Princess Luna was silent for the most part; not cold, exactly, but maybe a little uncertain on how to behave around them. She spoke only to Fluttershy. Maybe Fluttershy's true talent lay in taming all kinds of creatures, rather than just the woodland critters she cared for. As timid as she could be, she never had trouble winning over all she met.

Rainbow Dash felt numb, unable to summon up even enough energy to fake it the way she used to. The food was good and the atmosphere pleasant, but Rainbow couldn't eat, instead settling for picking at her meal and pushing it around on her plate while the others exclaimed over it. Her thoughts wouldn't stay focused long enough to really take part in the talk going on around her, either; her mind always found a way to return to the note.

She had suspected for a long time that Mare Do Well was really one of her friends, in spite of no true proof, but this was the first time that Rainbow Dash really understood what that meant. It meant that one of the ponies who laughed so readily and talked so easily was secretly leading some kind of bizarre, twisted double life; that she didn't know one of her friends at all, and since Dash still had no idea who Mare Do Well *was*, it potentially meant that she didn't know *any* of them. If she truly understood her friends, shouldn't she have been more certain? Shouldn't her trust in them have been firmer? More unwavering? There shouldn't have been these doubts haunting her; Dash should've just known instinctively whether or not any of them was capable of such deception, and who.

Dinner came to an end, and nopony questioned her when she declared her intention to call it a night, likely chalking it up to her inherent laziness. It was easier to go along with the teasing than to try and explain how she couldn't bear to look at them anymore.

• • •

Rainbow Dash fell asleep thinking about her.



That sinuous grace and formidable strength, that velvet voice, that odd sense of humor and unexpected fragility. Her dreams were peppered with images of the mare, of bodies wrapped together and delirious warmth. Of greediness and wanting and *need*.

And then she woke up drenched in sweat, breathing heavily, legs tangled hopelessly in the covers.

*Oh, Celestia*, she thought with a groan.

Her wings were fully erect, much to her horror. They were so stiff that folding them back down again was almost painful, and after a moment, Rainbow Dash growled in frustration and gave up, diving back into the mess she'd made of the blankets.

*Why'd I even wake up?* she thought bitterly, but it wasn't because a part of her wanted to finish the dream.

Then she heard it. A rapping at the door.

"What?" Rainbow snapped, voice gruff and muffled by the blanket. "Come in, I guess."

The door creaked as it swung open, and she lifted her head to see who it was: the scrawny unicorn from before, who had carried their bags to their rooms. He popped his head through the entrance, looking nervous.

"Um, sorry to bother you," he squeaked, voice cracking in a grating way, like a colt on the verge of becoming a stallion who wasn't quite there yet. "But, uh, you have a message. Miss!" he added hastily, like an afterthought.

That was all it took for Rainbow Dash to bolt upright.

"From who?" Dash shouted, leaping out of bed. Her entire body grew tense, feathers bristling as she glared at him, a note of urgency in her voice.

"I don't know!" he cried, taking a step back. He was visibly panicked, now. "I was just told to deliver it to this room, I swear!"

Rainbow's mind was already whirring, the gears turning.

"Is there, like, a mail service in the palace?" she asked, pressing. "A delivery network? Or is it just the servants who do it?"

"T-there are runners," the colt squawked, looking terrified. "Servants who just deliver letters and packages and things to personal retainers, who then deliver them to the ponies they're going to. But I don't know who it's from! If the sender wants it anonymous, the runners won't tell us!"

Rainbow Dash closed her eyes, thinking. When she opened them, the colt was still there, albeit cowering in fear.

"Who makes up the rooms during the day? Specifically mine?"

"There's a couple of us who've been assigned here."

"Us? So you're one of them?"

"Y-yes."

"Even if neither of us knows who it's going to, if I wanted an answer, could you figure out a way to make sure it gets sent back along the same route?"

"That could probably be arranged," he said after a moment of consideration, and Rainbow Dash nodded before turning to approach the desk. The colt followed, carrying the letter behind him in a soft trail of magic.

"I want you to do something for me," Rainbow announced, opening one of the drawers and shoving her head inside to rummage through it, finally pulling out a pad of stationary. There was already a jar of ink and a quill set on the desk. "When you come to clean or whatever, if there's anything left on this table, do that thing and send it back down that route, and if I get a reply, just leave it here, too. It'll be like my personal mailbox. If you do that, I'll make it worth your while somehow, I swear. Okay?"

"Uh, sure. I can do that. No problem!"

"Cool. Can you wait here for a sec?"

Without waiting for a response, she snatched the note out of the air and opened it.

*Are you okay? You seemed distracted last night. If that's my fault, I'm sorry. (Did you know they have a whole system for anonymous deliveries here? You can respond that way. Just ask the messenger delivering this about it.)*

Rainbow Dash scowled to herself, resisting the sudden urge to break something and instead focusing on taking the quill and dipping it in the ink to scribble out her reply.

It took a long time to write, and when she was finished, the letters were shaky and clumsy, making her response look horribly amateurish in comparison to Mare Do Well's tidy little note. It was legible, though, and that was good enough.

*What the hay why are you bugging me HERE too?!? Can't you leave me alone for like a week?!?!?!?!?!?*

Satisfied, she wordlessly shoved it towards the unicorn colt, who no longer looked scared that she was going to hurt him. He just gave a slight bow before scrambling to leave.

So that was done.

Mare Do Well sure had guts to try and keep up the game thing when it would be so easy for her to get caught right now. Still, anonymous notes *were* kind of clever, and there was something about the whole format that completely changed the overall tone. If they'd met in real life and Mare Do Well had asked her how she was in such a way, Rainbow Dash would've assumed she was being condescending and reacted accordingly to the implied insult. In the form of a note, though, it seemed friendlier. More good-natured.

Logic dictated that she rip the paper up into a million tiny pieces and burn them, but she instead dropped it into the same drawer into which she'd stuck the one from her suitcase. If anypony found them, they might misconstrue Rainbow Dash's decision to keep them as some kind of sentimentality, but she couldn't just throw away such valuable evidence, could she?

• • •

Most of their afternoon was spent rehearsing the play, and Rainbow Dash threw herself into her role with unprecedented gusto.

Last year, she'd made a habit of dozing through practice, ad-libbing most of her lines on the night of the actual performance. Pinkie had found this hilarious when Dash later confessed to it, but nopony seemed too annoyed. Although the exaggeratedly drill-sergeant style Commander Hurricane ended up genuinely terrifying Fluttershy, the play was an old one that was often subject to reinterpretation. The original used stuffy, archaic language, and modifications were often made to make it more accessible to modern audiences; as long as the general message remained the same, nopony was bothered. Still, Twilight had later told her off about it.

Now, though, Rainbow Dash managed to stay awake the entire time, eyes wide and focused, catching the others off-guard, but it was all because she didn't want to consider the possibility that one of her friends might be an even greater actress than she knew, one of them carrying the talent they now all displayed into the real world, as well.

At the end of the hour they decided to call it a day, and she actually felt a momentary flicker of panic. If she didn't keep busy, her thoughts were going to stray, and she knew it. But then Pinkie cast a glance back, and gave her a very small smile.

"Dashie?" she asked sweetly, batting her eyelashes innocently. "Wanna go play outside? They have so much snow here! We can have a super major giant snowball fight!"

"Um, sure," Dash reluctantly agreed, but then she saw the way Pinkie's face lit up at her answer, and felt herself slowly get into the spirit of things. "But there's no way you can beat a pegasus at a snowball war. We *make* the snow. You know that, right?"

Pinkie giggled and stuck her tongue out at Rainbow. "Silly filly! There's no way you can beat a Pinkie, either!"

And Rainbow Dash found herself smiling back.

Not everything in the world had to revolve around Mare Do Well and her attempted flirtation with Rainbow Dash, even though it could feel that way sometimes, and the way the afternoon blew by seemed specifically designed to emphasize that point. Not once did Rainbow Dash find herself thinking back to the mare or the notes or the game; she was too preoccupied with making sure Pinkie got hit in the face as many times as possible during their snowball fight. It was entirely possible that this had been intentional, a ploy designed by Pinkie to distract Rainbow Dash from whatever was bothering her, but if that was true, then it worked.

When they finally returned inside after utterly destroying the pristine, snow-blanketed winter wonderland that had greeted their arrival, they were still giggling and red-faced from the cold. Dash's mane was dripping and matted from the melting snow and she couldn't stop shivering, but it was hard to mind very much.

"I *totally* won that," she bragged. "It wasn't even a contest."

They were in Pinkie's room, and the pink pony was toweling off in the corner. Her hair was limp and damp, just like Rainbow Dash's was, but it was starting to bush up again as she dried herself with one of the thick, fluffy towels she'd found in the closet.

"Are you feeling better now?" she asked conversationally.

"Huh?"

Pinkie had been standing by a vanity table, making faces at herself in the mirror as she dried off, but now she turned to face Dash, giving her a sad smile. There were so many different kinds of smiles that Pinkie had in her arsenal, and she wielded them all like an expert, Rainbow Dash realized. It was amazing that she could say so much with a single expression and a single glance from those big blue eyes of hers.

"You looked sad," Pinkie explained softly.

Rainbow Dash resisted the impulse to shake off the excess snow like a dog, instead brushing it off her coat with a chilly hoof and letting it melt in a pile on the carpet. When she was satisfied that she was as dry as she could get, she let herself fall back onto Pinkie's bed. She bounced a little on the mattress – soft and cushy, like Pinkie herself – and shut her eyes, sighing.

"I'm not sad," she mumbled.

"Well, you looked like you were thinking too much, and Doctor Pinkie Pie says that's no good. It's the holidays! You need to be playing and having *fun*!"

It was entirely possible that Rainbow Dash had been thinking too much, she reflected. Most of her life lately had revolved around one thing and one thing alone, and it was driving her crazy.

She felt something fall onto the bed beside her with another bounce, and when she opened her eyes, turning her head to see what it was, she saw Pinkie looking back at her. She looked solemn.

"You're my very bestest friend in the whole wide world, Dashie," Pinkie said, quietly and firmly, eyes huge and sincere. "And you're also my favoritest pegasus, except for maybe Fluttershy and Pound Cake. So if something is happening that's making you hurt, it's okay to tell me. You can talk to me about anything."

"Um, all right."

"Really, it's okay. I know that Fluttershy is your *oldest* friend, but you can tell the *rest* of us stuff, too."

*No I can't, Rainbow Dash almost snapped. And you know why.*

But the Pinkie looking at her wasn't the same Pinkie who had kissed her; she was just the Pinkie who loved her friends more than anything and wanted them to be happy. And there was also a different Pinkie, a Pinkie lurking in the darkest recesses of her mind, who could be angry and vengeful and hold grudges, and yet another Pinkie who could be horribly, heartbreakingly lonely at times.

There were so many different aspects to Pinkie's character at play, every day they spent together, and she was a master at displaying only the personality she wanted to and hiding all the rest.

"Are *you* okay?" Rainbow Dash retorted, turning the tables and somehow managing to make the question sound like an insult.

Pinkie blinked, looking surprised. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

*Because I can't trust you.*

"Because sometimes you just fake it when you think we *want* you to be happy."

And Pinkie giggled. "Why would I be faking it, you goofball? I just had the funnest afternoon ever with my Dashie! Why would I be a Grouchy Pie *now*?"

Rainbow Dash sighed, and rolled off the bed. When her hooves touched solid ground, she began to flap her wings, taking to the air. They were still a little sore, but the best way to get used to flying again would be to do it as much as possible, no matter what Fluttershy said about not straining them.

"Are we still going to the Derby?"

Pinkie was sitting up now, looking worried.

"Sure. Why wouldn't we?"

For once, Pinkie seemed to have no answer, only giving Rainbow Dash a shrug before giving her another one of those too-complicated smiles.

• • •

Most ponies carried a mental image of the perfect pony around in their head, who was exactly what they wanted a pony to be, exactly who they thought they could love the most. Every pony they met in life, be they mare or stallion, was measured up against the pony in their head. It was pure wishful thinking, and many ponies ended up spending their entire lives trying to make that wish come true.

Mare Do Well talked big about not trying to sum ponies up, about not putting too much faith into what you saw – because most of the time, ponies projected exactly what you *wanted* them to see. But the truth was, in a way, she'd done the exact same thing without even realizing it. Rainbow Dash had been the pony in her head for a long time, and she'd fallen hopelessly in love with her, but that had barely scratched the surface of what *real* love could be.

She'd fallen in love for all of these shallow reasons. Rainbow Dash was strong and brave and beautiful and loyal and all of those good things, but with every meeting, every night that passed by and every glance exchanged and every conversation held, she fell deeper and deeper, until she wanted to laugh at the self she had once been for daring to assume she'd had even the slightest idea about what true feeling was.

When they were together under ordinary circumstances, Rainbow Dash saw her, but didn't see *her*. It was like a paradox. Mare Do Well could be more honest, but only because she was hiding her identity, and her true self could be more affectionate, but only because she was hiding her feelings. She could only be close to Dash in any shape or form under false pretenses. Either she hid her feelings or her face, neither option leaving her enough freedom to do what she truly wanted. And she wanted so much, too; more than anything, she dreamt of taking the pegasus and stroking those wings and holding her and maybe someday kissing her, long and deep, but she couldn't. Those fantasies alone made her blush and shiver from guilty embarrassment, and if there ever came a time where they might come true, she'd probably die.

A sheet of crisp, blank parchment from a scroll lay unrolled before her, ink and quill set beside it for when she began to write. Whenever that may be.

She wanted to say so many things. These notes were her new crutch, because she honestly hadn't known whether she'd be able to last an entire week without cracking, but even now, she didn't know what to say.

*I love you*, she could write. She could fill an entire scroll, back and front, with nothing but those words, and still not have said it nearly enough.

*You terrify me*, she could write. It would be true, truer than perhaps anything else she'd said to Rainbow Dash so far.

*I'm sorry. I never meant for things to go so far or for you to be so hurt. It was never supposed to become this big, but I can't stop now. You understand, don't you?*

But Dash *wouldn't* understand. That was just it. She was yet to see Mare Do Well as anything but an enemy, and that was only when she saw her at all. Rainbow Dash would never be able to forgive her or see her as sympathetic, not yet, not after everything Mare Do Well had done.

She started writing. Just let the words flow. Just be honest and write what she thought.

*I know you want to know who I am, but I was afraid that if I told you, your mind would be flooded with all of these inaccurate, incomplete depictions of me. I had these vague notions of getting to know each other without the noise of others drowning our true selves out. But by wearing a mask, I suppose I defeated my own purpose, and even now, I find myself running into wall after wall, one of the biggest being that although you didn't know me, I knew you. At least, I thought I did, and have been painting my own ideas on you ever since. I can't be honest with you out of fear that you won't accept me, and since I'm afraid to let myself see all of you, I don't know how to trust you. But every day that we meet, every time we talk to one another, I feel myself fall more and more in love with you. I would like to know you very much, if I only knew a way to start over again, and if only I hadn't already bucked up so many times.*

Okay, that was no good any more. It had started off so promisingly, too.

The worst part was that Rainbow Dash had, in all likelihood, spent a grand total of ten seconds pondering her own reply before sending it off. She'd done none of this crippling agonizing as she'd tried to decide what was safe for her to say.

Unwillingly, Mare Do Well's thoughts flitted back to that night in the alley, after Rainbow's wings had been broken. Horrifyingly enough, the strongest memory wasn't the guilt or terror she'd felt that night, but instead the look on Rainbow Dash's face when Mare Do Well had caressed the silky feathers of her wings. It had been a tight look, but her eyes were unfocused: a look of annoyed pleasure. One of somepony who was enjoying something they didn't want to enjoy.

The ironic thing was, if she gave into the urge to burst into tears and run sobbing from her room just to throw herself at the pegasus in search of comfort, Rainbow Dash would



probably let her, if only because she didn't know who she actually was. Or who she was pretending to be. A less scrupulous individual might have taken advantage of that from the very beginning, using their prior friendship as a way to get close to her crush. But she was better than that. Wasn't she? She would never stoop so low. Would she?

And with a sigh, Mare Do Well glanced back at the note she'd received earlier that afternoon.

*What the hay why are you bugging me HERE too!?! Can't you leave me alone for like a week?!?!?!?!?!?*

*No, she could write. I honestly don't think I can.*

Rainbow Dash wanted truth. Normalcy. But if Mare Do Well actually wrote that, the pegasus would likely assume she was being sarcastic somehow.

Words were not enough. Actions were not enough. The scope of this was too vast to be communicated so easily. Whatever she felt now had evolved from mere friendship to attraction to a crush to infatuation to pure adoration, far too quickly for her to even understand it.

She groaned and slumped at the desk, slowly and steadily beginning to bang her head against it.

• • •

For some reason, Rainbow Dash didn't immediately go back to her room after saying goodbye to Pinkie. Instead she stopped by Applejack's on a whim. After spending an afternoon with somepony like Pinkie, she was actually finding herself craving some kind of structure, and Applejack was the sturdiest, most no-nonsense pony she knew. Except Applejack didn't seem especially happy to see her.

"What do you want?" she asked curtly upon opening the door. Her mane was free of its usual ponytail, hanging loose around her face. She looked bleary-eyed and sleepy, in spite of the early hour.

"I just got back from hanging with Pinkie and everypony else is doing boring business stuff," Dash explained lightly, swooping past Applejack and into the room beyond. She didn't actually know if that was true or not, but it sounded plausible enough. Twilight and Spike would likely be in the library, and Rarity and Fluttershy were probably doing

some girly bonding thing together, neither of which sounded especially appealing. "Why're you so tired? You going to sleep already?"

"It's called *early to bed, early to rise*. Ever hear of it?"

"I like the *early to bed* part."

"D'you need somethin'?" Applejack snapped, looking and sounding annoyed. Apparently she became cranky when deprived of sleep.

"Nah, just wanted to hang out."

Maybe there was something in Rainbow's eyes, or in the way she spoke, that showed Applejack what the pegasus needed right then, but for whatever reason, her expression softened, and with a sigh, she relented.

"All right, all right," she grumbled. "But you'd better not be a pain in my backside, or yer outta here."

"No prob. Hey, what were you doing, anyway?" Rainbow Dash asked curiously, floating over to the dressing table, where Applejack's trademark Stetson was strewn haphazardly.

"None o' your business," Applejack muttered, snatching it up and yanking it onto her head.

"What, it's a secret?"

"Bein' honest don't mean bein' open. I don't go 'round declarin' my personal business to everypony all day, because it's *my* business, not theirs."

"How does your Element work, then?" Rainbow asked, settling onto the bed. She sat on the edge of the mattress, wings opening and closing idly.

"What d'you mean?"

"Can you lie at *all*, like, if it was an emergency? Can you sense dishonesty?"

Applejack chuckled. "I ain't some kinda lie detector, Rainbow, an' I reckon I don't know much more than you 'bout how the Elements work. All I know is, I don't like lies and I ain't good at tellin' 'em, but I could probably do it. I just wouldn't like it. Sorta like how I bet Pinkie could probably go a day without laughing', but it'd just about kill her."

That's right; Applejack didn't know. None of them did. They had never seen Pinkie at her worst, they didn't know how she could get, and Dash had sworn that she would never tell. Unless Pinkie had drawn similar promises from them, as well.

"Let's test that," Rainbow suggested, floating over to the dressing table Applejack still stood by and pointing at the hat, now perched atop Applejack's head where it belonged. "Say your hat is green."

Applejack blinked.

"Huh?"

"Say it. I dare you."

"I don't... no! That's just plain silly."

"What, you can't do it?" Rainbow taunted, her words a challenge.

"I can *do* it, I just don't *want* to. It's silly! My hat ain't green! Anypony can see that, plain as day."

Rainbow Dash snickered, and Applejack scowled, saying, "You really don't got anythin' better to do than to get on my nerves?" She was visibly annoyed now, when before she had spoken to Rainbow with more patience. "If you don't, then you can leave."

Rainbow grew still at once, face taking on a serious expression. "Actually," she began, sounding uncomfortable. "I wanted to ask you something."

And Applejack matched Rainbow's sudden change in attitude; she grew serious as well, eyes betraying her concern. "Ask me what?"

"Um..."

Rainbow Dash's eyes lifted skyward, staring somewhere at the ceiling, feathers bristling with trepidation.

"Have, have you ever, um... have you ever had a crush on somepony before?"

Applejack turned beet red. Although considering who she was, she may have preferred it to be said that she turned as red as a Red Delicious, or something. "None o' your business!" she barked, but the furious blush stayed on her cheeks.

"I was just wondering," Rainbow said quickly. "I wasn't trying to make fun of you. I mean \_"

She couldn't ask Pinkie. Rarity was the fanciful romantic type and wouldn't give her a good answer. Fluttershy would be too embarrassed. That left Rainbow Dash the option of either seeking out Twilight or Applejack, and frankly, she felt safer asking the farmer, who was practically guaranteed to be straightforward with her.

"I was just wondering if you knew anything about what it's like," she weakly mumbled, ears and wings drooping. "Is it... is it supposed to hurt?"

"Well, I reckon it ain't *supposed* to," Applejack mumbled back. "But I'd bet that sometimes it can feel like yer heart's takin' a proper buckin'. Otherwise, why'd there be all those love songs that end with somepony dyin'?"

"Yeah..."

If Rainbow Dash was going to get anywhere, she needed to be honest with herself, as hard as it would be, and the truth was, there was the faintest possibility that Mare Do Well could be somepony she wanted to know. At the very least, she seemed interesting: somepony it might be *fun* to know. The kind of pony that could probably keep up with the Dash, and could be entertaining enough in her own right to merit approval.

And if Rainbow Dash happened to potentially be *kind* of attracted to her, and sometimes had dreams about her or suddenly really wanted to see her, well, that was perfectly understandable, too. Because when a pony behaved as aggressively as Mare Do Well did, then, well, one was bound to respond, right? It was instinctual.

Like the wings. Pegasi wings were just overly sensitive for some reason, so if Dash got kind of turned on when Mare Do Well had stroked them, then it totally wasn't her fault. It could have happened to anypony.

So that was it: she was confronting the truth of the situation, and once she faced the subconscious enemy, it would cease to have control over her. If she acknowledged that she might kind of like Mare Do Well, or at least find her the tiniest bit appealing, then the mare would no longer have such a hold on her and her life, and Dash would be able to move on.

Applejack was giving her a funny look now, like she was waiting for the pegasus to continue, but Rainbow Dash just stared ahead blankly as she thought. Finally she shook her head, returning to the present.

"Is that a hairbrush?" she asked to stave off any questions Applejack might have had.

"No!" the farmer shouted, knocking it off the table as her face turned even redder.

"It totally is!" Rainbow Dash accused, staring at the corner where the offending implement had landed. "Were you brushing your mane? Is that why your hair was down, and you didn't have your hat on?"

"Y'know what?" Applejack said loudly, grabbing Rainbow Dash's tail and yanking her back down to the floor. She grabbed her shoulders and began to steer her in the direction of the door. "Yer startin' to be a pain in my backside. I think you'd better get goin'."

"Oh, *Applejack*," Rainbow Dash said in mock disappointment. "How could you have fallen so far? Is Canterlot getting to you already?"

"Go. Now."

Rainbow Dash leaned forward and plucked off Applejack's hat so that she could muss the mane underneath with a hoof. "There!" she said with a nasty glee. "*That's* more like the Applejack I know."

Applejack shoved her into the hall and slammed the door, leaving Rainbow Dash alone to cackle.

• • •

Back in her room, Rainbow Dash found a folded piece of paper on the table – the makeshift post office. Without even opening it, she knew that it had to be another note from Mare Do Well. This time, she didn't hesitate, bolting to the table the instant her eyes fell on the missive so that she could read it.

*I'm not leaving you alone because I'm afraid of finding out that you won't miss me if I go away, it said. Also, I sincerely doubt I could last a full week without breaking under the pressure. I've allowed myself this small outlet, so as to vent some of the frustrations I feel. That is my reason, but you don't have to feel obligated to indulge me by responding. It's a selfish reason, and I am a selfish mare who doesn't want to let you go.*

She read it at least three times before finally putting it down.

Selfish? Yes, it was selfish. Not only selfish, but possessive and disturbing and just plain *irritating*. Because seriously, was Rainbow Dash never going to get to have time to herself ever again, or was she going to be hassled *every single freaking day for the rest of her life*?

Rainbow Dash wasn't up for writing a reply right now. She needed to think a little longer. About what to say and what she was hoping would happen. Maybe she needed to reread the note a few times, to get a better sense of what she felt about it.

She fell asleep reading it, clutching it to her chest.

It wasn't as hard as she was making it out to be. At least, it didn't *have* to be. The actions were simple enough: put pen to paper. Write. Don't stop and think about it, just whatever came into Rainbow's head.

*You're annoying you know. If you're gonna keep bugging me for the rest of my life you could at least do it yourself instead of sending these dumb letters.*

No.

*I keep dreaming about you, what's up with that? Are you invading my sleep now too?!*

No.

*I think I might l*

No. She wasn't going anywhere near that one.

Each piece of paper Rainbow Dash started to write on ended up crumpled into a ball and tossed aside. Nothing she started to say seemed quite right. It would be easier if she had hands or unicorn magic; her mouth tasted gross from trying to hold a pen for so long, and her cheeks were starting to cramp from the strain of it.

*I feel sorry for you, she wrote, face screwed up in concentration as she carefully shaped each letter. I don't get why you think you're in love with somepony you can't even trust. You must be pretty messed up. You make me mad but I can't really hate you because it's just too sad.*

It was meant to sound snarky, but upon rereading, Rainbow Dash was disgusted to realize how sincere it came across as. Plus, it rhymed, something done completely unintentionally. And then she had yet another piece of paper crumpled into a ball and thrown into the garbage can.

Rainbow had dreamt about Mare Do Well again, much to her horror; about closeness and gentle touches, with just enough gaps in her memory to leave her wondering what, exactly, had happened. All Dash knew was that when she'd woken up at last, her wings had once again been fully outstretched and her heart had been racing.

The first thing she did upon waking was dig through the bed to find the note again. As soon as she did, her eyes fell on that final line for the umpteenth time.

*And I am a selfish mare who doesn't want to let you go.*

There was something intimate and possessive about those thirteen simple words; something that made Rainbow Dash shiver, but not in a wholly unpleasant way.

It was hard to believe that there could be anypony in the world capable of adoring somepony else as completely as Mare Do Well claimed to. Whoever she was, Mare Do Well was likely profoundly emotionally troubled, because no matter what else happened, this level of obsession definitely wasn't normal. *Definitely* not when directed at somepony like Rainbow Dash, who was probably the least lovable pegasus in Equestria. Sure, she was awesome and heroic and all that, but she wasn't especially likable, really. As thick as Dash could get, even she could see that.

That's not to say it wasn't flattering. Rainbow Dash loved attention, after all, even if Mare Do Well's brand of attention made her kind of uncomfortable. And as hateful as the smug, condescending, personal-space-invading Mare Do Well could be, the shy, awkward Mare Do Well was much more sympathetic. There were times when Rainbow Dash *almost* liked her, *almost* wanted to return these affections. To just give in and see what happened next. If it weren't for her stupid, stubborn pride, it was completely possible that Dash might have forfeited by now, just to see where such a decision would take her. A tiny part of her wanted to know and was almost willing to give in just to find out.

Presumably, Mare Do Well would finally remove the mask and drop the act. If Rainbow Dash decided to give any kind of relationship with her a shot, just to try it, it would be ridiculous for the mare to try and hide her identity any longer.

Would the romantic theatrics continue? Presents and tender gestures, all meticulously crafted to manipulate Dash into liking Mare Do Well: those would probably stop if Rainbow Dash ever *did* like her. Or, who knows, maybe Mare Do Well would keep them up, to keep her from getting bored.

But she was *Rainbow Dash*, and she would never concede defeat, no matter how uncertain she was becoming. She would win, and if she *didn't* win, she would lose with dignity; except losing wasn't an option this time, plain and simple.

You could be attracted to somepony without being in love with them. And besides, Mare Do Well didn't even have to know that much. She didn't have to know that Dash ached thinking about those ugly dreams where they were so thoroughly intertwined that she



never wanted to pull away, or that sometimes Rainbow just wanted to wrap her forelegs around the mare, offering comfort and reassurance during her more fragile moments.

There was more to love than pity or attraction. At most, she and Mare Do Well could only ever be friends. Hesitant, distrusting friends, and even *that* was risky, because once you crossed that *friends* threshold, what was left?

And for the time being, Rainbow Dash sighed and decided to give up on writing her reply just yet, instead crawling back under the covers. Hopefully she would be able to catch some sleep.

There was no sudden realization. No grand epiphany. It wasn't a big moment in any sense of the term. Instead, her thoughts came slowly and quietly while Rainbow Dash lay tangled in bed, holding the note. A gradual thing.

It was easy to confuse love and friendship, especially when you were somepony who wasn't very used to either.

As a filly, Rainbow Dash had never been the pony others took care of. It had been assumed from the beginning, because of her rowdy personality, that she was fully capable of taking care of herself. She'd been raised to be tough and feisty, and she liked to think of herself that way, and then she'd become Rainbow *Crash*, and it suddenly became more important than ever to maintain that image. At her most fragile, she'd become determined to live up to that ideal of strength at any cost; and everypony had fallen for it. They'd all believed she was tougher than she felt, able to stand tall against troubles that would break any other foal her age; troubles like crushing insecurity and the jibes of her peers.

She'd been left alone because nearly everypony she met assumed that she could take care of herself, and she took care of herself because nopony else was going to do it for her. She'd become alienated by these expectations, and eventually, enough time had passed for it to be too late for her to do anything about changing her image. It had been too long.

Growing up self-sufficient in such a way had taken its toll, though; Rainbow Dash had grown too used to it. The thought of ever needing to be coddled or protected disgusted her, because she'd taken care of herself for years. She'd become used to shunning the attentions of others, even as she craved them like a drug, and she was utterly helpless when confronted with these attentions, unsure what to say or do in the face of such basic compassion.

Being vulnerable didn't necessarily have to be a bad thing, did it? Not when you were made so because you were so overwhelmed by somepony trying to care about you that their affection caught you off guard. That wasn't exactly the case here, of course, but it was close. Mare Do Well had taken things too far, but if she was telling the truth, she was only doing so because she cared about Rainbow Dash, and even if her actions were unforgivable, didn't intentions count for something?

During her Rainbow Crash period, Fluttershy had been a source of unwavering support, and it was so easy to confuse love and friendship, especially when you were somepony who wasn't very used to either.

But Rainbow Dash had promised herself that she would never make that mistake again, and Fluttershy had promised not to tell anypony. No pony had to know that Fluttershy had been the target of Rainbow Dash's first ever crush, because Dash sure wouldn't tell them and Fluttershy was far too good to ever humiliate her that way by telling them. It was only by mutually agreeing to forget Dash's hapless confession that Rainbow Dash had been able to keep her first, and for the longest time *only*, friend.

And yet... Fluttershy had told her that it was selfish to try and do the same with Pinkie. So what did that mean? Did that mean that Fluttershy resented Rainbow Dash for the secret between them? Did Fluttershy wish that they *hadn't* just agreed to forget?

Fluttershy wouldn't do that.

If Gilda had never said anything, they could've stayed friends. It was because she told Rainbow Dash and Rainbow Dash had to reject her that they'd lost what they'd had.

But Fluttershy hadn't done that. Rainbow Dash had been young and stupid and in need of some kind of love after having gone for so long without it. Fluttershy had offered the kindness she sought, and Rainbow Dash mistook the gratitude and friendly feelings she felt for something stronger, but Fluttershy had been so understanding, and so gentle, and so sweet, never bringing it up again and continuing to play her role as the nurturer Dash needed. Even now, she stayed by Rainbow Dash's side, offering comfort and support when she most needed it.

And Pinkie. Pinkie Pie had kissed Rainbow Dash, and although that had been a source of pain for a while, they were still together. They hadn't fallen apart. They'd been hurt, both of them, but they were strong enough to pull through it anyway.

Maybe she needed to have more faith in her friends.

And herself.

Maybe she needed to believe that they were capable of staying together, no matter what hardships they faced, and that if she just sucked up her fear and been the fearless Rainbow Dash she knew she could be, things would have been all right. She didn't have to run. She didn't have to hide. Fluttershy was proof of that. So was Pinkie.

Accepting Mare Do Well meant accepting that one of her friends had a side that was darker than Rainbow Dash ever could have imagined: a twisted, cunning, devious side. Not only that, but it meant looking past that fear Rainbow Dash carried, of confusing love with something else; that terror of risking everything for what would only turn out to be nothing. But it didn't *have* to be a risk. She was strong enough to get through any hurt such a decision might bring, and if the pony posing as Mare Do Well truly cared about Rainbow, then they would both be able to survive. She wasn't going to be irrevocably damaged because a friend had a crush on her, and neither was the friend.

The Mare Do Well charade was one thing. The idea of a friend being in love with her was another thing entirely. But Fluttershy was proof that it didn't have to destroy you; even now, she cared about Dash, and even now, Rainbow cared about Pinkie. If love and friendship truly existed between them, if it was *genuine*, then they should be able to get through any potential pain. Not necessarily unscathed, but not necessarily broken, either. And if Mare Do Well was one of her friends, then love *had* to be there, because Rainbow Dash truly *did* love the friends she now had. It was a strange and desperate and warped kind of love, love strained beyond belief and maybe not quite the kind of love Mare Do Well had in mind. But it was there, the tiniest nugget of compassion.

It was there in the way that Rainbow Dash missed her when she was gone and worried for her when she was emotional, and in the way that it felt so natural to be held by her. It was unintentional, but it was *there*, and it all stemmed from the simple fact that Mare Do Well absolutely had to be one of her friends. And whatever else the five of them were, whatever else they were hiding, they were friends first, and nothing else mattered.

That was why Rainbow Dash kept going back. That was why she played along.

No sudden realization. No grand epiphany. Just a natural train of thought as Rainbow Dash drifted into a state of semi-awareness, between consciousness and sleep, eyes shut but mind wandering, but the moment she came to this conclusion, it was like an enormous weight had been lifted.

That was why.

She could deny it as much as she wanted to, but the facts were there. No matter what else she felt about the mare, there was also a kind of love underlying it all – because Rainbow Dash knew, knew without a doubt, that Mare Do Well was one of her best friends in the world, and no matter what happened between them, nothing could change that.

The attraction was there, and so was that tiniest flicker of compassion, albeit practically overshadowed by the resentment Dash carried. But it wouldn't be that hard, really, to cultivate those feelings into something... bigger. All she needed to do was give those feelings a chance to grow. To let herself stop fighting and see where they led her. The question was, was it worth it? Was it worth finally facing her fear of risking everything and potentially losing it all? Was it worth taking that plunge?

And Rainbow Dash didn't know.

Not yet, anyway. She needed more time. For now, though, she knew one thing: whatever else happened, she was curious, at least. Curious to see what else Mare Do Well had in store. And for now, there was *one* thing she could do, even if she wasn't sure about anything else; she could write that reply.

• • •

Brushing her mane and trying to smile. Washing her face to hide the evidence of tears. Trying to pull herself back together in time to face the others. A knock at the door, and a servant with a message. Heart pounding, she opened it, almost afraid to see what it said.

*So you're just gonna hide the whole time? That's crazy you know. You're not just selfish you're a total whackjob too. What if I wanted to see you huh?*

She turned red. Yet even as she flushed, she felt herself smile. That was flirty, wasn't it? It meant Rainbow Dash *did* want to see her. It wasn't just sarcasm. Right?

The mask didn't just protect her identity; it also spared her untold embarrassment. She blushed a *lot* around Rainbow Dash, likely more than a normal pony could take without exploding; both because of the ridiculously over-the-top behavior she fell into as Mare do Well and just because being so close to her crush could be more than she could take at times. Now, though, she had no mask to hide the heat on her cheeks. Luckily she was alone.

She had promised herself that if Rainbow Dash ever truly wanted her gone, she would stop, but even when Rainbow told Mare Do Well to leave, there was always that flicker of untruth in her eyes or hesitation in her gestures. And Rainbow Dash always, always came

back, even though nothing was making her. When she'd said she hated Mare Do Well, the pegasus had still hugged her back.

If Rainbow Dash felt some hesitancy or somehow indicated that she didn't entirely mean it, Mare Do Well took it to mean she had permission to continue. Maybe that was a mistake on her part, but she was desperate. And now, Dash was responding to the notes. A small degree of hope was sufficient to give the birth of love, and as long as there was *some* possibility of something good coming out of all this, she didn't want to stop. It would all be worth it in the end. Somehow. That's what she needed to believe, at least.

Rainbow Dash wanted to see her. She'd implied as much. The thought of it made her happier than she'd been in a long, long time. In the past, a negative, jeering little voice might have taunted her with her own insecurities – saying, *she doesn't want to see you, she wants Mare Do Well. She doesn't even know you.* But the act had been slipping lately, more and more often, with more of her real self shining through, and still, Dash wanted to see her. It meant that Rainbow Dash accepted what she saw, as broken as it was. She was okay with it. And that was the most important thing in the world.

• • •

Friendship – true friendship, the kind the six of them shared – was supposed to be able to withstand anything. It stood strong against Nightmare Moon and Discord, and could easily do the same against anything else that fate threw their way.

First love and the fears and uncertainty it brought with it was a new kind of threat, granted, but whoever else she was, Mare Do Well was one of Rainbow Dash's friends beneath that mask, and Rainbow Dash always stuck by her friends through thick and thin. Falling in love didn't *have* to mean losing everything, so why were they so afraid? Fluttershy had stood by her and continued to do so, and Rainbow Dash stood by Pinkie. Whoever Mare Do Well was, whatever happened between them, they could get through it. They would recover.

All Rainbow Dash needed to do was figure out what she wanted to come out of all this. Did she just want to know who Mare Do Well was for her own curiosity? Did she want closure, or did she want to spare her pride? Was she willing to pursue some kind of relationship with the mare after this was all over, or did she just want their friendship to return to normal? What was she hoping for?

The love was there. There was nothing she could do to change that. Dash had been thinking of Mare Do Well as some kind of separate entity, but that wasn't right; she was

just another side to one of her friends, and she almost couldn't *help* but love her because of it.

The attraction was there. How much of it was due to genuine interest and how much of it was in response to Mare Do Well's advances, Rainbow didn't know. She didn't even know if she was willing to test it and find out. Half of her wanted to and half of her wanted to stay in hiding under the blankets.

She was still lost in thought when the knock came, and Dash jumped. She hadn't expected an answer so soon.

The unicorn colt from before stood there with a new note. He looked exhausted; not as terrified as before, but still nervous. But honestly, Rainbow Dash didn't especially care about how he was doing, so she didn't ask. She snatched the message out of the air where it floated in a magical bubble beside him without a word, then slammed the door in his face.

She shouldn't have been this excited, the pegasus reflected as her eyes skimmed the contents of the missive, but she really couldn't help it. It was a physical thing, one she had no control over. If her heart thudded in her chest and her mouth smiled automatically, well, too bad, wasn't her fault.

*You want to see me? That's adorable*, she read.

One line in and she had to close her eyes to keep herself from accidentally reading more. She felt her chest constrict, growing tight around her heart. It was almost more than she could take.

Rainbow Dash wasn't adorable. No pony thought that about her. *Fluttershy* was adorable. *Twilight* was adorable. *Pinkie* was adorable. Rainbow Dash was tough and spunky and rough around the edges. Not adorable, definitely not, and nothing she did could be considered such.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Rainbow Dash opened her eyes and continued to read.

*You want to see me? That's adorable. It's nice to know I'm not the only one who's become hopelessly attached. Don't worry, it's barely a week before we're back in Ponyville.*

Below this was a crude doodle of a pony wearing a hat and cape. A rough, clumsy drawing, similar to what a foal or an amazingly untalented artist would produce, labeled: *So you don't forget what I look like.*

Oh, Celestia. *That* was adorable. She shouldn't be allowed to do such cute things, things that made Rainbow Dash really, really want to see her. It was just plain unfair.

It was difficult to say why, but she felt giddy as she read the note, practically trembling with restrained excitement. The mood she was in right then made her want to stay in that room all day, exchanging replies back and forth; but she couldn't. Pinkie was expecting her so they could go to the derby, and nopony broke a Pinkie Promise.

• • •

Rainbow Dash could see the VIP box from their place in the stands, and suppressed a longing sigh. She could only imagine what was going on in there.

She tried to comfort herself by remembering Rarity's vivid descriptions of the sophisticated, high-class ponies she'd met the one and only time she'd ever attended such a derby. Rarity had seemed gleeful enough that she'd been included among their ranks at the time, but Rainbow Dash had been bored out of her mind, disgusted that such ponies would even *be* at a Wonderbolts event. She just needed to hold *on* to that feeling of disgust, or else the jealousy she felt would consume her instead.

Unfortunately, Pinkie seemed to notice the bitterness simmering under the surface, and kept casting nervous glances towards Rainbow.

"Are you sure this is okay?" she'd asked over and over again upon their first arriving, sounding uncharacteristically anxious. "I mean, you totally don't have to, Dashie. I know this was important to you. You don't have to give up your pass for me."

"I *want* to," Rainbow Dash had stubbornly replied more than once, more to convince herself than Pinkie. It was mostly true, anyway. She wanted to spend time with Pinkie. She wanted to go the derby. She wanted Pinkie to stop looking so guilty, as if this was somehow the end of the world, because if she didn't, Rainbow Dash might start to agree and change her mind. Ideally, she would've somehow been able to miraculously find a second pass, and she and Pinkie could've gone to the VIP box together and had a blast. But unfortunately, life didn't seem to work out in her favor very often; so she settled for second best, and found a stallion who gave her two normal tickets in exchange for the pass, just as she'd both hoped for and prayed against.

It hadn't occurred to her before, but would Mare Do Well be angry? The pass had been a present, after all, and the mare didn't seem especially fond of Pinkie. If she knew that

Rainbow Dash had traded it in to take Pinkie Pie, too, would she have a total freakout or something?

But that didn't seem to matter as much once Rainbow Dash was waving the tickets at Pinkie, and she saw the way the pink pony's eyes lit up. Any lingering worries seemed to melt away right about then. After all, all Rainbow Dash wanted was to find a way to make it up to Pinkie, to fix the rift that had appeared between them. If this was a way to accomplish that desire, then so be it.

"This is going to be so *fun*!" Pinkie squealed when they found seats somewhere in the stands.

The seats weren't great. They could see, at least, but they were lost in a sea of rowdy ponies who came to see the derby as well, bodies pressing against them from all sides and forcing them to sit uncomfortably close, a fact Pinkie instantly took full advantage of by squeezing Rainbow Dash in a fierce hug.

"Oh, totally," Rainbow Dash agreed in a mutter as she squirmed to pull away, but Pinkie didn't let go. Finally, she gave up and settled herself against Pinkie Pie. She smelled like sugar and warm bread. Sweet, homey kind of smells, befitting the bakery she worked in. That was probably it, Rainbow decided. She worked in Sugarcube Corner, so naturally she picked up some of the scents found there.

"Who do I cheer for? You said you'd tell me who the bestest ones are!" Pinkie demanded in a comically serious way.

"Oh, um..."

She was spared the need to answer by the announcer's voice coming in over the loudspeaker.

"Aaaaand... *they're off*!"

Maybe she should have paid more attention. Maybe she should have listened to the announcer, or possibly the sound of cheering crowd and stomping hooves that rang through the bleachers. Maybe she should have watched the race, or at least decided who she was going to root for based on who she knew was flying. She couldn't actually place a bet – she didn't even have any bits on her, anyway – but when watching a race, Rainbow Dash always, *always* chose a preferred contestant to support. That was just what she did. But it was exceptionally hard to concentrate with Pinkie gripping her neck that way and hollering in her ear as she bounced in her seat, causing Rainbow to bounce as well.



"Dashie, what's wrong?" Pinkie asked during a lull in the roar of the crowd, still retaining her iron grip around Rainbow's neck.

"Can't breathe," the pegasus managed to gasp. "Let go!"

Pinkie instantly did so. No goofy reply, and Rainbow Dash almost felt guilty. They may not be broken yet, and they may have been recovering, but things were still a little strained between them. They couldn't joke quite as easily as they used to, and it would be a long, long time before things were fully back to normal.

Pinkie scooted away just far enough to now be completely avoiding physical contact on her either side, and the absence of her touch was almost painful. Rainbow Dash craved affection the way a pony stranded in the desert for a hundred years would crave water. Ponies were so rarely gentle with her; to be treated with love and care was a new and strange experience, once she was still getting used to, but once that she wanted desperately and that Pinkie had always been good for in the past.

So wordlessly, she drew closer, scooting nearer to Pinkie and earning herself a look of wide-eyed surprise in return, an expression that she made a pointed effort to avoid. But then the shock on Pinkie's face gave way to an enormous grin, and then with a squeal of delight Pinkie was once again clutching her in her relentless grip and shrieking in excitement along with everypony else. And soon, so was Dash. The race didn't really matter that much.

• • •

It was so close to Hearth's Warming by now that most of the shops in Canterlot were trimmed in festive colors, decorated with bells and garlands and hearts. The ponies milling about the streets were all going about their business, visiting friends and doing last minute gift shopping, all decked out in hats and scarves and coats. It almost made Rainbow Dash feel self-conscious, and she chose to focus more on the crunch of snow under her hooves and the way her breath hung in the air in puffs of white. The cold didn't really bother her now; maybe she'd spent so many nights out in the alley that she'd gotten used to it – the chill that took everypony else by surprise each winter without fail.

The derby had ended, and Dash had barely paid attention to a thing the way she might have in the past. If anypony had asked her about it, she wouldn't have been able to answer their questions. Pinkie, though, still seemed high off of the excitement of it all, literally bouncing her way through the city as they made their way back to the palace.

Rainbow Dash followed a ways behind her, wondering at the energy Pinkie always seemed to have about her. How come *she* was never able to summon such verve?

"Want to just hang out in town for a while?" Rainbow asked on a whim. The words came out sounding wrong, made strange by the way her suddenly-dry mouth choked them out. She was sweating, but it was freaking *cold*, so why would she be hot?

Pinkie whipped around, curls bouncing, looking surprised, and before she could speak, Rainbow Dash hastened to add, "We can find a coffee shop or something, and just get hot chocolate. Or whatever." As if further exposition would somehow make her sound less awkward.

Pinkie Pie giggled in what was likely the closest approximation to a literal *tee hee* that Rainbow Dash had ever heard. "That sounds really super-duper nice, Dashie, but we don't have any money, silly filly," she reminded the pegasus, and Dash wanted to kick herself. She'd completely forgotten about accidentally leaving her wallet behind.

"Oh," she mumbled. "Right. Never mind."

She started to bolt forwards, so that she wouldn't have to look at Pinkie's gentle teasing smile, but something stopped her; literally, yanking her back. Rainbow Dash turned and saw Pinkie spit out her tail before grinning.

"You know what?" she said, eyes shining. "I think I have a couple of bits with me after all! I *always* have money for snacks, you know."

"That's okay, you don't –"

"It's fine! I mean, you were *super* nice to invite me today, and I had a lot of fun, so this way I get to return the favor and everything!"

The look in Pinkie's eyes seemed to soften a little. Not in sadness or anger; they just became gentler, somehow, as they watched the pegasus.

Pinkie who was so happy just to be with her friends, who carried a quiet, peaceful kind of calm within her that always seemed to be reserved just for Dash. Whatever else she could be – hyper maniac Pinkie or scary breakdown Pinkie or horribly sad and lonesome Pinkie – this was a part of her, too. The Pinkie who loved everypony was always at the heart of it all.

Her curly, bubblegum pink mane was getting dusted with the softly falling snow, and unless Rainbow Dash was imagining it, she almost seemed to be trembling a little, maybe from the cold. If Rainbow Dash had had a scarf or a hat, she would've given it to her in a heartbeat. But as it was, maybe they just really needed a hot chocolate to warm themselves up.

The hot chocolate they ended up getting from a nearby café was beautiful, but tasted like sawdust. Still, it was almost pretty enough to make up for that, piled high with whipped cream and chocolate flakes. It was more like eating some kind of especially decadent dessert than enjoying a drink.

Once she'd managed to dig her way through the toppings and take a sip of the actual drink below, Rainbow Dash grimaced. "Yours is better," she informed Pinkie. "*Loads* better."

And Pinkie beamed before taking a noisy slurp of her own chocolate. When she set down her mug, there was a touch of whipped cream on her nose.

In a cheesy movie, maybe Rainbow Dash would've leaned forward and wiped it off for her, and Pinkie would've blushed cutely, and then –

But Rainbow barely had time for the thought to enter her head before Pinkie caught sight of her reflection in the polished tabletop. "Oopsies!" she giggled, wiping her face with a hoof and licking off the cream, and Rainbow Dash relaxed, settling back in her seat, almost feeling a little let down.

If Pinkie kissed her now, that implacable sweetness probably would've been replaced with the taste of chocolate. Or maybe whipped cream.

• • •

After their drinks, the two of them didn't dawdle in Canterlot much longer, heading straight back to their rooms in the palace. Rainbow's was the first room they came across, and Pinkie bounded along inside as well before Rainbow Dash could say anything.

"*Brrr*, I'm all shivery and shaky now!" she announced, flopping onto Rainbow's still-unmade bed. Apparently the servants hadn't been around to clean yet.

It was only when Pinkie had already jumped into the bed that Rainbow Dash remembered.

"Wait!" she shouted. "Don't –"

But it was too late.

The note was still in the bed. She'd been in a hurry to leave, so as not to be late, and hadn't bothered to stash it in the drawer where she'd been keeping the rest of Mare Do Well's letters. Since nopony had been around to clean yet, it was still exactly where she'd left it; carelessly forgotten by the pillow, where she'd reread it at least a million times earlier that day.

Pinkie had already found it. She was already reading it. There was nothing Rainbow Dash could do but watch in a panic, wings spread wide in a defensive display against whatever Pinkie might do now.

"What does she mean by you wanting to see her?" she asked. No anger or tears or complicated fake smiles that could've given Dash the slightest indication as to what was going through her head right then. Instead, she was utterly blank, face and voice void of any emotion whatsoever. Dead.

She didn't sound like a pony demanding answers, more like a teacher quizzing a student, and Rainbow Dash didn't know the right answer.

"Um –"

"You must really like her." In a matter of fact way.

"Uh, I –"

"Even though she's basically a stranger and you don't know her at all."

"Pinkie, I just –"

Pinkie silently set the letter back on the mattress and slid off the bed, walking to the door, no bouncing or skipping, leaving Rainbow Dash to stare after her helplessly. At the doorway, she stopped and turned, glancing back at the pegasus.

"Mare Do Well isn't real," she said, looking Dash dead in the eye, still carefully empty of any feeling that Rainbow Dash might have known how to deal with. "Nothing about her is real. She's a bad pony and she's hurting you for selfish reasons. You shouldn't like her."

"Don't tell me what to do," Rainbow Dash snapped before she could help herself, a move she instantly regretted when she saw the hurt flit across Pinkie's face.

"I had fun today," was all Pinkie Pie said in response. And then she was gone.

• • •

Everything that had been good and happy about that day was ruined now. And what did that even mean, *don't tell me what to do*? Could she have said anything stupider?

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

By the ache Rainbow Dash now felt in her chest, she knew that something had gone horribly wrong, and she couldn't even say what. She hadn't done anything bad. Under normal circumstances, nothing that had happened could've been misconstrued as a mistake on her part, right?

So somepony had sent her a letter. So what? Pinkie had no right to be mad about that. And the pass had been a present, so what Dash did with it was none of Mare Do Well's business.

She had betrayed somepony and she didn't know who or why or how. All Rainbow Dash knew was that she felt utterly consumed by guilty feelings whose origin she couldn't determine.

Her friendship with Pinkie was strong enough to survive this. She had to remember that. Everything was going to be okay. So why did she want to cry?

When she ran into Pinkie later during the play rehearsal the six of them held in the afternoon, she acted like nothing had happened. She eagerly recounted the events of the derby to their friends, and Rainbow had nothing to contribute, seeing as how she could barely remember what had happened. All she remembered was the dead look in Pinkie's eyes when she read Mare Do Well's note.

The first moment she had alone, she wrote one last note.

*Don't write to me anymore.*

She didn't say *leave me alone*. She didn't say *I never want to see you again*. And Rainbow Dash hoped that Mare Do Well would understand that, even if she didn't fully

understand it herself. It would be nice to still have somepony who liked her. Even if it was somepony she had no idea what she really felt about.

Maybe it was the heavy weight of the armor that encased her body in a thick shell of heat, or maybe it was those glaring lights that caused her to sweat so profusely. All Rainbow Dash knew was that she felt caged in. She had never felt trapped before a crowd before; usually, she *lived* for an audience. Now, though, she stood before over a thousand ponies, all of whom were waiting for her to be somepony else as soon as she walked out to the stage.

"Are you nervous?" Fluttershy asked softly, coming up from somewhere behind her.

"No," Rainbow Dash lied in a hissing whisper, ignoring the fresh wave of cold terror washing over her, but the stare Fluttershy gave her right then demanded further explanation, so she quickly added, "My costume's just really uncomfortable."

"Oh," Fluttershy said with a knowing gleam in her eye. "My costume's uncomfortable, too."

She ignored the glower that darkened Rainbow's face right then, instead offering a comforting wing around her shoulders in a feather embrace, and Dash sighed. Fluttershy always managed to be so good and make her look terrible in comparison. It wasn't fair.

There had been no more notes from Mare Do Well. This was both a relief and a disappointment, paradoxically. A part of her had wanted Mare Do Well to prove more persistent, but at the same time, it was nice to know that the mare respected her wishes at least *some* of the time. It was difficult to fully relax, though; Rainbow kept expecting something to happen the moment she finally let her guard down. It was just a matter of time.

Pinkie hadn't brought up the note she found, and she didn't seem to be avoiding Rainbow Dash or acting resentful, either. For all intents and purposes, it seemed that she honestly bore no grudge, but that didn't explain her eerie behavior when she'd first read Mare Do Well's letter. It didn't make sense.

No pony else even seemed to notice that anything was wrong, but that was Rainbow's fault. If she hadn't been so determined to keep everything private, maybe her friends could have helped her and the situation wouldn't have become so bad. Only Fluttershy could tell anything was up, and she thought Dash had stage fright.

"You'll do really well," she was now saying, in an encouraging, hopeful way. "You're very good, and you've been rehearsing very hard."

Rainbow Dash wasn't listening. She was staring at Pinkie, who was happily whispering to Rarity off to the side. They were waiting for their cues, and for the time being, all they could hear, aside from their own whispers backstage, was Spike's pompous narration, slightly muffled by the curtain.

*"Each tribe sent their leaders: daughter of the unicorn king, Princess Platinum..."*

With a haughty toss of her mane and a magical adjustment of the crown she wore for her costume, Rarity trotted through the door that was part of the set and out onto the stage. Pinkie was wriggling about in obvious excitement, the way a filly would.

*"Ruler of the pegasi, Commander Hurricane..."*

And that was her cue. Rainbow Dash put on her Hurricane face – her meanest grimace – and without a single backwards glance, she walked through the door as well, this time as Commander Hurricane. Becoming somepony else, if only for a little while.

"All I wanna know is, why the earth ponies are hogging all the food!" Rainbow bellowed, slamming her forehooves on the table. Her voice had never been especially soft or delicate, but tonight she pitched it deeper and coarser than usual, trying to make it ring with the authority it rarely carried. Behind her, the extras playing the parts of the other pegasi all began to shout on cue, roaring angry sentiments. At least, that's what it must have sounded like to the audience; onstage, Rainbow Dash could hear them well enough to suspect that at least a few of them were literally shouting *rabble rabble rabble*.

"Us?" Pinkie Pie cried. "We're not hogging all the food, *you* are! Oh, wait, you're right. It's us," she corrected as an afterthought. "Well, it's only 'cause you mean old pegasusususes are making it snow like crazy!"

That was such a *Pinkie* thing to say, and Rainbow Dash had to fight the urge to grin. Twilight had explained before that the play had been rewritten many times over the decades to be better suited for current audiences, but the part of Chancellor Puddinghead in this edition seemed specifically written with Pinkie Pie in mind. All of her lines were of the whimsical, nonsensical variety, and she delivered them so easily, as if they were the kinds of things she might have said on her own without any prompting in these situations.

As the sets were changed and the play continued, Spike narrating the events with that silly, affected accent of his, over and over again Dash found herself having to suppress a goofy smile whenever it was Pinkie Pie's turn to speak.



"Heaven forbid that should happen, your chancellorship," Applejack said as Smart Cookie. "It's just that, the map is also upside down."

"I got a newsflash for you, Cookie," Pinkie Pie retorted, the map still taped to her face. *"The Earth is round. There is no up or down."*

Laughter drifted up from the audience; chuckles of appreciation from the older ponies, while the little fillies and colts watched the spectacle with rapt attention, giggling only because everypony else was and not necessarily understanding the joke.

It was difficult to pay attention to the play when Pinkie Pie's antics seemed to hold Rainbow Dash's attention so thoroughly. Dash had been expecting Pinkie's heart to not really be in her performance that night; she'd expected some kind of aftermath to deal with upon her finding the note – but Pinkie was being her usual ridiculous self.

In the final act, when the three leaders were meant to be frozen solid while the others discovered friendship, Rainbow Dash had trouble staying still and found her gaze constantly flickering to Pinkie – who responded by making faces at her, so quick as to almost be unnoticeable, sticking out her tongue and crossing her eyes. This got them both giggling silently, shoulders trembling with repressed laughter until Rarity's scowl made them go still, becoming serious once more.

At the end of the play, the six of them stood in a semicircle, all gathered around the banner of the new Equestria. Voices rose not only from the actors onstage, but from the audience as well as all those present joined together to sing the words of a song they all knew.

*"Though quarrels arise, their numbers are few; laughter and singing will see us through..."*

Their eyes met, and Rainbow Dash gave her an uneasy smile. Pinkie Pie beamed back.

It was so easy for Pinkie to switch back to normal. She could adapt to anything. Maybe that wasn't something Rainbow Dash should've envied about her, but right then, Rainbow would've given anything to be the same way.

• • •

Immediately after the play was done, the six of them were herded back by Rarity so that they could begin to get ready, having transformed her room into a dressing room where she could oversee their preparations.

"Oh, Applejack," Rarity sighed as she did something to Applejack's mane that involved a lot of pins, grumbling, and various sounds of exertion from both parties. "I've told you so many times! You could be so *pretty* if you'd just *do* something with yourself every once in a while. Maybe wash your face, or comb your mane, or apply just the *teensiest* bit of makeup..."

Applejack's expression darkened, and Rainbow Dash couldn't help but give her a mean grin, recalling the brush incident.

"I don't got time for that kinda nonsense," the farmer retorted. but she sat perfectly still while the unicorn fussed with her hair. Rainbow opened her mouth to say something, but Applejack shot her a nasty look that seemed to say *breathe one word about that and I'll buck you into next week*, so she thought better of it.

As Rainbow Dash put on her own dress – that stormy sea of grays and blues – she tried to look only at herself in the mirror. Her eyes wandered, though, as she struggled with the clasps and ties, settling on each of her friends in turn. Twilight in her dress of shimmering, ethereal violet. Rarity, looking regal and cold in her silver and blue. Fluttershy looking more like an angel than ever. Pinkie giggling and shimmying about, sending her ruffles and flounces bouncing. Applejack looked as sophisticated as Rainbow had ever seen her, thanks to Rarity's dexterity when it came to magic; her hair had been set in a lovely, elaborate mass of soft waves that somehow softened her normally hard features – and her dress, though simple in comparison to the others, was the exact same shade of green as her eyes, now that Rainbow Dash truly looked.

Rarity watched them change with the air of an artist appraising a painting, flitting about and offering words of advice or making minute corrections when needed, before finally pronouncing them ready and fit to be seen in public.

There was no carriage to take them this time, as they were staying in the palace itself. Instead of entering through the front gates like the other guests, they were led by a servant down the hall, to the gallery that overlooked the ballroom, where they stopped at the landing at the top of the grand stairway where the two princesses were waiting. Celestia beamed at them like the sun while Luna remained stiff and uncomfortable-looking.

"Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student!" Princess Celestia said brightly, leaning close to nuzzle Twilight with all the warmth and affection of a mother and her daughter. "I dearly hope that you and your friends will enjoy yourselves tonight. You all look wonderful."

"Thank you, Princess!" Twilight said proudly, returning the nuzzle. "And Luna, it's so nice to see you!"

"Likewise, Twilight Sparkle," Luna answered in a clipped tone. Still a little too loudly, but better than it had once been. "We hope that you and your companions find tonight to be \_"

"Now, Luna," Princess Celestia chided gently, and Luna seemed to grow even stiffer.

"My apologies. *I* hope that you and your companions find tonight to be, ah... fun."

"I'm sure we will," Twilight said with a gracious nod.

"Hopefully there won't be any grand disasters this time," Princess Celestia said cheerfully. "But I can't say I'll be too disappointed if you *do* manage to liven things up again," she added in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Grand disasters? *This* time? Sister, of what do you speak?" Luna asked, sounding puzzled.

"If you had come to the Grand Galloping Gala like I'd suggested instead of spending the night hiding in the library, dear sister, you would know," Celestia teased.

"I'll tell you about it later if you want. It's a long story," Twilight offered with a wry grin, and Luna rewarded her with a very small smile of her own.

Some invisible servant must have given a signal, for right then, the music started, an orchestra filling the vaulted room with the gentle strains of a promenade.

The two princesses descended first, and Rarity moved to go next before flashing an expectant glare behind her. After a moment of exchanging confused glances, Applejack seemed to realize what she was waiting for, jumping up and rushing forward to her side. They went down together, Rarity looking satisfied that she was being taken in to the ball properly, and Applejack scowling at nothing in particular.

Before they could have another silent debate over who went into the ball with who, Rainbow Dash took the space beside Twilight, leaving Fluttershy to go in with Pinkie. Rainbow was sure her face must have been on fire as she entered with the unicorn, but Twilight, to her credit, didn't look embarrassed at all, albeit a little startled.

When they were safely down the steps and halfway along the huge room, they drifted apart, Twilight giving Rainbow Dash an apologetic look before going to join Luna as promised. The moon princess looked grateful for the company, and visibly relaxed once they began to talk.

Now that the princesses were present, the band picked up the pace, changing from the promenade to a quicker, more light-hearted step. Even though the music was growing more festive, the cellist looked deathly serious and utterly focused on her instrument, almost grimacing as she played. It was a strange contrast between the mood of the piece and the mood of the musicians, but nopony else seemed to notice, too focused on the music itself to care.

Rainbow Dash slipped through the crowd, maneuvering her way across the dance floor. Ponies all around her were already all coupled up, moving through the complicated steps with sureness she would never be able to match, even if she tried. She would have just flown over them all if she could have, but that would likely be seen as rude, somehow. Besides, her wings were restricted by the tight fabric of her gown, and she wouldn't be able to spread them without tearing it. Rarity probably did that on purpose.

At last she made her way to a wall where she could breathe, far at the edge of the crowd. There was a nearby buffet table, loaded with food and drinks of the dainty, rich sort. Tables for ponies wishing for a place to rest or even just a place to sit and eat in peace were scattered about; for the most part they were unoccupied, except for one where a familiar orange earth pony was slinging back drinks.

She would never admit to it, but Rainbow Dash couldn't help but feel relieved upon finally spotting a familiar face who wasn't too busy for her to hang with. Twilight was with Luna, Rarity was dancing, Pinkie was harassing the band for some reason – probably trying to request a song – and Fluttershy was nowhere to be seen. Probably hiding. That, or trying to *love* the animals again.

Without asking, Rainbow Dash bounded forward to join Applejack, who took another swig from her glass before giving Rainbow a bitter grin and small wave of her hoof.

"Can you believe how boring this is?" Dash asked loudly. "It's *exactly* like the Gala, only not as fun, because nopony in our group is messing around. The Wonderbolts aren't even here! If they *are*, I can't find them!"

"Eyup."

Applejack had a glazed look in her eyes.

"You okay?"

"Just dandy," she muttered, then stood up, wobbling slightly. "'Scuse me, I'm gettin' more."

As Applejack took her cup back for a refill, Rainbow Dash eyed it suspiciously, then noticed the scent in the air. "Is that booze?" she blurted. "Are you getting smashed?"

"It ain't gettin' *smashed* when it's as weak as this punch is," Applejack replied. "Why're you here, anyway? Everypony's out there havin' a good time. Lookit 'em. Go join 'em, an' have fun, an' leave me alone to have fun *my* way."

"What're you so worked up about, AJ?"

"I told you. Lookit 'em."

Rainbow looked, and saw the same things she saw when she'd first found her way to this break in the crowd. Twilight and Luna. Rarity dancing with some random stallion. Pinkie being Pinkie. Invisible Fluttershy.

It kind of made her heart hurt to know that they were all having their own kind of fun when she felt so lost and out of place.

Maybe Rainbow Dash would've felt better if Pinkie *had* held a grudge against her about the note, because at least that would've been expected. Dash didn't know how to handle this.

Maybe it was dumb of her, but she'd kind of wanted Mare Do Well to keep bothering her. She'd wanted somepony to still want her, since she was so good at alienating her peers lately. But what had she expected? Had she been secretly hoping that Mare Do Well would somehow pull an appearance at the ball? That was stupid. Mare Do Well wasn't dumb enough to make a mistake like that. All Rainbow Dash would've had to do to figure out who she was would be to see which of her friends wasn't there when the mare showed up.

Still, it might have been cool to see her. It had been a while. And Rainbow Dash had never especially enjoyed dancing – she fell over and banged into stuff too much to be very good at it, except for when it was in the air – but it might have been nice to dance

with somepony who *liked* her, rather than with one of her friends or a total stranger. It might have been different. Fun.

If Mare Do Well had been there, Rainbow Dash might have danced with her. But she *wasn't* there. What had Dash expected?

Applejack returned to the table, this time with two cups of the punch, sliding one over to Rainbow.

"You look like you need it, too," she explained with a sigh.

Rainbow Dash, contrary to popular belief, didn't like to drink very often. On occasion, sure, but you couldn't fly if you were wasted. Not *well*, at least. But she was at a stupid party and her friends were all jerks and she felt incredibly uncomfortable in this dress and she felt almost unspeakably lonely right then; so without a second thought, she took the punch, and took a sip.

• • •

It felt like maybe fifty billion years had passed, and Rainbow Dash still wanted more. Her mouth tasted like cotton and she felt bleary-eyed and sleepy; her words seemed to take an unusually long time to travel from her brain to her mouth, and when they finally came, they sounded funny. All thick and slurred.

"Y'know what?" she managed to mumble through the wood of the table that she was currently resting her face on. "Thish ish *much* more fun."

"Heh. Yeah," Applejack mumbled in agreement. She was still upright, but obviously tipsy, even though she wasn't on the verge of passing out the way the pegasus was. *Lightweight*, Applejack had called her earlier. That totally wasn't Rainbow Dash's fault, though. *All* pegasi were like that.

Rainbow lifted her head, still slumped in her seat. Her cheeks were sore now. "Everypony sucks," she repeated for the umpteenth time.

"Eyup."

"Just... just... why, y'know? S'not that hard."

Applejack didn't know what she was talking about, but still nodded her solemn agreement before taking another shot.

"I bet Mare Do Well's hot," Rainbow Dash mumbled. "She *sounds* hot. She has a really sexy voice. Geez, you should listen to her. I bet... I bet she'd be really good at making out."

Applejack just chuckled darkly, saying, "It don't matter if she's hot or not. Love never works right."

"Like *you'd* know."

"I should just go back to stallions."

That made Rainbow look up, and she deeply regretted it the moment she did so, wincing in the glare of the lights, and she slammed her head back down on the table. "You're a fillyfooler?" Rainbow Dash slurred through the counter. It came out sounding like "Yer a feefoo?"

"Yeah."

"Me too," the pegasus announced loudly. Louder than the situation called for, but it suddenly seemed very, very important that Applejack knew this about her, since they'd never really discussed it before and honesty was a vital factor in any friendship. "Since I was little. All... all the foals in my class bugged me about it. I had a crush on some teacher, and they found out, and all the colts made fun of me and all the fillies stayed away. Cuz they thought I'd attack 'em I guess. They weren't even my type. 'Cept Fluttershy."

"Fluttershy?" Applejack slurred back, sounding mildly amused.

"Yeah. She was always nice to me, even when everypony else was being stupid. And she was older and *sooo* pretty. Not anymore, though. I mean, she's still pretty, I just don't *like* her that way anymore."

"Does she know?"

"Yeah. I told her once and she told me she liked stallions. But she was *sooooo* nice about it."

"Fluttershy's *too* pretty," Applejack said decisively, slamming her cup on the table with a hard *clack*. "She's all fragile and breakable-like. I don't wanna mare who I'm scared to touch, y'know? I want somepony that can take care o' herself."

At that, Rainbow Dash lifted her head again, looking Applejack straight in those green eyes of hers.

"*You're* hot," she said loudly.

"Sorry. You ain't my type neither, sugarcube."

"Aw."

Slamming her head back down on the table. Her neck felt too weak to support it any longer. How was she going to get back to her room if she couldn't even sit up?

"That doesn't matter," Rainbow whined. "Me'n Gilda used to mess around and *she* wasn't *my* type."

"Bad move."

"Hey. Yeah. She wanted more and I was all, you're a griffon and I'm a pony. *How?*"

"I reckon that don't matter much when you're both girls."

Rainbow Dash laughed. Then sniffed.

"Aw, sugar, don't be gettin' all weepy on me," Applejack groaned. "You ain't a cryin' drunk, are ya?"

"No," Rainbow Dash whimpered, but from the way her eyes were misting over, she found herself questioning the truth of that statement. She hadn't been simultaneously drunk and conscious enough times in the past to have a very good idea of what she was like when she wasn't sober.

"You okay?" Applejack asked.

"No. I think I'm gonna puke."

"RD, I'm sorry to say this, but I can't very well stand up right now. You gonna throw up, you'd better find somepony else to take care o' you."

They both started to chuckle. "Seriously, I'm totally gonna –" Rainbow Dash began to say, when a pink blur rocketed to the table out of nowhere, crashing between Applejack and Rainbow and sending the glasses clattering.



"Hi, guys!" Pinkie chirped, grinning widely. "I was feeling snacky so I was getting something to eat, when I saw you two sitting here all alone on your own!"

Dash made a sound that sounded like "Mmmnnnggh" in response.

"C'mon, Dashie!" Pinkie said, taking one of Rainbow's hooves and yanking her upright. "Let's go somewhere else, okay?"

Rainbow Dash looked up, and saw Pinkie gazing at her with such concern, like some kind of bright pink guardian angel. "Thanks, Pinks," she managed to slur, leaning against Pinkie Pie, who was surprisingly somehow able to support all of Rainbow's weight on her own. "What... where are we going?"

"We're just going somewhere quiet and private for a teeny-tiny bit," Pinkie explained gently. "I throw a lot of parties. I know what to do. I'll make you feel better."

Dash was starting to feel weepy again, the desire to cry competing viciously with the nausea and dizziness gradually overtaking her. "Pinkie, you're my best friend, y'know that?" she declared, because Pinkie really, truly needed to hear that right then. Rainbow Dash wanted everypony in the *world* to hear this, frankly.

"You're *my* best friend too, Dashie," Pinkie answered warmly.

"Yeah. Yeah. And you know what? I should've kissed you."

Rainbow Dash was still being supported by Pinkie, who she could feel grow rigid under the pegasus' weight. "It's okay," she said quickly as she led Dash through the crowd, presumably to some powder room where she could be sick and pass out all she wanted to. "I understood about that, remember? You don't –"

"No, I mean... I mean yesterday. At the café. I wanted to kiss you and I should have, I *totally* should have." The words were spilling out at an uncontrollable rate, and Rainbow Dash no longer had any hope of quelling the flow, even if she *had* been sober. "Because you're so cute and sweet and *really* funny..."

"Dashie –"

Before Pinkie could say anything more, Rainbow Dash lifted her head so that she was facing the pink pony, whose eyes were wide open in alarm, and kissed her.

It was a Hearth's Warming Miracle that Rainbow Dash managed not to be sick right then. Instead, Pinkie seemed to melt beneath her, and a rush of warmth and softness from somewhere deep inside her threatened to cause her wings to burst from the restraints of her dress. At last she broke away – not because she wanted to, but because she needed to come up for air.

Her breathing was heavy and shallow as she panted, gasping, and her mouth curved into a satisfied smile. Pinkie looked torn between delight and horror.

"That was good," Rainbow Dash said softly, slumping against her friend even more. Pinkie Pie was the only force keeping her from sinking to the floor right then. "I like you."

It might've been appropriate for a silence to have fallen over the crowd right then as all eyes fell on the couple, but nopony else seemed to notice or care. It was Hearth's Warming Eve, after all, and ponies *everywhere* were kissing and getting drunk. That's the kind of party it was turning into.

"Dashie?" Pinkie squeaked. Before, she had been perfectly capable of carrying Rainbow Dash, but now she seemed weaker, as if Dash was threatening to topple her over from the way the pegasus leaned so heavily against her.

"I bet she'll be mad," Dash mumbled with a mean snicker; and for the second time, she felt Pinkie Pie utterly freeze beneath her.

"Who'll be mad?" she asked, her voice all ice and sharpness.

"She doesn't like you. I dunno why. You're so nice," Rainbow Dash continued, oblivious, not really listening to Pinkie, and then she felt hooves, harder than she would've expected, roughly shoving her away. Dash stumbled backwards, struggling to maintain her balance. The nausea threatened to rise in her throat once again, but she managed to keep steady, and she looked at Pinkie, bewildered.

Those big beautiful blue eyes of Pinkie were huge and angry and brimming with tears, and she made a strange, painful sound in her throat, like a suppressed sob or a strangled cry of pain. Without another word she whirled around and ran away, pushing through the crowd until she was gone.

Suddenly, Rainbow Dash couldn't stand up anymore, and felt with a new sense of certainty, that she was very, extremely drunk and was in all likelihood going to pass out.

• • •

When Rainbow Dash woke up, she expected her mouth to be dry and her head pounding. Instead, her mind was surprisingly clear, no trace of a hangover or even a headache. The scent of mint lingered in the air, and although it was dark, a slant of moonlight poured through the window and stretched across the room, falling right across the end of the bed she was now lying in. She sat up quickly, but her head didn't spin, and then she found herself staring into the furious eyes of Twilight Sparkle, still all dressed in her winter finery.

"W-what happened?" Rainbow stammered, seeing the anger flashing in Twilight's eyes, but before the unicorn could speak, she cut her off, saying, "Wait, no, don't say it. I remember."

"I can't believe you," Twilight snapped, looking so upset that she was practically on the verge of tears.

"Twi, I'm so, so sorry. I must've looked like a total idiot and made some kind of huge scene, but I almost never drink, and –" Dash began to babble, but Twilight interrupted her by raising a silencing hoof.

"That's not what I'm talking about. No pony even noticed you. I saw you drinking and teleported us out of there, and used a spell to get rid of your hangover. It's fine. I'm *talking* about what you did to Pinkie Pie."

For a moment, Rainbow Dash was lost, and then she remembered.

"Oh, no," she whispered, closing her eyes.

"*Oh no* is *right*. What kind of friend would intentionally use somepony's feelings for them just to hurt somepony else?"

"That's not –"

"Pinkie *told* me what happened, Rainbow Dash! It's one thing for her to confess to you and you turn her down. No pony blames you for that. It's something *else* to have you *use* her like that! You broke her heart! What kind of friend are you?"

And Rainbow Dash listened to Twilight's lecture in silence. She couldn't think of any snarky comments or clever retorts to make. All she could do was listen as Twilight told

her every single thing that was wrong with her, and know that she was absolutely right about every single one of them.

*I don't know how to fix this*, she thought. *I don't know what's wrong with me.*

*I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know.*

• • •

Twilight eventually left. Thanks to her magical hangover cure – some kind of green light that caused that minty smell Dash had noticed – there was no residual nausea or unsteadiness to slow the pegasus down, so as soon as the unicorn left, so did Rainbow Dash.

There was no way she was going to stay here for Hearth's Warming. Not after what she'd done to Pinkie, and not after she'd acted like an idiot and embarrassed herself in front of everypony. There was no way she could face this. This was too huge; it wasn't just huge, it was huger than huge, and there was no way for Rainbow Dash to make it better.

It was easier than she initially expected to get out of the palace unnoticed. As she snuck out, silently floating past guards and down hallways, Rainbow hoped that Applejack was just as miserable as she was; that would probably make her feel slightly better, if the farmer was suffering somehow, too. Stupid Applejack. All her fault.

Where would Dash go? Cloudsdale, she guessed. Back home. To her parents. She shuddered. She didn't *want* to go home, but she couldn't face Pinkie, and it would be safer to just stay out of Ponyville completely than to risk accidentally running into her.

You couldn't ignore it because it wouldn't go away. Nothing went away. All you could do was run and pray it didn't find you.

The streets of Canterlot were surprisingly empty at night, but Rainbow Dash stuck to the shadowy corners and back alleys anyway. If anypony decided to look for her when they noticed she was gone, they'd likely ask around, and she didn't want anypony to be able to say they'd seen where she'd gone.

At last she stopped, by the café where she and Pinkie had almost kissed. No, not *almost* kissed. Rainbow Dash had wanted to, but she'd chickened out.

She needed to stop. Needed a place to think, a place to plan. What was going to happen?

Rainbow Dash was the biggest idiot who'd ever lived and the worst possible friend a pony could have, but she hadn't meant any harm. She'd been drunk. She hadn't been thinking. It wasn't her fault. And was it her imagination that she could hear the crunch of hoofsteps through snow in the distance somewhere? Or –

"Look at brave Rainbow Dash, heroically running away. Such loyalty."

"No," Rainbow Dash said automatically.

Not here. Not now. *NOT. POSSIBLE.*

"How are you *here?!'*" she screamed, wild-eyed.

"Sorry. Do you want me to leave?" Mare Do Well asked coolly.

"N-no. Wait," Rainbow Dash stammered, struggling to rise back up on all fours before taking a step closer to the mare. "But *how? Why?*"

"I can't believe you didn't think to just search one of your friends' suitcases."

"You *brought* the *costume?!'*"

"Obviously," Mare Do Well said, still calm and unaffected, even as Rainbow Dash screeched like a banshee. "Otherwise, how would I be wearing it now?"

"Why are you *here?'*" Dash asked weakly.

The snow fell all around them, glimmering in the soft glow of the street lamps and moonlight. The sound of the snow was like a whisper, overlaid by the faint sound of festive carols playing in the distance, maybe coming from some shop down the road.

"I'm here because I knew you'd try and run away, and I wanted to catch you first. I need to tell you something."

"Hurry up then."

"I'm telling you that I'm done."

Her words were like a swift punch in the gut. It took a moment for Rainbow Dash to recover enough to squeak out a single, "*What?'*"

"I'm done," Mare Do Well repeated, her voice still frosty and disdainful. "I'm going away. I'm leaving you alone. I'm saying goodbye. Do you understand now?"

"You can't do that," the pegasus managed to choke. "W-why?"

"You need a *reason*?" she snapped. "I thought you'd be happy to see the last of me, given how much you hate me."

"I don't – what are you *talking* about?"

"You kissed Pinkie tonight *just* to hurt me!" Mare Do Well shouted, and her voice came dangerously close to cracking into the higher register it had only ever broken into once before. "Well, guess what? it worked, okay? I'm hurt, and I'm angry, and you got me upset, just like you wanted to, and –"

"It wasn't about you," Rainbow Dash whispered. She was shaking now, legs trembling uncontrollably, almost so much that she couldn't even stand, but somehow, she didn't fall. She shouldn't feel so shocked. She shouldn't feel so panicky. "It wasn't about you. I only said that about you being bad because I was being drunk and stupid. It had nothing to do with you."

"Well, you either kissed her because you wanted to or because you wanted to hurt me, one or the other, and either way, it would be better for both of us if I just left now," Mare Do Well retorted, and her voice quavered as though she was fighting back tears. "You either hate me so much that you're willing to utterly *destroy* your so-called best friend, or you've finally decided that you like her more, so why should I waste any more of my time?"

"Are you..." Rainbow began, then stopped. It was such a ridiculous question, yet she couldn't think of a better way to phrase it. "Are you breaking up with me?"

The masked mare gave a short, brittle laugh. "That would imply we'd had some sort of romance, wouldn't it?" she asked bitterly. "We never even got around to establishing a friendship."

"What about the game?" Rainbow Dash tried, desperate and floundering now, grasping for reasons that she didn't understand. "Don't you want to keep playing?"

"You weren't even *trying* anymore!" Mare Do Well shouted, jamming an accusing hoof through the air at the pegasus, who flinched, almost as if she expected the mare to smack her for some reason. "There was so much you could've done that you didn't even *try*! It's

like you just stopped caring! Why didn't you even *think* to search our bags? Why didn't you try following the messenger once? Why did you stop trying to figure out where I got the costume from?"

"So, what, you *wanted* me to find out who you are?" Rainbow snapped back, fighting to keep the anger and fear from seeping into her voice and failing miserably.

"Yes! Because I'm sick of this, and I'm sick of trying to act like I don't love you, and I'm sick of torturing myself by seeing you like this when you're never, *ever* going to love me back!"

A silence fell over the two of them; Rainbow Dash too stunned to speak and Mare Do Well trembling, breathing shallow and uneven.

"I really, really thought I could do it," she whispered, bringing a hoof to her face as if to wipe away tears, even though the mask covered them. "I know I made mistakes, but I thought that if I was likable and charming, you might forgive me. I tried so hard to be what you wanted, but none of it worked. I tried to be heroic and romantic and funny, and every time something didn't work, I tried something else. But none of it was enough, so I'm giving up. I'm quitting. Game over."

"Game over?" Rainbow Dash repeated.

Her voice sounded so tiny and far away.

"Game over. A draw. We both lose, and I'm calling it off completely. Goodbye."

Mare Do Well turned with one final dramatic flourish of her cape, then paused for a moment, as if to give Rainbow Dash a chance to stop her or beg her not to go. When the pegasus didn't speak, she silently began to walk away, down the shadowy alley she came from, leaving Rainbow to watch her go.

Rainbow Dash wanted to say something, but her words were getting caught in her throat, blocked by the sudden lump that was now choking her into silence.

Her need was as huge and as all-encompassing as the beautiful midnight sky above, and Dash felt so incredibly small and useless, like she could scream and fight all she wanted against this crushing hopelessness and desperation, but nopony would ever hear her.

She was losing everything. Just like she'd feared for so long.

But...

But once everything was taken from you, there was nothing else you could lose. Nothing else could hurt you.

And that was where true fearlessness came from.

"No," Rainbow Dash managed to rasp when she at last found her voice. It was little more than a whisper, but Mare Do Well still seemed to hear her, pausing in her tracks and turning to glance back at Rainbow.

"No *what?*" she spat.

"No," Dash repeated, her voice growing stronger.

She took a step forward.

"No, you can't do this. You can't come into my life and change everything and run away once it stops working for you. You can't totally buck with my head and turn everything upside down, then vanish."

With every word spoke and every step taken, her voice grew clearer and her resolve firmer.

"You're not allowed!" Rainbow Dash barked. "You're not allowed to just disappear without giving me any answers! You can't *do* that!"

"And why not?" Mare Do Well cooed in a voice like silk. "Who's going to stop me?"

Rainbow Dash stopped. And grinned.

The evillest grin she could muster.

"You said the game was called off. I guess that means the rules no longer apply," she said softly.

Rainbow Dash liked to imagine that Mare Do Well's expression right about then would've been one of dawning comprehension, but all the mare *said* was, "You wouldn't."

So calm and reassured, like she knew for a fact that Rainbow Dash didn't have the guts to do what she threatened.



The rules they'd agreed on stated that Rainbow Dash wasn't allowed to tackle and unmask Mare Do Well by force, but if there was no game, there were no rules.

Her wings flared, snapping open in preparation of imminent flight, and Mare Do Well took a step back.

"You'd better start running," Dash said sweetly.

Another beat of silence, the two of them staring at each other, the air between them almost electrically charged with their tension. And then Mare Do Well bolted, taking off in a run down the alley.

With an almost gleeful cackle, Rainbow Dash shot after her, and into the labyrinth that was the city of Canterlot at night.

She ran. She didn't know where she ran *to*, just that she couldn't stop. Her legs ached and her lungs burned, but she couldn't pause, not even for a moment, because if she did, Rainbow Dash would catch her.

She was almost sick with fear of what Dash would do to her upon catching her, and this was the fear that propelled her forward. Her thoughts wouldn't quiet down long enough for her to actually stop and think, so she continued to run ahead blindly rather than risk giving herself even a moment of rest only to get caught off guard. Now, more than ever, she wished she could fly. If she had wings, at least they'd be on even ground.

Her heart was pounding against her ribcage so fast and so hard that she thought it might tear out of her chest at any moment. Her pulse fluttered in her throat, rapid and hot, and sweat stung her eyes. The panic was like a noose slipped around her neck, gradually tightening and constricting around her throat, choking the life out of her.

She should have *waited* to have her little temper tantrum. Waited until they were at least back in Ponyville. She didn't know Canterlot nearly well enough to outrun Rainbow in a chase; the city was like a maze, with countless unexpected twists and turns and buildings that were far too high for her to climb easily. Not only that, but the streets continued to bustle with life, even this late on Hearth's Warming Eve. It wasn't quite the urban sprawl of Manehattan, but it was still a living thing, huge and ever-shifting.

She was afraid of it, this strange and foreign place and the secrets it held. It could swallow her so easily. Especially since she didn't know where she was going.

Back home, the nights were silent and still. Peaceful, with the exception of the occasional easily-subdued petty criminal. She'd never had to worry about being seen by anypony during her midnight treks. Here, she had to limit herself to dark corners and narrow, abandoned alleys: places she might have chosen to haunt back home, but she now resented the fact that she was restricted to them, praying all the while that she wouldn't be spotted.

This was the kind of city where a mare running around in a mask and cape would likely be carted off to jail, or even to an asylum, rather than hailed as a genuine superhero. She wasn't a superhero, though. She was a stupid little filly who'd wanted to play pretend to impress her crush. She'd wanted to feel big and important and heroic because she'd thought that was what Rainbow Dash liked, and now she was being exposed for the coward she truly was. The kind of coward who shook so violently from fear of being

caught that she could barely run. The kind of coward who would rather keep up the game until the very end, despite knowing what it was doing to Dash, rather than risk being exposed. The kind of coward who would rather quit and hide than drop the act, even now.

What had she expected to happen? Had she honestly believed that Rainbow Dash would just let her quietly fade away?

In an ideal world, Rainbow Dash would've begged her to stay, not because she wanted revenge or closure, but because the pegasus *wanted* her to *stay*.

In an ideal world, Rainbow Dash would've left her alone. Would've just let her disappear the way she wanted to and let everything go back to normal, forgetting any of this had ever happened.

In an ideal world, it would've taken just one kiss for everything to be okay again, and then they would've lived happily ever after.

But this wasn't a romance novel. It wasn't a superhero comic. It wasn't a movie and it wasn't a fairytale love story. It was reality, and in the *real* world, where those cherished ideals almost never came to pass, there were *consequences* to mistakes as huge and phenomenally stupid as the mistakes she'd made.

When you messed with somepony, they became angry, even if you'd only done it out a misguided sense of love. When you hurt somepony, they wanted to hurt you back, even if you'd only ever wanted to see them smile. And when you ran, they chased you, even if you only ran because you wanted them to forget that you'd ever been there in the first place.

She couldn't stop. When you're being chased by a pegasus capable of breaking the sound barrier, pausing to catch your breath isn't a good idea.

Shamefully, she couldn't help but feel almost grateful that Rainbow Dash's wings were still recovering; if they'd been whole and well, Mare Do Well wouldn't have had the slightest chance of escaping. If Rainbow was having trouble flying properly, that made things marginally easier.

So what was the plan? Was she just going to run and hope Rainbow Dash got bored and gave up? Not likely. Maybe she could hide and ditch the costume. But then Rainbow Dash would want to know why she was wandering Canterlot in the middle of the night, instead of hanging out at that stupid ball. Maybe she could go back to the palace? No,

that was stupid; before she'd even finished thinking it, a voice in the back of her head screamed *that's the dumbest idea ever!*

Would it be better to stick to the ground, or should she take her chances on the rooftops that were more familiar to her? The ground was restrictive, and it would be easy to get cornered when she had to take such care to avoid being seen, but it would be harder for Rainbow Dash to follow her if she stuck to crowded areas and tight spots like the alley she was now running down. Still, maybe she should risk it; she had no idea where she was going, and she'd have a better view from above. Maybe then she could get some idea of where to go next. Maybe she could find somewhere to hide.

She was somewhere downtown by now; they weren't quite slums, but they were far rougher than the more sophisticated areas of the royal city that were reserved for aristocrats and tourists. Up ahead was a fire escape, and she didn't give herself time to rethink her next move; she was already climbing, hoof over hoof, scrambling up as fast as she could, faster than she knew she was capable of moving – it was strange, the way you could surprise yourself – and then she was on the roof.

This rooftop was small, and she covered the distance quickly before her hind-legs kicked off the edge.

It was such a rush. She'd been born with no wings, but as Mare Do Well, she could fly. Like a foal in a playground, she'd climbed and swung and leapt, gleefully delighting in the freedom of it. Even if she'd only donned the mask with the intention of approaching Rainbow Dash without fear, she'd gotten carried away more than once with the superhero persona she'd taken on. There was nothing so exhilarating as the feeling of hanging in the air mid-jump, heart pounding fit to burst and stomach flip-flopping. It was terrifying and wonderful all at once; terrifying because she was never quite sure if she'd make it, always afraid that *this* would be the one time that she slipped and fell, and wonderful because... well, just because. As long as she didn't look down.

It was a long jump, but she made it, landing with a hard *thud* on the building across the way.

Then, only then, did Mare Do Well allow herself to chance a brief glance backwards. She almost laughed with relief when Rainbow Dash was nowhere to be seen.

• • •

*Where did she go?!*

It was like a scene out of a greeting card. The night was cold and clear, the moon huge and shining and lovely, the snow softly falling. The shops were decorated with tinsel and glittering lights and festive garlands, holiday carols drifting out onto the streets; streets full of laughing, busy ponies, all infused with the good cheer of the season.

It should've been *easy* to spot something as conspicuous as a mare in a cape dashing ahead through the merry throng, yet somehow, Rainbow Dash had lost sight of her. Mare Do Well had melted into the darkness as easily as ever. Now, Rainbow Dash's gaze swept over the scene splayed out before her, desperately searching for some sign that she'd been here.

In a quiet community like Ponyville, all she would've had to do was look for hoofsteps, but there wasn't a single patch of undisturbed snow as far as the eye could see. Even now, when it was practically midnight, ponies of every age were trotting about, oblivious to the frustration felt by the rainbow-maned pegasus.

Heck, in Ponyville, Rainbow Dash could've just flown overhead to try and scope out Mare Do Well from above, but that wouldn't work in Canterlot. It was too freaking *big*. There were too many places that Rainbow wouldn't be able to see, places that the mare could hide.

Then, Rainbow Dash noticed the sign hanging outside the building nearest to her. It was the café that she and Pinkie had gone to. The café they'd had hot chocolate in. The café she'd thought about kissing Pinkie in.

That was all it took for her to feel another surge of anger. No, not even that. It was more than mere *anger*. It was bitterness and betrayal, and a hurt so deep that she wanted to scream.

Rainbow Dash rushed forward, grabbing the first pony she saw by the shoulders and whipping him around so that he was facing her.

"Did you see anypony go by here just now?" she asked, words tumbling out in a rush.

He raised his eyebrows. "I work a newsstand in Canterlot, lady," he replied with a smirk. "I see a *lotta* ponies go by."

It was all Rainbow Dash could do to keep from smacking him. "No!" she snapped. "A pony with a hat and a cape, all black and purple! I could've *sworn* she went this way! Did you see *anything* like that?"

"A hat and cape?" he asked, a note of interest in his voice. Rainbow Dash nodded urgently. He lifted a hoof to scratch the back of his head, brow furrowed in thought.

"You know, it's the funniest thing," he said conversationally, despite Rainbow's impatient scowl. "I gotta cousin over in Ponyville who works as a reporter, and she came up to visit for the holidays. Said there was a big story a little while ago about this weather pony who was saved by some kinda superhero. The hero had a cape and funny name and everything, too. It's on the tip of my tongue... Mare Do Good? Mare Do Right? Something like that."

"*Mare Do Well*," Rainbow corrected through gritted teeth.

"Mare Do Well?" the stallion repeated, face lighting up. "Like *ne'er* do well? I like that. It's clever," he chuckled. "I'll remember that one. Anyway, no, sorry. I didn't see anypony like that. But if you –"

Rainbow Dash didn't wait to hear what else he had to say, already bolting forward to grab somepony else.

"*Did you see a superhero go by?*" she asked in one breath. If Rainbow had stopped to think first, she might have realized how crazy that sounded and wouldn't have been surprised when the unicorn just shrugged her off in disgust before quickly trotting away, not even deigning to answer. As it was, she just rolled her eyes before moving on to a nearby pegasus to ask the exact same question.

By the fourth time Rainbow Dash was shrugged off with no reply, her frustration had reached its peak and she was about ready to explode. Then she heard it. The tiny, squeaky voice of a very young colt, maybe only a foal, asking, "Mommy, did you see that?"

Rainbow Dash looked, her eyes following the tiny outstretched hoof of the colt who had spoken. And then she saw it – in the distance, so far away and so tiny as to very possibly be a figment of her imagination, a streak of black tearing across the sky. In a flash, Rainbow was gone, chasing it.

• • •

"Hey!"

Oh no.

*Ohnoohnoohnoohnoohnoohnoohno...*

She tried to keep running, to will her limbs back into motion. But at the sound of Rainbow Dash's voice, she froze up, legs locking, the noose of fear easily slipping back around her throat, strangling her. *Nononononononononononononononono...*

But she had to stay calm. Even if she didn't *feel* it, she had to at least *act* it. Had to keep up the game. Had to keep up the charade. If her body was going to disobey her and stop working properly, she would take advantage of that. She had to act like she'd *intended* to do this.

Uttering a silent prayer of thanks that the disguise she wore would hide the terror that was undoubtedly written all over her face, Mare Do Well took a deep breath, and turned to face her pursuer.

It must have made a strange sight. Two ponies perched on the roof of a brownstone apartment building, somewhere in the downtown pseudo-slums of Canterlot; on one side, a mare dressed in black and violet, head adorned with a wide-brimmed hat and a cape tossed rakishly over her shoulders. On the other, a pegasus with a brilliantly colored rainbow mane, the likes of which had never been seen anywhere else in Equestria. Both of them were still; Rainbow Dash glaring, teeth gritted in determination, Mare Do Well's expression blank and unreadable due to the mask she wore.

"Still planning to run?" Rainbow Dash spat.

It would've been so easy for her to dart forward and grab Mare Do Well. It would've been so easy for Mare Do Well to start fleeing once again. But neither of them moved, too focused on each other to take a single step in any direction. Except for the snow that was quietly falling all around them, one might have almost thought that they were looking at a still photo of a scene rather than the scene itself.

"Why can't you just let me go?" Mare Do Well managed to choke through the noose. Her voice sounded steady to her ears; that was good. She needed to sound calm. She couldn't freak out. "Why can't you let things go back to normal? I told you, I'll disappear. I won't bother you anymore. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Are you *serious*?" A hard, brittle laugh and a bitter smile. "Do you *seriously* think things can just go back to *normal* after you pulled a crazy stunt like this? There's no way I'm just letting you go. Not now. Not after everything you did. Even if I don't get anything else out of all this, I'm at least going to know who you *are*."

Heart pounding. Mouth dry. The noose tightens. She can't breathe.

Rainbow Dash's coat was illuminated almost silver in the moonlight, and although she looked angry, angry beyond belief, she still managed to look so incredibly *beautiful*, wrathful and glorious all at once like some kind of avenging angel. Almost ethereal.

*I love you*, Mare Do Well thought helplessly. As if that would make any difference now.

• • •

Mare Do Well didn't move. She just *sat* there, as if she wasn't even listening. As if she didn't even care. Didn't she understand how *big* this was? Didn't she understand how *mad* Rainbow Dash was? Even now, she was as smug and hateful as ever. Why had Rainbow Dash ever felt anything deeper for her? Why had she ever thought that she could *like* the mare?

"What's the point?" Mare Do Well challenged. Taunting her. "It's not going to make any difference now. All this is going to do is turn you against one of your friends. Do you *want* that? It's not worth the risk. Let me go. Pretend none of this ever happened. I swear I'll disappear, just like I promised."

"That doesn't *work*, you *idiot*," Rainbow Dash snarled. "I've been doing that my whole life, and it *never works*! If you ignore things, they just simmer, and build up below the surface, until they finally *explode*!"

"Maybe you don't really want to know. Maybe a part of you would rather keep the mystery. Maybe you don't want to have to think of one of your friends like this."

"No, I don't, but a *bigger* part of me *needs* to know," Rainbow retorted.

"Maybe I was never real. Maybe I'm just a figment of your imagination."

"Well, then at least I'd *know* I was crazy instead of always wondering."

Another silence fell over them.

Rainbow Dash panted. She didn't want to say anything – she didn't want to confess to any kind of weakness, especially not now – but the chase had taken a lot out of her. Her wings were still stiff and sore, and flying after her that way had been a lot harder than she'd expected. That was the only reason she wasn't charging right then. If Mare Do Well



wasn't running, Rainbow Dash wasn't going to chase; at least, not until she'd taken a moment to catch her breath.

And of course, that was the way fate would have it. The moment that Rainbow Dash acknowledged her relief at the break, Mare Do Well would have to suddenly whip around, taking a running leap and once again flying through the night.

There was no time to hesitate. Rainbow Dash shot after her.

• • •

Her heart was in her throat. Again and again, her mind returned to the look of mingled anger and triumph and determination that had blazed in Rainbow Dash's eyes only moments ago.

She was going to die. Either she was going to slip and fall, or Rainbow Dash was going to catch her and kill her, or her lungs would finally give out, or maybe her heart would just explode, or *something*. It didn't even matter how it happened; she just knew it, with a sense of overwhelming certainty. She was going to die.

Just to make things worse, she somehow managed to land wrong. Normally she was able to get in position before landing, knees bent and ready, but tonight she was distracted and shockwaves of pain shot up her legs, making her cry out. Her knees almost gave out then and there. But that would've been so anticlimactic, really, to end up getting caught because she'd screwed up the landing and fell over, so she forced herself to get back up and push onwards. It was a good thing she could be so fast. It was a good thing Rainbow Dash was hurt. No, that *wasn't* a good thing and she was a horrible pony for thinking like that, but she didn't have time to feel guilty. She needed to get out of there, *nownownownownnow*.

She was quickly approaching the edge of yet another roof, and the closest building was too far away; there was no way she'd be able to make that jump. But Rainbow Dash would be expecting her to at least try, and would probably shoot on straight ahead, flying too fast to immediately stop. If Mare Do Well aimed for the balcony below instead, maybe she'd buy herself enough time to make her getaway.

It was worth a shot.

Once again, her hind-legs prepared to kick off the edge.

"*Mare Do Well!*" a voice behind her screamed.

And she froze.

• • •

The moment Mare Do Well stopped, Rainbow Dash screeched to a halt in midair. If she'd kept going, she would've flown directly into the mare, knocking them both over the edge.

"What did you just call me?" Mare Do Well demanded. Her voice shook.

That hadn't been what Rainbow Dash had been expecting her to say, and if Mare Do Well had been looking, rather than standing with her back to the pegasus, she would've seen the blatant confusion on her face.

"Um, I said *Mare Do Well?*" Rainbow ventured.

"No," Mare Do Well said quietly, shaking her head. "No. No... no! Don't call me that! *Don't call me that!*"

Her voice began to grow louder, sinking further and further into panic with each word spoken, and suddenly she was shouting.

"*Don't call me that!*" she screamed. "*That's not who I am! That's not my name!*"

"Well, what am I *supposed* to call you?" Rainbow Dash shouted back. "I don't even know your *name!*"

"I don't know, but *don't call me Mare Do Well!*"

• • •

Rainbow Dash had never called her that before. Never. Not even once. Or had she? Maybe she *had*, and she'd just never noticed. But it sounded so strange, to hear that name on her tongue.

When they five of them had first begun the Mare Do Well masquerade, they hadn't picked a name; the mayor had given it to them after the first incident, and they'd just gone along with it. When she'd adopted the Mare Do Well persona on her own, she'd assumed the name as well.

But the name wasn't *hers*. It wasn't even a name she'd *chosen*. It was a name she'd been *given*, a name forced upon her that she'd only continued to use out of convenience.

Mare Do Well wasn't real. Mare Do Well was a character. Mare Do Well was a part she was playing.

And Rainbow Dash thought she was Mare Do Well.

She wanted to scream.

Rainbow Dash didn't know her at all; the point of all of this had been to find a way to be real in front of Rainbow Dash, a way to be *real* and *honest* without jeopardizing the friendship they had, and it had backfired so utterly *spectacularly* that words failed her.

A strangled cry of pain was rising up from somewhere deep inside of her, a cry that she tried to stifle by shoving her hooves over her mouth, but nothing could quell the sound.

"Mare Do Well?"

"Stop it!" she sobbed. "Don't say that! Don't *call* me that!"

She couldn't stay here. Not with Rainbow Dash looking at her like that, looking at her with confusion and something like fear in her eyes.

So she turned, and she ran.

In retrospect, that was a very, very bad idea. When you're breaking apart into a thousand million pieces and being chased across rooftops in a city like Canterlot and you're shaking so hard you can barely stand and you can't even see because you're blinded by your own tears, it's probably best to just stay put, rather than risk making another running jump.

Because if you *do* risk the jump, you *also* risk losing focus and looking down. And when you look down, you aren't looking where you're going, because all you can think about is falling, and then your hooves stumble on the edge, and the next thing you know, you *are* falling.

If she cried out, she didn't hear it. One moment she was struggling to hold herself together, and the next thing she knew, she was plummeting through the air into the alley between the pair of buildings, the sidewalk rushing closer, closer.

Until somepony slammed into her.

Her breathing was shallow and quick, but she was still breathing, because she was being cradled like a filly by the pegasus bringing her to safety.

Because she wanted to stay that way, enfolded in the warmth of Rainbow Dash's embrace.

She was still crying, but these tears weren't the agonized sobs of before. These were silent tears, quietly trailing down her face as all of her love and grief finally spilled over, too much for her to carry any longer.

She wrapped her forelegs around Rainbow Dash's neck, burrowing her face in her neck.

One moment, she'd been falling. The next, she was being carried. But even if she hadn't hit the ground, she knew that Mare Do Well was dead. The knowledge was like the lifting of a burden that she hadn't noticed the weight of before. Whatever happened now, she no longer had a mask to hide behind. There was only herself.

• • •

Rainbow Dash tried to be careful as she held Mare Do Well, but that lasted only as long as they were in flight. When they reached the ground, she dropped her, letting the mare slam down onto the sidewalk before roughly pinning her down with her hooves. The mare gave a cry before beginning to struggle, writhing and squirming beneath Rainbow Dash. She straddled Mare Do Well, intentionally looming over her. It felt pretty good, actually, to know that she was the one in control for once.

"All right," Rainbow Dash panted. Then she paused, unsure of what to say next. She swallowed, and took a deep breath before starting again. "All right. So how's this gonna go down?"

"Please," Mare Do Well whimpered. "Please don't. Please, I'll do anything. Just let me go. Please."

"Uh-uh. I don't think so. See, I think I kind of like having you under me like this," Rainbow Dash answered lightly. Her voice sounded so much calmer than how she actually felt, and she tightened the grip she had on Mare Do Well's forelegs, driving them harder into the alley. Mare Do Well let out another gasp of pain.

"You know what I'm gonna do?" Rainbow hissed. "I'm gonna tell you *exactly* why I hate you. And you're gonna *listen*."

Mare Do Well didn't answer.

"I hate you because you came out of nowhere. I hate you because you just *had* to keep popping up whenever I didn't want to see you, bugging me over and over again, even though you must have *known* how much I didn't want to see you," Rainbow Dash began. It was harder to speak than she'd expected; it was like there was a knot somewhere in her throat that threatened to gag her. But she kept going, because she needed to say this, and she needed the mare to hear it.

"I hate you because you were selfish and wouldn't leave me alone. I hate you because you made me doubt my friends. I hate you because you turned me into a different pony, a pony who couldn't sleep and couldn't relax and couldn't focus on anything. I hate you because you *took* things from me. You took my peace of mind, you... you took *Pinkie!* You took my best friend, and I don't know if I'm ever going to get her back after all of this!"

"I –" Mare Do Well began, but then she stopped, shrinking beneath Rainbow Dash's glare.

"I hate you because you made me different," Dash continued, flapping her wings with a sharp snap. "I hate you because you made me deal with things I would have rather avoided. Because of you, I had to confront all these issues I didn't even know I *had*."

She paused, and purely out of spite, she ground her hooves a little deeper, just to hear Mare Do Well cry out again. It was sadistic of her, she knew that, but it was so unbelievably satisfying that she couldn't help it.

Rainbow took another deep breath.

This was the hardest part.

"You didn't even *mean* to do it, either," she continued. "You made me face up to all these problems I had, made me realize I needed to deal with them, and you never even *meant* to. You just wanted to... I don't even know. But that's why. I hate you because you made me *care* about what you wanted. I hate you because you made me worry about you. You made me *like* you, and I *didn't want to*."

Mare Do Well had grown still, no longer struggling.

"I hate you," Rainbow Dash repeated, her voice little more than a whisper. "I hate you so much. I hate you for doing this to me. I hate you for making me not want to hate you."

All around them were the sounds of the city and the season, and here they were, alone in this tiny little pocket of Canterlot, unseen and unheard by anypony but each other. Just the two of them, as close to being eye-to-eye as one could hope for when one of them wore a mask.

The mood was quietly changing between them. Shifting. They were no longer a hunter and prey.

Mare Do Well's body, still sheathed in her black and violet costume, was slick and shining from the melting snowflakes she was dusted with, but Rainbow Dash could still feel her warmth. She could feel the mare's chest rise and fall as she breathed. It made her seem so much more real. Before, Rainbow Dash might have actually believed that she had never existed – that maybe she had imagined the whole thing. Now, though, there was no doubt.

A third deep breath, and at last, Rainbow moved in, slowly lowering her head.

Mare Do Well gave a tiny whimper.

"No more hiding," Rainbow Dash said softly. "No more running away. Nothing's gonna go away; it's just gonna come back later. It's better to face it now."

"I'm scared," Mare Do Well whispered.

She had never sounded as young or as vulnerable as she did right then.

"It's going to be all right," Rainbow Dash found herself saying, in a tone far gentler than she'd even known herself capable of using. "I don't know how, exactly, but we'll figure it out."

Mare Do Well was no longer trying to pull away, so Rainbow Dash at last released her hold on the mare's forelegs, moving instead to cup her face.

She closed her eyes. Leaning forward, she gripped the cloth of the mask between her teeth, and with a swift movement, tore it away.

Then, eyes still shut, Rainbow Dash kissed her.

• • •

She hadn't been expecting this.

It was more of an assault than a kiss. Like a purely accidental collision of mouths – hard and angry and fierce and full of so much *wanting* that she almost couldn't stand it. And yet, as brutal as it was, the moment their lips met, there was such beautiful, soaring release.

One of Rainbow Dash's hooves slid downwards, pressing flat against her stomach, as if to keep her still. But even if she'd *wanted* to move right then, she wouldn't have been able to. She *couldn't* move. She was too startled.

Finally, Rainbow Dash broke away. Her eyes were closed; they hadn't flickered open, even once, and she panted, the breath of the pegasus hot and sweet as it mingled with her own.

"What are you doing?" she managed to gasp, feeling almost breathless herself. "You didn't even –"

And Rainbow Dash silenced her with another kiss, bringing her mouth down upon hers.

Swift, possessive and hungry: that was what the caress of Rainbow Dash's lips felt like. The same hunger that *she'd* felt for so long. This time, she didn't pull back or wrench away; she responded immediately, leaning forward into the kiss.

Rainbow Dash's hooves were still pressed against her chest, still keeping her in place, but she was no longer pinned down. Not really. Not the way she'd been before. After all, her forelegs were free. And now, she wrapped them around Rainbow Dash's neck, drawing the pegasus even closer.

• • •

Rainbow Dash kept her eyes shut. It was stupid, but it was almost like she was trying to pretend that could just stay this way, thoroughly wrapped in one another, and that a time when she had to know the truth would never come.

A part of her *needed* to know who the pony who prowled in the dark was, the pony now kissing her back, but at the same time, another part of her needed to keep up the charade for just a little while longer. Because no matter what she'd promised, she knew it was a lie.

Things were going to change for them. Whoever Mare Do Well was, the moment Rainbow Dash laid eyes upon her face without the mask, things were going to break. Whatever friendship they had would become fractured.

But even if they cracked after all, there was always the slightest possibility that they would eventually be able to put themselves back together again. That was what she needed to believe. After all, she'd once been in love with Fluttershy, and the rejection had shattered her heart into a thousand million different pieces, and yet, here she was. She was still alive.

You couldn't fit this well with somepony if there wasn't some way for you to be whole together. You couldn't kiss somepony like this and never find a way to be with them without your heart breaking as your whole world turned upside down.

Countless soft, hesitant kisses followed that initial passion; fleeting and uncertain brushes of their lips, of their mouths against their skin, every kiss full of a tenderness that left Rainbow Dash needing more as her fur prickled.

At last, Rainbow Dash managed to say, voice hoarse from the way her throat tightened, "I guess you won."

Even now, her eyes were closed. She didn't want to see yet. She wasn't ready.

She felt Mare Do Well shift beneath her, sighing as the mare pressed her face into the crook of Rainbow Dash's neck. There was so much affection in such a simple gesture; it was overwhelming, causing her eyes to sting with the threat of even more tears. Since when did she ever cry this much?

"I called the game off, remember?" Mare Do Well answered, voice little more than a mumble.

Rainbow Dash's eyes were beginning to water behind the closed lids, and she realized that the stinging wasn't because she was on the verge of crying; it was because she couldn't hold her eyes shut much longer.

"I'm gonna have to look sometime."

"It would've been so much easier if I could've just been the bad guy for real," the mare said weakly. "Then I wouldn't have felt so incredibly guilty about all of this."

"If you were a bad guy for real, what would you have done?"



"I don't even know. Maybe... maybe I would've just taken you away somewhere, somewhere where I could've kept you to myself and not have had to worry about what would happen to us afterwards. But I couldn't exactly do that, could I? Not without getting arrested or something."

"Only if they found you."

A moment passed.

There was only silence, the sound of the two of them breathing and the hushed whisper of snow falling.

"We'll be okay," Rainbow Dash said, her voice firmer this time. "I promise. No matter what happens. I'm not going to give up on you."

And without waiting for a reply, she enfolded the mare in one final embrace before quietly lowering her to the ground.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"No," Mare Do Well answered, still breathless and panting.

A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth, and Rainbow Dash ducked her head in, so that her mouth was moving against the shape of Mare Do Well's ear.

"*Too bad*," she whispered. She could feel the mare shiver beneath her.

It was time. She took one final deep breath.

Mare Do Well was perfectly still, as if preparing herself for what was coming. For whatever Rainbow did next.

And Rainbow Dash opened her eyes.

Under her... *before* her... there lay a pony clothed in shades of midnight, a cape fanned out beneath her. Atop her head there was perched a matching wide-brimmed hat.

But now, there was no mask to protect her face. No facade to hide behind.

There was only her.

Big blue eyes. A mouth, seemingly unsure about whether or not it was meant to smile. And a mane, bright and beautifully pink, pooling around her like a waterfall, long and straight as glass.

• • •

Rainbow Dash's jaw dropped. Her eyes were wide, her voice disappearing somewhere on its way to her mouth. Utterly lost for words.

"No," was all Rainbow could think to say, and a flicker of pain flashed in those eyes, those big and beautiful eyes. The exact same color as the sky that Rainbow Dash loved so much. "No. No. That doesn't make sense."

And still she had nothing to say for herself, only watching as Rainbow Dash shook her head, wings fluttering anxiously.

"That doesn't make sense," Rainbow Dash repeated. Her hooves had found their way to the mare's shoulders, gripping her as tightly as she could without even meaning to. The mare winced, then gave Rainbow a weak smile.

"Surprised?" Pinkie Pie whispered.

You're mad. You said you wouldn't be mad.

*That's not what I said.*

You said...

*I said it would be okay. But that doesn't mean I can't be mad at you first.*

...I guess that makes sense.

...

I... I guess I have a lot of explaining to do, huh?

*Yeah. You do.*

I don't know where to start.

*Not my problem.*

Should, should we get up? It's kind of cold.

*Yeah, we probably should.*

...

...

...

*Okay, start talking.*

I'm... I'm not sure where to begin, Dashie.

*Don't call me that right now.*

R-right. I'm sorry. Rainbow Dash. Right. But... I... I still don't know where to begin.

*The costume.*

Huh?

*Where did you get the costume? You said Gummy ripped yours up. Your story was pretty suspicious to begin with, so does this mean you flat-out lied to me?*

No! I never lied to you, I promise. Maybe I did bad things, and maybe I kind of misled you a lot, but I never actually *lied*. I swear. Pinkie Promise, even.

*Like that even means anything anymore.*

...

...

Applejack.

*...huh?*

Applejack. I took it from Applejack.

*...I knew it would be something like that. I should've asked everypony to double-check that their costumes were where they were supposed to be. I don't know why I didn't.*

Me neither. I kept expecting you to. I was kind of mad that you didn't.

...

...

...

I took it a few months ago. Mrs. Cake sent me to Sweet Apple Acres to get an order of apples for Sugarcube Corner, and while I was waiting for Applejack, I got bored and started digging around her room.

I wasn't really looking for anything, but I found the costume in her dresser and tried it on, just for fun. It had been a long time since we'd dressed up as Mare Do Well, and I wanted to see if it felt the way I remembered.

Then she came back. She laughed when she saw me, and told me that she had to get back to work, but to make sure I put her stuff back the way I'd found it.

But I didn't. I took it with me. I didn't even know *why* at the time, I just did.

But if you'd asked her about her costume, she might have looked for it and noticed it was missing. Then she probably would've known it was me right away.

*...What do you mean, "felt the way you remembered?"*

It's... kind of weird, but I really *liked* being Mare Do Well. No pony knew who I was, so I didn't have to *be* anypony. I could be anypony I wanted. If I wanted to be dark and mysterious instead of bubbly and happy, I *could* be, and no pony would think less of me.

*Geez. Is it really that hard for you to be happy? Are you just... constantly on the verge of a breakdown, or something?*

No, it's... I don't know. I'm not sure how to explain it. I *am* happy a lot. But not *always*, y'know? And when you're supposed to be the Element of Laughter, it's kind of hard to know what to do with yourself when you don't feel like laughing. Everypony expects me to be smiling and happy, and sometimes I just don't *want* to be. But... no pony likes the serious Pinkie.

*Okay. Fine. You took it from AJ. But what happened to your costume?*

I ripped it myself. I still have the pieces in my room somewhere. I didn't want it to be a lie when I told you I didn't have it anymore. I even tried to get Gummy to help, and he kind of tore it with his claws a little.

...

...

...

Should I keep going?

*Yeah.*

...

...

A-after we dressed up as Mare Do Well that first time, all I could think about was how easy it would be if I could just wear a mask all the time and do what I wanted without worrying about what everypony thought.

And then I found Applejack's costume and took it, because... because I really *wanted* it all of a sudden. I was stupid and forgot I had my own. It was just on a whim, I guess. And... and I decided to just *do* it.

It wasn't even *about* you at first. At first, I just wanted to start again with a new identity; so I pretended to be a superhero, because that was the kind of costume I had. I went on nightly patrols, looking for trouble. I wanted to keep on being Mare Do Well, even though all that was supposed to be over.

Then I realized that this could be my chance to approach you. I'd had a crush on you for a really, really long time, but I knew that you just thought of me as silly Pinkie and wouldn't take me seriously. I *wanted* to be taken seriously, and I was scared that you'd turn me down because you'd think I was joking. But as Mare Do Well, you wouldn't know anything about me. You wouldn't have had any prejudices.

*You're still talking weird.*

Huh?

*Mare Do Well... Mare Do Well talked really fancy, with big words and stuff. You're still doing that.*

I'm not stupid. I can sound smart if I want to.

...

So, um, so, I decided that it might be fun if I approached you in disguise, since I'd be able to be honest with you without worrying about what would happen between us afterwards. I followed you around for a while – a few nights, maybe. I'm not sure exactly how long. But I wasn't trying to stalk you or anything creepy like that; I was just trying to build up the courage to actually *do* it.

Then that stallion tried to rob you, and I jumped in without thinking. When you tried to talk to me, I panicked and ran away, because I didn't know what to say to you. I wasn't ready yet.

After that, I decided that I wouldn't follow you anymore. I was pretty shaken up about almost getting caught. Everything I was doing felt so *wrong*, like it needed to be kept absolutely secret no matter what, although I guess it kinda *was* wrong, and it didn't feel worth it, really. So I decided that the Mare Do Well idea had been pretty silly. But then my tail started twitching, and –

*Pinkie Sense? Seriously?*

I know you don't think it's real, but it *works*!

Anyway, my tail started twitching, and my Pinkie Sense told me that something bad was gonna happen to you. I didn't warn you because I knew you didn't believe in my Pinkie Sense, and even though I'd told myself to forget about the costume, I think a part of myself really wanted to keep wearing it – because I had the idea to keep you safe that day, and I ended up doing it as Mare Do Well.

I really liked the feeling of watching out for you for once. *You* always get to be the hero, always saving me and the others and being brave for everypony, and... and I liked how it felt to be on the other side for a little while. It made me feel strong.

I never feel strong.

After that, I ditched the costume in a back street somewhere and went to meet up with the others. I told them that I'd found you, and I led them to the alley where you'd cornered me before I got away. We'd been looking for you, so I didn't have to explain where I was. They thought I'd just split off from the group.

I tried to sound like I'd been in the audience by talking up Mare Do Well's rescue of you. I wanted you to be impressed. But you were *mad*, not impressed... something I should have expected, I guess, considering how you reacted to the *original* Mare Do Well thing. I hadn't thought you'd still be upset.

So, the next night, I went to get the costume from the alley I'd hid it in when I saw you walking around, and I figured you were looking for Mare Do Well.

*Was that seriously the first thing your mind went to?*

Well, yeah. I know you pretty well. And I was right, wasn't I?

...

It made me kind of uncomfortable, to see you purposely trying to get in trouble. I mean, I know you can take care of yourself and everything, but still, it was risky. So I thought that since you were only doing it to draw out Mare Do Well, you'd cut it out if I just gave you what you wanted – but then I got carried away again. I wanted to have fun with it, since I'd be talking to you as whoever I wanted to be, but it was like I couldn't control myself. You were so close, and I didn't *have* to be the Pinkie you knew, so it was like I became the exact opposite instead.

That's what it was like, when I wore the mask. I wasn't happy, silly, make-everypony-smile Pinkie anymore, because I was tired of all that. Instead, I was serious, cold, make-everypony-angry Mare Do Well.

I felt bad afterwards and threw that party to try and cheer you up. It was like an apology, almost, but you still seemed upset, so I took you to my room to talk to you. I wanted to try and figure out how upset you actually were, but... then you said that you thought Mare Do Well liked you, and I got upset. It didn't make sense to me. I'd liked you for such a long time, and you'd never noticed how *I* felt *ever*, but Mare Do Well talks to you for five minutes and you're already interested?

But then you said that you didn't like her back, and that you just wanted to know who she was. And I was relieved. I was still confused, though, because if you liked her better, it meant you didn't like me as my ordinary Pinkie self – but if I gave up the act, it meant I lost the one outlet I had for my feelings.

Anyway, you probably didn't notice, but when you went outside afterwards, you sat right under my window, right where I could see you. I wanted to keep talking to you, but I knew you were done with Pinkie, so I thought I'd give it a shot as Mare Do Well, and put on the costume. So I snuck out of my window. I had to climb onto the roof and out around back, so it was kind of hard, but then –

*What about the flowers?*

Huh?

*The carnations. What was the deal with those?*

Oh. Um.

Well, I'd heard Rarity telling Twilight about this book she'd bought about the language of flowers, and she said something about roses being cheesy and how it would be *really* romantic to get flowers with some kind of deeper meaning. I thought "friendship" was a



good one, so I had them delivered, because I thought what you'd said about flowers and moonlight was funny. And the notes were easy to write. I just used a pencil. I get a lot of practice at the bakery, since I have to write up menus and bills and stuff.

So like I said. I snuck out to see you. I wanted to keep talking to you. I was getting kind of desperate. I just kept wanting to see you and talk to you, and I took any chance I got to do that. But while we were talking, I became too honest and told you too much. I confessed a lot that night.

I was afraid that I'd given myself away, but then you brought up the whole game idea, and... I got excited. I mean, I *like* games, and here was an excuse to keep being Mare Do Well for you.

If you hadn't brought up the game and given me the idea for the challenge, I think I would've stopped that night.

Then Twilight showed up and I got scared and ran.

When I was back in my room, I started to freak out when I realized what I'd done. It was like Mare Do Well was another pony completely. The total opposite of *me*. When I put on the mask, I became possessed by her, and it scared me, how it was like I couldn't stop myself from acting out like that. She was so *different* from me. But you seemed interested in her, so I kept it up, just so I could be near you. I knew you hated her, but you also seemed intrigued, and I thought that I could win if I could just get you to like her, too. That way, you wouldn't be mad at me once I revealed who I really was. It would be safe.

I offered to help you investigate because I wanted to find out how much you already knew, so that I could postpone your investigation as much as possible. That's why I was so unhelpful.

*Why were you jealous of yourself, though? I mean, that's crazy. Like, seriously crazy. Drag you to an asylum SCREAMING crazy.*

...I know. But it was like I told you; Mare Do Well was somepony else. Pinkie didn't understand why you were so interested in Mare Do Well when you'd never noticed her before, and Mare Do Well wanted Pinkie to shut up and stop interfering, because at least this way I got to be close to you.

That was when I really started hating myself. I *know* it's crazy to be jealous of myself, but I *was*.

*So, you brought me to Rarity's, and then Applejack's, and then you just kind of stopped. What was up with that?*

I took you to see Rarity because I wanted to make sure that you wouldn't be able to access those sales files I'd told you about. I wanted you to think that Mare Do Well had bought the costume from Rarity, to throw you off, and I knew that as soon as you actually saw them and saw who'd *actually* bought it, you'd know I must have gotten mine from somewhere else.

It was around then that I really started to hate having a double life, though. I wanted to be honest with you – but at the same time, I didn't want to lose what I had. Mare Do Well could do whatever Pinkie wanted to do without being afraid, and I didn't want to give that up, but still. I was sick of lying to you.

I started thinking it would be easier if you just found out who I was on your own, and I started sabotaging myself. That's why I brought you to Applejack next. I wanted you to ask her about the costume. I wanted her to notice it was missing and piece it together.

*Why did you leave me alone with her, though? Because you couldn't face up to it, or something?*

No. Because I had an idea.

*What?*

...The derby. I'd heard about it, and had this idea to get you the best Hearth's Warming Present ever, because I knew tickets would be hard to get. I went off with Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo and Apple Bloom because I wanted to be the one to walk them home, so that I'd have a reason to stop by Rarity's. When I brought Sweetie back to the boutique, I told Rarity that I knew how busy she was and offered to watch Sweetie Belle for her until her work was finished.

She was super grateful and asked how she could repay me, and I asked her if she'd be able to get me a ticket. I paid for it; I just wanted her to secure one, before they sold out, since I knew the shows went quickly. So she got her friend Fancy Pants in Canterlot to figure it out for me.

Also, while I was playing with them, they showed me their zipline. I hadn't intended to show it to you at the time, but after your wings were hurt, I remembered it and asked if I could use it and they lent me their gear.

*You said you had connections! What kind of connections are those?*

I never said I had connections. I said I called in a few favors.

*More like "manipulated Rarity into feeling like she owed you something."*

...

...

...

*Keep talking.*

Um... well, after I took Sweetie home, I headed back with Apple Bloom, because I wanted to find out what Applejack had told you. But it was late and I realized that you'd probably be going to find Mare Do Well, and I wouldn't have time to run and change, so I asked you not to go.

I thought you'd stay, for my sake. But you didn't want to, and... and that hurt my feelings. I'd thought that me being a friend would trump Mare Do Well being interesting, but you chose *her*, and I was mad. Really, really mad. Because Mare Do Well was pretty much my exact opposite, and if you liked her, that meant you *didn't* like *me*.

But I still wanted to be near you. Even if it meant being somepony I hated. So I told you not to go to the bakery, because I wouldn't *be* there. And I went, and I changed, and I slipped into the alley to wait for you. And then you came, and... and I was still so, so mad at you, and it came out in a really weird way. I think... I think I wanted to hurt you, but... I don't know. It was like, "you chose the mysterious stranger over your best friend? Fine, let me show you what she's *really* like; you'll regret it." So it was like I was being Mare Do Well *extra* hard that night, and I was really aggressive and mean, even though I knew it made you uncomfortable. I did it on purpose.

Then your wings were broken.

That was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me ever and I never, ever, ever want anything like that to ever happen again. I thought he'd killed you at first, and... and I won't even tell you what I did. But I was so, so scared, and I decided that the Mare Do Well thing had gone on long enough and I put the costume away.

You'd said before that you kind of liked Mare Do Well when she was being normal, and... and I was so relieved. Because I thought you meant that you liked her better when she was acting more like Pinkie. More like me. I thought that meant you liked *me*. So during the storm, when you came to Sugarcube Corner, I decided to tell you that I liked you. I thought you'd say you liked me too, but...

I don't know.

You didn't, I guess.

I was really upset after that, and I hated myself even more for being so stupid. I didn't want to be me anymore, and I took the costume back out. And then *you* showed up out of nowhere and tried to make Mare Do Well feel better. That almost made things worse, because... well, why were you trying to comfort her, when you'd run away from Pinkie?

And I know it's crazy, but it just made me more jealous.

*That is pretty crazy.*

I... I know.

*Can I ask you something?*

Yeah. Of course.

*What about the heights thing? You said you were scared of heights, but you've been up high before and never freaked out.*

Um... there's kind of two things about that.

The first is that I'm pretty good at hiding it when I'm upset about something.

And the second is that I sort of misled you again. It's not the heights, exactly. It's falling.

*Huh?*

My Pinkie Sense.

*I don't get it.*

I think that the worst feeling in the world is when you *know* something bad is going to happen, but you just can't stop it because you don't know when or how. So it's not the heights, exactly. It's when I *know* somepony's going to fall and I can't do anything about it. Like when you were chasing me before; I was shaking so hard that I almost couldn't run, but I didn't know when it was going to happen or to which one of us, so I couldn't do anything. And sure enough, I fell, and it was scary.

*That kind of makes sense, I guess.*

*Okay. Keep going.*

I bribed the servant unicorn to put the note in your bag. I told him to make sure you didn't find out. That's why he was so scared of you.

*...I don't even know what to say about that.*

When you invited me to the derby, and when we spent the day together, I was so *happy*. It was like when you told Mare Do Well you liked it when she was normal; it felt like you were rejecting Mare Do Well because you'd decided you liked regular Pinkie more.

And then I found the note in your bed, and I didn't even know what to do. I didn't know if I was supposed to be angry or sad or *what*. I mean, *I'd* sent the note, so I couldn't really bring myself to be upset, but I knew that I was *supposed* to be. I just... I don't know.

But I guess you thought I was upset, because then I got your note about not writing to you anymore. I'd liked the notes, though. Even though I knew you were writing *to* Mare Do Well and I was *answering* as her, I could pretend they were for Pinkie.

Then you kissed me, and... wait.

*What?*

Did you hear that?

*No. Hear what?*

I thought I heard somepony.

*We're crouched in some random alley in Canterlot on Hearth's Warming Morning. Of course you're gonna hear somepony.*

Yeah, I guess... anyway, then you kissed me, and I know you were drunk, but I felt like... I think... I really, really wanted it to be real.

Then you said that about Mare Do Well being mad, and I sort of freaked out.

Because you were *right* and suddenly I realized how completely bonkers it was, that I'd be jealous of myself and that you'd be kissing me to make me angry without even knowing it, and...

*That's not why.*

...

*I kissed you because I wanted to. The... the thing about Mare Do Well being mad was just me being stupid. Like an afterthought. I didn't mean it. That wasn't why.*

...

*I don't really remember what happened, but... but I remember that.*

I was kind of spying on you at the ball.

*That's creepy.*

I know, but I was worried about you. Applejack shouldn't have given you anything to drink. But I heard some of what you guys were saying, and –

*What did I say?*

You said that you thought Mare Do Well had a sexy voice, then that you used to like Fluttershy, then that you thought *Applejack* was hot, and then that you were going to throw up, so I jumped in.

*I did not!*

Yes you did!

*No! I... oh, geez. Did I really say all that?*

Yeah.

...

...

...So. So, you kissed me, and I got upset. Twilight came over but I ran away, and later she came to ask if I was all right. I told her that you'd kissed me, and that you only did it to make somepony else mad, and I don't think she really understood why I was so upset, but she said she'd talk to you. But I knew you wouldn't be there.

*How the hay did you know that?*

I know *you*. You run away when things get too difficult for you to cope with. You've told me yourself. I knew you'd have probably flown off. And I decided, right then and there, that this was definitely the very last night. That Mare Do Well was going to disappear. It was crazy for me to have this whole other self that I was in a rivalry with, and the thought that you might actually, genuinely like her better was scary. So I was going to get rid of her. But I didn't want you to keep hunting for her, so I put on the costume one last time and went looking for you, to tell you that the game was over, but when I was talking to you, it was like I lost control again, and the anger I felt at myself manifested as hurt directed at you.

I wanted Mare Do Well to disappear. I wanted to kill her. I wanted her to vanish, and then I wanted Pinkie to be able to go and comfort you in her wake.

But then you started chasing her.

And now... here we are.

*...I don't even know what to say. I mean... Pinkie, that makes, like, no sense. At all. That is so totally messed up I'm not even sure where to begin. And... and why's your hair like that, anyway? All straight and stuff?*

...When I was little, I wasn't very happy.

...

I used to go by my full name then. Pinkamena. And I was really sad and lonely and serious. Then I saw a rainbow, and it was so, so beautiful. I'd never *seen* anything that beautiful; I was so happy to see it, and I wanted to be that happy forever. But the thing is, it's hard to be that happy.

Smiles hurt after a while, and sometimes I'm just not up to it. I try to act happy no matter what, but sometimes, it gets so hard. I just need a break. When I get all moody, it's like

I've gone back to being that sad little filly I used to be. I call myself Pinkamena when that happens. When I stop being Pinkie Pie.

What I said about Mare Do Well and Pinkie being two different ponies? It's like Pinkamena and Pinkie are two different ponies, too. And for some reason, my hair always goes straight when I'm in my Pinkamena mood. I don't know why.

...

...

...

...I think I'm broken.

*You're not broken.*

I'm in so many pieces, though. And I don't know how to put them back together again.

I – did you hear that? I thought I heard somepony say your name.

*Are you sure?*

Yeah, but... never mind.

*Want me to go look?*

No. Please stay.

...

...

*I don't know what to say, Pinkie.*

I know.

*But... I mean... I liked you, Pinkie. And I liked Mare Do Well. So... if those are all pieces of you... then once you're put back together, won't we...?*

...I don't know how to do that, though.



*There's gotta be something. I don't know what, but there's gotta be something we can do. I mean, friends help each other, right? So if you seriously think of yourself as broken, then we gotta fix you up.*

...You still want to be my friend?

*Duh. This whole thing is pretty messed up, but... I don't want to lose you completely.*

...

...

...So what happens now?

*I'm not sure. But... I guess... we start over. And this time, no hiding. No masks. At all.*

*If... if you're sad, you need to tell us, okay? We're still going to love you. It's not like we only like you because you make us smile. We like you for more than that. And...*

*And there's probably more we should do, but I don't know what. I don't think one night is enough to figure this out.*

...

*We're probably gonna need, like, a million years. I mean, this got really complicated. And I have a lot of issues, too, so... you're not the only one. I gotta figure stuff out, too.*

What about us?

*You mean... "us?"*

Y-yeah.

*I... I don't know.*

You said you liked Pinkie and Mare Do Well. So... so if I find a way to fix myself, do you think... do you think you'd ever...

*I don't know if I can answer that right now.*

Okay. I understand.

*But...*

But what?

*I think... I kind of want to...*

Um, want to what?

...

...

...Dashie?

*Do that.*

Can... can we do that again?

*Yeah.*

...

...

...

...

...

**Rainbow Dash! There you are!**

*Uh-oh.*

Oops. I *told* you I heard somepony.

*Um, hi, Twilight.*

**We've been looking for you every... Pinkie? What are *you* doing here?**

Hi!

**Why are you dressed like that?**

Um...

**Were you two...**

*Can we just go back to the palace? I'm kind of tired.*

...

...

...

The first thing Rainbow Dash saw upon reappearing in the palace was a pair of green-blue eyes flashing in anger, moments before she felt the sting of a hoof across her face.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Fluttershy squeaked. "I didn't mean to. But... but you do *not* run away!" she continued with a stomp of her hoof, her voice firm with a newfound resolve. "How *dare* you make us all worry about you like that? And on Hearth's Warming Eve, too! Do you have *any* idea how scared we all were?"

At first, Rainbow Dash was too surprised to respond, able only to stare with wide eyes as she lifted a hoof to touch her stinging cheek, but then Fluttershy moved in for a hug, whimpering softly.

"Where *were* you guys?" Applejack asked, coming up from behind the pegasus. Rainbow Dash had frozen completely, and at the sound of the farmer's voice, Fluttershy broke away. Her eyes asked the same question.

They were still dressed in their party finery. Fluttershy and Rarity were, at least; now that Rainbow Dash stopped to notice, Applejack had apparently taken off her dress at some point, although her hair was still arranged in an elaborate mess of curls.

Twilight hadn't asked any uncomfortable questions, thankfully, but it was also strangely out of character for her, causing Rainbow Dash to wonder just how much the unicorn had heard of her and Pinkie's conversation. When you find two of your best friends kissing in an empty alley on Hearth's Warming Eve, with one of them dressed as a superhero, especially after you'd just told one of them off for kissing the other one while drunk, you'd be bound to have questions. But if Twilight had heard what they'd been saying, maybe she'd put two and two together and drawn her own conclusions. After all, she *was* pretty smart.

When the initial shock at discovering Rainbow and Pinkie together had apparently worn off, instead of demanding an explanation, Twilight had only said, "Fluttershy went to check up on you and saw you were missing, so I said I'd look for you. I was worried you were upset about what I'd said." Her eyes drifted over to Pinkie, who was sitting impossibly still, a nervous smile plastered on her face as her eyes flickered between Rainbow and Twilight.

"Oh," Rainbow Dash had answered in a halting voice. "Um, okay. Um. Well..."

"Maybe we *should* just go back. You *do* look kind of tired," Twilight had graciously offered, interrupting Rainbow Dash's stammering, and still Pinkie was frozen, not offering even one of her trademark inane comments to smooth things over the way she usually did. All it took was a relieved nod from Dash, agreeing with her suggestion, for Twilight to close her eyes and allow the glow emanating from her horn to envelop them, and then they were back in Rainbow's room in the palace, where the rest of their friends had been waiting.

Pinkie was standing somewhere behind her, as if trying to use Rainbow Dash's body as a shield from the curious eyes of their friends. When Dash glanced behind her, she saw that the pink pony was no longer standing rigidly still, but was instead now trembling. She still looked so small, but now that Rainbow Dash knew the costume was Applejack's, that made more sense. Applejack had a thicker build than Pinkie, after all, so naturally her costume had been bigger. No wonder it had seemed too large for Pinkie – it *was*.

Pinkie Pie's eyes were fearful and uncertain, still darting between her friends. She looked like an animal that was used to abuse and knew what was coming, but couldn't say for sure *when*. They stopped on Rainbow Dash's face, though, and maybe it was Dash's imagination, but some of the tension, coiled so tightly beneath the calm of the smiling surface, seemed to loosen slightly once they did.

"RD?" Applejack asked. "I said, where'd you two run off to?"

"Nowhere special," Rainbow answered, the lie coming easily as she turned back to face the others. "We just went for a walk. Had some stuff to talk about."

"Um, why... why was Pinkie...?" Fluttershy began, but Rainbow Dash quickly cut her off.

"It was a prank – a totally awesome one, too. Boy, did she get me; I totally flipped, but it was pretty funny."

It was obviously a lie, and she could see by the look Applejack gave her that it was a horribly transparent one, as well. They were going to have to explain everything *sometime*, but... now was not the time. Tonight, she and Pinkie still had too much to figure out for themselves. Neither of them would be ready to share it with the others, friends or no.

When Rainbow Dash once again swiveled her neck to glance back at Pinkie, the other mare was gone. She must have quietly slipped away while Rainbow Dash had been trying to cover for the two of them. Even if she'd somehow managed to explain away every

other aspect of her identity as Mare Do Well, the one thing Dash would never understand was how Pinkie had been able to appear and disappear so suddenly and completely at will, but maybe there were just some things that ponies were simply not meant to know.

However Pinkie had done it, though, didn't matter. What mattered was that Rainbow Dash needed to see Pinkie. There was still so much they needed to talk about, needed to share. So without a word of explanation, the moment Rainbow Dash noticed that the earth pony was missing, she shot out of the room like a dart.

Luckily, all of their bedrooms at the palace were in the same wing, so Dash didn't have to go very far to catch up with Pinkie Pie. The pink pony was only in her *own* room, just across the hall, so at least she wasn't making some kind of desperate bid for escape, the way Rainbow Dash had earlier that evening.

Pinkie was already out of costume. The Mare Do Well suit had been left in a careless heap on the floor, abandoned and forgotten, still damp from melted snow. Pinkie herself was huddled in the corner, gazing at the costume with a strangely distant gaze, but the sound of Rainbow Dash's hooves landing on the carpeted floor seemed to jar her out of her stupor, jolting her back into reality.

Her hair was still straight. Her eyes were almost haunted, but when they saw Rainbow Dash, the haunted look changed to one of pure alarm. Fear. It was like Pinkie was shrinking into herself, trying to curl up into nothingness.

"Pinkie?" Dash ventured, trying to keep her voice as gentle as she could. Pinkie looked so fragile right then; Rainbow Dash didn't want to be the reason she hurt anymore than she already did.

No matter what Pinkie had done, she was still the pony who'd acted as Dash's pranking buddy, who'd brought her surprise cupcakes and held parties for her just to cheer her up whenever Rainbow was feeling down. She was still the pony that Rainbow Dash had intentionally kissed, not once, but twice, now; the pony she almost thought she wanted to kiss again.

"Why'd you lie to them?" Pinkie asked in a low voice.

Her hooves were clutching either side of her head and she looked like a madmare, for all the reason her voice carried, wild-eyed and desperate. But that wasn't the first time Rainbow Dash had seen her this way.

"Because this is about *us* right now, duh. We can talk to *them* when we're ready. Friends don't have to share everything, you know," Dash answered calmly, her voice masking how unnerved she truly was. She'd seen Pinkie like this before; all she had to do was stay in control.

"But... but it's too late. They saw me, they *know*," Pinkie whispered. Her voice sounded hoarse and frail, like it had travelled a long, long distance to reach Rainbow Dash's ears. "They saw. They saw me as crazy *Pinkamena* Pinkie instead of crazy *normal* Pinkie. They're, they're all going to hate me now! Y-you won't want to be my friend anymore, and, and..."

"Pinkie, stop."

"I *can't* stop!" Pinkie cried. Her face was twisting as if in pain. "They *know*! They *saw* me be totally crazy, and now they won't want to be my friends anymore, and, and neither will you, and everything's *ruined* now..."

It was amazing, really. How Pinkie was able to talk so much and so quickly, even in the midst of some kind of panic attack. At least it provided Rainbow Dash an opportunity to draw closer without the pink pony flinching away.

Settling down beside her, Rainbow Dash said, "You don't know that."

"...Huh?"

"You don't know that they'll hate you. Maybe you're wrong."

A hollow, bitter laugh. A defeated sound.

"Believe me, I *know*," Pinkie answered coldly. "That's how it *always* is. When I was a filly, nopony wanted me because I was useless; when I first decided to be happy, they thought I was annoying. Then they thought I must be insane because I was always flipping around my moods. When I left home and came to Ponyville, I wanted to make friends for once, so I compromised. If everypony thought I was crazy in a *funny* way, that was okay; at least they wouldn't leave me. But this... this is bad, this is really bad. Now they'll all think I'm crazy in a *c-crazy* way, crazy for real, and now they'll all be scared and stay away because *that's what happens*."

Pinkie was sniffing. Her voice wavered, and still, she looked like she was in pain.

Wordlessly, Rainbow Dash shuffled a little closer. She'd seated herself by Pinkie, leaving a few inches of space between them, but now, she drew close enough to touch, silently offering what little comfort she could as their shoulders brushed against one another.

"Pinkie, I seriously need to ask, before I say anything else," the pegasus said after a moment of shared silence, a silence only occasionally punctuated by Pinkie's snuffles. "What... what *was* all this, exactly? I mean... you said it was like you couldn't control yourself as Mare Do Well, and you're calling yourself Pinkie and Pinkamena, so... well, is this like multiple personalities, or something?"

And Pinkie sighed, a long and shuddering sigh.

"Not exactly," she mumbled. "I don't know. I mean, it's not like I actually lose time or anything. It's just... it's more like my *mood* changes. When I'm being Pinkie, I *want* to be fun and silly and happy, but when I'm being Pinkamena, I want to be taken seriously and I'm *tired* of being goofy. And then when I acted like Mare Do Well, I... I wanted *you* and I tried so, so hard to be cool and interesting for you. But then my mood would change again, and suddenly I'd want something else and I'd feel ashamed and embarrassed."

Rainbow Dash sighed as well, rubbing her suddenly-aching forehead with a hoof.

Not instability, then. Not exactly. At least, nothing scary like schizophrenia. More like fragility. Instead of multiple personalities, Pinkie was composed of the facets of *one* personality: an identity fragmented and scattered beyond belief.

"I'm so used to being a new pony with everypony I meet," Pinkie whispered. "I don't know what I actually *am* anymore."

"...I don't get it."

"With you, I want to be fun. With Mr. and Mrs. Cake, I want to be responsible. With almost everypony in town I want to show them a happy, silly Pinkie that they'll like, but with my family back home, I want them to see me as the serious pony they knew me as while I was growing up, because that's what they appreciate. And after a while, I got so used to always switching that I began to forget how I started out. I don't know *who* the real Pinkie Pie is anymore. I want to be happy, and sometimes I *am*, but I don't know if it's real or not."

This, more than anything else Pinkie had said so far, was something Rainbow Dash could understand. As a filly, she'd been self-conscious and fearful, but had trained herself to act bold and daring. Now, she couldn't imagine herself being any other way, not even if she



*wanted* to be different. She had no romantic experience at all, aside from the innocent crushes of her foalhood and that mess with Gilda, but she'd painted herself as some kind of heartbreaker to accompany her cocky image. Now, everypony believed that's who she *was*, and would likely completely flip out if she one day woke up and reverted back to her old self.

"I guess I *do* get it, then," was all Rainbow Dash said, unusually quietly.

Pinkie gave her a curious glance, as if trying to prompt her to continue. Instead, Rainbow Dash went on to say, "But if you've never shown anypony what you can really be like, how do you know they'll leave you?"

Pinkie gave no answer. She still stared at Dash, looking puzzled, her head cocked. Her pink mane hung like a curtain between them, shrouding her face from Rainbow Dash until she lifted a hoof and brushed it back over her shoulder, but then it slithered back into place, and she had to push it back once more, irritated.

*Pinkie shouldn't look irritated*, Rainbow couldn't help but think, before mentally chastising herself. The entire point of this conversation was that Pinkie Pie didn't know who she was anymore, and it certainly wouldn't help for Rainbow Dash to start blatantly telling her who she was and wasn't allowed to be.

"I mean... you really don't know," the pegasus continued, unsure about where she was going, but hoping she would find the words she needed if she just plowed on. "You've never let anypony see you like this, so you can't say for sure how they'd react. You don't *know* if they'll hate you or think you're crazy for real. How *can* you know, if you've never trusted them enough to test it out?"

Pinkie blinked.

The look of curiosity had been replaced by one of confusion.

"Because..." she began, before her voice faltered. "I... because..."

She looked lost.

"Remember your birthday?" Rainbow Dash continued. She could feel herself picking up steam; her voice became stronger with each word as her conviction grew. "I didn't leave you. Remember? You went completely loco, and I still stuck with you. And here I am, still with you even now. I bet any of our *other* friends would've done the same, too, because –"

"That's why I like you, you know," a soft voice interrupted. "Because of what happened. You saw me be somepony else and you stayed anyway."

"...*That's* why?"

The other mare nodded. A tiny smile was playing on her lips now; a sad one, true, but a smile nonetheless. "I think... I think it might've started even earlier than that. But that was when I *knew*. I'd been so sure that you girls all hated me and didn't want to be my friends anymore. I completely snapped, but then you came to see me and took me to my surprise party, even though I was being stupid and stubborn about it. It's like you're always there to bring me back when I start to go over the edge."

Pinkie's birthday. The inanimate guests, all puppeteered by Pinkie herself. The first time Rainbow Dash had genuinely been afraid of Pinkie's erratic behavior. At the time, it had felt like a major turning point in their friendship, but Dash had first begun to fear the possibility of Pinkie having a crush on her *long* before that. Her fears had begun soon after she and Gilda had dissolved their friendship. In retrospect, it might have been her imagination, but Pinkie Pie had seemed to be much clingier than usual in the time before and after that particular incident.

But your mind could play tricks on you. Maybe Dash *had* just been imagining it, or maybe she'd been in denial over her possibly reciprocating. Maybe Pinkie just hadn't realized how she'd felt, herself. Any of those possibilities were likely, and the truth was, it didn't really matter anymore. What mattered was that Pinkie Pie was giving her one of those too-complicated smiles: still small, still hesitant. No longer fearful, though; instead, it was almost shy.

It only lasted a moment before that timid smile faded, giving way to yet another expression of heartbreaking sadness that a pony like Pinkie never should've had to wear.

"The worst part about all of this is that I'm not even sure how much of it is real," Pinkie confessed, her voice low. "It's not just that I'm not sure who I actually am; it's that I'm not sure who I ever *was*. I can't even really remember anymore. I have these... these vague memories of being unhappy as a filly, but that was so long ago. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe my memory's mistaken. Maybe I was the happiest filly in the world and I just convinced myself later that I'd been troubled. I honestly don't even know."

"Well..." Rainbow Dash answered slowly. How did she always get stuck in these conversations? She didn't know anything about psychology. Anypony but her probably would've known exactly what to say right then, but she had no clue. "I guess... you just

start again. From scratch. But this time, you don't pretend. You just do and say exactly what you feel. And you know what? I *guarantee* you that everypony'll still like you, even if you're not completely happy all the time. Just look at Rarity. She's always having these total meltdowns, but we all put up with it. Right?"

Another hint of a smile, and then, another sigh.

"How did this happen?" Pinkie asked, almost mournfully. "You're doing it again... pulling me back from the edge. *I* wanted to be the one to take care of *you* for once."

"Technically, you did," Rainbow Dash mumbled grudgingly. Even if Mare Do Well *had* been Pinkie all along, that didn't do much to diminish how embarrassing it had been to need rescuing, not once, but twice. The only thing that might've made it worse was if Mare Do Well had been revealed to be Fluttershy or somepony. If *that* had happened, Rainbow likely would've gone into hiding in a cave someplace and never have come out.

"That's not really the same, though. I mean, it was fun, sort of, but... I dunno."

Gradually, she was slipping back into her old way of speaking, losing the formal, dignified air Mare Do Well had always spoken with.

"How was it *fun*?" asked Rainbow Dash.

And now, the smile was a sly one. "Because it was fun to tease you. You're cute when you're mad."

"I am *not*."

Her heated response was met with a giggle. "There," Pinkie said, prodding one of Rainbow Dash's cheeks almost triumphantly. "Your cheeks puff out and you make your face all squishy."

Rainbow's face might've stayed that way out of pure annoyance if Pinkie hadn't genuinely been grinning right then. As it was, Dash couldn't bring herself to stay angry, and instead found herself grinning as well, huge and happily, like an idiot.

*I really like you*, she wanted to say.

The words were on the tip of her tongue. Probably, that was a given, especially after the way Rainbow Dash had kissed Pinkie Pie earlier, even after Pinkie's confession, but she

still wanted to say it. And yet, she couldn't, her throat closing up at the mere thought of it.

Her wings were beating, slowly and steadily, restless from pent-up energy she was beginning to feel.

Whatever had happened, Pinkie was still Pinkie. Even though Rainbow Dash had been almost unspeakably angry with her – and justifiably so, she believed – it hadn't changed the way she felt when her eyes fell on the pink pony: a fondness, which she'd once mistaken for some sense of deep, abiding friendship, which only grew more and more with each day that passed. A fondness that made her want to – no, *need* to reach out and touch her, just to see if Pinkie was still there, beside her. Still real.

If Rainbow Dash had fallen in love with both Mare Do Well *and* Pinkie Pie, surely that meant something. And if they were both just alternating personas of the same pony, then, well...

Before Rainbow Dash could stop and rethink what she wanted to do next, she did it. After all, Rainbow Dash *never* thought ahead. She was a pegasus of action.

It shouldn't have felt so huge. In theory, at least, the effect should've been somewhat diminished by now. After all, she'd kissed Mare Do Well Celestia knows how many times in the alley, and then she'd kissed Pinkie as herself surprisingly often, too. Even so, when their lips now met, yet again, it felt like they were kissing for the very first time.

A glow of warmth, spreading through Rainbow Dash's body, wings spreading in excitement; a blush touching her cheeks; the shape of a smile against her own. But this time, there was no desperation, no reason to stop or interruptions of any kind. They were alone and they were together and both of them wanted the same thing; two broken and splintered ponies, finding wholeness in one another. If only for a little while.

• • •

One night *wasn't* enough to fix everything, just like Rainbow Dash had warned, but still they stayed together in that quiet room, just the two of them. And then, the night eventually gave way to the morning, and from it emerged two ponies, changed in almost imperceptible ways – both of them exhausted and scarred, but looking considerably happier than they had before.

At breakfast, Twilight had given them a knowing look when they entered together, but Dash couldn't be bothered to get annoyed, because just as she and Pinkie had sat down,

she'd felt Pinkie's tail switch, brushing against her and sending shivers of pleasure throughout her entire body.

Since the entire conflict from the evening before had stemmed from Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash ostensibly arguing, their coming to breakfast together seemed to confirm that there was nothing to worry about, and none of the others said a thing about it. Again, this was suspicious, but Dash suspected that Twilight *had* heard their conversation and had warned the others just to leave them be. For a unicorn who'd first arrived in Ponyville with no social skills at all having been assigned the task of learning about friendship by her mentor, she could be surprisingly insightful at times.

Hearth's Warming Day itself was a quiet, solemn affair at the palace, unlike the joyful celebrations everywhere else in Equestria. At least, until that night. Although the morning was somber enough and full of ceremony and ritual, by nightfall, things were in full swing; there were food and gifts and carols, like any other Hearth's Warming celebration. And then, that night, as well, Rainbow Dash found her way to Pinkie's room, and the second night began – a night of speaking in hushed whispers, of silent tears, then quiet smiles and soft kisses before falling asleep together.

So, no, one night *wasn't* enough to fully repair the damage that had been done. But there was no time limit, after all – no rule saying they only *had* one night. They were friends and lived in the same village, seeing each other nearly every day. They had as many nights as they wanted to find their way. If it took a thousand, so be it.

• • •

Applejack was the only one to mention anything about that night at all. Once the six of them had at last returned to Ponyville, the farmer had approached Rainbow Dash, looking guilty, before saying, "I'm awful sorry, Rainbow Dash."

And Dash, like the idiot she was, said, "Sorry about what?"

Applejack winced, pawing at the ground with a hoof – a nervous habit she must have picked up from Fluttershy. "About... about the party. I shouldn't've given you anythin' to drink. I shoulda known better. I'm sorry, though, and... and if it makes you feel any better, I did somethin' kinda dumb that night, too."

But before Rainbow Dash could ask her what she meant, Applejack scurried away, looking for all the world like she was too embarrassed to be honest for once.

"What was *that* about?" she asked Pinkie.

"Probably Rarity," came Pinkie's cryptic reply, complete with a suggestive waggle of her eyebrows before sticking her tongue out at Dash.

Rainbow Dash had been dumbfounded by this answer, almost wanting to laugh, but once you knew to look for something, it was almost impossible not to see it. Suddenly, whenever Applejack and Rarity were together, all Rainbow could see was the gallant way Applejack would hold doors open for the unicorn, or how Rarity always seemed to be looking for excuses to style her mane. Although they argued, that didn't keep them from stealing glances at one another, turning bright red if they ever happened to look at the same time.

*Really?* the pegasus wanted to ask them, grabbing the two by the shoulders and pulling them into a huddle. *Are you two serious?*

But who was she to question it? Besides, it wasn't like either of them even seemed to notice it themselves. For once, Rainbow Dash was on the other side of that knowing smile that friends who were all in on the same secret tended to wear, even though it drove Applejack nuts and caused Rarity to haughtily feign indifference.

• • •

There were nights when all Rainbow Dash wanted to do was ask questions. Questions that hadn't occurred to her before, or clarification that she needed to fully understand something, and Pinkie would answer them all, giving whatever explanations the pegasus seemed to require, even though it obviously caused her pain.

Other nights, Rainbow Dash would talk about herself, instead, and Pinkie would listen, so, so patiently. To Dash's many stories about growing up – about flight school, about Fluttershy and Gilda – never offering even a single judgmental word of reproach, even as Dash confessed to her many embarrassing mistakes over the years.

And still on other nights, Pinkie would talk, instead. Not about Mare Do Well, but about her memories of her foalhood. She always had so much to say – much, much more than Rainbow Dash ever did, which meant occasionally, Dash would have to interrupt or cut her off with a kiss just to get a word in edgewise. But Pinkie never complained. Rainbow Dash was too restless to sit and listen as patiently as Pinkie did, but that didn't seem to bother the pink pony at all. She seemed happy just to be in Rainbow's company or to return the kiss with enthusiasm.

They made no grand announcement of the change that had come over the two of them, but the others seemed to pick up on it, anyway. It wasn't as if Rainbow or Pinkie actually tried to *hide* it – they just didn't go out of their way to advertise it. Maybe Twilight *had* said something, or maybe the others had been expecting something like this to happen eventually.

At first, the relationship they struggled to establish was wavering and uncertain, built on little more than these shared nights and tiny gestures of affection. It didn't take much to shake it, as they were already on the brink.

When Rainbow Dash finally summoned the courage to say those four little words – *I really like you* – Pinkie Pie reacted by bursting into tears before throwing herself at the pegasus in a fierce hug. Something similar happened the first time Rainbow Dash was given the idea to bring Pinkie flowers, as well. Rarity had been the one to suggest it, ever the hopeless romantic; again, Pinkie had burst into tears upon seeing them. That time, though, she'd apologized for her outburst by later sending Rainbow Dash a bouquet of her own. Red carnations.

The sight of them alone induced a momentary flutter of panic in Dash's stomach, but the note accompanying them consisted only of a crudely drawn pegasus wearing a big smile. *Remember to smile*, it said.

Sometimes they would be alone together, on one of the nights where there was no talking at all, and Rainbow Dash would find herself confronted with something darker than the Pinkie Pie she was slowly getting to know. On those nights, Pinkie's whispers and her laughter would take on a seductive tone, and the way her hooves travelled over Rainbow's body, caressing her wings, were eerily reminiscent of those nights in the alley. Before Dash even knew what she was doing, she'd shoved Pinkie away – and that was all it took for Pinkie's mood to change yet again, voice breaking as she begged for forgiveness.

The sixth or seventh time this happened, Rainbow Dash just seized Pinkie's hoof and firmly pulled it back into place against her wing, an action that seemed to both shock and delight Pinkie, prompting her to pull the pegasus into another eager kiss.

And so the nights passed.

By day, things were much the same as usual; the change had come so quietly as to be practically unnoticeable. There *were* days, though, where Pinkie Pie wouldn't smile quite as widely as she used to. Days where she wouldn't even smile at all. Days where she wouldn't go off on quite as many tangents, or where her hair just wouldn't curl the way it

usually did. At first, Pinkie would hide on these days, refusing to leave her room or the company of Gummy, but at last, Rainbow Dash managed to entice her outside, and they continued from there. Step by step.

Winter came to an end, and true to her word, Rainbow Dash worked twice as hard at Winter Wrap-Up, bringing in spring with a previously unheard-of gusto. From the skies, she watched as Pinkie scored the ice, twisting and leaping as gracefully as a pegasus dancing amongst the clouds.

The chill of winter faded, melting into the delirious golden warmth of summer.

A broken mirror would always show cracks. Even if every piece were to be glued back into place, the spider-web thin fractures would continue to carve elaborate patterns across the surface and the mirror would never truly be repaired – but it would still reflect. That was what Rainbow and Pinkie were like, now. Every day that passed saw yet another piece be put back into place, slowly putting them back together again.

For a time, it was like they both underwent a shared period of mourning, but Mare Do Well had never been real, Dash had to remind herself again and again.

It hurt. But you couldn't lose somepony who had never existed, and there came a day at last when Rainbow Dash was able to see Pinkie and smile at her without the smile being touched by some kind of imperceptible sadness.

*But this is fun, isn't it?* Mare Do Well had asked. *The games we play. I chase you, you chase me. Like an elaborate game of hide and seek; neither of us reaching each other, both of us circling one another...*

It had seemed more like a game of tug-o-war at times. After all, both of them had been pulling as hard as they could without giving an inch themselves. And yet, it *had* been a kind of hide and seek in the end – the biggest difference being that Pinkie had *wanted* to be found.

*Here I am. This is what I look like.*

A realization of this magnitude may have been something to write a letter to the princess about on any other occasion. If only Rainbow Dash had known what to say.

When she'd mentioned it to Pinkie on one of the good days – a day when both Pinkie and Dash were able to laugh and smile without that edge to it – Pinkie had suggested the



lesson, "don't say your pet alligator ate your costume when he doesn't even have teeth" and Rainbow Dash had rolled her eyes.

Sometimes in life, you had experiences that were much too complicated to summarize in a mere few words, but if Rainbow Dash were to have tried, maybe she would've said something about falling. About how fearing the fall didn't stop it from happening. About how all you could do was try and ensure a soft landing. About how being afraid didn't always mean there was a genuine cause for fear, and that sometimes you could come out all right, after all.

She wasn't a poet, though, and didn't have any special way with words. So Dash settled for letting the subject go, and instead basking in the warmth of one of Pinkie Pie's true smiles.

The costume was returned to Applejack's closet without a word.

And at last there was a day when Rainbow Dash was finally able to say it – *I love you* – only for Pinkie Pie to begin laughing and crying at the same time.

Even if they didn't know where they were going or what would come of it, they still continued onwards, going ever forwards. Their days and nights revolved around one another, and never before had Rainbow Dash felt quite at peace with herself in the same way she felt around Pinkie.

*I love you too, Dashie.*

Every kiss tasted as sweet as that first time. Every night felt as monumental. Every day felt as glorious and beautiful. If anything, life, something that had once seemed so hard, was mending right alongside them.

"I love you," Rainbow Dash had said again, but it wasn't enough. Pinkie needed to hear her, needed to know that she really and truly meant it. "I love you, Pinkie, I love you so –"

And she was cut off with a kiss.

The promises they made began to overshadow the lies they'd told, and the scars began to heal, until eventually they were barely noticeable anymore.

With the end of each day came the refitting of another piece, and whether there'd truly been a winner or a loser to their little game went unmentioned.

They were beyond that.

Those who watched them from the outside might have laughed. The two biggest pranksters in Ponyville, tamed by the wonders of first love, made docile by the puppyish devotion that now bound them to each other. But if any of them had known what had transpired during the months previous, maybe they wouldn't have laughed. You could never really know, though. You could never say for sure what was happening in somepony else's private life, or what they were thinking in their most secret thoughts.

Neither of them cared, though. It was enough that they could fall asleep wrapped in one another, and that they could take walks with their tails twisted together – a show of affection so common between young couples. It was enough that Pinkie would surprise Rainbow Dash all throughout the day with random sugary treats, and that Rainbow Dash began to frequent Sugarcube Corner more and more, under the disapproving gaze of Mr. Cake. It was enough that Rainbow Dash began to entice Pinkie on her back, so that she could take her flying, swearing up and down all the while that she would never let the pink pony fall.

It was enough that they could watch the sun rise, and Rainbow Dash could turn to see Pinkie smiling and know that she meant it.

It was enough. Because it meant that – no matter what else happened – right then and there, in that moment in time, they were happy.

It meant that everything was going to be fine. It meant that everything would be all right. There wasn't much more you could ask for, really. Those snapshots of happiness *had* to be enough.

And when Rainbow Dash lifted her head to see Pinkie beside her, whether it was a good day or not and the expression gracing her face was a smile or a frown, it felt like more than she deserved.

The sentiment never rang truer for her than those times when Rainbow would catch a glimpse of Pinkie and the smile would falter, flickering for just a moment, and she would see the exact same wonder in those big and beautiful blue eyes of hers – wondering how this had happened. How this had come together. How it hadn't all collapsed already.

Those were the moments when she knew, with a conviction stronger than anything she had ever felt before.

No more hiding. No more pretending. There was only the two of them, and together, as broken as they were, they could make the whole they'd both so desperately sought out.

And they were going to be okay.