

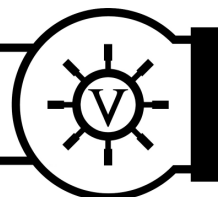
A Shower of Stars

Caerdwyn

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 — Dinner Flight	2
Chapter 2 — Fly Me to the Moon	8
Chapter 3 — Satori	12
Chapter 4 — The Star of the Show	16
Chapter 5 — The Finest Hour	21
Epilogue — The Element of Loyalty	26

PONY FICTION VAULT



*Marvel not if the family of Heaven still dazzle thee.
It is a messenger that comes to invite all to ascend.*

—D. Alighieri

Twilight was hanging on for dear life.

As a long-time resident of Canterlot, favored by the Princess Celestia almost as an apprentice, Twilight had often ridden pegasus-chariots reserved for the elite. It was among the best ways for ponies without wings to travel, and had never been a frightening experience. But then, she had never ridden a chariot pulled by Rainbow Dash.

"Slow down!" Twilight pleaded as she wrapped her forelegs around the guard-rail of the passenger cockpit. "This is just a prototype!" As if on cue, one of the running-lights tore free of the yoke and fell, hopefully to land somewhere uninhabited. The outskirts of Canterlot were almost a mile below, and Twilight was also worried about the effects of altitude on the spells she had cast upon the chariot. The panicked words were all but lost in the wind-noise though, and Twilight resorted to grabbing Rainbow Dash's tail in her teeth and tugging to get the headstrong pony's attention.

"Oh, all right," Rainbow Dash grumbled, easing her pace. "I just wanted to see how much drag your 'performance chariot' generated, that's all!" She looked back over her shoulder and laughed. "You can let go of my tail now."

Twilight released her driver's tail and gingerly stood up in the chariot, noting with dismay where cracks in the framework had appeared. At least the wheels hadn't fallen off, and the passenger platform was intact. "Next time I'm going to bring a parachute. And some reins. And a buggy-whip."

Rainbow Dash snorted in response. "The pegasus-guards don't have reins."

"The pegasus-guards have self-control! You can bet that they have to show restraint when they pull the Princess. They're orderly and professional and disciplined. You'd hate it. Why in the world would you want to be in the Guard anyway?"

"Because they have that cool armor! And they get to kick butts when ponies get in the Princess' face too much!" Rainbow Dash made a little bucking motion, causing her passenger to duck.

Twilight sighed and shook her wind-tousled mane. "When have you ever heard of the Guard actually 'kicking butts'? They're soldiers, not bouncers at a nightclub!"

"Yeah, well, I'm really doing this because I saw the Wonderbolts pulling stunt ponies on air-skis once. If they know how to tow, I gotta know too! Besides," Rainbow Dash said with a Rarity-like toss of her head, "Princess Celestia said I was the best flier in Equestria. She might want to get somewhere in a hurry someday. And might want to look cool doing it too, y'know?" She accelerated for a moment, just enough to allow her rainbow-trail to manifest.

A splintering sound interrupted Rainbow Dash, and Twilight watched with dismay as a wheel-fender and a few inches of guard-rail fell away. Twilight's horn glowed a moment as she telekinetically snatched the fragments of the chariot before they were lost. "I'm going to need air-skis if this thing falls apart. The integrity spell is damaged, and the frame is too light to hold together without it. Can we land? Gently, please?"

"Sure," Rainbow Dash replied as she began a slow, spiraling descent. "I'm getting hungry anyway. Hauling you around is hard work!"

Twilight almost snorted at the mention of 'hard work' from Rainbow Dash, but managed to keep quiet... Rainbow Dash did indeed put a great deal of effort into perfecting her flying skills. 'Credit where credit is due', as the saying went. Twilight pointed a hoof downward at a plaza near the royal palace. "There are some wonderful places to eat there. My treat!"

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Those are the magic words!"

Several minutes passed, with the chariot slowly coming apart. The sun was setting, its light reddening upon the west walls of Canterlot. Twilight's horn glowed as she kept the chariot together, reinforcing the failing integrity spell. It was not difficult, as the spell was already in place; it just needed active management. As they approached the plaza, a mail-clad pegasus flew up to meet them, banking around to parallel the chariot. "This is restricted airspace! You must— oh, it's you, Miss Sparkle." The pegasus guard pointedly ignored Rainbow Dash. "Do you need help landing your... vehicle?"

"Oh! Hello, Lieutenant Cloudmane," Twilight replied. "I think things are under control. Thank you though!"

"Hey, am I invis—" Rainbow Dash started to protest the snub, but then recognized the guard-pony. It was one of the soldiers whom she had taunted weeks ago in Ponyville. She silenced herself, and flew sulkily ahead, making a show of ignoring the guard as surely as he was ignoring her.

The guard nodded his head to Twilight in a small bow. "My pleasure, Ma'am. Welcome back to Canterlot!" He saluted Twilight with a forehoof, glared distastefully at Rainbow Dash, then turned away toward the palace.

After the guard was out of earshot, Rainbow Dash asked, "You know Mister Stuffypants?"

"Of course I do," Twilight said. "There aren't *that* many—" She paused a moment to straighten one of the wheels which threatened to come off of its hub, a brief sparkle from her horn marking the magic in action. "—that many guards at the palace grounds. He used to be assigned to the Royal Observatory, when I was in Celestia's School." Twilight grinned impishly at Rainbow Dash. "Why, would you like me to introduce you? As far as I know, he's single..."

"No. We've met," Rainbow Dash sullenly replied. "Now lemme concentrate. We're about to land!"

She was quiet for a few moments as she lined up their approach to the plaza, their slower speed turning the thermal buffeting of the sun-warmed evening air from sharp jolts to gentle bounces. The light cross-wind was corrected for by lowering her upwind wing and steering slightly into the breeze. The plaza ahead was sparsely populated; there was plenty of room. Rainbow Dash cupped her wings, shedding speed for more lift and a slower sink-rate.

The cobbled pavement loomed below them as they approached the ground. Twilight braced herself...

The landing was surprisingly gentle; for all her bluster and inexperience with pulling carts and chariots, Rainbow Dash did know how to fly well. The chariot's wheels touched, then Rainbow Dash's hooves. Three powerful reversed wing-flaps brought them to rest. As soon as the chariot came to a halt, Twilight relaxed. The spell binding the chariot together evaporated, and with a clatter the chariot collapsed into a heap all around Twilight. Rainbow Dash grinned saucily at her as she shrugged out of the harness.

"Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing. Now let's eat!"

• • •

Twilight and Rainbow Dash sat at an outdoor table covered with a red-and-white checkered tablecloth. Before them, the crusts of a veggie-combo-super-deluxe pizza were all that was left of their dinner. Twilight had been right; "Momma Gaspacho's", though somewhat fancy as pizza parlors go, was excellent, and both Twilight and Rainbow Dash enjoyed eating outdoors. The night sky was starting to show after a spectacular sunset. Tonight was the night of the new moon, and the stars were especially brilliant. Already there had been several dazzling shooting stars, much to Twilight's surprise; her astronomical ephemeris had said nothing about meteors on this date. Even Rainbow Dash, normally unimpressed by natural displays, was entranced by the streaks of light. Both ponies found themselves intently watching the sky for more.

"Well, hello, my faithful student! And you also, Rainbow Dash."

Twilight and Rainbow Dash leaped in surprise to their feet, having not heard anyone approaching. They turned to face the elegant white alicorn who had quietly alighted behind them. They both bowed deeply, as did the restaurant's waitstaff and other customers. Princess Celestia nodded in acceptance of the formal greeting, then smiled at the two ponies. "I was informed of your visit. I'm glad I caught you before you left." She moved her head slightly, her long horn indicating a guard-pegasus standing at the patio gate. As she turned back to the two at the table, the guard stuck out his tongue at Rainbow Dash, who gaped in surprise. Lieutenant Cloudmane chuckled quietly, muttering something about sauces and geese.

Twilight and Rainbow Dash quickly invited Celestia to join them. Celestia sat at the table, a purple cushion placed under her by their waiter just before the royal rump met the ground. "Are you here for the falling stars?" Celestia asked. As she spoke, another waiter set desserts before all three, unbidden; the house specialty, bak-klover, a sweet, nutty, flaky pastry atop a bed of shamrock-like wood-sorrel.

"We were, um, just in the area testing something," said Twilight. In the nearby street, the civic maintenance-ponies were loading the last of the remains of the chariot into a cart to be hauled back to the Ponyville library for a post-mortem. Celestia was politely pretending to not draw a connection between the 'test' and the 'results', though Twilight knew Celestia well enough to be certain that she would have immediately come to an accurate conclusion. Twilight felt the need to change the subject. "I didn't know there was a meteor-shower tonight. But this would be a great place to watch them from!"

The cafe's patio had a splendid view of the sky and nearby palace, and Celestia nodded agreement. "Luna is particularly excited about the shower. She informed me there would likely be a star-fall tonight, then excused herself to the observatory earlier this afternoon. I believe she has been there ever since." Celestia lowered her head as she magicked the dessert up and began nibbling at it. Twilight and Rainbow Dash immediately began on their own, protocol and manners having been satisfied by waiting for the princess to start eating first. The other patrons of the restaurant returned to their meals, and the waiters to their duties.

"It's good to see her so interested in things like this," Celestia continued. "My sister is turning into quite the little bookworm! I may need to send her to Ponyville to make some friends, though." She winked at Twilight, who blushed. Celestia then turned to Rainbow Dash. "And what of you, my favored flier?"

"Oh!" said Rainbow Dash, a little startled. She had been keeping her silence, intimidated by (and a little jealous of) the camaraderie between Twilight and Celestia. "Um, well, your Majesty, I've been working on my flying. That's kinda why we're here, Twilight was helping me..." She trailed off for a moment, as the

results had not been brag-worthy, then hastily went on. "I gotta be as good as I can if I'm gonna get into the Wonderbolts someday!"

Celestia laughed merrily. "Oh, I have no doubt that you will. But there's so much more to being a Wonderbolt than flight skills."

Rainbow Dash looked a little puzzled. "What do you mean, Princess—" She suddenly stopped and stared. Overhead, behind Celestia, a tight formation of pegasus ponies streaked across the sky from the direction of Cloudsdale, marker-lights attached to ankle-bands on their hooves showing the group clearly. It was the Alpha Team of the Wonderbolts, and they were in a hurry, heading toward the royal palace.

Celestia, curious as to what had Rainbow Dash's attention, turned and watched the flight squad as they landed on a balcony on the upper reaches of a tower into which Twilight had never been allowed. "What a strange coincidence," she said mildly. But there was a slight frown of worry on Celestia's face, a frown which intensified as another pegasus-guard flew down from the palace to the restaurant patio. The guard's bow was hasty, and without waiting for the princess to prompt him, he immediately leaned forward to whisper into the princess' ear.

Twilight and Rainbow Dash looked quizzically at each other. There was an uncomfortably long hushed exchange between the princess and the guard. Celestia then stood and turned to face the palace. She looked back over shoulder, her manner having suddenly become aloof and formal. "I am afraid I am needed elsewhere." A chill went down Twilight's spine; she had seen the princess like this before, and it always had preceded something serious. Celestia continued as she spread her wings, "Until I see you again, I hope you are—"

Celestia stopped, paused a long moment as she considered Twilight and Rainbow Dash, then said, "Actually... would you both join me, after you have finished your desserts? I may need your help."

Twilight and Rainbow Dash both took a moment to absorb that. Almost in unison they answered, "Yes, Princess!"

Celestia dipped her horn. "Thank you. I will send someone to fetch you." Twilight and Rainbow Dash bowed as Celestia took flight along with her escorts. Almost as if on cue, a meteor overhead left a glowing trail, then flared as it silently burst into nothingness.

Rainbow Dash pranced a moment in excitement at having been personally asked to help the Princess over a mysterious matter. "She needs *us*! She needs *us*!" That excitement quickly turned to nervousness as she saw the concern on Twilight's face and the implications sank in. "Waitamminute. Why would *she* need us?" Rainbow Dash's usual self-assured attitude was suddenly gone as visions of dragons filled her mind.

Twilight shook her head. "I don't know." But her eyes followed Celestia in the distance. The princess was heading not to the palace, but to the observatory.

*The Stars with deep amaze
Stand fit in steadfast gaze,
Bending one way their precious influence,
And will not take their flight.*

—J. Milton

It did not take long before the promised messenger arrived. She introduced herself as Nimbus, and led Rainbow Dash and Twilight on the ground in deference to Twilight's lack of wings. Nimbus was a white-maned pegasus with a pale blue color. On her haunch was a stylized fireworks-rocket, and she was a few years older than the ponies she had been sent to guide. As Twilight had suspected, their destination was the dome of the observatory. The shutters were wide open, and the inside was darkened. The building was silhouetted against the starry sky, dramatically framed by the flaring trails of meteors.

Twilight tried to ask the messenger what she knew about the Princess' summons, but Nimbus would only reply, "I'm not at liberty to say." Nimbus had an air of detached formality about her, a mannerism which Twilight found somewhat impersonal. Her manners and eloquence were, however, unquestionable.

Nimbus had her own questions though, primarily for Rainbow Dash. Apparently, Nimbus had heard more about Rainbow Dash than about Twilight, and Rainbow Dash was certainly in a more talkative mood. Twilight was content to listen quietly to the others' conversation.

"I saw your performance at the Young Flier competition," Nimbus was saying. "Spectacular, if I may say so."

"Thanks!" said Rainbow Dash, a little strut coming to her steps. "I was nervous at first. Well, just a *little* nervous, anyway."

Both Twilight and Nimbus laughed, though perhaps for different reasons. "A little, yes," Nimbus replied. "It takes some getting used to, being stared at like that, by that many ponies. Funny how it doesn't matter who's watching when things turn serious though, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah," laughed Rainbow Dash. "Lemme guess, you entered the Young Fliers competition too?"

Nimbus shook her head. "I was too afraid to fly competitively, back then. You're a leg up on me in that regard. I got started late."

Rainbow Dash was going to ask what that meant, but at that moment they arrived at the gates of the observatory grounds. There were two of the palace guards – unicorn guards, Twilight and Rainbow Dash noticed – at the gates. Twilight

looked puzzled, as the observatory was not normally considered sensitive even when there was a princess using the instruments. The guards saluted, and one said, "They are awaiting inside, Lieutenant Firestreak."

"Fire—" Rainbow Dash froze in mid-step, her wings splaying. "Nimbus Firestreak? Omigosh omigosh omigosh omiGLURK"

Twilight stuffed a hoof into Rainbow Dash's mouth. Nimbus turned around, a silent question on her face. Twilight giggled and asked, "I'm going to guess you're a member of the Wonderbolts?"

Nimbus nodded and grinned. "Their most junior member, actually. Beta team alternate. And occasional errand-pony, when I'm out of uniform."

Twilight cautiously withdrew her hoof, ready to put it back if needed. Rainbow Dash was, fortunately, in the 'speechless' phase of her hero-shock. Nimbus took advantage of the moment.

"I need to go," Nimbus said. "The princesses await you, and my uniform awaits me! Perhaps I'll see you later tonight?" she said to Rainbow Dash. A little "squee!" was the only answer. Nimbus laughed, waved a hoof in farewell to Twilight, then leaped into the air and headed toward the tower which the other Wonderbolts had flown earlier.

Twilight had to practically drag Rainbow Dash into the observatory by her tail.

• • •

Twilight glanced around as she entered the observation-dome. Things had changed since last she was here. The myriad of smaller instruments, some of which she had duplicates of back in the Ponyville library, had been replaced by a single powerful telescope with a brass gear-festooned tracking mechanism. The oaken floor was as lovingly polished as ever, though, and the elegant high-precision clock was the same as she remembered. A table with books and scrolls was next to the clock, along with an assortment of writing and calculating instruments. Dim marker-lights provided enough illumination for visitors to get about without tripping, and a single shaded lamp on the desk created a small pool of light. Two more palace guards, unicorns like the ones outside, waited quietly and alertly next to the curved dome wall.

The two princesses stood to one side, speaking quietly. It was obvious that Luna was upset; her head was down and her wings extended and low. She seemed like she wanted to hide somewhere. Celestia looked up at Twilight and Rainbow Dash, then beckoned them over.

"Your Majesties," Twilight said as she and Rainbow Dash made small curtsseys. "What can we help you with?"

"Thank you for coming." Celestia looked over at Luna. "We need to have something verified. Sister, would you show our friends what you showed me?"

Luna took a deep breath, then stepped over to the telescope. She looked up at the slice of sky the open dome-shutter exposed. Another pair of glowing plasma-trails appeared, then faded. Luna's horn shone dimly for a moment, and the telescope slewed toward what appeared to be the center of the falling stars. She glanced at the telescope's coordinate-rings, looked into the eyepiece for a moment, then stepped back. "Please, look."

Twilight peered into the eyepiece, then gasped. "I've never seen anything like it. That's beautiful... what are they?" Before Luna could answer, Rainbow Dash bumped Twilight aside.

"Lemme see!" Rainbow Dash looked through the telescope, then drew in a deep breath. There were many, many more stars that she could not see with her eyes unaided; they sparkled like a handful of diamonds cast into the night. As her vision adjusted to the dark, she could see washes of faint purple and pink, wispy clouds that she instinctively knew no pegasus would ever touch. The sight was soul-stirring, but it was not the stars or the star-clouds which held attention. Within the field of view were three intense motes of light, each surrounded by a glittering cluster of dim red sparks like tightly-packed swarms of fireflies. "Wow," she said. "That's... awesome."

"Those aren't comets," Twilight said, but not in the self-satisfied voice she usually used when lecturing ponies on matters of magic and science. She was more subdued than normal. "Are these why you asked us here, Princess?"

Luna nodded. "Look again... look carefully." She was obviously trying to not suggest what to look for, not trying to lead the ponies to any particular conclusion. Twilight again approached the telescope, but Rainbow Dash stubbornly would not move away from the eyepiece.

"Hey, I can see them moving!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. Indeed, the telescope itself was very slowly in motion, tracking the objects.

Twilight looked startled. "That must mean they're very close," she said. Luna and Celestia glanced at each other, then back to Twilight. There was a sudden sinking feeling in the pit of Twilight's stomach. She asked Luna, "Princess, do you have tracking data from earlier?"

Luna's horn glowed, and a notebook with neatly-recorded coordinates levitated up and hovered before Twilight. Twilight looked at the telescope's coordinate-rings to see precisely where it was currently aimed, then at the nearby clock, then back at the numbers within the book. She began calculating, her own horn aglow as a pencil scrawled equations in the margins of the notebook, accompanied by a slide-rule that rapidly generated numbers in response to Twilight's manipulation.

Twilight was muttering: "...the radial delta... now take the cosine... an eccentricity greater than one? That's hyperbolic! Okay, that means... solve for intersections..." The others watched pensively.

Even Rainbow Dash knew that something serious was happening, though she had no idea what. She felt irritable, largely because she knew that this all was way over her head, both literally and intellectually. She did not have to wait long for an explanation, though. Twilight suddenly let out a gasp, putting a hoof to her mouth.

"What?" Rainbow Dash demanded.

"Just before the dawn?" asked Luna.

"Yes, Princess, about two hours before sunrise," said Twilight in a hushed voice.

Rainbow Dash nudged Twilight. "What is it?"

Celestia closed her eyes, a ripple of sparks flowing down her ethereal mane. "So you were right, Luna. Forgive me for not acting earlier... I had to be sure."

"WHAT?!" Rainbow Dash cried out, her frustration overwhelming her restraint in the presence of royalty.

Twilight turned eyes filled with dread upon her friend. "The... meteors? Whatever they are... they're going to hit Equestria. Tonight."

Luna, her head again lowered, added in a barely-audible voice, "And it's my fault."

*Beyond the path of the outmost sun through utter darkness hurled
Further than ever comet flared or vagrant star-dust swirled
Live such as fought and sailed and ruled and loved and made our world.*
—R. Kipling

The room at the top of the off-limits tower was unlike any that Twilight or Rainbow Dash had ever seen. A large circular floor, inlaid with several types of luxurious wood in the same stylized sunburst that Celestia bore on her haunch, dominated the room. It was sunken into a recess, and a circular table surrounded it completely with the exception of two walkways. On the wall beyond the tables, high-quality maps, framed as if they were art, hung on the walls. The somewhat-harsh lighting came from an array of overhead spotlights, with the brightest illuminating the central floor. This place, which Celestia described as the "incident room", had a deadly serious feeling to it.

Twilight would have liked to study the maps (particularly the ones of the lands neighboring Equestria), but there was no time for that. She and Rainbow Dash were escorted by unicorn-guards to places at the surrounding table. There were others in attendance. The Wonderbolts' leader (whom everyone simply called "Captain") also stood at the table, as did the commander of the Royal Guard, the chief archivist, the headmaster of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and several ponies that Twilight knew only by sight, some of whom stood at the tables, some of whom were standing by the walls with rank-and-file Wonderbolts and mid-level guard officers. Nimbus, now in her Wonderbolt flight suit, waited behind Twilight and Rainbow Dash, her presence somehow comforting to them.

Celestia and Luna stood upon the central floor, speaking very quietly to each other. As the last of the attendees entered and the doors were closed, Celestia rapped a golden-shod hoof on the floor. Conversations ceased immediately.

"Friends, thank you for your attendance on such short notice," she began. All bowed their heads. "There is little time to waste, so I will keep the formalities to a minimum. Though not all of you have met each other, it is enough to know that you are all defenders of the land of Equestria, and have in the past put yourselves at risk for its good. Tonight, I must ask you to do so again."

There was an intensity and aura of command about Celestia which neither Twilight nor Rainbow Dash had ever experienced. This was not the gentle motherly ruler of Equestria; this was royalty in the most meaningful sense.

"A threat approaches from the night sky," the princess continued. "Some of you may have heard or guessed something of it already. The falling stars which you may have seen tonight are its harbingers. Please lend an ear to Princess Luna; she can explain better than I."

Luna stepped forward. For a moment, she hung her head. Her eyes lifted, and met Twilight's, just for a moment. Luna took a deep breath, then stood straight. When she spoke, her voice had an older, world-weary timbre; even the very words she chose belied her young appearance.

"Do you remember the ancient tales? 'The stars shall aid her escape.' The... thing that I was, Nightmare Moon, did escape. None are gladder than I am that she was defeated." The princess dipped her horn toward Rainbow Dash and Twilight, eliciting deep blushes from the two and curious glances from others. "Yet, her plots... *my* plots, I am ashamed to say... did not disappear with her. She set some of the stars themselves against Equestria. If she could not rule, she at least would have vengeance."

There was a chill silence. Some of the attendees looked upon Luna with pity, some with fear, and some with open loathing. Celestia again tapped a hoof, an expression of stern disapproval on her face as she wordlessly reminded all that this was her sister the princess Luna, not the creature Nightmare Moon.

Luna glanced at Celestia, who nodded. "Show them," Celestia said.

Luna closed her eyes and spread her wings. The lights seemed to recede, and wisps of star-dusted night flowed from her mane and tail, filling the room like a fog. As the gathered ponies watched nervously, a ghostly outline of Luna seemed to grow from her, becoming slimmer and taller until it stood as tall as Celestia. There were whispers of "Nightmare...!", but these were hushed as the outline became more distinct. This was not Nightmare Moon, but the regal Princess of the Stars, equal of the Sun-Princess... what Luna might have been, had there not been a thousand years of timeless exile and heartless rage.

The dark mist around the ponies dissipated. They were all standing on nothingness, surrounded on all sides, above and below, by a sky darker than any Equestrian night and stars more brilliant than any diamond. There was no sign of the furnishings, the walls, the floor, anything of the room which they had been in, though the ponies' hooves still felt something underfoot. Several of the pegasus ponies present reflexively flapped their wings, though doing so only set them hovering in place. In their midst, Celestia and the regal ghost-Luna stood; the post-adolescent Luna whom they knew was not to be found.

Luna gestured with a wing. "There they are," she said in a breathy, ethereal voice, "the revenge of Nightmare Moon." All turned to look where she had indicated. Three luminous star-like objects – the same which Twilight and Rainbow Dash had seen in the telescope earlier – were moving steadily toward a blue-green disc. Along their path, both preceding and trailing the bright specks, were the lesser sparks. Some had almost reached the disc.

"These are the spirits of wrathful stars, given form. I had hoped they would have disappeared when Nightmare Moon was defeated, but it seems they have a life of

their own now. They are not normal, natural meteors, which by the power of Celestia do not reach the land. The borders will not stop them, for they are sent by a Princess of Equestria." Luna's voice took on a note of profound sadness. "Yet I cannot recall or divert them, for Nightmare Moon is gone. It is by *her* will that they strike, not mine. And when they have passed through the border-veil, though they will have been slowed, they will become cold, real stone. They will strike. And they will destroy." Luna paused, then recited in a spell-like litany, "Manehattan, for its indifferent, self-absorbed thousands. Ponyville, for its laughter that seemed mockery. And Canterlot..." She turned to face Celestia. "...for *you*."

Nobody spoke for long moments. Celestia spread her wings and with the slightest of wingbeats moved to Luna. She rested her head on Luna's shoulder, Luna doing the same on Celestia's shoulder, and they touched golden-shod to silver-shod forehooves. It was somehow reassuring that even in a council of war, the princesses were unashamed to show affection and forgiveness for each other.

Luna moved her wings and separated from Celestia. "I have been afraid to reach too deeply into *her* memories. If I had done so sooner, perhaps I would have known—"

There was a sudden concussive BOOM which struck them all. The surrounding space-scape rippled, then seemed to collapse into itself. The shock of transition back to the chamber was dizzying; someone along the wall retched. As the ponies came to their senses, they saw that the doorway to the chamber's balcony had been blasted open, and a flinty, burnt smell filled the room. Several ponies staggered over to the balcony to look out upon the plaza below, Twilight and Rainbow Dash among them.

There was a smoking pit ten feet across in the middle of the patio of the restaurant at which Twilight, Rainbow Dash and Celestia had eaten not two hours earlier. Glowing red crystals lined the pit; a few more were scattered across the plaza. Several ponies were limping away from the small crater, bleeding from shrapnel cuts. Others were running or flying about aimlessly. Some were screaming in terror. One with a broken leg and a gash on his side that showed the white of a rib bone and the scarlet of a crystalline shard was being dragged by his tail away from the scene; it was the waiter who had served them their desserts. Twilight's stomach threatened to spasm. She had never seen such appalling injuries before. However, even as they watched the royal guards were arriving at the scene, calming the crowd and making way for the evacuation of the seriously hurt. As Twilight had told Rainbow Dash earlier, the guards were professionals. There was comfort in that.

Spitfire and a pegasus-guard whom Rainbow Dash recognized as Lieutenant Cloudmane spoke quickly with the guard commander, then flew down to the plaza below. The rest of the ponies returned their attention to the two princesses in the center of the room.

Luna, now back in her familiar youthful appearance, had collapsed and was being gently nuzzled by Celestia. After a moment Luna struggled to her feet, the effort of becoming the Star Princess showing. "I'm okay, I just need a moment," she whispered to Celestia.

Celestia turned to face the other ponies. "We have no time for elaborate plans," she said firmly. "We will have to simply do what we can." She regarded Luna for a moment, then held each of the other ponies in her gaze, one after the other, taking their measure.

"I will go to Manehattan," she said at length. "I will take the Royal Guard pegasus ponies with me. Princess Luna will remain here at Canterlot, and with the unicorns of the Guard and the elder magi..." She indicated the school headmistress and the chief archivist. "...she will lead its defense." Luna looked startled, but Celestia continued. "She knows more of the nature of this threat than any of us. If anypony can find a way to save lives, she can. The Guards who remain here will be under her command."

Celestia then turned to face the blue-uniformed fliers. "The Wonderbolts, along with Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash and their friends, will protect Ponyville." Rainbow Dash made a fearful 'eep!', and Twilight opened her mouth to object. Celestia smiled and raised a hoof, forestalling objections. "The greatest fliers of Equestria, and the Elements of Harmony... together, you are equal to the task."

Together, Celestia and Luna lowered their horns to the assembly. Every pony bowed deeply in return.

"There is no time to lose. Go now, with the blessings of Equestria upon you!" With that, Celestia nodded to the pegasus-guards, and they stepped onto the balcony and took wing.

Luna took a deep breath, then turned to the cluster of unicorns. "Let's go," she said, "I have a few ideas..." and led them out to the spiraling stairway.

The Wonderbolts gathered around Rainbow Dash and Twilight. Nimbus approached Rainbow Dash, a broad smile on her face. "Looks like we get to fly together, sooner than I'd thought. Good thing you're used to being a hero."

The tension in Rainbow Dash burst all at once, and she laughed. "Yeah, no pressure! Now let's go save Ponyville!"

As the Wonderbolts moved to the balcony to take off, Twilight asked in a meek voice, "Could one of you give me a lift? My chariot is um, out of order..."

*If any star shed peace, 'tis thou,
That sendest it from above.*

—T. Campbell

The night was eerily quiet as the flight of ponies made its way toward Ponyville. Ten blue-suited pegasus ponies, one rainbow-maned flier and a chariot pulled by two royal guards bearing a scared purple unicorn made for quite a sight.

Rainbow Dash was in a subdued mood, keyed-up but not talkative. She couldn't stop staring at the marker-light-equipped steel boots she had been issued. They were simplified, brightly-polished versions of the shin-guarding boots which the Princesses wore... or was it the other way around, that the royal shoes were ornate versions of these? Rainbow Dash mentally replayed the words Nimbus had spoken as she had brought her the boots and buckled them on... "The Wonderbolts are going to battle. You'll need these."

As they approached the market-square of Ponyville, they could see that the trouble had already begun. Ponies were gathered, milling around, and at least two buildings had been hit and were on fire. Here and there red crystal fragments, the shattered remains of the fallen stars, reflected and refracted the light of the flames.

One of the Wonderbolts zipped ahead, calling "Make way!", clearing a section of the plaza for the chariot to land. Even as the chariot touched down, another pair of meteor-crystals streaked downwards. Spitfire surged upwards with uncanny acceleration, looped to parallel the shard, and bucked it as she passed; the shard veered off to one side to impact in an empty field on the outskirts of town. The other was dealt with by Soarin' in similar manner; though he couldn't turn as tightly as Spitfire or match speeds with the meteor until it was closer to the ground, his kick was much stronger, and actually shattered the crystal.

Twilight jumped out of the chariot before it had even come to a halt. The mayor of Ponyville ran up to her, accompanied by several of Ponyville's leading citizens. Twilight and Captain were soon in hurried conversation with the town elders, leaving Rainbow Dash to fidget uncertainly.

Nimbus drew Rainbow Dash aside. "They're going to be talking evacuation and what can be done on the ground to help with defense."

"Yeah, maybe I can help—" said Rainbow Dash as she started towards Twilight. Nimbus put out a wing to check Rainbow Dash.

"Let them worry about that," Nimbus said. She indicated the sky with a lift of her head. "Our problem is up there. We have to play our zone, and trust them to handle theirs."

Nimbus tickled Rainbow Dash's face with a wing, then leaped into the air. Rainbow Dash sneezed, then followed, catching up quickly. Nimbus looked over at Rainbow Dash, grinning widely. She got an eloquent "Thpppt!" in return.

"So you think you can keep up with the Wonderbolts, do you?" Nimbus taunted. "Let's see if you have what it takes... we're in for a long night. You're with me, stay close! We work in pairs. When in doubt, come up on my right wing. And watch my back, I'll be watching yours!" She gave Rainbow Dash a salute, received one in return, and began a figure-eight patrol a few hundred feet above town.

Below them, the crowd had become more orderly. Groups had formed, and a steady line of ponies was heading southwards; fillies and colts, escorted by adults. Rainbow Dash recognized the distinctive yellow and pink of Fluttershy, and there was no mistaking the hyperkinetic bouncing of Pinkie Pie as she moved from child to child. Rainbow Dash smiled to herself; leave it to Pinkie to turn an evacuation into a game. The foals wouldn't be frightened with Pinkie there.

As they worked their patrol, Canterlot was visible from time to time. The red meteor-streaks were making it nearly to the ground before slowing to a halt, then winking out. Occasionally parts of Canterlot were obscured by what seemed to be a dark cloud that was itself full of stars; the meteors vanished as they touched the cloud. Whatever it was that Princess Luna and the unicorn mage-guards were doing was as disturbing as it seemed effective.

Seeing how low the falling stars were getting before being dealt with in Canterlot worried Rainbow Dash. She asked, "Shouldn't we be higher up with the others?" She looked overhead, and saw pairs of ponies high above spiraling up, then diving to parallel incoming red streaks. The ponies' marker lights would converge with the falling stars, then the falling stars would veer away from the town.

"We'll get our turn," said Nimbus. "You can't stay long in air that thin, that high up, and you're working hard. We rotate who's on high watch, and while we're down here we—"

Nimbus suddenly banked hard left and dived. Surprised, Rainbow Dash followed a moment later. A falling star-shard a couple of feet across streaked past them at a shallow angle, heading straight for Twilight's library-tree. Nimbus was ready for it though, and as it passed her she gave a hard buck. The shard was deflected upwards, missing the library by perhaps twenty feet, and continued beyond the edge of town where it gouged a deep furrow in a carrot patch. Nimbus extended her wings and pulled back up.

"—we watch for anything that gets through," she concluded. "And we don't let it hit anything breakable." Nimbus had a bit of a smug look to her. Rainbow Dash noticed, though, that sparks were trailing from Nimbus' hind-hooves for several seconds after the buck. It was a good thing those boots were tough... and heat-resistant.

Rainbow Dash had little time to consider though, as three more low-angle shards came in. She put on a burst of speed, leaving a multicolored trail behind her. She passed underneath one of the shards, rolled to inverted and bucked upwards as she passed below, then finished the roll as she overtook another shard. This one she kicked to the left. Both shards missed buildings, one cratering an alley behind Sugar Cube Corner, the other barely missing the clock tower as it sailed out of sight to land steaming in a pond.

Turning back, Rainbow Dash saw that Nimbus had taken care of the third shard. It had needed three kicks to guide it past the town hall, and had crashed into a hillside just out of town.

"Not bad!" Nimbus called out as Rainbow Dash came alongside.

"That's how we do it in Ponyville!" Rainbow Dash grinned at Nimbus, but the grin faded as she looked down. A third building had caught fire, set alight by the already-burning home next to it. The flames were threatening to get out of control.

"Maybe we ought to bring in the weather ponies to rain out the fires," Rainbow Dash said. "I could go to Cloudsdale and—"

Nimbus shook her head. "That would take too long, and if there were clouds we wouldn't be able to see the incoming falling stars until it's too late... and that's assuming the weather-ponies don't have problems of their own." She banked about and pointed a hoof downwards. "Your friends have it covered."

Down below, a large group of ponies were galloping in to Ponyville from the direction of the apple orchards to the west, some pulling violently-lurching carts and wagons filled with barrels and pails. At the head of the group was a distinctive blonde-haired orange pony. The newcomers moved to one bank of the stream running through the town, and set up a line. The lead pony ran back and forth, giving directions, and within moments two bucket-brigades began relaying water to the fires. The ponies of Sweet Apple Acres had seen their neighbors in distress, and responded in force.

Rainbow Dash let out a cheer. "Go Applejack! You rock!"

Nimbus smiled, then pulled up to a hover as two panting Wonderbolts flew down. One had a scorch mark on his flight suit; both had soot on their hoof-boots. "High watch, Lieutenant!" panted one of them.

Nimbus saluted. "Yessir!" She looked over her shoulder to see that Rainbow Dash was following, then began the long climb.

Overhead, the incoming star-fall was intensifying, and the brilliant central star-shard was almost bright enough to cast shadows. Pairs of Wonderbolts looped and banked, and wherever they came into contact with a glowing red streak, the streak was deflected. Not all of the shards were intercepted, and it seemed to Rainbow Dash that the shards were also becoming larger.

Still they climbed, until breathing became difficult. The other Wonderbolts were below them, and as Nimbus and Rainbow Dash took their station they could see that the defense had come down to ground level. Splashes of light from the town square showed unicorn-magic of some sort at work. They had no time to wonder what those on the ground were doing, however. A swarm of several dozen shards suddenly blazed past, and the two pegasus ponies dived down after.

Nimbus began dodging among the shards, giving each a modest kick as she passed. At first Rainbow Dash was puzzled as to why Nimbus was not bucking as hard as she could, but then she remembered: at this altitude, small deflections would be enough to make the shards miss the town. Nimbus was also right about conserving their energy; just keeping aloft this high up had them both gasping for air. This was a kind of flying which Rainbow Dash had thoroughly mastered, however. Nobody beat Dash at aerial dodge-ball!

Rainbow Dash began making quick, graceful arcs through the swarm, leaving her glowing spectrum-trail behind her. Each arc brought her within range of several of the shards, and she rolled and banked to kick at the shards as she overtook them. Forehoof, hindhoof, left side, right... all four steel-shod feet were in action. She looped up and behind, then dived down for another pass, and another, and another, twisting to strike in an almost dance-like rhythm. Nimbus, seeing the situation being handled, pulled up and began working at the swarm's trailing members.

They had almost reached the altitude of the next flight of Wonderbolts when Nimbus called for a return to station. Though there were a few shards still on their deadly course, the others would handle them. Both ponies pulled up, turning their momentum into regained altitude as far as they could before resuming their wingbeats to climb.

Nimbus was about to compliment Rainbow Dash on the skill of her flight, but hesitated as she saw a look of pain on Rainbow Dash's face. The reason was obvious; her hoof-boots were smoking, the steel discolored to a blue-tinged straw color on their edges. Nimbus' own boots were uncomfortably warm, and Rainbow Dash had deflected many more.

"Are you okay?" Nimbus called. "No bravado, I need to know."

Rainbow Dash held her legs downward where the most airflow could get to them and cool the boots. "It's kinda hot, but I'll be okay. How'd we do?"

Nimbus grinned. "Not bad for a beginner. No, really, that was amazing!"

Only the darkness of the night sky hid Rainbow Dash's blush. Blistered hooves stood no chance against a compliment from a Wonderbolt. Rainbow Dash did a little victory-roll, then formed up smartly on Nimbus' right wingtip, feathers almost touching.

The celebration was short-lived, though. From below, the pair saw the other Wonderbolts climbing urgently towards them. A glance upward showed why... the main star-shard, nearly as bright as a full moon, was almost upon them.

"Warm-up's over," said Nimbus quietly. She could not hide the nervousness in her voice. "Time for the main event."

*Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light;
I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.*

—S. Williams

The falling star was huge, easily as large as a house. It looked like an irregularly-cut diamond, nearly transparent and covered with facets. Any light which entered into it was refracted within, emerging in bursts which were uncomfortably bright. It was attended by several of the lesser red shards which circled the main shard in quick, close orbits. Though none of the pegasus ponies watching it were unicorns, even they could sense enormous magical energies bound up within it.

As soon as all of the fliers were gathered, the Wonderbolts' leader called out, "Passes in groups of two, kick to the left, keep at it! Watch for those red escorts and mind the vortex behind. GO!"

The Wonderbolts and their guest formed up as ordered. The first pair, Soarin' and Spitfire, banked and dived. As they picked up speed, they curved outward from the path of the falling star to avoid the superheated air behind it, then back in to intercept. Even as they did so, the next pair, Misty and Blizzard began their dive, with Captain and Tyco next. Nimbus and Rainbow Dash queued up behind them.

Soarin', in the lead, rolled as he came alongside the falling star, then made a mighty buck that would have equaled the best effort of any earth-pony. There was a dazzling flash and a sound like a slab of steel dropping to a concrete floor, then Soarin' was tumbling out of control, trailing smoke. Spitfire immediately aborted her pass and dove after Soarin', catching him on her back.

The next pair had already committed themselves to the pass. Again there was a flash on impact, and two ponies were cartwheeling through the sky, unconscious with smoldering wingtips. Captain yelled "ABORT!" as he and his wingman dove to save the injured ponies before they could hit the ground.

Rainbow Dash's heart was pounding. She had never felt such fear, not even when facing down Nightmare Moon. Nimbus descended towards Captain, calling, "They may need backup!" Rainbow Dash followed, grateful for something to focus upon.

As they descended, their path took them past the falling star. Rainbow Dash could not help but stare at it as they flew past. A thousand glittering facets distorted the scene beyond the huge crystal, and for just a moment Rainbow Dash was looking at her own reflection. There was a stab of pain as she met her own gaze, a headache and an overwhelming feeling of malice from the direction of the great shard. For an instant, Rainbow Dash recalled the pitiless eyes of Nightmare Moon.

Just then, beyond the falling star and behind the mountains in the direction of Manehattan, there was a bright golden flare which illuminated the horizon. The light was caught in the crystal, and beams of every color radiated from its surface. As the light over Manehattan faded, so did the prismatic rays emanating from the falling star, and it continued its inexorable arc towards Ponyville.

An inspiration came to Rainbow Dash with a sudden heady rush. She turned to Nimbus. "I've got an idea. But you're going to have to get the Wonderbolts away from the falling star, far away!"

"What—" began Nimbus, who was still a little dazzled from the blinding color-burst.

"Trust me!" Rainbow Dash said, then pulled up sharply and began climbing as fast as her wings would take her, back in the direction of the falling star, then above it.

Nimbus shook her head, then turned and folded her wings, diving down to the other Wonderbolts to relay what Rainbow Dash had said. She thought she had an inkling of what Rainbow Dash intended, and it scared her, but there was no time to do anything else.

Rainbow Dash climbed as fast as she could, panting "hurry up, hurry up!" to herself. Glancing back, she saw that she would have to commit herself now if her plan would have a chance. Arcing up, she turned in a wing-over to dive again, and aimed straight at the falling star.

She accelerated. Stretching her hooves before her, she pushed herself to the limit. A multicolored vapor trail formed behind her. More speed, more speed, she needed more speed! Already she could feel the searing heat pouring from the wake of the falling star. Her forehoof-boots began to become warm, then hot. In a moment, though, a shockwave-cone began to form before her, and the worst of the heat was deflected. Still she accelerated, clenching her teeth as the blast of air distorted her face. The falling star seemed to expand rapidly before her as the shock-cone sharpened and began to collapse upon itself. The timing would have to be perfect...

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The Wonderbolts descended toward a hill on the edge of town, bearing their injured to a group of ponies gathered on the hilltop. Captain had cursed like a sailor at Rainbow Dash's impetuosity, but had no ideas of his own. The pegasus ponies slowed as they neared the ground, then looked back. They could see Rainbow Dash's color-streak as she closed on the falling star. "Is that crazy filly trying to kill herself?" he said. He turned to look for Nimbus, to ask her if she had any idea what was going on, but Nimbus had not followed the others down. Then he saw her... she was flying back up toward the path of the falling star.

Nobody could fault a Wonderbolt for sticking to her wingman, regardless of anything else.

Captain shrugged Misty from his back onto the grass into the care of the others, then leaped into the air, surging toward the two reckless pegasus ponies. Moments later, those of the Wonderbolts who could still fly followed.

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The ponies of Ponyville looked up at the brilliant star descending upon them. Many of them were exhausted, smudged with soot, or bleeding from small cuts from fragments of shards that had made it to the ground. The area near Twilight was littered with ruby-like crystals, the remnants of those she had managed to deflect or shatter with her telekinetic magic. Beside her stood Rarity, bedraggled and covered with sweat; while Twilight had been deflecting large pieces from the town, Rarity had seen to it that shrapnel from the crushed shards had not harmed Twilight. Much depended upon the purple unicorn, and Rarity would not allow her friend to be hurt. Rarity's hobby of telekinetic archery had paid off handsomely; aside from leg-trembling exhaustion, they were both uninjured. There was no way that Twilight could stave off the approaching crystal, however, and it was too late to run. In a moment of eerie calm, the remaining ponies gathered around Twilight and Rarity. Whatever came next, they would face together.

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There was a sudden explosion of light in the sky. Every color of the rainbow suddenly burst from a point next to the falling star, and a thunderous BOOM knocked everypony to the ground. A disc of brilliant color expanded rapidly, intersecting the falling star-crystal. The crystal glowed as brightly as the sun for a moment, then shattered into a million pieces as the shock-plane of the sonic rainbow sheared it, overwhelmed it, filled it with more pure light than it could absorb. Secondary detonations followed as the orbiting red lesser star-fragments crossed the shear-plane of the sonic rainboom. Over the rumbling echo of the explosion, everypony heard an anguished, hate-filled voice screaming, then fading.

From the center of the rainbow burst, a multicolored streak continued in the path of the fragments of the exploding falling star. The ribbon of color was irregular, erratic, as if its source was tumbling. The rainbow-streak was about to be engulfed in the deadly flak-field, but the streak was suddenly, sharply displaced from the shrapnel-path, then vanished.

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The ruined shards began to fan out, tumbling, glittering, slowing. It was like a glass window that had just been shattered, only much larger and more violently.

Twilight scrambled to her feet, lowered her head, then strained. Her horn began glowing as brightly as a blowtorch, and a moment later blood started trickling from Twilight's nose.

A faint hemispherical flicker stretched over the town plaza. The splinters of crystal began pelting it, raising little purple sparks where they hit the shield, disintegrating into pieces no larger than a grain of sand. The sound of the impacts was like hail on a tin roof. For ten, perhaps twenty seconds the town square was bombarded by the razor-sharp shotgun-blast of crystals, but none struck the ground, or any pony. Silence followed for long moments, followed by the gentle rushing sound of sand being poured onto a beach.

The night sky overhead was clean.

A ragged cheer went up from the crowd. As the last of the diamond-sand settled, Twilight staggered, then collapsed. A thin glowing wisp of violet smoke rose from her horn, and a small divot showed where a flake had spalled under the strain. Rarity knelt down beside her friend. "Twilight! Twilight, are you okay?"

It took a few moments before Twilight was able to lift her head. She was a mess, discolored on her muzzle and chest from the nosebleed. "Ugh... what a headache..." She was helped to her feet, then a scrap of cloth began dabbing away the blood as Rarity tended to Twilight. Twilight shooed Rarity away. "I'm okay, others need the help more."

At that moment, Captain descended to the town square. Draped across his back was a dazed Rainbow Dash. Two large bruises discolored the blue along one side of her chest; the bruises looked almost like a pair of heavy, indistinct hoof-marks. An ugly, profusely-bleeding gash on Rainbow Dash's wing from which a crystal fragment protruded drew a gasp from Rarity. Captain gently set Rainbow Dash down. As soon as he was free to do so, he urgently took wing again.

A white pony with a red cross on her flank began caring for Rainbow Dash at once, withdrawing the shrapnel shard, then pressing gauze against the wound to staunch the bleeding. While the nurse was doing so, Rarity carefully removed Rainbow Dash's steel hoof-boots, then called for a bucket of water. When it arrived, she began washing the scorched hooves. Other injured ponies gathered nearby, and volunteers began treating them as well. The casualties were given a respectful distance by the crowd.

It was several minutes before Rainbow Dash stirred. She began mumbling, "What, how'd I get down..." She looked around, disoriented for a moment, then groaned as the pain in her ribs and wing began to bring back memories in bits and pieces. "Ow, Nimbus, that hurt, why did you... Nimbus?"

Her head snapped up as she realized where she was. Everyone was talking to her at once in an excited babble, but she ignored the crowd as she called, "Nimbus?"

Where are you?" Rainbow Dash began to curse through clenched teeth. Her eyes locked onto the Wonderbolts' leader, standing alone near the edge of the gathered ponies.

Her voice took on an edge of panic. She roughly shouldered the crowd aside, stumbling toward Captain. "You've got to find her!" Captain lowered his head, then brusquely swept his flight-goggles to the ground. Rainbow Dash almost shrieked into his face, "WHERE IS SHE?!"

Slowly Captain looked up at Rainbow Dash, then toward the edge of Ponyville next to the library. There stood a small cluster of blue-suited ponies. Even as they watched, from the sky a pair of alicorns slowly descended to the group, flanked by two bedraggled-looking armored pegasus ponies. The princesses looked down at the ground in the center of the group, then together lowered her heads. A chill of dread ran down Rainbow Dash's spine.

Rainbow Dash tried to take flight, but one wing wouldn't obey her. She began stumbling toward the library, angrily lashing out at ponies who tried to restrain her. She half-galloped, half-limped toward the circle of Wonderbolts. Behind her, Twilight and Captain followed.

Rainbow Dash suddenly halted. She could see a still pony-form on the ground, surrounded by jagged diamond shards, and by the Wonderbolts.

"No..."

Celestia stepped up to Rainbow Dash, leaned forward to nuzzle her. "I'm so sorry," Celestia whispered.

Rainbow Dash's lower jaw began quivering. "No, it can't... you have to do something. You have to!" She turned wet, pleading eyes up to Celestia.

Tears began to run down Celestia's cheeks. "I cannot. I have no power over this. No power..." Her voice took on a low, almost raspy sound of barely-restrained grief. For a brief moment, the burden of a thousand years bore down upon her. "I am helpless in the face of death."

"If I could trade places with her..." Luna stood forlornly a few steps away, her eyes closed as she tried to maintain a semblance of self-control. Twilight gingerly approached her, leaning against her. A moment later Captain did the same, wordlessly offering consolation and absolution.

Rainbow Dash buried her face against Celestia's shoulder, weeping. Luna, Twilight and Captain moved close, drawn by the need to share grief. The Wonderbolts pressed in around them, touching, trying to draw comfort from each other. Celestia extended her wings and held them all tightly, making no effort to hide her own tears.

*Greater love hath none than this:
That one lays down life for one's friends.*

—Yeshua

Rainbow Dash's wing and ribs still hurt. Two weeks had passed since the star-fall, and she had only been back in the air for a couple of days. She was being very careful as she flew, avoiding any sudden changes in speed or direction, and she took advantage of whatever lift she could find as she traveled. A thermal bubble under a puffy little cloud, the rising portion of the waves generated by moving air downwind of a ridge of hills, it was all welcome. There certainly would be no rainbow-trails today.

Nonetheless, she had insisted on pulling Twilight's new chariot. "Therapy", she had called the task, using a word looked up just for the purpose of convincing Twilight to let her do it. Fortunately, this magically-enhanced chariot was much improved from the first attempt. It was light, stable and strong.

As they passed over Ponyville, they could still see signs of the terrible night. Most of the damaged buildings had been repaired, the shard-gouged pits filled in and the glittering dust swept up, but work was still ongoing. In the town square, Mr. Cake hobbled along on a crutch. The good news was that the cast on his foreleg would be coming off in a few days, according to Pinkie Pie. In a similar vein, reports from Canterlot and Manehattan spoke only of modest damage, and life in the cities was more-or-less back to normal. It was a miracle that the night had not been more costly. Though there had been many injuries, it could have been so much worse; the loss of life was light.

Just one pony.

Climbing to the height of Cloudsdale was an effort, and when they finally alighted on the cloud-surface Rainbow Dash was exhausted. Twilight stepped out, buoyed by her "cloudwalker" spell. She nosed at her friend's neck, wordlessly sharing concern. Rainbow Dash waved her away, but a smile showed her appreciation.

"I'll be back later," Twilight said. "I'll be at the Equestria Atmospheric Administration office. They have so much data on the effects of the star-fall!"

"Don't swell your head with too many reports," Rainbow Dash replied. "You're heavy enough without your brains getting bigger!"

Twilight laughed and trotted away, her hooves raising little cloud-puffs like dust.

Rainbow Dash backed out of the chariot-harness, wincing as she folded her wings to do so. For a moment she became entangled in the tack, and let fly a few words that would have made a draft mule blush. Someone stepped up and helped her,

lifting the forestrap and padding from Rainbow Dash's head where it had gotten stuck.

"Aren't you the versatile one? Towing chariots, saving towns... can you cook, too?" There was a laugh, and Rainbow Dash turned to the pegasus who had helped her. It was Spitfire, out of uniform, and though the urge to fan-filly briefly arose in Rainbow Dash's chest, it was suppressed by something more profound... a camaraderie from the shared experience.

"Depends. Are you tough enough to survive my cooking? Some can't hack it." Rainbow Dash grinned, then accepted a winghug from Spitfire.

"Thanks very much for coming, Rainbow. There's something I wanted you to see." Spitfire looked closely at Rainbow Dash's wing and the nearly-healed gash. "I wasn't sure you were ready to travel."

"Oh, it's nothing, really," Rainbow Dash replied. "Nurse Redheart says I'll be as good as new in a week or two. Though she'd be mad if she knew I'd flown here today!"

Spitfire laughed. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her. I'm not so sure it'll do you any good, though." She and Rainbow Dash began walking toward a nearby colonnaded building... the headquarters for the Wonderbolts. Rainbow Dash had been there once before, after the Young Flier competition. It seemed to Rainbow Dash to be an eternity ago.

The lobby was as Rainbow Dash remembered it: statues of Wonderbolts on the floor and suspended by wires from the ceiling, a single royal guard whose presence now made sense, a small gift shop where Wonderbolt merchandise was sold (of which Rainbow Dash had a nearly-complete collection), and a door which would only unlock to a hoofpress from one of the team. Spitfire opened the door and they entered a wide corridor beyond.

The hallway lead past the "ready room", in which several of the Wonderbolts were couch-napping, bragging at each other, playing games, and in general loafing about. A couple of them, still in bandages, waved. Spitfire led Rainbow Dash along, and they passed doorways to barracks, locker rooms, a gym, and other more mysterious rooms which the 'victor's tour' several months ago had not included. Rainbow Dash wanted to ask about them, but she could tell Spitfire had a destination in mind. They arrived at the far end of the hall, and through another locked double door more ornate than the others they entered a private garden in an open-air atrium.

The garden was perhaps fifty feet across, and circular. Only the doorway and the open roof allowed access. Stone planters held lush ferns and flowering shrubs, and climbing tendrils of morning-glories clung to the columns supporting the eaves. In the center of the garden was a circular dais of dark marble, inlaid with

light alabaster in the royal eight-rayed sunburst; in the center of the sunburst was the Wonderbolt insignia.

The portion of the wall opposite the door was half-covered with granite plaques, each with a cutie mark deeply engraved, but nothing else. Some of them were obviously old, as time had somewhat weathered the engravings and discolored the stone. Rainbow Dash looked in puzzlement to Spitfire, but Spitfire merely gestured for Rainbow Dash to look more closely.

The last of the plaques was fresh, the stone mirror-polished and the edges of the inscription sharp-edged. The glyph was a stylized fireworks rocket. Rainbow Dash took a sharp breath, then turned to face Spitfire. She saw that Spitfire's eyes were as wet as her own were becoming.

"That's... Nimbus, her mark..."

Spitfire nodded. "This is the Hall of the Fallen. These are the marks of the Wonderbolts who have died so that others could live."

Rainbow Dash took a step backwards to take in the wall. There had to be at least twenty of the plaques. "So many..." Once again, tears began flowing.

A moment later Rainbow Dash felt a comforting wing draped across her back. "And she won't be the last. This is what it *really* means to be a Wonderbolt," Spitfire said quietly. "This is the real reason we exist. I... we... wanted you to see this. Most ponies wouldn't understand, but I think you do."

Rainbow Dash turned to face Spitfire, and saw that behind her, several of the Wonderbolts had gathered in the doorway and were silently watching. Not all of their eyes were dry, either, and none tried to hide that fact.

"So," said Spitfire. "Knowing this, do you still want to be a Wonderbolt someday?"

Rainbow Dash stood still for a long, long while. Her head lowered, and she closed her eyes as two steady drips of renewed grief fell from her cheeks. She finally looked up, and slowly approached the memorial wall. She reached out with a hoof to touch Nimbus' memorial stone.

"More than ever," whispered Rainbow Dash. "More than ever."