

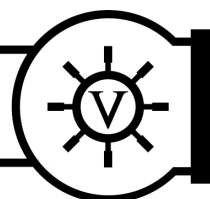
# Wild, Sweet & Cool

Kwakerjak

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**PONY FICTION VAULT**



"If you want to be an elite athlete, you have to accept that you'll sometimes find yourself doing things that look ridiculous to everypony else."

– Muscle Memory, *Training for the High-Performance Flyer*

Rainbow Dash stood on a cloud just above Ponyville's central square, talking to herself. "Okay, this isn't a big deal. Twilight's my friend. She won't think it's weird, since she let me borrow that book in the first place, and the worst she can say is 'No.' I can do this. I mean, I *will* do this." Apparently satisfied with her planned course of action, the pegasus glided down to the ground, landing just in front of the doorway of the large tree that housed both the town's library and its resident librarian. She took a few more deep breaths and knocked on the door.

A few seconds later, the door opened, revealing the unicorn Rainbow Dash wanted to see. "Oh, hey, Dash," Twilight Sparkle said, smiling. "Is something the matter?"

"Uh, no. I just... um, wanted to come in and talk about... er... something."

"Okay..." the unicorn replied, her voice trailing off in mild suspicion. "You do realize that you don't need to knock during the library's operating hours, right?"

"Oh... right. I forgot."

Twilight giggled. "Don't worry about it. So, what's up?"

"Well..." Rainbow Dash glanced around to make sure there weren't any other ponies patronizing the library before continuing. "I kind of want to talk to you about that book I borrowed."

"*Daring Do and the Windigo Prophecy*?"

"No, the other one."

"Other one? Oh, you mean the one Spitfire's personal trainer wrote about exercise routines. What was his name again?"

"Muscle Memory."

"Right, Muscle Memory. So, did you like it?"

Only a few months earlier, getting Rainbow Dash to admit she'd ever read (much less liked) *any* book in her lifetime would have been like pulling teeth, sans any local anesthetic. However, her introduction to the fictional exploits of Daring Do had softened her opinion of the medium considerably. When combined with the fact that Twilight had managed to get fifth place in the Running of the Leaves simply by following the advice she'd found in a book, the blue pegasus simply didn't have any reason not to give nonfiction a shot. "Uh, yeah. It's given me some good ideas about how I can take my training to the next level."

"That's great! I'm sure you'll be ready for the Wonderbolts in no time."

"Yeah, well, actually, I'd kind of... like your help."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, I usually practice on my own, but there's this one strength-building technique the book talked about that I'd like to try. Then again, I guess it's not so much a technique as it is a way of making my practices more effective. In any case, it sort of requires help from another pony."

"And you'd like me to do it?"

Rainbow Dash averted eye contact with Twilight as she nervously dragged a blue hoof across the library's floorboards. "Um... yeah... I guess...."

The unicorn, however, smiled. "I'd be happy to help you, but don't you think that another pegasus would be a better coach?"

"Um, this isn't exactly coaching. Well, I suppose it's sort of like that, but you'd be a lot more hooves-on, I guess. More like a training partner, actually."

Twilight raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Okay, now I'm even more certain that a pegasus would be more qualified than me, or maybe a griffon, or any sapient creature with wings – and before you bring up the ones I made for Rarity out of dew, keep in mind that making those takes so much energy that I'd be in no condition to work out."

"I wasn't going to bring that up." Actually, Rainbow Dash hadn't even taken it into consideration when she'd initially debated whether or not to even approach her magically inclined friend about this in the first place.

"Oh. Still, do you see my point? If you want help with your flying practice, you're probably better off with someone who can fly."

"Ordinarily, yes. But this isn't exactly ordinary. What I mean to say is that I've got good reasons to think you'd be good at this."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Basically, the idea is to have somepony else handle the thinking for you while you concentrate on your physical activity."

"I'm... not quite certain what you're getting at. How is the fact that I'm smart supposed to make me more qualified than a pony who can actually fly?"

Rainbow Dash groaned. Why couldn't she just spit it out? "It's not because you're smart, it's because you're a good driver."

It took a few seconds before Twilight realized the pegasus was referring to the use of reins to steer other ponies, as one might do when riding in a carriage. "Huh? But Applejack has more experience doing that sort of thing."

"She's always busy doing stuff at Sweet Apple Acres. Besides, all of her experience is on the ground, not in the air."

"In the air? Since when have I had that kind of experience?"

"You know... during the whole Discord thing. You managed to get *Fluttershy* to catch up to *me*, while dragging your balloon behind her, no less. If you can get her to perform like that, there's no telling what I can do with your help."

"Oh... okay." Suddenly, the whole conversation made a lot more sense. "So, you want to pull my hot air balloon around to increase the resistance, then? That shouldn't be too hard to coordinate."

"Uh, that's not exactly what I'm talking about here. That thing's kind of bulky, and I need maneuverability if my practicing is going to do me any good."

Twilight Sparkle was now thoroughly confused. "Then... what *are* you talking about?"

Rainbow Dash's attempts at subtlety were failing like an Equestrian History test, so she decided to switch tactics entirely. "Um, is anypony else here? Because this is... well... a little embarrassing...."

"No, nopony else. It's been a slow day, so I let Spike go gem hunting with Rarity."

*Great. There goes my excuse to procrastinate,* the pegasus thought to herself. She decided to just be blunt and get it over with. "I... I need a rider."

The librarian was taken aback. "A... a rider? Like, with a... saddle?"

"Yeah... not the kind of saddle that Rarity sells that are mostly for looks, but the real deal, like the kind search and rescue teams use to transport injured ponies out of the wilderness – except in this case, you'd be using a saddle specifically designed for riding pegasi."

Twilight still seemed to be processing her friend's request. "Rainbow Dash... I've never done anything like *riding* another pony before. I'm not certain I'm up to it..."

"But the way I see it, that's actually a good thing! See, Muscle Memory says that the hard part about riding pegasi is that it's totally different from riding other ponies, but you shouldn't have that problem, since you don't have to forget how to do it the normal way."

"Um, Dash, that doesn't make a lot of sense..."

"You'll be fine! The saddle came with instructions on how to do everything."

"'Came with instructions'? Dash, are you saying you've already gotten one of those things?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it wasn't cheap, but Muscle Memory says that Spitfire totally swears by the brand."

"I don't know, this sounds kind of dangerous."

"It's completely safe. Well, I mean, maybe it's technically not *completely* safe, but it's close enough. The saddle's designed to make sure you won't fall off, even if I go upside down. Besides, you're my friend. It's not as though I'd let anything happen to you."

Twilight, however, still seemed unsure. "It still seems pretty risky."

"Maybe, but on the plus side, you'll have the experience of flying with the future star of the Wonderbolts, and when I'm famous all over Equestria, I'll make sure that everypony knows that you helped me get to where I am. I mean, where I will be."

"How selfless of you," came the flat reply of the current protégé of Princess Celestia.

Rainbow Dash seemed to sense that it was time to make a final push. "C'mon, if you do this for me, I'll..." The pegasus wracked her brain, trying to figure out how best to sweeten the deal. "I'll do some sort of library... book... thing for you."

Twilight brought a hoof to her chin as she considered this offer. "Well, I have been meaning to convert the library from Hackney Decimal Classification to the Library of Canterlot's system."

"Great! I'll do it."

"It's going to mean replacing the spine labels on every single book."

"No problem."

"And then reorganizing and reshelving every one of them."

"Uh... that's fine."

"And I'm going to be really nitpicky, since this is what I actually get paid to do for a living."

The thought of knowingly going into a situation where she'd be dealing with Twilight Sparkle's perfectionism head-on sent a chill up Rainbow Dash's spine, but she nodded anyway. "I... I can handle that... I think...."

"And we'd have to do it all during a single weekend."

The pegasus swallowed hard. "That's... okay. It's fine. Sign me up." Sometimes, sacrifices needed to be made in the pursuit of greatness.

Twilight was really taken aback by this – she'd only been half-serious, but it seemed as though Rainbow Dash was dead-set on getting her help. "This is really important to you, isn't it?"

"Of course! This could give me the edge I need to really get the Wonderbolts' attention."

The unicorn sighed. "I'm still not entirely sure about this...."

"Please?"

• • •

A week later, the two ponies stood in an isolated field outside of Ponyville, with a small cart containing a large, unmarked cardboard box nearby. Getting the cart out here had taken some effort, since Rainbow Dash had insisted that the practice take place far from any roads, and the grassy field didn't exactly have the most even surface for draft work, particularly for a pony who didn't do that sort of thing on a regular basis. (When Twilight later asked why she couldn't have just levitated it for her, the pegasus responded by smacking her hoof against her forehead.) Still, it was a very pleasant day; after all, the pair had chosen this day precisely because there weren't any clouds or strong winds scheduled for the Ponyville area that afternoon.

Rainbow Dash was visibly excited, already doing small loops in the air. "This is going to be so awesome! You're not going to regret this, Twilight."

The unicorn seemed less inclined to share in this unbridled enthusiasm. "Why did I agree to do this again?"

"Because you're my friend, and this is important to me, and I used the sad puppy face."

"That was a rhetorical question, Rainbow Dash."

"Whatever. The important thing is that *I'm* about to step up my training to a whole new level!"

"And *I'm* glad I found that spell."

"A spell? For what?"

"For reducing my terminal velocity. Basically, it's a variation on the standard levitation spell, used on the caster's body to slow it down in freefall. You need to have a lot of raw magical power to even pull it off, but I'm almost certain that I can."

"So if you fall, there's no problems?"

"Uh, no. If I fell from the altitudes you do most of your tricks at, there's no magic in the world that would let me walk away from the crash. Basically, this spell is the difference

between ending up in a hospital bed, and ending up in a coffin... assuming I've got it right, that is."

"Well, trust me, it's all a mute point."

"Moot."

"Excuse me?"

"It's 'moot point,' not 'mute point.'"

"Whatever. It doesn't matter, because this saddle has a lifetime warranty."

"Does it cover hospital bills, or just the cost of a new saddle?"

"Will you quit worrying? It's going to be okay. Look, how about this... we won't go higher than the deck at the top of your tree. You can't be worried about falling from that far up, or you'd never use it, right?"

"Well, that sounds reasonable, I guess."

"Awesome! Then let's get started."

Rainbow Dash opened the box to reveal her purchase: a brand new PommelHorse Four-Point Fitness Saddle System, made mostly out of Nagahyde, a magically reinforced synthetic material said to be as resilient as the skin of a long-extinct reptilian creature (according to the ad campaigns, anyway).

Twilight was stunned. "PommelHorse? Dash, that's one of the most expensive brands of fitness gear on the market."

"I know! This baby set me back almost 400 bits."

"But... that's so much money."

"What do you want me to do? Risk your life by using substandard equipment? I don't think so. Besides, Muscle Memory says this is the gear Spitfire uses, so it must be worth the money!"

"Well, I suppose I can't object to you wanting me to stay safe."

"Great! Then help me get this stuff on."



• • •

Being much more complicated than the standard saddle, the PommelHorse Four-Point Fitness Saddle System was, unsurprisingly, quite a bit more difficult to actually saddle. Multiple times, Twilight found herself wondering how two ponies were expected to use this thing if one of them didn't know how to use magic to levitate several items at once, since all of the extra straps meant that there was a lot of coordinated cinching needed to ensure that the saddle wasn't crooked. Like every other saddle Twilight had ever seen, this one was situated on the back of the pony being ridden (or "flyer," to use the appropriate term in this context). The stirrups for the "rider's" hooves were notably less common, but then again, the vast majority of saddles sold in Equestria were used as decoration, rather than to provide a place for a rider to sit down.

However, what made this particular saddle really unusual was the addition of what appeared to be greaves just above the stirrups. A quick look at the surprisingly exhaustive instruction manual confirmed this to be the case: they were designed to completely cover the rear cannons of the rider from hock to hoof, firmly securing the rear legs to the flanks of the flyer with minimal sacrifices to the mobility of either pony. These comprised two of the four safety points mentioned in the product's name, while the other two were found on the specially designed reins. Much like the traditional reins used for driving ponies before a cart (or in Twilight Sparkle's case, the occasional hot air balloon), they were secured at the pasterns of the forelegs, but these had many more fail-safe measures than could ever be incorporated into a simple knotted rope. In short, the product designers at PommelHorse had done absolutely everything possible to ensure that the rider would stay exactly where he or she was supposed to be.

Just as importantly (in the opinion of whoever wrote the manual, at least) was the fact that the reins slid over the muzzle, instead of incorporating a bit, allowing the flyer to communicate more easily with the rider. Thus, when she'd finally gotten all of her gear on, Rainbow Dash was able to clearly voice her primary concern: "Do I look as ridiculous as I think I do?"

"Well, let's just say I understand why you wanted to be far away from anypony else when we did this."

The pegasus sighed. "The things I do for the Wonderbolts..."

Twilight chuckled. "It isn't *that* bad. When your wings are down, they cover the greaves, so the saddle almost looks normal."

"Almost?"

"Well, maybe if you'd gotten one in some shade of brown instead of black, it would look more inconspicuous."

"Hey! This was the only color they had in my size."

The unicorn sighed. "If it's any consolation, I'm sure I'll look just as silly once I'm all strapped in, too."

"Speaking of which, we haven't got all day."

Somewhat reluctantly, Twilight Sparkle climbed onto her friend's back. "Well, the saddle's comfortable, at least," she remarked absently as she secured her rear legs. "I think you're definitely right about me being the most qualified."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, if I had to use my teeth to secure myself instead of magic, we'd be here all day, and I don't think Rarity would ever agree to this, no matter how good a friend she was."

Rainbow Dash chuckled in agreement. "Yeah, she'd definitely want to make accessories for this thing at the very least."

"I'm pretty sure that no amount of accessorizing could move this out of 'fashion disaster' territory, at least by her standards."

"Well, it's not designed to look good – it's designed to actually work."

"Hey, I'm not complaining," Twilight replied. "Are you sure you're okay? Not having any trouble carrying my weight?"

"I can lift fully-grown ponies in my forelegs without any problems. Compared to that, carrying your weight on my back is easy."

The violet unicorn secured the reins to her forehooves and levitated the instruction manual in front of her. "Okay, it says that we're going to need to break this equipment in before doing advanced maneuvers, so let's just take it slow for today."

Rainbow Dash briefly considered objecting to this, but the thought of having to deal with excessive chafing squelched that idea. "Got it. We'll do this nice and easy. You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Take off!"

Grinning, Rainbow Dash flapped her wings and took to the air.

"Because the rider will often be in significantly more danger than the flyer, it is imperative that he or she be given control for the entire session."

- *User Guide: PommelHorse Four-Point Fitness Saddle System*

As it turned out, the reputation pegasus riding had for migraine-inducing confusion was well-earned, but Twilight Sparkle, fortunately, had always been a fast study.

The reins were the easy part: pull one side to go in that direction, pull both to slow down, lightly slap them against the neck to speed up. What made riding a pegasus complicated was the fact that the rider also needed to indicate the desired degree of pitch to the flyer, and this was done with the rider's hind legs. The manual called it "applying rotational pressure on the flank with the rear cannons" but Twilight soon figured out that that simply meant that the shifting positions of her rear legs would send Rainbow Dash basic signals for "up" and "down." This explained why so much effort had been put into making the rider's cannons secure within the greaves: otherwise, the pegasus might not have been able to tell if her friend was extending her legs (to ascend) or retracting them (to descend).

Of course, none of this pressure had to be particularly hard; as the instruction manual put it, steering was simply a matter of activating instincts that almost every pony appeared to have. Like many instincts, they could be fought off with a little bit of willpower, but then again, anypony who allowed themselves to be ridden by somepony they didn't trust was more than likely a fool to begin with.

Nonetheless, despite the complexity, the manual gave the impression that there were virtually no problems once the rider became accustomed to maneuvering his or her flyer. And to be fair, Twilight Sparkle's experience on that first day seemed to bear this out. Once she learned how the basics of riding, it actually felt quite intuitive; Rainbow Dash responded to all her stimuli with no resistance at all, and by the end, the unicorn was comfortable enough to have her friend fly upside down for a few seconds. It seemed that all that was left to do was to gradually increase the pegasus' flying speed until Twilight had no problems zipping through the air – perhaps even riding along during a Sonic Rainboom if her proficiency levels rose high enough.

Their second practice session, however, revealed that things weren't quite that simple.

• • •

Things were going fairly well in the beginning. Both rider and flyer were much more comfortable with the saddle, and Twilight was confident enough in its safety features to let her friend fly at her usual altitudes. This extra wiggle room allowed Twilight to figure out what the instruction manual meant when it talked about directions being "relative to the flyer." Basically, going "up" simply meant adjusting the pitch in the direction of the flyer's head, while "down" was the direction of the flyer's hooves. In other words, when the pair were upside-down, an "up" signal would send Rainbow Dash closer to the ground, because that was the direction of her head at the moment.

"What the hay are you talking about?" Rainbow Dash asked after hearing Twilight's explanation. "I don't have any relatives named 'Up' or 'Down.'"

"That's not what I... oh, never mind. The point is, I think I'm getting the hang of this."

"Great! How about some tricks, then?"

"Uh, sure, why not?"

The pegasus smiled. She'd been getting bored with simply hovering while enduring Twilight's long-winded commentary, and now that she finally had the chance to be impressive, she was determined not to disappoint. "Okay, we're going to do something relatively simple, since I kind of doubt you're interested in flying high enough to manipulate the cirrus clouds out today."

"On that matter, you'd be correct."

"All right, so here's what we'll do. First, we'll descend at 45 degrees into a nice, wide loop. We'll go around the full 360, then head into an Immelpferd turn to gain some altitude. Then, we'll do a barrel roll – not an Aileron roll, but a barrel roll – and finish up with a quadruple corkscrew nosedive before leveling off and gliding to the ground. Got it?"

"Uh, no. You're using a lot of technical jargon that I'm not familiar with. I mean, what's an Immelpferd turn?"

"Uh, well, the Immelpferd is... um..." Rainbow Dash wasn't quite certain how to respond. She'd assumed that Twilight would have already studied aerobatics enough to pick up the basics. "Look, you know what? It'll be way easier if you just let me do my thing and see for yourself. Hang on!"

"Wait –"

But the pegasus was already off like a rocket, streaking towards the ground. She was smiling widely as the air rushed past her and through her prismatic mane. As she began pulling up into the loop, she noted that there seemed to be a lot more difficulty. That was to be expected, since she was carrying Twilight's weight as well as her own, but she didn't expect that doing so would produce a strange feeling of compulsion to slow down and level off. Still, she decided to push through the mental obstacle, and was soon inverted, and beginning the downward portion of the loop, increasing her speed for the next maneuver.

As she leveled off in preparation for the Immelpferd's upward surge, Rainbow Dash could barely make out the sound of her passenger's voice over the air that was buffeting her ears, but it seemed clear that Twilight Sparkle was enjoying the adrenaline rush as much as she was, if not more so; after all, maneuvers that were comparatively easy to pull off even for average flyers were likely to blow the mind of a pony who couldn't fly at all without magical assistance. Grinning, she angled herself upward, making the first half of a second loop; however, this time, when she had fully inverted, she did a half-roll and continued flying straight ahead.

*And now for the barrel roll...* Rainbow Dash shifted herself up and to the right, moving her legs as though she was running on the inside of an invisible cylinder. She had never quite understood how anypony could mistake the much tighter Aileron roll for this move – after all, there was no aspect of *that* maneuver that even remotely called to mind the image of a barrel, whereas her current springlike trajectory left no doubt as to the appropriateness of the trick's name.

After the roll's fourth inversion, the blue pegasus found herself chuckling with glee – it seemed that Muscle Memory's advice was spot-on. It had been a long time since she'd had to put this much effort into her practice; she could tell her wings would be a bit sore tomorrow, but it would be the good kind of soreness that let you know that your work out had been thoroughly and undeniably *awesome*. It was time to wrap things up.

Rainbow Dash shot straight up into the air, and when she'd reached an appropriate altitude, she yawed to the right and sped towards the ground in a nosedive. *Now for the corkscrews*, the mare thought to herself. *And a-one, two, thr-*

The graceful-yet-exciting descent was suddenly cut short as the reins violently yanked the pegasus' head back, causing her to stop abruptly and level out. "Hey, watch it, Twilight," the flyer said as she rubbed her neck with her hoof. "You could seriously hurt my neck if you aren't careful."

"Seriously hurt? *Seriously hurt?! Rainbow Dash, you nearly killed us!*"

The pegasus turned her head and was shocked to see her rider scowling furiously at her. "Killed? Come on, Twilight, I executed everything perfectly until you went and cut me off."

"Perfectly, huh? Have you tried looking down?"

Confused, Rainbow Dash did as her friend requested – and discovered that she was hovering mere inches above the grassy field. "What?! Why are we so close to the ground? My timing was dead-on!" The pegasus immediately winced when she realized just how poor her choice of words had been.

The unicorn on her back sighed in obvious annoyance. "It's called inertia, Rainbow Dash. When you're carrying me, it not only takes more energy to start moving; it also takes more to *stop*. I could tell right away that you hadn't thought to compensate for it, and I've been trying to get your attention the whole time."

"But... you were having fun, right? I could hear you squealing in delight."

"I wasn't squealing; **I was screaming!**"

"Wait a minute. I'm almost certain I heard a 'whoooooaaa' in there somewhere."

"You did, but it wasn't 'whoa' as in 'I'm having a great time,' it was 'whoa' as in 'Stop right the feather now!' Didn't you feel me pulling back on the reins and trying to get you to level off?"

"Oh... so *that's* what that was..."

"You're supposed to pay attention when I do that! I'm not just here to provide extra resistance, I'm here to handle all your timing for you, since my weight is going to throw everything off. If you aren't going to let me do that, then I'm sure Applejack will let you borrow a bale of hay to haul around the sky to your heart's content! Thank Celestia I learned that terminal velocity spell, or that last yank probably would have been too late." Twilight sighed. "Speaking of which, that spell took a lot out of me, so we might as well stop for the day."

The unicorn wordlessly undid all the bindings and straps holding her to her friend. "Can you get the saddle off yourself?"

"Uh... yeah, I think so."

"Good. I need to get home."

"Twilight?"

"Yes?"

"I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

The purple unicorn sighed. "I know you didn't, Dash. But... I'm still angry, and I need to get home and process this when I've calmed down, okay?"

Rainbow Dash looked down at the ground for several seconds. Eventually, she answered, "Yeah, okay," but Twilight was already out of earshot.

• • •

The following evening, Rainbow Dash again found herself knocking on Twilight Sparkle's door. "Who is it?" came the voice of the bookish unicorn.

"Um... it's me. Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure thing. Come in." The pegasus opened the door to find her friend reshelving a large stack of books. "How can I help you?"

"It's about yesterday..."

"Yes?"

"Um, I just wanted to thank you for at least giving it a shot. I'm sorry it didn't work out the way I planned."

The unicorn shrugged. "Don't worry about it. So, same time next week?"

To say that Rainbow Dash was surprised would be like describing Pinkie Pie as "happy" (that is, a massive understatement). "Huh? You still want to help me practice?"

"Of course I do. Aside from what happened at the end, it *is* a lot of fun. As far as our argument goes, after taking some time to cool down and think about it, I've decided that there's really no need to dwell on it. Sure, you made a mistake, but you're not likely to make it again, right?"



The pegasus shook her head rapidly. "No! No way. From here on out I'll be letting you handle all the timing, I promise."

Twilight smiled. "That's good to hear. And while we're on the subject, I feel like I need to apologize for being so snippy with you."

Rainbow Dash laughed it off. "Hey, it's totally understandable. I'd probably flip out even worse if I was in your place."

"I take it that means you forgive me?"

"Absolutely. And as far as the next practice, can we bump it up an hour? There's going to be some nice cumulus clouds to work with then."

"I think that's doable. And in the meantime, I'll be reading up on aerobatics so we can actually talk about what we're doing."

"Awesome."

"So, is there anything else?"

"Nah, I think we pretty much covered it. Later, Twi!" The pegasus flew out the door in a much more cheerful mood.

"What was that all about?" came Spike's voice from upstairs.

Twilight glared at her eavesdropping assistant. "It's a personal matter, Spike – nothing more. Now, don't you still have some new acquisitions to sort through?"

"Believe it or not, it's actually quite simple once you know what you're doing."  
– Aileron

Twilight approached the practice field, levitating the saddle in an unmarked cardboard box beside her. She'd gotten a few weird looks from some of the residents of Ponyville, probably because unmarked cardboard boxes as bulky as this one tended to rouse the curiosity of others. Well, that and the fact that it was somewhat unusual to see a unicorn levitating large objects all the way across town. *Maybe I should just use a cart next time until I have to go off the road....*

The unicorn chased the thought from her mind. This was a minor detail that could wait until later. For now, she was more interested in learning why Rainbow Dash had insisted on arriving ahead of time to "take care of the preparations" (whatever those were). A glance towards the sky provided an answer: the pegasus was zipping around, meticulously arranging fluffy piles of water droplets into what was apparently some sort of obstacle course. "Hey, you're here!"

Twilight wasn't exactly certain how to respond to this statement of the obvious, except with an equally self-evident statement of her own: "Yes, I am."

"Great! Just give me a minute or so to finish getting everything ready, and then we can get started."

The unicorn grinned slyly. "A whole minute? Isn't that a little slow for you?"

"Hey, this is the first time I've ever tried to teach anypony else basic aerobatics."

"I suppose that explains why you brought your whistle today. But where's your cap?"

"Uh, hello? We're going to be flying all over the place. It'd probably just fall off."

"Well, we'll certainly be all over the place, considering how large this obstacle course is."

"It's not an obstacle course. It's a series of stations for us to work on different tricks. I'm pretty sure it's all set up the way it's supposed to be, but I wanna make sure everything's just right."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "And you guys think *I'm* a perfectionist."

"Well, if you don't want to learn it..."

"What is this 'not wanting to learn' concept you speak of? I'm not familiar with it."

Rainbow Dash laughed at this joke (at least, she was pretty sure it was supposed to be a joke of some sort, given the unicorn's smile), and glided back to the ground. "Okay, enough talking. Let's get strapped in."

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As the two ponies had gotten quite proficient at saddling up in the past few weeks, it didn't take very long at all before they were in the air. "You ready to get started?"

Twilight Sparkle nodded. "You bet. I've been reading up on the terminology, just like I promised. I'm ready for everything you have to tell me about loops, rolls, turns, and spins."

Rainbow Dash chuckled softly – her friend's eagerness to learn about flying reminded her of her own foalhood impatience. "One thing at a time, okay? Let's start with the loops."

The inside loop was undoubtedly the easiest of all the maneuvers on the day's agenda, mostly because Twilight had been using partial versions of it as her primary means of inversion thus far. Twilight simply gave the signal for "up," and since her directions were all relative to the pair's current orientation at any given moment, continuing to go "up" caused Rainbow Dash to fly in a vertical circle. The pegasus, knowing that her friend always preferred to have as much information as possible about everything under the sun, started to give a somewhat involved clarification of the trick's name, explaining how flyers would visualize a circular band, sort of like one of Zecora's neck thingies, but Twilight cut her off.

"It's called that because I'm on the 'inside' of the loop, right?"

"Uh... yeah, now that I think about it, it's true. I mean, that's basically a simpler way of saying what I was already saying, if you know what I'm saying."

"I... uh, think so. And the outside loop is the same, only I'm signaling 'down' the whole time and I'm on the 'outside' of the loop, right?"

"Pretty much. I take it you wanna give it a shot?"

Indeed Twilight did, and the first attempt was soon made. However, this proved to be significantly more difficult, as the unicorn's "outside" position meant that the g-forces of the maneuver were pulling her away from her flyer, causing her to extend her legs and lessen the strength of the "down" signal. This hadn't been a problem with the inside loop, since in that case she was being pulled towards Rainbow Dash, and Twilight Sparkle, like most ponies, had a lot more experience pushing against positive g-forces than pulling against negative ones. That being said, this particular rider was somewhat better informed than most beginners due to her meticulous research habits, and had been mentally prepared for the extra difficulty; the fact that her hind legs had been getting regular workouts from the previous practices helped as well. It only took a few more tries before Twilight was making complete outside loops, although she clearly needed more practice before they'd be circular enough for performance in a theoretical competition.

Still, Rainbow Dash decided that her student was proficient enough to try a more complex trick: the vertical eight. This was done by performing an inside loop, followed immediately by an outside one (or vice versa), tracing a vertical figure-eight in the sky (hence the name). In order to help Twilight judge when each loop had been finished, the pegasus had set up two small cumulus clouds so that they resembled a colon: the two would perform an inside loop around the higher cloud, and an outside loop around the lower, with the space in between acting like a gate to let Twilight know when to transition from one loop to the next. It was the same way the pegasus had learned it in flight school, and not surprisingly, a teaching method that had been successful for an academic underachiever like Rainbow Dash was outstanding for a pony like Twilight Sparkle, whose brain seemed to be hardwired for learning.

However, beyond the vertical eight, most tricks (including all of the ones Dash wanted Twilight to be familiar with) required proficiency at rolling. The most basic of maneuver in this category was the Aileron roll. This particular trick, which was named after the pegasus who'd first developed it, consisted of a complete rotation around the flyer's longitudinal axis without any changes in direction. It had replaced the barrel roll (which Twilight had experienced the previous week) as the first rolling maneuver traditionally taught at flight schools, because it was much easier to perform.

Or rather, it was *supposed* to be much easier to perform, but for some strange reason Twilight seemed to have difficulty completing the rotation. She had no problems inverting, but reverting required so much physical effort on her part that she was tempted to declare learning it not worth the effort. A brief break to let the unicorn rest and read through the saddle's instruction manual didn't appear to do much good, either. The manual made no mention of Aileron rolls, but instead skipped them entirely in favor of barrel rolls. This stumped the two, until Twilight, on a hunch, suggested that they try

the (allegedly) more complex maneuver. When Rainbow Dash caved in, they quickly discovered that barrel rolls, while not exactly easy, took much less effort to pull off.

"I don't get it," Rainbow Dash said as she hovered at the end of the line of cloud rings she'd set up for practicing rolls. "Aileron rolls have always been easier for me – and practically every pegasus ever, for that matter. I'm pretty sure even Fluttershy can do them when she's not feeling pressured. Why in Celestia's name would they give you more problems, when a barrel roll is basically the same thing combined with an inside loop?"

This, however, caused Twilight to have a flash of inspiration. "Of course! It's the inside loop."

"Huh?"

"Because the barrel roll has an inside loop, it's creating positive g-forces for me. On the other hoof, the Aileron roll is spinning around an imaginary line that goes through your body, but since I'm on the outside, that's creating negative g's."

"And this matters because...?"

"Well, I indicate roll by leaning to one side or the other. That causes one of my legs to extend while the other retracts, and then you roll in the direction I'm leaning. But leaning over like that is really difficult without positive g's, since negative g's tend to push me back to the normal sitting position. This explains why the instruction manual didn't even bother mentioning the Aileron roll. It's too difficult for a rider to signal."

"Oh, come on. It's not like leaning over is the only way to get your legs to do that."

"It isn't?"

"No way! I mean, you do that sort of thing all the time when you're trotting, right? One leg's extended, the other isn't. Or are you telling me you sway back and forth when you're walking down the street?"

"But... surely you aren't the first pony to think of that. There must be *some* reason they don't bring it up."

"Maybe, but with the way we're strapped together, I can feel pretty much every move you're making, so if you don't make my instincts kick in, I can just think about it. Personally, though, I doubt it'll come to that. C'mon. Try it."

Given that her only other option was to end the practice session early, Twilight agreed to give this a shot. The two ponies returned to their starting position, and began a flat pass through the cloud rings. *Okay, Twilight*, the unicorn thought to herself as they entered the pseudo-tunnel. *Lift one leg, push off the other, and... hold!*

Rainbow Dash rolled to the right, fully inverted... and continued the roll until she reached her starting orientation, all in one smooth move. Sure, it had been a little slow (ideally, they would have completed it before exiting the rings), but the pegasus decided that this was still worthy of a hearty "Yahoo!"

"That... was... wow...." Twilight Sparkle concurred.

"So, I take it my idea was a good one?"

"Yeah... although I was a bit surprised at the direction. For some reason, I thought we'd go left, because I was pressing down with my left leg, but once I got over that, it worked... pretty well, actually."

"Wanna try again?"

"Definitely."

The two did several more passes until Twilight got the feel for the procedure and felt comfortable enough to try incorporating the roll into other maneuvers. It still wasn't close to being "pretty" enough for competition, but then again, if the pair had wanted others to see this, they wouldn't have gone so far outside of Ponyville in the first place.

Learning the Aileron roll allowed the two to move on to the Immelpferd turn. This required little explanation, since Twilight had ridden along for one the previous week: one-half of an inside loop, with a half-roll at the top to level out. Somewhat surprisingly, she suggested trying the Split-S before her flyer could even bring it up, on the grounds that it was "the same thing, only in reverse." One inversion and second half of an inside loop later, Rainbow Dash was confident that her student was ready for the most complicated trick on the day's agenda.

The trick in question was the horizontal eight. When she heard the name, Twilight initially assumed that it would be little more than a vertical eight begun from a nosedive or a vertical climb rather than a flat pass, an assumption which seemed to be supported by the fact that the "course" Rainbow Dash had arranged for the trick looked just like the one for the vertical eight, only turned 90° so that the two clouds were arranged parallel to the horizon, rather than perpendicular.

In reality, the only thing the horizontal eight had in common with its vertical counterpart was a vague resemblance to the number after seven. Starting from an ordinary flat pass, the flyer would complete five-eighths of an inside loop before performing an Aileron roll (in other words, an Immelpferd turn, except the roll occurred after the full inversion, when the flyer was at a 45° angle to the ground). Then, after continuing in this trajectory for a brief period, the flyer would execute six-eighths of a second inside loop, inverting again at the same angle as the first turn. The trick ended with the flyer returning to her original altitude and leveling off.

According to Rainbow Dash, the reason she wanted Twilight to give this trick a try was so she could practice stringing together different maneuvers so that she could make the transitions as smooth as possible. It was this, the pegasus claimed, that made aerobatics impressive, and not coincidentally, it was also the reason relatively few pegasi were qualified to become full-time flyers like the Wonderbolts. It demanded an extremely sharp mental acumen, or else one risked disaster – usually to one's professional reputation, but sometimes to the wellbeing of other ponies, especially when flying in formation. "Lucky for me, you've got brains to spare, so this should be no problem for you!"

"Well, I'm certainly glad that you're confident about this."

"Great! Let's get to it!"

Rainbow Dash's plan was to start out by using her whistle to signal when Twilight was supposed to be transitioning to the next section of the maneuver. The point wasn't to let the unicorn get her timing down perfectly; rather, it was intended to help her learn what her physical orientation was supposed to be when the Aileron rolls were meant to be executed. After several tries, she felt confident enough to give the horizontal eight a try without Rainbow Dash's coaching.

The first half of the trick went off without a hitch. Twilight guided her friend through the partial loop, and rolled at the exact spot where she had in the practice runs. *This isn't so bad*, she thought to herself as she approached the second loop's inversion – which was a problem, because at that time, she was supposed to be thinking about Aileron rolls.

Twilight realized almost immediately that she'd executed the second roll just a bit too early, as she was headed straight for the cloud. This didn't cause her too much concern, other than mild disappointment at having made a mistake. One second later, however, the unicorn was abruptly reminded of one of the most oft-overlooked corollaries of a pegasus' ability to walk on clouds – namely, the ability to crash into them.

Of course, one doesn't become a winner of the Best Young Flyer competition without learning how to quickly recover from mid-air collisions, so Rainbow Dash had little trouble regaining control and hovering while her rider recollected herself. "Are you okay, Twilight?"

"Yeah... I'm fine. I just didn't expect hitting a cloud to jerk me around so much."

"Well, you're a unicorn, so you normally pass right through them, which means that you kept going for a little bit, even though I'd already stopped."

"Right. Conservation of momentum."

The pegasus had heard enough about the physics involved in flight over the years to recognize the phrase, even if she could never quite remember what exactly it meant, so she assumed that her friend knew what she was talking about, and decided to move on to the next subject. "Well, I'm sure you'll be ready for it next time."

"You're right. Let's get back to it."

"Uh, sorry, Twilight, but I've got to pull the plug here. My wings are getting tired, and believe me, straining a wing is *not* something you want happening at these altitudes."

"Aww... I was hoping to get to spins. The books I read made them sound so beautiful and graceful."

"Well, yeah, I'll admit that they're really kick-awesome to watch when they're done by a flyer who knows what she's doing, but they're also really difficult and dangerous, and you're not even close to the skill level needed for me to feel comfortable letting you do that yet. In fact, I'm not even sure I have the skill to pull one off if you just sat on my back like a sack of potatoes and let me take over. I mean, I'm more of a speed specialist to begin with, so I don't practice the graceful stuff nearly as often. "

"Oh... that's too bad, I guess."

"Besides, to do a spin, you have to stop flapping your wings entirely for the duration of the trick, so I wouldn't really be getting any extra strength training in by having you ride along."

Twilight sighed. "No point in moping about it, I guess. After all, we made some good progress today, right?"



"Some progress? Twilight, it took me months to learn how to do everything you did today. I mean, granted, it's still a little sloppy, but that's nothing that can't be fixed with some more practicing."

The unicorn grinned sheepishly. "Well, to be fair, I don't have to worry about the actual mechanics of flying. All I'm really doing is pointing you in the direction I want you to go."

Rainbow Dash chuckled as she landed on the grass. "Alright, be modest if you want. Still, I say it's a shame you weren't born with wings. You'd be a natural pegasus."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Twilight replied as she released herself from the saddle. "Same time next week?"

"Definitely," the pegasus replied as she removed the saddle and replaced it in its box. "There's going to be really thick stratus clouds all over the Ponyville area, which basically means the entire sky will be padded, so we can take a few more risks."

"Maybe even a spin?"

"Maybe... but I have something else in mind."

"No pony is certain what the spectrum barrier actually is or why it exists, but scientists and mages alike have been all but unanimous in their agreement that there is absolutely no way that it can possibly be broken by any means known to ponykind. Nevertheless, the fact that a huge crowd of spectators, including Princess Celestia, recently witnessed a young pegasus accomplishing this very feat has caused some to doubt the conventional wisdom."

– *Scientific Equestrian*, "The Myth of Super-Spectral Flight"

Rainbow Dash smiled broadly as she pulled the cart containing her fitness saddle off to the side of the road. It had taken a few weeks, but she and Twilight had finally figured out a system that allowed them to get this bizarre-looking oddity outside of Ponyville while keeping the suspicions of busybodies to a minimum.

"You certainly look cheerful today," Twilight said as she levitated the saddle out of the cart. She'd been waiting for her flying partner to arrive for nearly ten minutes.

"Of course I'm cheerful! Most of the time, an overcast sky means I need to put in extra hours at work, because it usually means showers to monitor. You have no idea how fussy they are about precipitation rates back in Cloudsdale."

"Well, I'd imagine that they'd be quite persnickety about it," Twilight replied. "After all, many crops are dependent on certain amounts of rainfall, so mistakes could be devastating for the agricultural sector."

The pegasus sighed. "Listen, I'm complaining about my bosses here. That means you're supposed to be on *my* side, even if the pencil pushers have a point."

Twilight winced at her conversational *faux pas*. "I'm sorry – I misunderstood you. Still, when you want empathy, it would help if you talked about your feelings."

"I did! Didn't I start out by pointing out how cheerful I was that I *didn't* have to do all that crap?"

The unicorn thought for a bit and realized that Rainbow Dash had indeed been implying that she merely found aspects of her job to be annoying, even if they were necessary. "Oh... I see what you mean... I think." Twilight decided to change the subject a

bit. "So, why exactly *is* the sky overcast today? Don't tell me you scheduled it that way just for this practice."

"What? No way! I take my job as Ponyville's chief weatherpony seriously, and pulling that sort of thing would get me demoted in a heartbeat. The reason we've got an overcast sky is because several local farmers requested it so they could get some work done outside without having to deal with the sun on top of everything. We get requests like that all the time, but usually none of them can agree on a date."

"I take it this time they coordinated with each other?"

"Uh, no, actually. From what I can tell, they just got lucky, and enough of them requested it today to justify requisitioning a nice, thick stratus."

"Huh... I never would have imagined you as the bureaucratic type."

"Yeah, well, that part of the job may be boring, but after you get a grip on how the whole system works, you can usually get things done quicker. I've still got lots of free time, and the pay is good."

"Really?"

"Of course! How else do you think I could afford my home?"

"Uh, well, I assumed that cloud houses were cheaper than those on the ground because there's a lot more sky to go around than land."

"Well, that's true," Rainbow Dash admitted, "but that isn't some cheap winged-trash double-wide we're talking about here. Trust me, decorative columns and rainbow water features cost money."

"So, why did you put them in?"

"I didn't, actually. They were already in place when I bought it. It's actually the first cloud house built in Ponyville," Rainbow Dash added with no small amount of pride.

"Really? Have you considered registering it as a historic landmark?"

"I'm way ahead of you on that one. Legal Tender suggested it so I could get some tax benefits."

"Legal Tender?"

"He's my accountant – the best one in Cloudsdale."

"Huh... well, I guess we'd better get strapped in."

"Oh, no you don't," Rainbow Dash replied with a smirk. "Not yet. Now, it's your turn."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, what does a librarian's salary get you?"

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable talking about that..."

"Hey, it's not like I'm asking for a specific figure here – I'm just curious. Besides, my tax bits help pay for it, so I've got a legitimate interest."

Unable (or perhaps more accurately, unwilling) to argue with this line of reasoning, the librarian reluctantly caved in. "Well, pretty much all of my compensation comes in the form of room and board. The money I have for personal purchases comes from the stipend I receive as Celestia's protégé, and I won't reveal *that* to anypony, because I don't want to sound like I'm bragging about how much I have access to."

"Okay, okay, suit yourself. It's not like I told you all that stuff about my house to try to impress you. I'm just really proud of it, that's all."

Twilight sighed. "That's okay... it's just that so many ponies in Canterlot make judgements about others based on how much money they have..."

"I hear ya. Besides, you've already told me plenty."

"What?"

"You must be pretty well-off if you're worried about other ponies thinking that you're bragging. Am I right?"

Twilight Sparkle chose not to dignify this with an answer. "Let's just get up in the air," she groused.

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The stratus clouds were indeed quite thick. When Rainbow Dash had zipped up the hole they'd used to get through the cloud layer, Twilight couldn't see anything but clouds and mountaintops. "Wow... this is really... impressive." The unicorn was rather disappointed that she hadn't been able to come up with a better adjective to express her feelings on the sight before her; it was as though Rainbow Dash was standing on an apparently endless floor of cotton. Sure, she'd seen the tops of clouds plenty of times before, but that was usually from the basket of her hot air balloon, rather than the back of a pegasus, and the clouds themselves had never seemed so indescribably *vast*.

Rainbow Dash seemed to pick up on her rider's unspoken comment. "Yeah," she said with a characteristic smirk, "I bet that overcast skies would be a lot more popular if everypony could see what they looked like from above. But we've talked enough for now. Time for flying!"

The pair warmed up by running through most of the maneuvers they'd worked on the previous week at a moderate speed. Now that Twilight had a reasonably good idea of what she was doing, the loops and turns were becoming tighter, the Aileron rolls were faster and cleaner, and Rainbow Dash was even more certain that she'd chosen the perfect mare to be her rider. It was time to *really* get down to business.

"Twilight, when I first had the idea to ask you to ride me, I had one goal in mind. A seriously, totally, undeniably *awesome* goal of pure, unadulterated coolness!"

"And that goal is...?"

"Two words, my friend: Sonic Rainboom."

The pegasus' rider let out a low whistle, although she didn't find this revelation to be particularly surprising in and of itself; after all, Rainbow Dash's penchant for setting lofty goals was common knowledge in the Ponyville area. That said, she was glad to learn it. Knowing precisely what her friend ultimately wanted to get out of this training session meant that the remainder of their time could be occupied more efficiently. "So, you really think we'll be able to do it today?"

To Twilight's astonishment, her friend's reaction was to laugh so hard that it felt like a minor earthquake from her perch in the saddle. "I wish! I've only pulled it off a few times, and every time I did, I was flying downwards, so I had gravity helping me."

"But... won't having me along make it easier, then?"

"Sure... but making things easier won't do anything to help my strength training. No, my ultimate goal is to be able to pull it off whenever I want, no matter what direction I'm flying in. Horizontally, diagonally... or maybe even *vertically*. I mean, if I can do that, I'll be a shoo-in for the Wonderbolts!" Rainbow Dash paused to allow the rapturous visions of personal glory to play out in her mind. "But to do that, my wing muscles need to be way, way stronger to make up for the lost acceleration, so using gravity now would kind of defeat the whole purpose of having you along for the ride."

"I see... so, what *are* we going to do, then?"

"Well, just because I can't *break* the spectrum barrier without gravity doesn't mean I can't *reach* it. In fact, I've actually done it on my own while flying horizontally plenty of times before. I'm pretty sure I can take you there today, though it won't be easy."

"Oh, of course. It's basic resistance training, isn't it?"

"Right. If I get good enough to reach the barrier with a rider without any problems, then breaking it on my own should be a lot easier."

Twilight was really starting to comprehend the full extent of Dash's plan. "That's great! And later on, we can use gravity to increase the resistance by increasing the angle of ascent."

"By Luna, I think you've got it!"

"Oh... but what happens when you don't break the spectrum barrier again?"

"Well, the compression pushes back against you. The faster you go, the more it builds up, and if you don't break the barrier, it rockets you back like a slingshot. That's why I didn't want to try doing something like this until there was enough cloud cover around to absorb the crash."

Twilight nodded in understanding. "Okay. So, what's the procedure here?"

"It's pretty simple. You pick a point somewhere off in the distance, and fly towards it as fast as possible. Only thing we need to do is make sure there's enough room to reach the barrier before we actually get there."

"I see." Twilight looked around, and the only things visible besides the clouds (which were subject to the wind and thus not stationary enough to use as a target) were various mountain peaks, one of which had an unmistakably distinct feature. "Do you suppose the

Royal Palace is far enough away for this?" the unicorn asked, motioning towards the outcropping upon which the Princesses' castle stood.

Rainbow Dash pondered this for a moment. "Yeah... that should do nicely. Ready when you are!"

The pair began by making a large inside loop, mostly to gain speed before beginning the extended flat pass (after all, using a little gravity from the downward half of the maneuver – just to get the metaphorical ball rolling, nothing more – wouldn't really interfere with the overall results). Once they'd leveled off, Rainbow Dash began her acceleration. Even though she hadn't gone into this exercise with any predefined plan to do so, Twilight found herself increasing her friend's airspeed every eight wing flaps. *One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight, One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight, One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight, One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight...*

The rhythm was nice and steady, almost musical, and Rainbow Dash didn't seem to be pushing herself too much as she continued accelerating. Twilight smiled as the wind whipped through her mane, which would doubtless be an absolute mess when this session was finished (and which, now that she thought of it, probably explained why her flyer never bothered to style her own mane or tail). Still, the speed was exhilarating, creating a sort of tunnel that soon blurred out much of her peripheral vision. Twilight Sparkle found herself getting excited at the prospect of just arriving at the spectrum barrier, even if breaking it today was somewhat unlikely. Unfortunately for her, physics had other plans that day.

The unicorn had mentally prepared herself for the eventual approach to the spectrum barrier. When Rainbow Dash began slowing down, she would have a split-second to get ready before the catapulting effect kicked in. When it did, it would be her job to reorient her flyer as soon as possible, so they could move on to the next stage in the training session (whatever that might be). What she most certainly *hadn't* prepared for was the possibility of Rainbow Dash suddenly going out of control before this ever occurred, which is why the unicorn was taken completely by surprise when her friend suddenly shot straight upwards, her typical precision vanishing in an instant as Twilight's attempts to regain control sent the pair hurtling towards the fluffy padding beneath them.

The two ponies bounced along the tops of the clouds as Twilight was once again reminded that the soft, fluffy nature of these meteorological phenomena didn't make crashing into them all that pleasant. Upon seeing the pair, an outside observer might have been tempted to make an analogy to a pebble being skipped across the surface of a pond, but that would imply a degree of stability that simply was not present, at least from

Twilight Sparkle's point of view. To her, the bouncing and jostling was more akin to a ball being thrown across an erratically shaped field, or perhaps the parties Pinkie Pie occasionally threw when she was absolutely certain that there would be no foals in attendance, giving her the opportunity to serve Sugarcube Corner's award-winning extra-proof rum cake. When she and Rainbow Dash finally came to a stop, Twilight was upside down, completely surrounded by cold, damp stratus clouds, and extremely grateful that her friend had spent the bits necessary to purchase the safest saddle on the market.

The unicorn still looked dazed as Rainbow Dash righted herself, pulling her out of the clouds. "Urgh... I thought you said we'd be bounced *backwards* if we didn't pull off the Rainboom...."

"I did, and we would have, but we never even got close to the spectrum barrier."

"So, what happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. We were going along fine, and then suddenly I was completely out of control. I mean, I didn't even feel you pulling back on the reins."

Twilight thought about this for a few seconds before the obvious explanation came to her. "Of course!" she said, knocking a hoof against her forehead in a show of frustration. "I was sitting upright the whole time, which meant that your aerodynamic profile was completely disrupted. When you got up to speed, the air pushed against my body with enough force to flip us end over end."

"Huh... I guess that makes sense. You have any ideas on how to fix that?"

The unicorn took several more seconds before replying, "As a matter of fact, I do. If I lean forward, that should reduce our aerodynamic profile significantly."

"Hmmm... simple and to the point. Sounds like a good Plan B to me."

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At first, it really did appear to be a good plan. The smaller profile that resulted from the forward lean didn't just make it easier to stay in control; the reduction in drag also meant that Rainbow Dash was able to accelerate much faster. At least, that's what Twilight Sparkle thought, although she admittedly had much less experience with high-speed flight than her counterpart. Still, the unicorn was fairly certain that her flyer had taken less time to reach the point where they'd run into problems before, assuming the



increasing strain on the muscles in her midsection were a reasonably accurate indication of airspeed. Besides, this time, the barrier was starting to become visible, just like Dash said it would.

As the distortion associated with the spectrum barrier began to manifest itself in a translucent cone around the pair, Twilight's natural curiosity caused her to turn her head so she could observe the phenomenon from the side. The unicorn was fairly certain that this action would not create significant drag, and technically speaking, she was correct. Turning her neck did not cause the pair to spin out of control. No, that happened because the distraction caused Twilight to forget to keep the muscles in her barrel and shoulder contracted, which meant that she was suddenly blown into an upright position by the air resistance, this time flailing her forelegs wildly.

This, in turn, caused Rainbow Dash to receive so many conflicting signals that she simply stopped flapping her wings altogether. The good news was that Dash now had some idea of what Fluttershy experienced whenever she attempted to fly in front of an audience. The bad news was that she and Twilight ended up nosediving directly into the clouds below.

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"Alright, time for Plan C. Since you're just going to be flying in a straight line, that means you don't actually need me to steer you. Therefore, I'll just leave you in charge, while I drop down and wrap my forelegs around your neck and hang on. Does that sound good to you?"

"You bet it does! Let's do this!"

It certainly *seemed* like a good plan, and indeed, when the two ponies reached the point where Twilight had been previously been unable to lean forward under her own power, she was able to keep clinging to Rainbow Dash's neck with relative ease. Unfortunately, the pegasus didn't notice that as the winds buffeted Twilight's body, once again shifting her posture upward, her friend's grip was sliding slowly up her neck – until the unicorn's hooves reached her larynx, that is.

"GAaaAaK!"

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Once again, Twilight Sparkle found herself with her head quite literally in the clouds. "Okay, on to Plan D..."

"I'm not really sure that I can handle a 'Plan D' right now," Rainbow Dash groaned as she rolled over. She coughed a few times and rubbed her throat. "Can we just call it a day and head home?"

"Um, actually, that *is* Plan D. If we want to even get close to the spectrum barrier, we're going to have to come up with a safer way to reduce our aerodynamic profile, and right now, I don't see how that's going to happen without some good old-fashioned research."

"Great... you can do that, while I head home and recover."

"Uh... don't we have to go back to the field and get the cart?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Canterlot looks a lot closer now than when we started..."

Rainbow Dash looked at the castle, and groaned as she realized that the unicorn's observation was correct, and that she and Twilight would have to fly all the way back to their starting point. "This is just great... My wings are going to be so sore tomorrow."

"Instincts exist for a reason. Anypony who ignores them  
does so at their own risk."

– Rainbow Dash, *Taking Flight: An Autobiography*

"So, should I assume that that confident look on your face means you've thought of something?" Rainbow Dash asked as she slipped into the saddle.

"I most certainly have," Twilight replied as she cinched a strap around her friend's barrel. "It took me the whole week, but I'm fairly certain that this will work."

"Certain enough to ignore the fact that we don't have nearly as much cloud cover this week?"

"Well, that does complicate things a little, but I've got a solution for that."

"I see... care to explain it?"

Twilight hopped into the saddle and secured her hind legs, a motion that had almost become second nature to her over the past month. "I'll go into more detail after we warm up," she replied as she attached the reins to her hooves.

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Warming up, in this case, consisted of running through all of the moves the two had worked on previously, with the addition of a new trick that Rainbow Dash had recently come up with, inspired by the "weird squiggly thing" she'd seen in an ad for a firm of lawyers. Hearing this description, Twilight was able to identify this mysterious symbol as an ampersand, a word which her pegasus friend decided sounded cool enough to serve as the trick's name. The maneuver wasn't all that different from the horizontal eight, consisting of two partial inside loops separated by a single inversion. The main differences were the fact that the two partial loops were vertically arranged and the fact that it began and ended on downward angles on the bottom loop, instead of a flat pass. The only difficulty Twilight had in piloting her friend was a habit of inverting after the second partial loop (as was standard for the horizontal eight), which in this trick served no purpose other than to cause the two to end the trick upside-down.

However, all this was merely a preamble to what Rainbow Dash assumed was some kick-awesome technique Twilight had figured out to deal with problem of air resistance.

"C'mon, spill the beans, already," the pegasus asked as her friend guided her higher into the air.

"In a minute," the unicorn responded. "First, I need to make sure we have enough altitude to pull this off safely."

Rainbow Dash sighed and resigned herself to the fact that Twilight Sparkle wouldn't reveal anything until she was absolutely ready. In the meantime, there was little for her to do other than flap her wings and enjoy the scenery while her friend manipulated her instincts. She'd long since gotten over the weirdness of being a spectator of her own flying skills – though knowing that she could take over at any time made that idea *way* less creepy than it sounded – but she had to admit that when Twilight wasn't guiding her through various twists and turns, it could get a little boring.

Eventually, Twilight stopped their ascent and had her friend hover in place. "*Now* will you tell me what we're doing?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Gladly," the unicorn responded. "Basically, our problem is that we've been losing control because I ruin our aerodynamic profile. My attempts to reduce that profile by leaning forward met with failure, because I couldn't overcome the air resistance."

"Uh, no kidding. I already know all of this. Come on, skip to the good part. Did you find a magic spell or something that will fix it?"

"More or less. Basically, the spell I found is going to keep me in place so that I can concentrate on actually steering."

"Oh, so it's like glue?"

"Actually, it isn't. Any spell that could function like an adhesive would restrict my movement so much that I wouldn't actually be able to steer you, since I'd be stuck in one place. Instead, I learned about a spell that mimics the properties of magnets. It will cause our bodies to pull towards each other, but since the strength is adjustable, I can make certain that I'm never so far down that I can't do my job."

"Okay... I think I'm following you here. So, why are we up so high, then?"

"Well, I haven't had the chance to test it out, so we're going to fly to the barrier on a downwards trajectory."

"Whoa, hold up, Twilight. Remember what I said last time? I'm looking for a challenge here, not some way to make the Sonic Rainboom easier."

"Okay, first of all, this is primarily a test to see if my idea works. If the spectrum barrier bounces us back, I want it to be upwards so that I have more time to regain control. Secondly, after I double-checked the physics involved, I realized that it *is* going to be more challenging, since I'm going to add drag no matter what position I'm in, reducing your terminal velocity. It would be harder for you even if you were headed straight down."

Rainbow Dash slapped a hoof against her forehead as she listened to Twilight explain something she should have been able to figure out on her own. "Okay, enough talking. Let's get to work."

The unicorn's horn glowed as a magical aura surrounded the two ponies. When it subsided, Twilight abruptly lurched forward, collapsing onto Rainbow Dash's shoulders.

"Whoa! You okay?" the pegasus asked.

"I'm fine – it's just a little stronger than I expected. Let me dial it back a bit." A somewhat fainter glow emanated from Twilight's horn, allowing her to sit up again, although she had to steady herself with her forelegs, since she couldn't get her center of gravity over the saddle. "There... that should be okay once we start flying."

"Speaking of which, that sounds like a good idea right now."

The unicorn smiled, and slapped the reins to signal her friend to begin moving.

As the two ponies descended at a somewhat steep angle, Twilight was pleased to find that her plan was working out *exactly* as intended. The attractive spell counteracted the air resistance quite well, giving her a very comfortable riding posture. The only hiccup was the fact that she had to repeatedly increase the strength of the spell as Rainbow Dash's velocity increased, but this was a minor problem, since the spell didn't require her continuous attention, which was good, as most of that concentration was focused on her flyer's ever-increasing speed. The pair surged towards the ground as the visual distortion associated with the spectrum barrier formed around them. Twilight made a quick check of their altitude; she had a fairly good idea of how close to the ground they could get before a crash was inevitable, and she intended to cut off the maneuver quite a distance before that, but she really wanted this to work the first time. *Come on... almost there....*

The distortion grew more and more visible, but other than that, Twilight didn't notice any major changes. As the pair neared the cutoff point, the unicorn was nearly ready to have her flyer slow down and turn upwards, when suddenly the distortion coalesced into a solid white cone, stopping the two in midair.

"The barrier?" the rider quickly asked.

Rainbow Dash had just enough time to nod before the two ponies were catapulted back upwards. For a few seconds, it seemed as though they were out of control yet again, but Twilight somehow managed to reorient her flyer just as they reached the peak of their parabolic trajectory. She maneuvered her friend over to a nearby cloud, where they could debrief the proceedings.

"That was the most amazing thing ever!" the unicorn yelped excitedly.

"Whoa, easy on the technical stuff," Rainbow Dash joked. "I suppose it is pretty impressive for somepony who doesn't normally think of it as a failed Sonic Rainboom attempt."

"More importantly, the spell I found worked perfectly. I was able to adjust its strength as needed, and I canceled it entirely in time to get back to normal flying."

"Yeah... that's actually something I've never done on my own. I mean, I've *always* crashed when I didn't break the spectrum barrier before. How'd you manage to regain control?"

Twilight paused as she attempted to come up with an explanation. "Hmmm... well, maybe it's related to what you said before, about how I don't view this phenomenon as a failed Rainboom. That probably put me in a better mental state to deal with the chaos."

"Eh, makes as much sense as anything," the pegasus said with a shrug. "But you were right about it being more difficult than flying solo."

"So, I take it you're satisfied with my skills as a rider, then?"

"You bet I am. In fact... how about I do something for you?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"I want to take you along for an actual Rainboom."

"I'd love to, Rainbow Dash, but that's still a long ways off."

"Not if you use your magic to help me out."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You know that spell you use to reduce terminal velocity?"

"Yeah... "

"Well, what if you used it to *increase* it instead? That way, I don't have to fight against nearly as much drag, and the Rainboom should be a snap!"

"I don't know..."

"Come on, we can make sure there's a cloud in place to stop us if something goes wrong."

"But that really *won't* help you with your training."

"Duh! That's why I said I'd be doing something for you! Come on, it'll be fun."

"Well, in theory, there's no reason it *shouldn't* work."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"I didn't say that. You need to keep in mind that that spell takes a lot out of me. We'd only be able to try it once, and it would mean we'd have to end the practice early."

Rainbow Dash smiled. "That sounds like a 'yes, but' to me."

"I suppose it is."

"But a 'yes, but' is still basically a 'yes,' right?"

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It took several minutes of needling, begging, and pleading, but eventually the pegasus won over her friend, due in no small part to her unshakable confidence. Even so, Twilight Sparkle insisted that several clouds be pushed together to provide adequate deceleration in the event that they ended up going too fast for either of them to maintain control. This done, the two hovered high overhead, going over the plans one last time.

"Okay, so we'll do three-quarters of an inside loop to build up our speed, then you'll aim me straight for the clouds," Rainbow Dash said. "There's no way it isn't thick enough to absorb our momentum if we collide with it."

Her rider nodded, though not without some uncertainty. "I understand. But how do I know if the Rainboom is going to happen?"

"You know how the barrier looks white before it pushes you back? When you're about to break it, it becomes multi-colored for a split-second. When you see that, you give me an extra burst of speed, and then we'll be cruising."

"And you're sure this will be worth it?"

Rainbow Dash smiled. "Did Rarity ever tell you what it was like when I rescued her?"

"Well, no. She said she was too busy panicking at the time to really appreciate your achievement."

"Oh," the pegasus said disappointedly. "Well, in any case, flying at super-spectral speeds is totally awesome by itself, but the moment you break the spectrum barrier is absolutely *amazing*. I mean, when I did it the first time, I became obsessed with the Rainboom for years."

"You're still obsessed with it today," Twilight pointed out.

"Which really oughta show you how awesome it is. Believe me, there aren't a lot of things that are worth the risk of abysmal failure, but the Sonic Rainboom is one of them."

Twilight slowly nodded to herself. "Okay... alright. You've convinced me that it's at least worth trying."

"Awesome! Ready when you are."

The unicorn's horn glowed as she ran through her mental checklist. "Attraction spell activated... check. Increasing terminal velocity..." The glow pulsated for a few seconds as the magic in question flowed through the two ponies. "...check. Emergency landing area still intact... check. Rider worries assuaged... well, close enough, I guess. Okay, let's go." Rainbow Dash began the maneuver at her normal sprinting speed, and only increased over the course of the wide loop. When the ponies had reached the three-quarter mark, they broke off the loop and nosedived straight for large cluster of water droplets intended to cushion their fall if anything went wrong.



They were moving fast, Twilight noted. Much, much faster than their last attempt – indeed, faster than they'd ever flown since beginning their regular practices, if the hastened appearance of the spectral distortion was any indication. The air resistance seemed nonexistent; if anything, it felt like they were being pushed downward by an unknown force rather than pulled by gravity. The unicorn wasn't certain if this was the result of her terminal velocity spell, or her own imagination, but she decided to push these thoughts aside and press on, if only because the adrenaline was starting to kick in again.

Twilight suddenly felt the drag of the air as she and Rainbow Dash hit their modified terminal velocity. It was all up to the pegasus' wingpower now. The cloud rushed closer and closer as the distortion became more opaque. When the two sights suddenly merged into a nearly solid wall of whiteness, Twilight briefly considered calling it off – but she decided against it. Her curiosity was now piqued; she had to see why Rainbow Dash thought that the Sonic Rainboom was so important that it needed to be shared with her. Still, the spectrum barrier clung to its notorious reputation as a nigh-indestructible phenomenon; the darn thing was almost stubborn enough to be a member of the Apple family.

The compression from the barrier was quite noticeable now: Rainbow Dash was showing more signs of turbulence than in any of their previous flights. It was all Twilight could do to keep them pointed straight down towards the cloud. However, just as she resigned herself to being thrown back up into the air, she saw it: the glimmer of color from the distortion. Remembering the pegasus' instructions, she signaled for a final burst of speed.

Twilight Sparkle had already experienced much in her brief lifetime. She'd studied magic under the tutelage of one of Equestria's ruling princesses and helped rescue the other from her inner demons. She had calmed an angry ursa minor, traveled through time, and observed the famed Dragon Migration from a closer vantage point than anypony else on record. She had been brought to the brink of despair by a mad draconequus, and with her friends, she had overcome both through the magic of friendship. *She had met Pinkie Pie.* She'd even observed two Sonic Rainbooms before, albeit from a distance. None of these experiences, however, could prepare her for the explosion of colors that washed over her, surrounding and permeating her as the spectrum barrier abruptly shattered with an indescribable roar. It only lasted half a second, but it was the most ineffably enchanting concentration of wonderfulness she'd experienced to date. Suddenly, Rainbow Dash's notorious obsession with the maneuver made perfect sense.

This reverie might have continued if Twilight hadn't suddenly felt the force of the attraction spell pulling her down towards her flyer once again. She quickly regained her

senses and began to steer her friend away from the cloud – there was no way she would let *this* experience be cut short by a collision. The unicorn didn't do anything fancy; she simply guided her friend in wide turns and climbs and dives until their momentum finally petered out, all the while staring awestruck at the rainbow trail they left in their wake. Appropriately enough, the violet band in Dash's rainbow seemed to be sparkling in the afternoon sun, a detail of the experience that would soon become much, much less poetic.

Twilight collapsed onto her friend's shoulders as they glided to the ground, breathing heavily from the adrenaline rush. "Worth it?" the pegasus asked with a grin.

"Totally worth it," agreed the unicorn. "Although trying to explain it to anypony else is going to be a major pain in the flank."

"Yeah, it is annoying. But I'd say that's enough for today."

"Right," Twilight said with a nod as she began to undo the assorted straps that kept her in the saddle. "Oh, Dash?"

"Yeah?" the pegasus asked as she slipped the reins off of her muzzle.

"Thanks."

"It's no problem." Rainbow Dash smiled as she waited for her friend to step off of her back. Five minutes later, the smile was gone. "You having trouble, Twilight?" She looked behind her to see that Twilight had undone all of the straps and freed her hind legs from the greaves, but was still sitting in the saddle with a strained look on her face.

"Something... something's wrong." Twilight suddenly pressed her forehooves against Dash's shoulders, lifting herself up and sliding the saddle off of the pegasus before her haunches landed on her back again.

"Ow!" Rainbow Dash said in annoyance. "Okay, two things. First, that's a really weird way to remove a saddle, and second, why the hay are you still on my back?!"

Twilight didn't seem to hear this, because she was in the early stages of a panic attack. "It's not the saddle? But then..." The unicorn's voice trailed off as a look of horrified realization spread across her face. "No, no, no, no, *no*, *no*, *NO!* This can't be happening!" The unicorn stared at the glow just over her forehead, which seemed to be completely ineffectual. "Why isn't this stupid horn working? Come on!"

Rainbow Dash had never, *ever* heard her friend openly doubting her horn before. Her eyes widened as she realized that something had just made life more complicated. "Twilight... what's going on?"

"I don't know... it could be that I'm just tired, or maybe the Rainboom had some sort of unexpected effect, but –"

"Twilight, I don't really need to hear the 'why' right now. I need to know what happened."

"The... the attraction spell."

"Yeah?"

"It... it won't go away."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean that I can't seem to cancel it like I should! It's still affecting us for some reason. We're... we're stuck."

"***What?!***"

"This is a very complicated case. You know, a lotta ins, a lotta outs, a lotta what-have-yous. And, uh, a lotta strands to keep in my head, man. Lotta strands in old Duder's head. Fortunately, I'm adhering to a pretty strict, uh, regimen to keep my mind, you know, uh, limber."

– Jeff "The Dude" Letrotski

"*I'm just saying* that I thought I heard a noise while the two of you were working on the fire pit. That's all."

Scotaloo rolled her eyes as her friend brought up the phantom sound she claimed to have heard while the Cutie Mark Crusaders had still been back in Ponyville yet again. "Look, Sweetie Belle, can't you give this whole 'noise' thing a rest?"

The unicorn filly, however, wasn't quite ready to let this issue go. "But it sounded kind of loud – are you guys sure you didn't hear it?"

"If I did hear it, I prob'ly wasn't listenin'," Apple Bloom replied, "on account of I got more important stuff ta be thinkin' about, like *gettin' our cutie marks*. An' after all the trouble I've already been through for this one, ain't no way we ain't gonna give it a shot."

"Well, I still say it doesn't make any sense," Sweetie Belle said. "Why did we have to spend so much time gardening with Mr. Greenhooves?"

"How else were we supposed to get our hooves on some weeds?" Scotaloo asked rhetorically. Indeed, after a few short hours under the tutelage of the elderly earth pony, the trio of fillies had amassed a considerable collection of thistles, dandelions, and kudzu.

"I don't know," the unicorn replied with a resigned sigh. "This all just seems so... ridiculous."

"Well, that earth pony with the shaggy mane and goatee who's always at the bowling alley seemed to think it was pretty awesome," the pegasus filly countered. Granted, she hadn't actually *spoken* to him – he'd been talking to the other members of his team at the time – but she was pretty sure that she'd gotten the general idea. Anyway, he seemed like a reasonably good pony, especially when compared to the creepy one with the hairnet.

"Besides, I already went all the way through Everfree Forest ta borrow that cauldron from Zecora," Apple Bloom added. It wasn't a particularly large one, but the earth pony would have bet her ribbon that it was enough to do the job.

"But why? Couldn't you have just used an ordinary pot from your kitchen?"

"Those are for cookin' on a stove," Apple Bloom said. "This'n is meant ta be put over an open fire."

"But how does that make it a 'smoking pot'?"

"Because where there's fire, there's smoke, obviously," Scootaloo replied. "I mean, it's pretty simple: we smoke the weeds in the pot along with some grass, and then..."

Sweetie Belle raised an eyebrow skeptically. "I'm waiting..."

"...and then something awesome happens, apparently." At least, Scootaloo was pretty sure that was how it worked. Of course, there were other things the grown-up pony had mentioned over the course of the eavesdropped conversation, but they all sounded too impractical. Roaches, for example, were living creatures, and smoking them with the weeds would just be cruel (besides, bugs were icky); getting bags full of dimes or nickels seemed too expensive and time-consuming; and the Crusaders didn't have access to a grandfather clock (or anything else that went "bong," for that matter). Thus, they had decided to start with weeds and grass (actually, Scootaloo and Apple Bloom had decided, while Sweetie Belle was reluctantly going along to get along for the moment).

With the pot and weeds taken care of, all that was left to do was to gather up some grass before heading back to the clubhouse to smoke them all over a fire pit. Of course, they couldn't exactly tear up somepony's lawn without having to answer some really awkward questions, so the solution, naturally, was to head to the large field just outside of Ponyville, where nopony would care about a few patchy spots on the ground. The three fillies had brought along several empty saddlebags, since they'd quite cleverly realized that figuring out how to properly smoke grass would be a trial-and-error process, and they'd need as much of it as they could get.

"Here we are," Scootaloo declared as they entered the large, grassy expanse. "So, where should we start?"

Apple Bloom slowly scanned the area. "Well, how about –"

"Wait a minute," Sweetie Belle interrupted. "Did you hear that?"

"More noises?" Scootaloo asked.

"Hang on," Apple Bloom said. "I think I hear it, too. Kinda sounds like... grunting?"

This was enough to convince the pegasus filly to actually have a listen herself. "Yeah... but it isn't just any old grunting... I think that's Rainbow Dash's voice! Come on!" The three fillies galloped off towards the strange sounds.

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Rainbow Dash was grinding her teeth as she bucked her rear legs as hard as she could. "Ugh... unh... come... on... why... won't... you... just... get... off... already!"

Twilight Sparkle, for her part, was starting to feel rather nauseated. "Dash... I don't think you're going to be able to buck me off of you. We need to try a different approach."

The pegasus reluctantly stopped her kicks. "Do you... have something... in mind?" she asked between heaving breaths.

"Actually, I do. The spell works like a magnet, right?"

"What... are you asking me... for?"

Twilight glared at her companion. "Now's not the time to get snippy, Rainbow Dash. We can argue once we figure out a way to deal with this mess."

The pegasus let out a frustrated sigh. "Fine. Go ahead with your explanation."

"Thank you. As I was saying, the spell works like a magnet, but for whatever reason, its strength has been greatly increased. But although really strong magnets can't simply be pulled apart without a lot of effort, it's relatively easy to separate them if you *slide* them apart."

"Right... and you know this... how?"

"My brother got a me a science kit for Hearth Warming one year that had some neodymium alloy magnets in it."

"Neo-what now?"

"Neodymium. It's a relatively rare metal, but its alloys can be used to make super-strong magnets, with no magic required."

"Oh... got it. So, all we need to do is slide ourselves apart?"

"Exactly."

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As the Crusaders approached the source of the odd noises, their gallops slowed down to trots before the trio stopped moving entirely. The sight before them was really... strange. They attempted to use the taller patches of grass as cover to get a closer look, but the increased scrutiny didn't exactly enlighten anypony.

"What in tarnation?" Apple Bloom asked rhetorically, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Are they fighting?" Sweetie Belle asked (somewhat less rhetorically). The strained looks on Twilight and Rainbow Dash's faces, as well as the occasional grunt, would seem to point toward this conclusion, but the young unicorn had always assumed that a brawl would involve a lot more kicking and a lot less rolling around on the ground.

This however, seemed close enough for Scootaloo's purposes. "Good friends like those two shouldn't be fighting. Come on, let's talk to them."

"Are you nuts?" Sweetie Belle hissed. "You might get whacked by a stray hoof if they don't notice you."

"Maybe... or *maybe* this is our chance to get our cutie marks in mediation!" The pegasus paused as images of well-dressed dignitaries presenting the trio with the Neighbel Peace Prize flitted through her mind.

"Actually, Sweetie Belle might be right," Apple Bloom said, interrupting her friend's reverie. "If they really are fightin', it's probably about grown-up stuff, and they might not take kindly to three fillies tryin' to break it up."

"We can't just do *nothing*."

Apple Bloom pondered this for a few seconds before answering, "Well, lucky for us, we already know the grown-ups they respect the most, and more importantly, my sister told me they'd all be together today. If they can't get to the bottom of this, ain't nopony who can."

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"I simply can't thank you enough for your help, Applejack."

"Don't mention it." As far as errands went, dropping off several of Granny Smith's old dresses at the Carousel Boutique on the previous Tuesday was hardly worth the showers of praise Rarity had given the palomino farm pony thus far. "To be honest, though, I ain't sure why y'all wanted me ta come back here today if you weren't returning them."

"Well, it's quite simple, darling. Ever since Fancypants proclaimed his approval of Twilight's dress, my brand has been widely thought of as the forefront of the emerging 'rustic' look."

"Yeah, I already knew that part. I'm guessin' y'all wanted Granny Smith's clothes for some inspiration, right?"

"Indeed – but I need to strike the right balance between the simplicity of the originals and the finicky demands of *haute couture*."

Applejack nodded, absently noting that she'd somehow managed to spend enough time around Rarity to pick up the meaning of highfalutin' words like "hot coater." She pushed her hat back farther on her head. "So, I'm guessin' y'all wanna make sure you didn't overdo it with the frou-frou and got me in here for a second opinion."

"More or less," the unicorn answered. "I need to make sure I didn't lose too much in the conversion from calico to taffeta." She turned her head towards the ornate dressing screen in the corner of her shop. "Are you ready, girls?"

"Just about!" Pinkie Pie's voice called back. A few seconds later the pink earth pony emerged, followed closely by a typically nervous Fluttershy. Both ponies were wearing variations of Twilight's "half-finished" dress: Fluttershy's was sky blue, with a pink sash added to the ensemble, while Pinkie's sleeveless dress was dyed indigo, and lacked any accessories at all. Both ponies were wearing matching bonnets in the traditional style.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Uh, well, y'all certainly got the whole simplicity thing down, but... the bonnets are a bit much. Ah mean, these *are* Canterlot ponies y'all are sellin' to."

"Hmm... I suppose you're right."



"Does that mean I can take this off?" Fluttershy asked hopefully. She'd thought the bonnets had looked ridiculous from the beginning, but she'd been hesitant about actually saying so, particularly since Pinkie Pie had spent several minutes gushing to Rarity about how she absolutely *loved* hers.

"I suppose... but this does mean I'll need to come up with some other sort of hat to go with my outfits – hats are a virtual necessity this season."

"Well, maybe you could use a cowboy hat like Applejack's," Pinkie Pie suggested.

Rarity smiled wistfully in response. "I appreciate the suggestion, darling, but as far as clothing material goes, straw and felt are at the bottom of the list when one needs to cater to the tastes of high society ponies."

"Well, how about –"

The earth pony didn't get the chance to finish making her follow-up suggestion, because at that moment, the Cutie Mark Crusaders burst through the door.

"Sweetie Belle! Please! You'll destroy the hinges if you aren't careful."

The unicorn filly, however, wasn't able to answer her sister right away, since she and her friends had returned to Ponyville at a full gallop, and they were still catching their breaths. "Twilight... Rainbow Dash... fighting!" she finally managed to force out.

"What?! Whatever do you mean?"

After a few seconds, Scootaloo had regained enough wind to answer this question using complete sentences: "The three of us were crusading in the fields outside of Ponyville, when we heard these noises. When we went to see what it was, Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle were fighting in the grass!"

"Oh no!" Fluttershy gasped. "What could have happened?"

"There must be some sorta mistake," Applejack said. "Ah mean, Rainbow Dash may be hotheaded sometimes, but she's never actually fought us unless there was magic involved..." The farm pony's eyes widened as the most distasteful possibility she could think of reared its ugly head. "Y'all don't suppose Discord's on the loose again?"

"I hope not," Pinkie Pie said with a shudder. "I don't wanna get turned gray again if it means I have to be grouchy to everypony."

"Darlings, I'm sure there's a logical explanation. I doubt Twilight would resort to violence no matter what sort of spell she'd been placed under." Rarity turned her attention back to the Crusaders. "Are you certain they were fighting?"

"Well," Apple Bloom said thoughtfully, "now that I think about it, they mighta been rasslin'."

"Wrestling?" Pinkie asked. "You mean like professional wrestling with a ring and masks, or the kind with the padded headgear that you see at the Equestrian Games?"

Apple Bloom shook her head. "Neither of 'em, really – this was more like the kind in Big Macintosh's rasslin' magazines."

"Huh?" Applejack asked skeptically. "Whaddya mean by 'rasslin' magazines'?" The large, red draft pony had never taken much interest in displays of athleticism, at least as far as his sister knew.

"Well, Big Macintosh has got this box fulla magazines in his closet, an' they all got pictures of mares rasslin', only it's usually on a bed or outside instead of on a mat, and there ain't no referees or audiences. And instead of doin' body slams and stuff like that, they're mostly just grabbin' each other all over and makin' funny faces."

Applejack's eyes widened as she somehow managed to pale and blush simultaneously. "And, uh, that's what Twi and Dash were doin'?"

"Uh, maybe. I don't remember all the details, but they were sorta sliding around all over each other."

"Yeah," Scootaloo added. "And they were making weird grunty noises, like 'uhh, uhh, uhh.'"

"Except every now and then it was more like a moan: 'Ahhhhhh....'"

Rarity stuffed a hoof in her sister's mouth to stifle the embarrassingly lewd noise. "I think we get the general gist of things, darlings. Uh, why don't the three of you head home while we take care of this matter?"

"Ah'll go with 'em," Applejack volunteered. "If this is anything like what I think it is, we can't really afford ta risk them gettin' curious about it and headin' back out there. Besides, it sounds like I'm gonna need ta have me some serious conversationalizin' with Big Macintosh anyway."

This was quickly deemed an appropriate course of action, at least according to the older ponies. Once Applejack had escorted the Crusaders out of the boutique (over the latter group's protests), the remaining mares were free to discuss the matter like mature adults. They simply chose not to.

"This is terrible!" Rarity wailed. "My poor little sister has no doubt been traumatized for life! Who knows what seeing such a thing might do to her developing psyche? Why, her confusion will no doubt cause her to avoid stallions as she chases after mares.... Well, that is, unless she turns out to be the kind who actually *is* interested in mares, in which case her inability to distinguish love from fighting will probably drive her to waste time pursuing emotionally sterile relationships with stallions! Either way, the best years of her life have been ruined by my friends' indiscretion! There can be no doubt that this is the Worst! Possible! Thing!"

Pinkie Pie, on the other hand, had a somewhat more positive perspective on the matter. "This is great! Twilight and Dashie are special someponies! Do you know what this means?" The pink earth pony didn't bother to wait for an answer. "It means I *finally* get to throw a 'coming out' party! I've always wanted to do one of those, but all the ponies I know who are 'out' were already 'out' before I met them. And they're such a cute couple, too! This is easily the Best! Possible! Thing!"

Fluttershy, for her part, cleared her throat with as much intensity as she could muster. "Um, actually, we don't really know for sure if they're in a relationship yet."

Rarity, however, seemed skeptical about this possibility. "But Fluttershy, dearie, what other explanation could there possibly be?"

"Well, if they are special someponies, but they want to keep it a secret for whatever reason, I, um, don't think they'd risk... Um, what I mean is, if... if somepony found them doing... things..." Fluttershy blushed as she trailed off, too distracted by the embarrassment she was certain that *she* would feel if she was caught in a situation that was even remotely similar to the alleged activities of her friends. "I mean, Twilight just seems, um, too level-headed for that. I can't really imagine why she'd do something like that."

"That's because you haven't seen just how reliant that mare is on books when it comes to subjects she knows nothing about," Rarity replied as she began nervously pacing around her showroom. "We're talking about somepony who was at a complete loss for what to do when a tree branch crashed through her window because her reference book on slumber parties didn't mention anything about property damage. If whatever book she's reading

about intimacy fails to mention that it's generally frowned upon to engage in it where you could get caught in the act by impressionable foals, she probably won't be able to figure it out on her own."

"But Rainbow Dash –"

"I would imagine that she's as well-versed in the subject as Twilight, darling; possibly even less so, given the way she devotes so much of her attention to her physical training."

"Um, that... that..." Fluttershy swallowed hard as she did her best to come up with a counterargument. "I'm... I'm not sure that actually, um, proves anything. Though, I suppose that I could be wrong...."

"Well, *do* you have another explanation?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"Uh, well, the Crusaders *thought* they were fighting at first, so, um, maybe... maybe they really *were* fighting."

Pinkie Pie abruptly stopped her streamer-and-balloon-filled reverie when this matter was brought up. "Oh, my gosh, that's right! They might have become the opposite of special someponies: normal noponies! And nopony would want to have a party to celebrate *that*."

"So, what do you suggest we do?" Rarity asked.

"Obviously, we find Twilight and Dashie and figure out what's going on. Come on, we don't have a moment to lose: the fate of a party hangs in the balance!" The three ponies headed out the door and galloped towards the empty field.

"Reluctantly, the treasure hunter followed the natives' orders in an effort to avoid the business ends of their spears. She wasn't sure what was more aggravating: the fact that her disguise had failed so abysmally, or the knowledge that the locals probably would have given her what she wanted outright if she hadn't tried to deceive them."

– Phantom Placer, *Daring Do and the Windigo Prophecy*

Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy galloped to the empty field as fast as they could, intent on breaking up what was apparently either an argument that had somehow degenerated into a fight, or a public display of affection that had somehow degenerated into public indecency. When the three of them arrived, however, there was no pony to be seen, nor could they hear any noises that would indicate that they weren't the only ones there. In fact, the only evidence to indicate that the Crusaders hadn't been pulling an elaborate (and tasteless) prank was an empty cart off to the side of the road. Finding Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash, it seemed, wouldn't be simple. Fortunately, Pinkie Pie was able to quickly improvise a solution to this dilemma.

The pink earth pony took a deep breath before hollering at the top of her lungs: "Twilight! Dashie! Are you guys out here?!" Granted, it wasn't a very *good* solution, but it was a solution nonetheless.

Rarity shut her eyes as she massaged one of her temples. "Pinkie, darling, given what we suspect those two might be doing, it's highly unlikely that one of them will actually answer you."

"Oh... yeah, that would be a problem, wouldn't it?"

The unicorn sighed and turned to Fluttershy, who'd been fidgeting nervously for the past few minutes. "Would you be a dear and fly over the field to make sure our friends aren't hiding in the grass?"

"Oh, um, sure..." The pegasus rose into the air and began to make several slow, methodical passes over the field, searching for any signs of their friends. "Um... I think I found something."

"Is it the two lovebirds?" Pinkie asked hopefully.

"N-No... um, I'm not sure what it is. Could you... um... could you come over and take a look at this?"

The two ponies trotted over to the area where Fluttershy was hovering. There, in a shallow depression, was what initially appeared to be a tangled mass of black straps, but as Rarity lifted it with her magic, it became easier to identify. "Is that... a saddle?" Pinkie asked.

"It would appear so... though it's not like any saddle I've ever seen."

"So, what, is this the latest fashion trend in Canterlot or something?"

"I'm going to pretend that that was an attempt at some sort of joke," Rarity replied dully before examining the saddle more closely. "PommelHorse? I don't believe I'm familiar with that particular line. Perhaps it's from one of those more avant-garde designers in Las Pegasus – that city's fashion scene has a bit of a reputation for flouting industry conventions. Still, the workmanship on this piece is superb – the stitching is very well done, and if I'm not mistaken, the material itself is actually Nagahyde."

"Um, I think there's some reins over here," Fluttershy added.

Rarity floated them over to the saddle, completing the "ensemble," (which was a technically accurate term, even though the fashionista had to suppress a wave of nausea at the thought of one of her models wearing this monstrous getup). "Well, regardless of how it looks, the quality of the materials suggests that it's expensive... which of course raises a rather obvious question."

Pinkie Pie nodded in sage agreement. "Do universal moral absolutes exist, or is all morality necessarily relative?"

"Uh... that's not quite what I had in mind..."

"Hmm.... Are earth ponies theoretically capable of channelling magic through their hooves the way unicorns do through their horns?"

"Not that one either, darling..."

The pink pony looked puzzled for a second or two, before making a third guess: "Poof! You've been transformed into a stallion. What do?"

"Pinkie!" Rarity was not in the mood for silliness at the moment. "The question I'm referring to is this: if Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle were using this... *thing* for Celestia knows what, why would they leave it out here in the open?"

• • •

"Are you sure the saddle's going to be okay out there?"

Twilight sighed as she did her best to ease her friend's worries, as there was little else she could do while riding on her back. "Don't worry about it. You said that the weather was going to be fine for the next few days, and Ponyville isn't the kind of place where you'll have to worry about somepony stealing it if it's found."

"That's not what worries me," Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath.

"Did you say something?"

The pegasus chuckled nervously. "Uh, no... it's, uh, nothing important. It just would have been more convenient to take the saddle back to my home, that's all."

"I'm not arguing with you there, but this attraction spell would have made getting it back on too cumbersome, and I'm too wiped out from the terminal velocity spell to have levitated it all the way back to Ponyville. Besides, somepony probably would have noticed it hovering next to a cloud and thought it was weird."

Rainbow Dash had to admit her friend had a point there; the cloud they were currently concealing themselves in had to be small – while moving larger clouds around in the sky wasn't really that difficult when you know what you were doing (which she did), manipulating the physical properties of clouds was an incredibly difficult task for a single pegasus, even one as awesome as she was. It had taken her several minutes to "hollow out" the cloud she'd settled on, and even with Twilight being able to pass through it, it was still a cramped experience. It was sort of like rolling around an empty sphere by walking along the inside, except that the cloud wasn't spherical, nor was it really empty: it still had several water droplets floating around with a misty consistency. This was merely damp and annoying to a unicorn like Twilight Sparkle, but to a pegasus, moving through mist or fog was like hiking through a swamp – strenuous and time-consuming. The fact that she couldn't really see where she was going didn't make matters any easier, since it meant having to detour around Ponyville so she wouldn't be spotted poking her head outside to check her bearings.

Fortunately, they were almost home free; Rainbow Dash's cloud house was within sight. Once they were safely inside, the two could wait for Twilight Sparkle to recover, and then she'd teleport them directly to the library, where her formidable researching skills would doubtless find a solution to their predicament. Just a little bit more....

"Hey, Rainbow Dash!"

Rainbow Dash somehow managed to avoid jumping from the shock of hearing an unexpected voice behind her. She didn't respond at first, hoping that whoever it was would just go away.

"What are you doing in that cloud?"

The pegasus sighed and poked her head through the clouds, where her mailmare was hovering with a smile on her face. "Oh, hey there, Derpy. How did you know I was in here?"

"Your tail is sticking out."

"Oh, right," Rainbow Dash confirmed with a nervous chuckle. *How long has that been out there?*, she thought to herself as she pulled the wayward appendage inside the puffy blob of water droplets. "So, uh, is there something I can do for you?"

"Not really. I just wanted to know what you were doing."

"Uh... nothing, really."

"Nothing? But couldn't you do nothing outside of a cloud?"

"Well, uh, yeah... but this is, um, fun."

"It is? Wow! Can I have a look?"

"No!" Rainbow Dash abruptly shouted, before she regained her composure and clarified: "I mean, no, you can't. Um, this is a private cloud."

"Oh... well, can you tell me how to find one of my own?"

Rainbow Dash would have answered, were it not for the impatient tapping she felt on her shoulder. Apparently, Twilight wanted her to wrap it up. "I, uh, can't talk right now, actually. Maybe later?"



Derpy Hooves looked a bit dejected. "Oh... okay." The mailmare fluttered away towards her next delivery.

"Whew... that was close."

"Yeah, it was," agreed the unicorn on Rainbow Dash's back. "Let's get inside before we end up with more problems."

• • •

The three ponies were still talking about the strange saddle as they returned to Ponyville. "You... um... you don't suppose that saddle is for... um... *that* kind of...." Fluttershy was blushing too hard to finish her sentence, but fortunately Rarity understood her general meaning.

"It's possible, but unlikely. As I understand it, ponies with that particular quirk prefer their outfits to be a bit more... restrictive, shall we say, and despite appearances, that saddle would actually allow a pegasus to move around with relative ease." The unicorn paused to motion towards the cart that Pinkie Pie was currently pulling, which had an unmarked cardboard box into which the saddle had fit too perfectly for anypony to assume that it was unrelated to the incident.

"Are you sure this isn't stealing?" the earth pony asked. "Because it might make the party kind of awkward if we are."

"Of course not. Both the cart and the saddle are almost certainly too valuable to be left alone for extended periods of time, even in a sleepy town like Ponyville. If it turns out that neither belongs to Twilight or Rainbow, we shall simply take out a classified ad in the *Ponyville Express* to let their rightful owner know that they've been found. But aside from that, I'm fairly certain that throwing a 'coming out' party for ponies who aren't yet ready to come out would be in bad taste."

"Oh," Pinkie Pie said. She hadn't actually thought of that. "Well... the party doesn't have to be *right now*. I can still plan it, and then wait until they're ready." Having thus solved her dilemma, the earth pony proceeded to amuse herself with some cheerful, random humming.

"That's a nice song."

Pinkie looked up to see her friendly neighborhood mailmare hovering overhead. "Hey, Derpy! Thanks! I actually just made it up right now."

"Oh, so it doesn't have words yet?"

"No, not yet."

"You should make some. You're really good at that. I like the one about smiling."

"Yeah, I like that one, too!" Pinkie replied with a grin.

"Well, it was nice talking to you –"

It was here that Rarity stepped in. "Actually, perhaps you could help us out."

"Me? You really think so?"

"Er, well, yes. Have you seen Rainbow Dash or Twilight Sparkle around today?"

"Uh, I haven't seen Twilight, but then again, there weren't any deliveries for the library today. But I *did* see Rainbow Dash!"

"Is that so? Tell me, did you notice anything... unusual about her?"

"Not really – except for the part about not wanting to come out of her cloud."

"I beg your pardon? 'Come out of her cloud'?"

"Yeah. She was inside a cloud the whole time."

"I see... and this cloud... might it have been large enough for two ponies?"

"Maybe... I don't know. Rainbow Dash wouldn't let me look inside. She said it was a private cloud. Do you think private clouds are expensive? I want one that looks like a muffin."

"I'm... not quite sure how to answer that, Derpy," Rarity said, repressing her wince as she said the pegasus' name. Lazy eye notwithstanding, she'd always felt that the pony deserved a name that rolled off the tongue better than "Derpy Hooves," but her efforts to get the mailmare to consider "Ditzy Doo" as an informal pseudonym had thus far met with mixed results. "In any case, do you know where she is?"

"Uh, we were pretty close to her house, so I'd guess that's where she is. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"Ah, no, not really."

"Good, I've gotta get back to my deliveries. See you later!"

As the three mares waved goodbye to their acquaintance, Rarity was already busy dissecting the implications of the conversation. "Fluttershy, can you think of a reason why a pegasus would want to move around inside a cloud under normal circumstances?"

The demure mare absently ran a hoof through her pink mane as she considered this matter. "Um... no, not really...."

"Maybe she was hiding something," Pinkie Pie suggested.

"Something... or somepony," Rarity corrected. "Come on, we need to find those two and get to the bottom of this."

• • •

As it turned out, finding Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle wasn't particularly hard – thanks to Derpy, they were pretty sure that the former was at her house, and once they'd eliminated all of the latter's usual haunts, it was likely that she was there as well. The problem was that they had no way to confront them about their recent escapades: Rarity didn't know the cloudwalking spell, Pinkie Pie's gyrocopter was out of commission thanks to an unfortunate encounter with the Cake twins, and Fluttershy simply didn't have the nerve to talk to them without any support. Eventually, the three of them ended up sitting at the local cafe, nibbling at bluegrass and watercress sandwiches as they tried to determine their next course of action.

"Hey!"

The three ponies looked up to see Applejack sauntering towards them with a mildly stressed look on her face. Without waiting to be invited, she dragged a chair over to the table and sat down, taking full advantage of the fact that their friendship was strong enough to let her get away with being blatantly impolite. "Y'all figure out what's goin' on yet?"

"Well, we know *something's* going on," Pinkie Pie said. "Specifically, the saddle in that box over there is going on somepony."

"That's it?"

"That's all we know for certain, darling. Everything else is just speculation at this point."

The farm pony sighed. "Darn. I was kinda hopin' y'all would have enough evidence to rope those two into explainin' the birds and the bees to Apple Bloom."

Fluttershy found this to be somewhat confusing. "Why would you want that?"

"Because as of right now, Granny Smith wants Big Macintosh to do it when he explains his magazine collection to her, and given how goshdarn embarrassed he looked when I chewed him out about this whole mess in the first place, that probably means *I* gotta be there to make sure he goes into more detail than 'Eeyup' and 'Nope.'"

Rarity winced; everypony knew how much the large draft pony disliked talking, and trying to imagine having to respond to all the questions he'd leave unanswered was not pleasant. "Well, in any case, we still need to speak with our friends. We know Dashie's in her home, but we're not certain if Twilight's with her. We've checked nearly everywhere in town, but we haven't found her yet."

"Did y'all try the library?"

"Naturally, it was the first place we went to, but..."

"...but Twilight wasn't there. Spike said she hadn't been back all afternoon," Fluttershy finished.

The farm pony sighed. "Makes as much sense as anythin' else, I guess. Still, if Twilight's out, that means Spike won't be goin' anywhere anytime soon, and if anyone's gonna know somethin' about this mess, it's probably gonna be him. I mean, he's Twilight's assistant – knowin' what she's doin' is practically half his job. I say we head over there, hang around 'til closin' time, and then pump that dragon for some info."

• • •

In theory, this, too should have been a good idea. But theory, it seemed, wasn't playing nice with reality today. Applejack's blunt questions didn't get them anywhere, while Fluttershy couldn't be convinced to use "The Stare" on such a good friend of hers. Of course, such scruples weren't a problem for Pinkie Pie, who was able to get a full confession from Spike. The veracity of this information, however, was suspect, for two reasons: First, these were the same interrogation techniques she'd previously used to get the dragon to "admit" that her friends didn't want to be her friends anymore, and second, the confession she'd ended up wringing out of him was a claim to be in love with

Rainbow Dash, which everypony knew was patently ridiculous, since he only had eyes for Rarity.

But, as it turned out, even the fashionista's patented "bat-your-eyelashes-and-pout-your-lips" technique failed to squeeze anything useful out of Spike, since for the simple reason that his boss had largely kept him in the dark about what she and her friend were up to. They even showed him the saddle that had been raising so many questions, but he had never seen it before.

"Look, all I know is that Twilight and Rainbow Dash have been meeting up every week to do something, and Twilight refuses to talk about it when she gets back."

Applejack groaned in frustration. "Great. Sounds like this here's been a waste of time. We musta spent an hour doin' this, and we still didn't learn nuthin'."

Rarity, however, disagreed with this assessment. "On the contrary, Applejack, I would say that Twilight's refusal to explain things to an assistant and confidante as trusted as Spike confirms that our friends are indeed trying to hide something. And given what the Crusaders claimed to have seen, and the rather... unusual evidence we found at the scene of the incident, I'd say we have a pretty good idea of what they're hiding. All we have to do now is find them, so we can give them our support in their new relationship and a tongue-lashing for their indiscretions."

Fortunately, this turned out to be a much simpler task than their previous efforts would have suggested, as the two elusive ponies suddenly appeared in a flash of light in their midst. "Great! My magic's back to full strength! Now, I just need to do some research, and then everything... should be... fine...." Twilight Sparkle couldn't help but notice that the rest of their friends were not only present in the library, but staring at them with rather irritated looks on their faces. "Uh... I guess you're all wondering why I'm sitting on Rainbow Dash's back."

"Not really," Applejack said. "If I had ta venture a guess, I'd say it's got somethin' ta do with the saddle."

"Saddle? Um, what saddle?"

"*This* saddle," Rarity said, levitating the equipment in question in front of her.

"Ah, ponyfeathers," Rainbow Dash said with a groan.

"I'm going to assume from that reaction that this belongs to one of you."

"It's mine," the pegasus said resignedly. "Twilight's been helping me with some strength training, and we use that saddle as part of it."

Rarity, however, was not an inquisitor to be trifled with. "Exercise? Really?"

"Yes, really. PommelHorse makes high-end fitness equipment," Rainbow Dash explained. "When I carry the extra weight of another pony, my wings get stronger. The saddle's designed to make sure the rider doesn't fall off."

The unicorn seemed skeptical of this, however. "You say it's high-end, but we found it in the middle of a field."

"Yeah... there was... uh..."

"...a complication," Twilight said, completing her friend's sentence. "One of my spells went haywire, and you know what that's like."

"And would this 'haywire' spell explain why the Crusaders found you in that field earlier today, drenched in sweat and pawing each other all over while making all sorts of interesting noises?" As laughable as Rarity's penchant for melodrama could occasionally be, there were times when it served her purposes well.

Unfortunately for Twilight Sparkle, this was one of those times. "Huh? Well, uh, we never noticed them... but trust us, that's really not what we'd normally do. We were just dealing with unexpected problems from the aftermath of the attraction spell I cast."

"Attraction spell? What's that?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"Well, it causes the two of us to be physically attracted towards each other, which is quite useful for keeping me in my place, but this time, I wasn't able to remove it using normal means, so I was sliding all over Rainbow Dash in an effort to get off -"

"For the love of Celestia, please stop talking before you make this more embarrassing than it already is!"

The unicorn hadn't really expected this sort of outburst from Rainbow Dash. "I'm just explaining what happened...."

"Yeah, but could you do it in a way that doesn't make it sound like we were having sex?"

Twilight blushed an extremely bright red. "You mean... *that's* what you guys thought we were doing?"

Four heads slowly nodded in response.

"That's... that's... n-no. We were just trying to physically separate ourselves from each other, but the spell I was using to pull my center of mass towards Rainbow Dash's didn't react well when we went into a Sonic Rainboom. We've been stuck together since this afternoon."

Applejack pushed her hat back as she evaluated this explanation, and, coincidentally, came to a conclusion that was almost identical to that of the other ponies. "Uh, Twi, that there story sounds like a mighty lame excuse."

"If it wasn't true, don't you think I would have climbed off of Rainbow Dash's back by now?"

The farm pony didn't have an answer to this, so she trotted over to the pair with a quizzical look on her face. Raising a hoof, she nudged Twilight Sparkle and was surprised to find the unicorn to be far more resistant to the pressure than she should have been. "What in Celestia's mane...?"

About ten minutes later, the three of them were sprawled out on the library floor. Applejack had her forelegs wrapped tightly around Twilight Sparkle's barrel as she attempted to use Bucky McGillicuddy and Kicks McGee to push Rainbow Dash away from the unicorn. To her credit, the farm pony's renowned strength had managed to get them several feet apart, but it seemed that she had hit a wall. Her body was noticeably sweaty, and the strained grunts coming from her mouth were getting more animated as her hind legs started to shake. As it turned out, even Applejack lacked the wherewithal to counteract Twilight's spell, and her legs eventually gave out, causing the unicorn to collide back against Rainbow Dash.

"Well," Rarity said as diplomatically as she could, "I believe we can take two conclusions away from this demonstration. First, the spell Twilight described is most definitely not a mere excuse, and second, attempts to free oneself from that spell look an awful lot like... er, foreplay."

Applejack's eyes widened as a blush rose to her cheeks. "That's seriously what it looked like?"

"Perhaps a better way to put it is that one can understand why somepony who didn't have any context on the issue might believe that to be the case."

Rainbow Dash sighed and rolled her eyes as she stood up (which is no easy task when you have a fully grown pony stuck to your back). "Well, that's just super."

As there was a lull in the conversation, Fluttershy was finally comfortable enough to ask a question of her own. "Um... if you don't mind my asking... why were you keeping this secret if you aren't in a relationship?"

"Well, part of it is because once we're totally strapped into that saddle, we do look kind of silly," Twilight answered.

"You say that as though it's a bad thing," Pinkie retorted.

"It is when you take aerobatics as seriously as Dash does."

The earth pony didn't sound convinced; how could silliness *not* make anything better? "What's the other part?"

Twilight glanced downward. "You want to field this one, Dash?"

"No."

"Well, then we have a problem, because for me, 'the other part' is the fact that keeping it secret was really important to you, and I can't read your mind."

The pegasus sighed. "I wanted it to be a secret because..." She paused and took a deep breath before continuing: "...because I didn't want anypony to know that I was getting help with my training."

It took a few seconds for everypony to process this. Finally Applejack spoke up. "Uh, Sugarcube, why would that be a problem? Y'all have asked me to help ya out plenty of times before."

"Not like this. When you help me, I'm still in charge, but for this... I have to let Twilight control pretty much everything, or else it's too dangerous. I mean, I know that there's nothing wrong with it; it's just kind of embarrassing, that's all."



"And this little incident wasn't?" Rarity asked rhetorically. "We thought the Crusaders had seen something obscene! If you'd told us about this, we could have at least come up with a plausible excuse for you."

"Yeah... I guess the whole 'secret' thing wasn't a good idea." Upon stating something so blatantly obvious, Rainbow Dash brought the conversation to a halt.

"So, I guess this means you really aren't special someponies," Pinkie Pie finally said, the disappointment obvious in her voice.

"Nope," Rainbow Dash said. "I wouldn't have asked her to help me if I felt that way – I wouldn't want to risk the temptation to do something... you know...."

"Something like what the Crusaders thought you were doing?" Spike offered.

The pegasus let out a frustrated puff of air. "Yeah, pretty much."

"But you make such a cute couple!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Pinkie," Twilight said, "but that's the way it is."

"Aww... and I was gonna throw you guys a party, too."

"Since when do *you* need a reason to throw a party?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"But this was going to be a *special* one."

"Since when do you throw the ordinary kind?"

"Uh... actually, you've got a really good point there." Pinkie Pie's mood brightened almost immediately. "Alright, everypony! Who's up for a 'No Particular Reason' party?"

"Not us," Twilight Sparkle said. "At least, not tonight. Dash and I would really like to get this problem taken care of, so we'll be researching all night."

"*You'll* be researching," the pegasus corrected. "*I'll* be bored out of my skull."

Applejack sighed. "C'mon, everypony. Sounds to me like these two got a long night ahead of them." The four ponies filed out of the library, leaving Spike to attend to the needs of the researchers.

"Coffee, tea, or sugary energy drinks?"

Twilight opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by a yawn from the pegasus beneath her. "You'd better make it all three."

"So the next time you're wondering, 'Where does all that extra rainwater come from?', just remember: it comes from ordinary pegasi like you, working together as a team!"

– *Tornado Power!*

For all the drama it produced, the "attraction" problem had a remarkably anticlimactic resolution. After several hours of fruitless research, Twilight Sparkle eventually hit on the idea of using a scrying spell to determine what exactly had gone wrong with the attractive spell in the first place. As it turned out, something (more than likely the Sonic Rainboom, though Twilight couldn't be absolutely certain about this) had caused the spell's intensity to increase to the point where she was no longer strong enough to dispel it under her own power, which sort of made sense, since she hadn't been able to undo the effects of her first encounter with the Rainboom – that had been Celestia's doing.

Nothing else, however, had changed about the spell, which meant that it had its own solution built in: its attractive effect had been originally designed to be temporary, specifically in case something went wrong. In other words, all they needed to do was wait, and its effect would eventually weaken. Sure enough, within 24 hours, the two ponies were able to separate themselves with relative ease – although they had to allow several more days to pass before they could be in close proximity to each other without starting to lose their balance.

Once everything had gotten straightened out, Rainbow Dash had briefly wondered if Twilight would still want to continue helping her train. She needn't have worried: by this point, Twilight Sparkle had caught the flight bug, and now that she'd been released from any obligation to pretend otherwise, she began doing training on her own to improve her skill as a rider, starting a daily exercise regimen to strengthen the muscles in her barrel and hind legs so that she wouldn't have to rely on the flawed attraction spell for stability. Meanwhile, during her actual practices with Rainbow Dash, she began developing her own tricks. The most notable of these was a surprisingly daring maneuver where she had her friend fly so high that she actually stalled out; the pair then let gravity pull them back towards the ground as they tumbled backwards four, five, or even six times before pulling into a corkscrew nosedive which leveled off into a flat pass shockingly close to the ground. Twilight Sparkle decided to call it the "Element of Loyalty," much to her flyer's flattered embarrassment.

Obviously, Rainbow Dash was well aware that her friend was becoming more and more interested in flight, but it wasn't until an incident about a month later that she realized

how serious the unicorn's dedication had become, when Twilight invited her into the library's basement to check out her brand new egghead toy.

"An anemometer?"

"It's a device that measures –"

"Twilight, I'm a professional weatherpony. I already know what an anemometer is – the number-crunchers use them to measure wind speed."

The unicorn sighed. "You're right, of course, but you didn't let me finish. *This* anemometer is intended for a somewhat different purpose. When you fly past it, it measures your accelerative velocity and translates it into wingpower."

"That doesn't sound very useful. Wouldn't the wind throw everything off?"

"You're right; it would, which is why it can be adjusted to take current wind speed into account before measurements are taken. Really, it's similar to the large anemometer the Weather Factory is going to loan us for Tornado Day."

"Oh, okay..." This seemed reasonable to Rainbow Dash, until she realized that there was something odd about that last sentence. "Hold on a second, what do you mean by 'us'?"

Twilight silently chastised herself for a split-second before answering her friend. "That's right, I forgot to tell you: I'm going to be helping out with the tornado."

"Twilight, you can't ride me in winds that fast."

"I wasn't going to. My job is going to be to collect data on each of the pegasi so you can reach your goal of 800 wingpower. Besides, the Mayor asked me to do it personally, and it's not like I'm going to turn down a chance to help out."

"Okay, first of all, my 'goal' is not 800 wingpower. That's just the minimum threshold for success. My goal is to beat the record set by Fillydelphia. And by 'beat,' I mean 'completely obliterate.'"

"So, we're looking at... what, 900, 950 wingpower?"

"Try 1,000!"

Twilight was a bit taken aback by her friends ambition. "Are you sure about this? That would require an average wingpower of about 10 per pegasus, and that's assuming that every able-bodied pegasus in town is able to show up."

"Oh, they'll show up, or my name isn't Rainbow Dash."

"Well, nopony can accuse you of lacking in confidence; I'll say that much," Twilight replied. "What was the other point you wanted to make?"

"Uh, well, it's great that you want to help, but did you really need to buy a specialized piece of equipment?"

"No... but then again, did you really need to buy a specialized fitness saddle?"

Rainbow Dash would have answered this, but she found that she couldn't really come up with a decent response. "Point taken."

• • •

Before anypony could even stop to think about it, Tornado Day had come and gone. The pegasi of Ponyville managed to deliver the rainwater that the Cloudsdale Weather Factory needed, Fluttershy learned an important lesson about believing in herself, Rainbow Dash had unquestionably demonstrated *why* she had been designated Ponyville's lead weatherpony, and Twilight Sparkle had more data about pegasus flight than she knew what to do with. All in all, it was a very successful day, if not the record-breaking one that everypony had originally hoped for, and as an added bonus, all of the pegasi got a chance to meet Spitfire, one of the biggest celebrities in Equestria.

Of course, it wasn't every day that a huge waterspout was formed over the Highland Reservoir, and as a result, Tornado Day was a major event to everypony living in Ponyville, not just to the resident pegasi. Naturally, as was the case with all major events (and the overwhelming majority of minor events), Pinkie Pie had deemed it worthy of celebratory afterparty. Fortunately for Twilight, the presence of a public figure as prominent as Spitfire meant that the town hall could be used as the venue, rather than the library (which in turn meant that she wouldn't have to worry about drinks getting spilled on her books).

Just as fortunately for Rainbow Dash, the party also provided an informal setting in which she could discuss her potential future as a Wonderbolt with the squad's captain. The problem was that the pegasus' nervousness around Spitfire had formed a near-insurmountable obstacle to bringing up a topic of such obvious personal interest. After

several flubbed attempts to bring the subject up, Ponyville's lead weatherpony retreated to the adulations of the masses (to the extent that a town as small as Ponyville could have more than one "mass").

Eventually, Twilight Sparkle decided to take matters into her own hooves, as she wasn't really encumbered by hero worship where Spitfire was concerned (particularly since her hero worship was reserved for somepony who was much, *much* more intimidating). After a few pleasantries, she launched right into the metaphorical fray: "So, do you think Rainbow Dash would be good Wonderbolts material?"

Spitfire smirked. "Did she ask you to bring this up?"

The unicorn chuckled a bit before responding, "There's no way Dash would ever ask me to do that. She'd be too worried about the impression that it would leave."

"Yeah, I felt the same way about approaching Aileron when I was her age."

"Aileron? I thought he lived about a century ago."

"This is a different Aileron. His great-grandson was the squad leader until about ten years ago."

"Right. So, about my question..."

Twilight's refusal to let the subject change was starting to make Spitfire uncomfortable. "Er, that's... sort of complicated, actually."

"Look, I understand if the Wonderbolts have a policy against giving a direct answer to that kind of question, but Rainbow Dash is a really good friend of mine, and I feel like I owe it to her to try."

"Trust me, everypony knows that you're good friends. You guys are Elements of Harmony, after all."

"Oh, right." Sometimes, it was easy for Twilight to forget that she and her friends were relatively well-known *outside* of the Ponyville area. "Still, you have to admit, she's certainly talented enough for her to get a chance to join, at least."

Spitfire nodded slowly, as if she knew her rebuttal was going to be a weak one. "Actually, we've been well aware of her talents for a while now. She did save three of us at the Best

Young Flyer competition, after all. Really, her physical abilities aren't an issue. She's probably got enough talent to fly circles around most of the squad's members."

"So what's keeping you guys from inviting her to try out?"

Spitfire paused before continuing as diplomatically as possible. "In my opinion, Rainbow Dash needs more experience with teamwork. I mean, her performance today certainly shows leadership abilities, but the Wonderbolts already have a leader. Now, I'm guessing she has a massive ego..."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Actually, it's an educated guess based on the fact that most top flyers, including me, have egos large enough to fill lower Manhattan. If Rainbow Dash is going to be a successful Wonderbolt, she needs to show that she can keep her ego in check and work as an equal or subordinate – not just as a leader."

"Is that really the only thing?"

"Officially, yes."

"Uh-huh. And unofficially?"

Spitfire sighed before continuing. "The Wonderbolts are a quasi-military squadron, which means that we get our paychecks from the government, and *that* means that we have to take politics into consideration when choosing new members."

"Politics? But Rainbow Dash is the Element of Loyalty; she's a personal friend of Princess Celestia. That has to count for something."

"Actually, it's the Element of Loyalty that's causing most of the problems."

"Huh?"

"Look, there are basically two things to consider. The first is that most of the Wonderbolts had to put in a lot of effort to even get noticed in the first place, and most of them did so in the military. If Princess Celestia is seen as playing favorites so a civilian can 'jump in line,' it could cause resentment – maybe not from the other Wonderbolts, who are usually pretty professional about this sort of thing, but definitely from those who want to protect our status as a symbol of pegasus pride or some other nonsense like that."

"I'm sure Rainbow Dash wouldn't mind waiting her turn, though, as long as she gets one."

"Oh, you misunderstand me: there isn't a line for tryouts: they're by invitation only. But a lot of ponies think there should be some sort of 'line,' and so they act as if it exists."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Of course it doesn't. We're talking about politicians, after all."

Twilight sighed. She could remember the few times that she'd tried to reason with unicorn politicians in Canterlot, and the results were generally less than ideal. "What's the other thing?"

"The other thing is that you Elements are widely admired throughout Equestria, and if the Element of Loyalty – who just so happens to be the only pony to successfully perform a Sonic Rainboom in recorded history – *fails* to pass her tryout, the PR fallout would be... well, I'd honestly rather not consider the possibility."

Twilight winced. "Yeah... I can see how that might be a problem."

Spitfire responded with a very slight smirk. "Listen, off the record? We really do want Rainbow Dash on our squad. But we're not willing to give her a chance until we're absolutely certain she'll pass."

The unicorn paused as she digested this information. "But... it's just the teamwork issue, right?"

"Basically."

"Well, then you don't need to worry about a thing! Rainbow Dash takes orders from me all the time when we're acting as the Elements of Harmony, and she's always respectful and helpful to the other Elements."

"Really? I heard she ditched you guys when you fought Discord."

"That doesn't count. She was under the influence of his magic at the time. When she came to her senses, she was her usual loyal self."

Spitfire sighed. "I suppose you have a point, but using her experience as one of the Elements runs us into the same political problems as before."



Twilight looked a bit befuddled. "Well, then what kind of experience do you want from her?"

"Ideally, coordinated flying experience of some sort."

Twilight knew that Rainbow Dash didn't really have that, since there weren't any other pegasi who even approached her level of talent living near Ponyville. Still, she was able to think of another possibility: "What if she was ridden by another pony?"

"You mean tandem flying? Eh, I suppose that could do the trick, in theory."

"In theory?"

"Well, letting somepony else take control of your instincts certainly shows that you're willing to put your trust in others, but simple casual flying doesn't really establish whether you're willing to work collaboratively. I mean, I'm not saying it can't demonstrate what we're looking for... but it would have to be something really impressive."

"Impressive?"

"Yeah, like some sort of recognizable achievement that would imply that Rainbow Dash and her rider had spent a lot of time working together towards a common goal."

"Such as..."

The pegasus merely shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, but it has to be something that nopony could deny was spectacular."

"In other words, you'll know it when you see it?"

"Not just me. Everypony will."

• • •

Twilight Sparkle, being the ever-diligent pony she was, set to work on a solution almost as soon as Spitfire left Ponyville. Her initial idea was to get in touch with other ponies who engaged in tandem flying to see if any of them would be interested in coordinated aerobatics, but she rejected that rather quickly, since finding tandem flyers as good as Rainbow Dash would be even more difficult than finding solo flyers at her level. Thus, she dove into the books in her library, and after several days, hit upon a notion that

seemed like it was absolutely perfect – if it worked, it would definitely be "spectacular," and the unicorn was confident that she and her friend had the skills needed to pull it off. After making the necessary contacts, Twilight Sparkle made the proposal to Rainbow Dash at the end of their next practice session.

"The Las Pegasus Stratochase?!"

Twilight was a bit surprised by the pegasus' incredulous reaction. "Of course! If we enter, it would be a great avenue for you to display your capacity for teamwork, which would allow them to avoid all of the politics that are currently getting in the way."

"You're... you're kidding, right?"

"Why would I be? A strong performance at such a well-known event would definitely demonstrate your ability to work as part of a team in a flight-related context, which is exactly what Spitfire said the Wonderbolts want to see from you."

"That might be true, but couldn't you have picked a different well-known event?"

"Look, I know that choosing the marquee event in tandem racing might be intimidating –"

"Yeah, if by 'intimidating' you mean 'boring as all get out.' The Las Pegasus Stratochase might be the worst spectator sport ever, thanks to the stupid way its rules are set up."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, basically, at the end of a the race, there's a long straightaway, where the teams can perform barrel rolls and get seconds taken off of their final time. The more inversions you do, the lower your official time is."

"That makes sense."

"Yeah, but it also means that you can be the first team across the finish line, and not commit any penalties, and *still* lose!"

"So why is it so well-known?"

"It's Las Pegasus. Ponies come from all over to gamble on the outcome. That's how you know it's lame: nopony cares who wins unless they've got a chance to get money out of it. And don't even get me started on the ridiculous hats and cucumber sandwiches."

"There's something wrong with cucumber sandwiches?"

"Never mind. Besides, that seems a little bit out of our reach. I mean, do you really think they'd let a couple of amateurs walk in and start competing?"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. I've contacted the Stratochase's organizers, and it shouldn't be a problem."

"Uh, no, actually, it should be. We've never done any professional tandem racing, and boring or not, the Las Pegasus Stratochase is the sport's premier event, like you said."

"Um, well, I *might* have gotten a little bit of help there from somepony I know with a few, um, connections..."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Don't tell me Princess Celestia got us in."

"How'd you guess?"

"You had that sheepish 'I don't wanna admit that I'm being a hypocrite' look on your face."

Twilight sighed. "For what it's worth, I didn't intend to get the Princess involved. But getting Spike to deliver letters to anypony but her is tricky – she accidentally intercepted my letter and after I explained what was going on, she offered to help expedite the process for us."

"And you accepted? I thought you said we were trying to avoid political crap."

"No, we're trying to avoid the appearance that you'd be getting a tryout with the Wonderbolts just because you're a personal friend of Princess Celestia. *This* is a matter of Princess Celestia convincing some bureaucrats that having two of the Elements compete could drum up some publicity."

"Which in turn gets me a tryout all thanks to the Princess. It's no different."

"It *is* different, since you'd still be earning the tryout on your own merits. And given the reputation that you say the Stratochase has, they probably *could* use the publicity. It's a win-win."

"Sure, unless we lose."

Twilight rolled her eyes in exasperation. "We don't actually have to *win*. We just need to make a good showing. After all, like you said, we're amateurs, so the expectations will be lower."

"No way. When I get into a competition, I play to win."

"And I'll do the same. But even if that's our goal, we don't necessarily have to reach it to prove that you're a good teammate. It's kind of like how you didn't need to break the wingpower record to get the rainwater to Cloudsdale on Tornado Day."

"Ehh... I still don't know about this..." The pegasus' resolve against the idea seemed to be wavering, so Twilight decided to move in for the coup de grace.

"Rainbow Dash, I need you to trust me on this. I trusted you on the Sonic Rainboom, didn't I?"

"Yeah... and look how well *that* turned out."

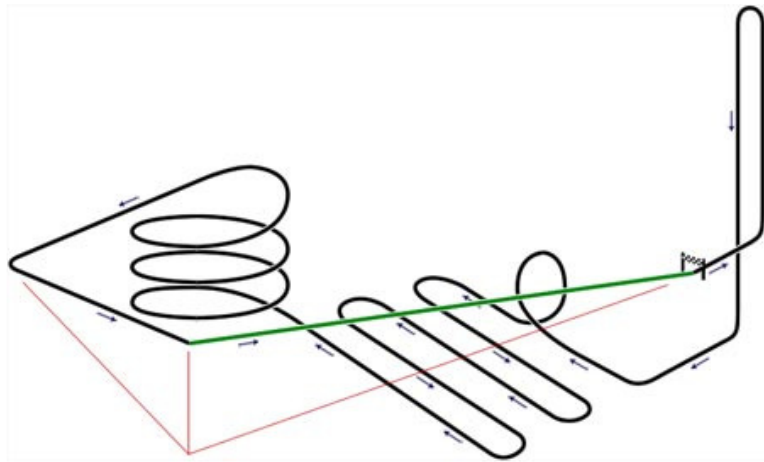
"Okay, I'll grant you that the aftermath was a hassle, but I still don't regret doing it. I learned more about what drives you in one second than I did in an entire year."

Dash sighed. "You really think this is going to work?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay... let's do it."

"Great. We've got two months."



**Figure 3.** In the year 967, the Las Pegasus Tandem Racing Committee added the "inversion zone" (shown here in green) to the Stratochase, giving the race the layout in use to this very day."

– Real Quiet, *A History of Tandem Racing*

"Vivaaaa, vivaaaa, Las Pegasus!"

Twilight Sparkle couldn't resist a grin as her friend finished her song. "I didn't know you were a fan of Elvis Przewalski, Rainbow Dash."

"Eh, not really – my parents loved his music, so I grew up around it. But c'mon, this is Las Pegasus. Somepony's gotta sing it, right?"

The unicorn chuckled before nodding her head in agreement. "It's too bad Pinkie couldn't make it. She'd probably come up with something that would put every showmare in town to shame." The pink earth pony wasn't the only one of their friends who couldn't make it – even with two months' notice, there still wasn't time for many of them to clear up their schedules to cheer them on. This wasn't like the Best Young Flyer competition, which had been held in Cloudsdale, a city that was fairly close to Ponyville; this was in a city that was farther away from home than Appleloosa. Still, Rarity was planning on making the trip, since the traditional fancy hats that were associated with the event gave her the perfect pretense to write it off as a business expense, and there were rumors that Princess Luna intended to show up, as she'd always had an interest in gaming, but neither could arrive until later that night, after the qualifying rounds were finished (which put more pressure on Twilight and Dash to actually qualify for the next day's race).

"This is great!" Rainbow Dash said excitedly. "Where are we staying? Celestias Palace? The Houyhnnm?"

"Uh, neither, actually. We're staying at the Lucky Horseshoe."

Rainbow Dash was, to put it mildly, disappointed. "The Lucky Horseshoe?! But that's on the ground! Everypony knows that all the best resorts in Las Pegasus are in the sky."

"I know, Dash, but the rules strictly prohibit the use of all forms of unicorn magic on any of the competitors, and that includes cloudwalking spells."

"Why would they single out unicorn magic?"

"Because pegasus magic is necessary to actually compete in the race, and most earth pony magic requires physical contact with the ground."

"Oh... that makes sense, I guess."

"Great... I'll get us checked in at our hotel, while you register us with the Stratochase organizers."

"Got it."

• • •

The Celestias Palace Resort, it seemed, had everything: a five-star hotel, a casino, shopping, restaurants (including an impressively stocked all-you-can-eat buffet), nightclubs, a spa, several impressive stage shows, and even a tattoo parlor for those ponies who felt the need to embellish their cutie marks. About the only thing it didn't have was an apostrophe in its name – apparently, their lawyers were worried that calling the place "Celestia's Palace" might cause some to assume that they had a royal endorsement when no such endorsement existed, which was illegal according to Equestrian law. That, however, was of no concern to Rainbow Dash, who made her way to the resort's convention center to register for the Las Pegasus Stratochase.

The actual registration went off without a hitch, initially. Once Rainbow Dash had signed in, the clerk was very friendly to her. "Good luck with the race, and we hope you enjoy your stay here at Celestias Palace."

"Um, actually, Twilight and I are at the Lucky Horseshoe."

"Really? Whatever for? We provide for all of your expenses."

"Yeah, but cloudwalking spells are a no-go, right?"

"But why would a pegasus need to use a cloudwalking spell?"

"Uh, Twilight's a unicorn."

The clerk looked stunned. "Are you... are you serious?"

"Yeah. Is there something wrong with that?"

"Er, well... no... it's just... well, it's been quite some time since a unicorn attempted to qualify. Or an earth pony, for that matter."

"Uh... okay. But other than that, there's no problems, right?"

"Um... no..." The pegasus was starting to look a little nervous. "Technically, there aren't any problems...."

"Great! I'll tell Twilight that everything's ready, then."

"Um... yes. Ah, you said that your rider is a unicorn, correct?"

"Yeah..."

The clerk pulled out a book and started sifting through the pages. After a several minutes, she found what she was looking for. "Ms. Sparkle is going to need to wear a magic inhibitor."

"A what?"

"It's a sort of sleeve that goes over her horn to prevent her from using magic. It's... well, it's required for unicorns to compete, according to the rule book."

"Uh, okay. I'll be sure to tell her."

"You can bill the Committee for it. Um, we apologize for the oversight."

"Thanks..." Rainbow Dash was really starting to get wary. Why was the fact that Twilight was a unicorn throwing this mare off so much?

"In any case, Team Twi-Dash is scheduled for a practice run in a few hours, so you'd better get back to your hotel to get ready.

"Huh? Twi-Dash?"

"For the ease of the announcers calling the race, each team is given a designation that's a combination of each member's name."

"I figured that much, but... Twi-Dash?"

"Well, if you prefer, it can be made from any combination of syllables, as long as there's at least one from each team member's name."

Rainbow Dash rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Is that so...?"

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"I still don't understand what was wrong with calling ourselves 'Team Twi-Dash.'"

The pegasus sighed as she once again attempted to explain the blindingly obvious to the unicorn strapped onto her back. "What was wrong with it was the fact that it doesn't sound nearly as cool as 'Team Rain-Spark.' I mean, come on! 'Spark' is easily the coolest syllable in your name."

"And 'Rain' is the coolest one in yours?"

"Uh, not really... but Rain is made of water, and Sparks are made of electricity, so when you put them together, it sounds really dangerous and edgy."

Twilight sighed; there really wasn't much point if squabbling about something that was ultimately this minor, particularly when there were more important things to worry about, like making sure the magical inhibitor covering her horn fit properly. It had taken a surprisingly long time to find a place that sold them, even in a city as cosmopolitan as Las Pegasus, and by the time they showed up to take their officially sanctioned practice run on the Stratochase's course, they were the only ones who hadn't done so, depriving the unicorn of the chance to see for herself why pegasi were apparently considered innately superior riders.

The pair did the best they could to block out the derisive snickers that they heard from some of their fellow competitors as they flew up to the starting line. Apparently, most of



them were expecting to watch them make complete fools out of themselves, though a few stray comments about their saddle suggested that this had already been accomplished.

Truth be told, Twilight was a little worried – her initial idea of creating a life-size recreation of the course had been shot down quickly, since the ecosystem around the Ponyville area required too many clouds to make clearing an area of sky that large practical. Thus, Team Rain-Spark had had to rely on practicing the individual twists and turns out of context over the field, while also working on improving Rainbow Dash's general middle-distance flying skills. The unicorn was still fairly confident that they'd do well, but she'd underestimated how intimidating a full 2.5-kilotrot course would actually look, and not just because the actual course was bounded by a series of rings that they hadn't bothered to recreate back home.

Twilight quickly suppressed these uncertainties when the starting bell rang. She began guiding Rainbow Dash through the course at a moderate speed; to her mind, there was no reason to let those competitors who were observing them know the full extent of their abilities. The course began with a 50-trot straightaway before pulling into a 100-trot vertical ascent. At once this ascent ended, there was a sharp, 180-degree hairpin turn into a 150-trot vertical descent. This extremely fast transition from the course's highest elevation to its lowest was one of the oldest features of the race, and more than a few of the illustrations Twilight had come across were of this particular section.

Once on the "ground level" (a rather ironic name, considering that it was nearly 100 trots above the actual ground), the course leveled out into another straightaway, this one 75 trots long, before making a 90-degree turn to the right. 50 trots after the turn, there was an inside loop approximately 50 trots in diameter, followed by another 50-trot straightaway, which, after a sharp 180-degree turn, led into the section that Twilight already knew would provide Rain-Spark with their greatest challenge.

This section consisted of three flat, 120-trot straightaways, laid out parallel to each other and connected by hairpin turns even sharper than the one after the loop. Naturally, it was the turns that concerned Twilight Sparkle, since Rainbow Dash's yawing skills weren't nearly as impressive when she had to carry the unicorn's weight. Still, they made it through without too much trouble, and after another 120 trots of straight flight, they entered the next portion of the course.

This was a long, helical section, with a spiral approximately 60 trots in diameter that went around three times before ending at a height near the starting altitude. This was followed by a 100-trot straightaway that turned left into a climb which, after 160 trots, ended at an altitude 50 trots higher than the starting line. Another left turn led into the

infamous inversion zone. On illustrations of the course, it looked like a simple, sloping descent that went on for 300 trots before ending at the course's starting point, which also served as its finish line. However, this was where teams that had been lagging behind could do rolls to reduce their official time, with five seconds being removed for each inversion, and, in theory at least, allowing the race's excitement to last until the official winner was announced. The boundary rings were completely absent from this section; in theory, a team could take any route they wished, as long as they ended by going through a final ring, but one would have to be a fool to take any route other than the straightest line possible.

Twilight had her flyer do several barrel rolls in this area – to her mind, there was no reason to let their competition know about their strategy of performing a dozen or so aileron rolls in the inversion zone when there wasn't an official timer. As far as she was concerned, the five minutes it took for them to complete the course this time would more useful in convincing the other teams to underestimate them. After returning to their ground-based hotel to prepare for the evening's qualifying round, she sent Rainbow Dash back to mingle with the other pegasi to scout for more information about the competitors.

The pegasus went to the competitor's lounge in one of the swankier cloud resorts, where the casinos had provided free food and drinks for all the entrants, including, much to her delight, an entire barrel of cider from Sweet Apple Acres (non-alcoholic, of course – after all, most of these athletes would be racing in a few hours). Rainbow Dash had just finished quaffing her third mug when she heard a cocksure voice from behind her. "You really think you have a shot at this?"

Rainbow Dash turned her head to see an orange stallion with a short, spiky brick-red mane and an abstract cutie mark that appeared to consist of three stylized arrows, laid out in parallel. "Wouldn't be here if I didn't," she replied. "What's it to you?"

"The name's Fast Twitch. I'm the flyer for Team Fast-Time."

"Cute name."

"Call it 'cute' if you want, but we're the odds-on favorite to win the whole thing."

"Yeah, well, good luck to you," Rainbow Dash said, taking note of the stallion's air of confidence.

"We don't need luck. You, on the other hand, are going to need a miracle."

"Excuse me?"

"You're one of the Elements of Harmony, right? Got in with your connections?"

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Yeah, I guess." *I knew getting Celestia's help would backfire*, she thought absently.

"You're rider's a unicorn, right? Personal friend of one of the Princesses, or something like that?"

"Twilight is Celestia's personal student. She's one of the smartest ponies in Equestria."

Fast Twitch snorted. "Yeah, I know the type. All the brains in the world, and not a drop of common sense."

The blue mare was really starting to dislike this guy's attitude. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The stallion didn't bother to answer the question. "I've gotta say, I admire your bravery."

Rainbow Dash wasn't sure what to make of this. "Bravery?"

"Yeah, most of the past winners of the Best Young Flyer competition wouldn't dream of humiliating themselves the way you are."

The blue pegasus scoffed. "If you're talking about our practice run, that doesn't mean anything. You really think Twilight and I would be dumb enough to go full speed when it didn't actually count? I thought you said you were a pro."

"I am, and it doesn't matter how much faster you can go when you're trying. You're going to lose, and you'll be a laughingstock."

"And just what makes you say that?"

"Well, for one thing, you've got the most ridiculous saddle I've ever seen. Seriously, a fitness saddle? That thing's strapped on you so tight there's no way a decent rider could get a good lean to indicate a roll. You need an actual racing brand, like Whirlaway."

"Twilight can roll me just fine."

"I wasn't talking about her, I was talking about a *decent* rider. Your unicorn friend just plain sucks."

Being the Element of Loyalty, Rainbow Dash was not one to suffer such a remark lightly. "What did you say?!"

"I said that she sucks. She's terrible. She can't do anything except to hold you back."

"What the – Why you – You don't even know her!" The other pegasi in the lounge had all gone silent, their attention completely focused on the shouting match before them.

"I know she's a unicorn, and that's enough."

"Oh, come on! You're actually going to be blatantly racist about this?"

"Please, there's nothing racist about saying that pegasi are inherently superior riders, any more than it is to say that they're superior flyers. Or do you need me to explain *that*, too?"

Rainbow Dash stood her ground. She had to defend her friend, for the simple fact that the unicorn couldn't be present to defend herself. "Twilight knows exactly what she's doing."

Fast Twitch rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm sure you're friend's quite talented for a unicorn, but if you want to ride at this level you need to have wings."

"Why?"

The stallion let out a derisive laugh. "Ha! If you can't figure that out, you deserve to be humiliated."

"Oh yeah?! Well, we'll see who's laughing after we kick everypony's tail tonight! Pole position for Team Rain-Spark – count on it!"

• • •

The good news was that Twilight Sparkle's riding skills were more than sufficient to back up Rainbow Dash's boasting. The bad news was that there actually was a very good reason that pegasi were thought to be superior riders to other ponies.

The unicorn had been correct that the series of hairpin turns would be the most difficult section of the course, but she'd vastly underestimated the degree to which this would be true. It turned out that the standard practice was for the rider to stick out a wing when turning, acting like a rudder and greatly decreasing the flyer's turning radius. When combined with the fact that the standard racing saddle allowed for much more vigorous wing movement than even a high-end fitness saddle could provide, Team Rain-Spark found themselves way behind the pack, and it looked like they wouldn't even qualify for the next day's race.

However, the same safety features that made Rainbow Dash's wing-flaps less powerful were also the ones that made her more responsive to the movements of her rider's hind legs. Thus, while most of the other teams performed a few barrel rolls in the inversion zone, Team Rain-Spark had the ability to perform Aileron rolls, which took much, much less time. Where most teams only attempted five or six inversions, Rain-Spark pulled off twenty, easily giving them first place and an official time of 2:34.30, setting a new course record, even though they'd crossed the finish line almost thirty seconds after everyone else.

Needless to say, the reaction of the professional teams who'd been tandem racing for their entire lives was a bit... mixed.

• • •

"You can't be serious!"

"This is an outrage!"

"Damn it, what about tradition?!"

The spokespony for the Las Pegasus Tandem Racing Committee was really starting to wish that she had some aspirin, or at least some sort of traditional zebra remedy for migraines, because the complaints were starting to drive her to distraction. "I really don't know what else to tell you. Rainbow Dash has been tested both for drugs and unauthorized magic, and she's come up clean on both counts, and Twilight Sparkle's magic inhibitor was inspected and found to be in good working order. Their time is therefore perfectly legitimate, and they'll be given the pole position for tomorrow's race."

"Why even bother having the race? There's no way they can possibly lose if nothing changes."

"The hot-dogging makes a mockery of this sport."

"I still say they're cheating. Everypony knows Aileron rolls can't be done during tandem flight."

The spokespony tried to resist groaning out loud. Even though the objections were flying at her so quickly that she couldn't tell which pony was making what complaint, she still had to maintain some semblance of dignity. "Team Rain-Spark has explained the methods they use to the committee, and they have determined that they are well within the bounds of sportsponylike conduct."

"Yeah, right. You're just letting them get away with it because they've got connections with the Royal Family."

"Please, there's no need to throw such accusations around. The committee's official position is that Rain-Spark's performance has exposed flaws in the official rules that were heretofore unnoticed, and they have decided to take action to ensure that nopony is needlessly humiliated when the event is held tomorrow. Now, as the nature of this action is still being deliberated, I must excuse myself to return to the meeting."

• • •

"Don't let them get you down."

Rainbow Dash looked up from her seat in the Lucky Horseshoe's no-frills lobby to see a pegasus stallion with light grey coat and a dark grey mane standing in front of her with a friendly smile on his face. His cutie mark was yet another example of the inexplicably common hourglass. "Uh... thanks, I guess. And, uh, you are...?"

"My name's Reaction Time. I'm the rider for Team Fast-Time, and I came here to apologize for my partner's... ill-considered remarks to you earlier in the day."

"Fast-Time... wait, you're that Fast Twitch guy's rider?!"

"Indeed. Twitch has the unfortunate habit of needlessly antagonizing opponents with his trash talk. He thinks he's playing some sort of mind game, but often as not, he ends up motivating them to do better."

"Well, it certainly worked in our case."

"Of course. Ms. Sparkle was smart to hide that little trick you had up your sleeve. Am I right in assuming that it's the saddle that allows for the Aileron roll?"

"Yeah... Twilight thinks that normal racing saddles are too loose to signal rolling the way we do it."

"I see. She has excellent flying instincts for a unicorn. Who taught her to ride?"

"Uh, well, she basically taught herself, with a little help from me."

Reaction Time chuckled. "Of course. Only somepony who didn't know Aileron rolls were supposed to be impossible would bother figuring out how to do them. How long has she been riding?"

"Three months."

The stallion, who had seemed quite collected up to this point, suddenly looked incredulous. "You're... you're joking, right?"

"Nope. Twilight *is* Princess Celestia's protégé, which pretty much makes her one of the smartest ponies in Equestria."

"No doubt... and I'm guessing that the rumors that the Princess got personally involved to even get the two of you in this competition are true, then?"

"Uh... yeah, pretty much. I know the other teams resent it..."

"Given how hard most of us had to work just to get here, it's hard to see how they couldn't. Still, I think most of them were more put off by the fact that the style of riding they've spent years perfecting has suddenly been rendered so obsolete that they would have had no chance at winning tomorrow."

"Don't you mean that they *won't* have a chance? I mean, it's not like anything's changed since this afternoon, right?"

The stallion seemed somewhat surprised at this response. "No pony told either of you, then?"

"Told us what?"

Reaction Time sighed. "I can't believe they're being *that* petty...." He reached into his saddlebag, pulled out a manila envelope, and gave it to Rainbow Dash. "Here. Apparently, your copy got conveniently lost before it arrived at your lodgings. Given the close relationship the two of you have with the Princesses, I highly doubt that it was the

intention of the organizing committee, or even of anyone racing tomorrow – most likely, one of the teams that didn't make it in bribed the messenger to 'misplace' it in some misguided attempt to get back at you."

"Rhat izh dis?" Dash asked with the envelope in her mouth (since she had no saddlebag of her own where she could put it.)

"I suggest you take that to Ms. Sparkle. You'll want to be together to discuss the ramifications."

• • •

Back in her hotel room, Twilight Sparkle read the pertinent section of the official memo aloud. "Due to recent events, glaring weaknesses in our current rules and regulations have been exposed, which we believe will detract from the tension and excitement our patrons have come to expect from the Stratochase. Therefore, to rectify the situation, we are modifying the regulations regarding the inversion zone. Instead of being rewarded for performing any number of inversions with seconds removed from the official time, teams shall now be required to perform seven inversions within the inversion zone, with a fifteen-second penalty for each missed inversion. The inversions may be performed by whatever means each team chooses."

Rainbow Dash scratched her head. "Uh... could you translate that from legalese?"

"Basically, they're changing the rules on us. Doing Aileron rolls all the way to the finish line won't affect our official time at all."

"This is complete load of horseapples!"

"Actually, it makes a lot of sense, when you think about it. Since ponies gamble on the outcome, if the rules remained the same, our victory would be a foregone conclusion, which would mean that everypony would bet on them to win, and as a result the casinos would lose money. Also, the rule change does mean that, absent any penalties, the winning team will be the one that crosses the finish line first, which will make it much more exciting for spectators."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "I guess it does make sense when you put it that way..."

Twilight nodded. "Now, as for the fact that they're making all of these changes the night before the race, *that's* a load of horseapples. Still, this is partly my fault. If I hadn't gone



overboard on the aileron rolls, they likely wouldn't have thought such a sudden, drastic change was necessary."

"Well, that and if you hadn't agreed to let Princess Celestia grease the wheels, they might not have been that hostile in the first place."

The unicorn sighed. "Okay, you were right, Rainbow Dash. I shouldn't have dismissed your concerns about how getting help from Celestia would look. I made a mistake, and I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted, I guess.... So what do we do? The Aileron roll can't help us now."

"Actually, I think it will – just not to the degree it did before. Doing barrel rolls still increases the distance a team has to cover, compared to the Aileron rolls, and currently, most teams choose to do five or six inversions. I can't be certain, but I think they chose the number of rolls to lengthen the course for traditional riders just enough to make it look like we're still competitive. If they didn't 'throw us a bone,' to use a Diamond Dog idiom, the resulting scandal would probably ruin the event's reputation. Being able to do Aileron rolls still gives us an advantage, but the advantage isn't big enough to guarantee a win for us on its own."

"But we're still going to be way behind thanks to those stupid hairpin turns."

The unicorn paused as she tapped a hoof against her chin. "Actually, I'm not so sure about that...."

"You have an idea?"

"Maybe... I need to think things out tonight. In the meantime, you need to make sure you're well rested. Don't worry; I'm the rider. It's my job to deal with obstacles like this. By tomorrow morning, I'll have a plan. I'm sure of it."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Okay... if you're sure."

"I'm positive."

The pegasus walked towards the door so she could head to her own hotel room. "Then I'll see you tomorrow. Good night, Twilight."

"If you do your job right, you'll never be surprised by anything that happens during a race. Disappointed, maybe, but not surprised. When something happens that genuinely surprises you, it means you've been outsmarted."

– Reaction Time

Rarity was beaming as she strode into the VIP box for at Stratochase course, which was located on the outskirts of Las Pegasus. "I can't thank you enough for your hospitality, Princess."

"We assure you, the pleasure is ours," Luna replied as the unicorn took her seat beside her. "We trust that you were able to make those business contacts you were interested in?"

"But of course! Given the ornate nature of the hats mares traditionally wear at these events, the simplicity of my new line complements them perfectly. I suspect that I'll be receiving several orders in the near future – but let's be honest: that's not the reason I'm here."

The alicorn nodded. "Indeed, we would not normally have made plans to attend were it not for the participation of Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. Much as we have always enjoyed watching tandem races, the sport has changed a great deal during our absence. This marks the first time since our return that we have felt it worthwhile to modify our schedule to personally attend such an event."

"Oh, that's right... this is rather early for you... or is it late?"

"It is quite late indeed, but our sister graciously agreed to raise the moon for us last night, so we presently have a bit more energy than is usual for us at this hour. But enough about that – we would like to hear about you."

"Oh, Princess, you flatter me."

"Flattering or not, it is quite sincere. You are, after all, the only one of our saviors that we did not get the chance to meet on Nightmare Night."

"Ah, I see... well, I was born in Ponyville, and I've wanted to be a fashion designer since I was a filly. I suppose that opening my own shop was the high point of my life before I became the Element of Generosity."

"Indeed... speaking of the Elements, did you get the chance to speak with 'Rain-Spark'?"

"I was able to briefly greet them at their hotel earlier this morning, but they're on a rather tight schedule. We plan on getting together this evening, once Twilight can use cloudwalking spells again, to take in the sights of Las Pegasus like proper tourists."

Luna smiled. "That does indeed sound... fun."

• • •

"We are so gonna take this."

Reaction Time raised an eyebrow as he briefly paused in saddling his flyer. "Your confidence is reassuring, but we still have a race to win."

"Whatever," Fast Twitch replied. "What's most important is that the Bondage Twins are going to eat our dust."

His rider chose to ignore the fact that that particular idiom made no sense when one was racing in the sky, and focused instead on the target of his insult. "If you're referring to Rain-Spark's saddle, I wouldn't be too hasty in disparaging it."

"Why not?"

"Because you're going to be wearing one as soon as our contract with Whirlaway expires – that, or I'll find a flyer who will wear one."

The orange stallion stared at his rider in disbelief. "You're... you're kidding, right?"

"I most certainly am not. No matter how much that saddle detracts from a flyer's top speed, it more than makes up for it in maneuverability."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Reaction Time smiled. "You'll see. Don't worry, even though Rain-Spark has better equipment, we have more experience, and that's what's going to take us to the winner's circle."

Fast Twitch didn't respond, mostly because he was still reeling from the utter seriousness with which his rider had proclaimed that ridiculous getup to be "superior" to their 2000-

bit Whirlaway. He would have assumed that his partner was joking, if it wasn't for the fact that Reaction Time *never* joked about anything even remotely related to racing.

Fortunately, an angry beige mare chose that moment to storm into Fast-Time's stable and pick up the conversation. "Reaction Time, you *traitor!*"

The grey rider smiled broadly at this rather untraditional greeting. "Why, Nitty Gritty, what brings you here?"

"Rain-Spark just arrived at the stables."

"And?"

"And they know about the rule change!"

"Well, of course they do. I informed them."

"You *informed* them?! You said you were going to make sure they didn't hear about it until this morning!"

"Well, I *was* going to go through with the plan to hoof-deliver the memo to the Lady Luck instead of the Lucky Horseshoe and afterwards claim to have made a mistake, but then I had a pang of conscience, and I decided that I could not thus sully the name of our sport, particularly when the rule change itself was sure to provoke controversy without any additional assistance."

"That's a load of crap, and you know it. You're planning something."

Reaction Time smiled. "Of course. I plan to win, just like every other competitor."

"But this would have taken those upstarts out of the equation!"

"Really? They were smart enough to figure out how to do an Aileron roll in the first place. How do you know this would have fazed them?"

"Well... it *might* have."

"But what if it didn't?"

"Er..."

"Anyway, if the rule change alone was enough to completely neutralize the Aileron roll, all that trickery would have been pointless."

"Grr... you won't get away with this!"

"Get away with what? Seeing the error of my ways before it was too late? Besides, it's not as though this completely torpedoed your chances of victory; after all, you can just use your backup plan."

The mare abruptly fell silent for several seconds before responding, "Backup plan?"

"You *did* make sure to come up with an alternative plan to beat them in case I had a change of heart, right? After all, since all of you thought it was necessary to do this in the first place, that must mean you believed they'd figure out another way to win if they were given the chance."

"Er... well..."

"That's part of your job as a rider, isn't it?"

"Um... you see..." The mare was visibly struggling to come up with a reply. Eventually, she decided to ignore the question and pose one of her own. "Well, what's *your* plan?"

Reaction Time smirked. "You'll find out once the starting bell rings." As the rider stalked off, muttering curses under her breath, he turned his attention back to his astonished flyer. "And *that*, Fast Twitch, is how one plays mind games."

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Because they had to get completely saddled before arriving at the stables, Team Rain-Spark had little to do other than wait to be called out to the starting line. Twilight adjusted her inhibitor to make sure it would stay tight on her horn. It was quite possibly the ugliest shade of green she'd ever seen, made even uglier by the garish way that it clashed with her indigo mane. "Rarity is going to have a fit when she sees this thing," the unicorn commented.

"Hey, it's not your fault," replied the pegasus beneath her. "That was the only color they had in stock."

"I know," Twilight replied with a sigh. "I'm just trying to pass the time."

There was another awkward lull in the conversation, with silence being broken only by a ticking clock over the doorway. Eventually, Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Hard to believe we've only been doing this a few months, huh?"

"Well, we did come up with a new technique...."

"No, I don't mean racing. I mean you riding me. It wasn't that long ago that neither of us knew what we were doing, but now... well, now, letting you take the reins feels like the most natural thing in the world."

Twilight nodded. "I think I see what you mean."

"Do you think we can win this?"

"I think it's a possibility."

"So, your plan..."

"If I've correctly anticipated the plans of the other competitors, we should do alright."

Almost on cue, the traditional trumpet fanfare sounded calling the teams to the post. "Well," Rainbow Dash said, "I guess it's time for us to do our thing."

• • •

Team Rain-Spark had expected to hear some sort of reaction from the crowd as they flew towards the starting gate – after all, as Elements of Harmony, they were already somewhat famous. What they didn't suspect was that there would be a noticeable roar as they came into view of the stands; roughly half of the spectators were unicorns and earth ponies, and the novelty of having a team with a wingless rider in the pole position had planted most of them firmly in their cheering section.

As they entered their stall, Rainbow Dash turned to her right to see Team Fast-Time next to them. She couldn't resist throwing a barb: "Good luck, you two."

Fast Twitch merely scowled at her, while Reaction Time appeared to be so focused on the task before him, that it was quite likely he hadn't even noticed her. She would have considered attempting to thank the stallion for his help the previous night, were it not for a pull on her reins, as Twilight directed her attention forward. The reason became obvious two seconds later, when the starting bell rang, the gates opened, and the 157th running of the Las Pegasus Stratochase began.

• • •

In their past runnings of the Stratochase, Team Fast-Time had made their break as they exited the spiral ascent. That, however, wouldn't work this time. Even with the rule change, Rain-Spark's mastery of the Aileron roll meant that they were going to make a huge break at the inversion zone, and they were going to leave any team that was close to them in their wake. The other teams would probably assume that they'd get left behind during the hairpins, but if Rain-Spark could stay close to them by that point, they'd win the whole thing.

Reaction Time knew better. He'd already figured out how they could keep up, and as far as he was concerned, there was only one strategy that could possibly win: break as fast as possible, right out of the gate, and then hang on to the lead for as long as Fast Twitch's stamina allowed. Under normal circumstances, it would be incredibly foolhardy, but as far as he could tell, most of the other teams (with the obvious exception of Rain-Spark) refused to accept that the circumstances were very much abnormal this year. This strategy seemed to be working very well: Fast-Time reached the apex of the vertical climb just as Rain-Spark began their ascent. None of the other teams had tried to pull ahead of them – and as far as Reaction Time was concerned, they'd already lost.

• • •

"But why is it a bad idea to get an early lead?" Rarity asked, somewhat confused.

"Wind resistance," Luna replied, not bothering to move the binoculars from her face as she watched the pack begin its descent to the ground level. Things were looking good for Rain-Spark, as they were managing to avoid getting left behind. "Think of instances when geese fly in a 'V' formation – the one in front expends much more effort than the ones behind it, which is why they trade spots to conserve their energy. Fast-Time doesn't have the option of trading spots with anypony, so they're going to be moving much slower by the end of the race."

"I see," Rarity replied, as she looked through her own binoculars to see Team Rain-Spark, easily identifiable thanks to Twilight's criminally hideous magic inhibitor, finishing the inside loop.

• • •

Team Rain-Spark was in the middle of the pack as they came out of the loop, which was right where Twilight wanted them to be. Her plan was about to face its most important

test: the hairpins. As she watched the riders in front of her stick out their wings to slow down for the turn, she took a deep breath. She hadn't had time to test her idea out, and even though Rainbow Dash hadn't seen any flaws in it, the unicorn would have greatly preferred to have some foreknowledge of its feasibility. *Here we go....*

The unicorn deftly maneuvered to the outside of the curve, as she had done in her previous attempts to yaw through the turn. However, just as the turn began, she performed a quarter roll to the left, so that she and Rainbow Dash were parallel to the horizon. She then directed her flyer "upwards," as if they were performing an inside loop. By the time they were done, they were on the inside of the turn, directly underneath one of their competitors, so Twilight finished the remaining three-quarters of the roll, popping up beside the competing team, whose eyes were wide with a mix of astonishment and panic.

Not only had Team Rain-Spark managed to make a turn that was nearly as tight as one made using the traditional method, but by avoiding using body parts in a rudder-like capacity, they had done so *without slowing down*. In short, Twilight's plan was working out beautifully.

• • •

Normally, Reaction Time's face was stoically blank during a race, but as he approached the spiral ascent and glanced to his right, he indulged in the briefest of smiles. Twilight Sparkle's inhibitor made Rain-Spark easy to spot as they zoomed down the straightaways, and they were still in the thick of things, which meant that the unicorn had indeed figured out how to use her maneuverability to make up for her lack of wings, and this was very good news indeed.

As it turned out, he had been correct in his belief that all of the other teams would plan on Rain-Spark falling behind. It really was a stroke of good luck, not only because he knew that many of the other riders were otherwise intelligent ponies who could have come to the same conclusion that he did, but because the Elements' unexpected tenacity caused them to panic, speeding up in an effort to create the gap that they assumed would already exist, unintentionally tiring out their flyers and virtually eliminating the disadvantage that Fast-Time had taken on by breaking so early in the race. It was just a matter of staying ahead of the feisty newcomers, now.

But what the grey rider could never have anticipated was the degree to which the other teams would overreact to this development, because what happened as he turned his



attention to the spiral could not have gone better for Team Fast-Time even if he'd planned it.

• • •

"What?!" Rarity shrieked. "What just happened? Why did they spin out?!"

Luna's face was cold and stern as she continued gazing through her binoculars. "During the last turn, one of the other riders used her wing to sideswipe Rain-Spark, causing them to go off course slightly."

"But that's cheating!"

"If it's intentional, yes. But there's likely no way to prove it wasn't. Don't worry – they didn't go out of bounds. They were merely slowed down long enough to allow most of the other teams to overtake them."

"So they can still win?"

Luna paused for an uncomfortably long second. "We are... uncertain."

• • •

Twilight Sparkle didn't know if she and Rainbow Dash had been sideswiped intentionally, or by accident, and at the moment, she didn't have time to care. Most of the other teams had passed Rain-Spark, and Team Fast-Time had just exited the spiral, but neither she nor her flyer were hurt. The race was still salvageable. It *had* to be salvageable. They could still win – and knowing how competitive her partner was, Twilight felt obligated to do everything she could to try. She leaned forward to Dash's ear and shouted, "Let's do this!" The pegasus grinned, immediately taking off in pursuit of the mass of ponies in front of them.

The spiral was supposed to be an opportunity for the flyers to take a break by catching a ride on an updraft that had been engineered to flow at a constant speed for the duration of the race, but that wouldn't be nearly fast enough to get Rain-Spark back in the game. Instead, they tilted sideways, treating the spiral like a trio of of inside loops lined up side by side and rotated so that they were stacked vertically. Twilight had Rainbow Dash flapping her wings throughout the maneuver, and by the time they had reached the final ascent before the inversion zone, they'd nearly caught up to the teams who'd passed them.

• • •

Reaction Time managed to catch a glimpse of his competitors as he guided Fast Twitch in the first of the barrel rolls. He had no idea why Rain-Spark was now behind the large mass of ponies, but that was just as well, since he'd overestimated his flyer's stamina; Fast Twitch's wingbeats were becoming more labored, and lacked the power that had propelled them out to such an early lead to begin with. Still, Rain-Spark's current position likely meant that they would have to settle for second place – barring any more unforeseen circumstances, of course.

• • •

If Rainbow Dash was getting tired, she was doing a superb job of hiding it from her rider; the potent mix of adrenaline and competitiveness had the pegasus running at full blast as they entered the inversion zone. Twilight signaled her flyer to begin the Aileron rolls, which the pegasus pulled off in an incredibly short amount of time. The rest of the competition, meanwhile, was still in the midst of their barrel rolls, with one exception. Team Fast-Time was only about 150 trots from the finish line, flying as fast as they could. At their present rate of speed, Rain-Spark might be able to get close... but winning... appeared to be out of the question, by any reasonable standard, anyway.

Twilight, however, wasn't in the mood to be reasonable today. They'd come here to do more than wow the Wonderbolts – they also had to wow the idiotic politicians who were hell-bent on standing between Rainbow Dash and her dreams, and those imbeciles would probably give most of the credit to the unicorn's ingenuity, rather than the pegasus' skills, unless they could end with a bang.

*A bang... or maybe....*

Twilight Sparkle gritted her teeth as she made her decision. She knew what had to be done, and there wasn't a doubt in her mind that Rainbow Dash could pull it off; the only question was whether she'd be up to the task. Even though this was essentially the reason she'd been exercising on her own, the unicorn hadn't really been put to the test yet. Squinting her eyes, Twilight tightened the muscles in her barrel and legs as Team Rain-Spark started to accelerate.

For her part, Rainbow Dash was thrilled that her rider was increasing their speed. Sure, she was near the end of her reserves, but that finish line was *so close*. It wasn't until her vision began to get obscured by white streaks and the mild turbulence hit her that she realized this was more than just a last minute sprint to the end. *She isn't....*

The pegasus briefly looked behind her, and saw her friend grinding her teeth and flaring her nostrils as she attempted to keep her body as prone as possible. *She is!* Rainbow Dash had a huge grin on her face as she refocused her attention on the finish line. Through the rapidly congealing cone of whiteness, she was barely able to make out Team Fast-Time, who were mere trots from the finish line.

And then, the sky exploded.

• • •

**"Sonic Rainboom! Sonic Rainboom! Rain-Spark has pulled off a Sonic Rainboom!"**

Up to this point, Rarity hadn't paid much attention the course's announcer, but with the way he was shouting into the loudspeaker system, he was difficult to ignore. Not that there was much else that he could talk about; the rainbow streak left in Team Rain-Spark's wake had obscured the vision of almost everypony in the crowd. At the moment, the most they could be sure of was that it was close – extremely close. Twilight and Rainbow Dash had passed Team Fast-Time at some point near the finish line, and the officials were going to have to rely on magically-activated photographs to determine the winner.

However, the VIP box had a clear view of the finish line, and though Rarity still wasn't sure what had happened, she was sitting next to someone whose eyes were likely sharp enough to provide an answer. "Princess Luna?"

The alicorn didn't answer; instead, she continued to follow the rainbow trail through the sky with her binoculars, her jaw hanging open in shock. "It's... beautiful..." *The perfect ending to a perfect day*, the princess mused silently to herself as a glimmer of inspiration began to form in her mind.

"Your Majesty!"

This finally got the royal's attention, and she turned to her guest. "Yes, Rarity? What is it?"

"Did you see who won?"

To the unicorn's surprise, Luna's smiling response contained a warmth that one would normally associate with her older sister. "Does it even matter?"

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*For a long time, I assumed that I would remember the day that you took me on as your student as the pinnacle of my entire life. Of course, since I began my studies in friendship, I've very quickly realized that that day was, in reality, merely the start of a journey, rather than the culmination of one, and my tandem flying with Rainbow Dash is just the latest example in support of that idea.*

*I would have written to you about this earlier, but the media blitz has been overwhelming. With the way we've been treated, you would think we'd actually won! Then again, I suppose for a pair of amateurs with no tandem racing experience to place at the Las Pegasus Stratochase is pretty impressive, no matter how you slice it, even before you take the Sonic Rainboom into account. We've already been offered several endorsement deals, and the Stratochase's organizers have already invited us back for next year, but after some soul searching, Rainbow Dash and I have turned most of these offers down. As exciting and potentially lucrative as a career in tandem racing could be, Dash ultimately wants to be a Wonderbolt, and I want to be an accomplished magician, and training for those goals won't leave us with much time to focus on this sport.*

*This is particularly true since Team Fast-Time (a.k.a. the actual winners) have already announced that they'll be using PommelHorse equipment next year. Since they're professionals, they can devote months to learning how best to take advantages of the saddle's qualities, and they would no doubt beat us by a much wider margin in a rematch. In addition, now that the saddle's been accepted by such a prominent team, more teams are probably going to defect from the "old guard" in the weeks and months ahead. What I find most encouraging is that the PommelHorse saddle appears to completely neutralize the advantages associated with having a winged rider, which means that the sport might see more unicorns and earth ponies competing in the future.*

*Speaking of PommelHorse, they're the one company that Rainbow Dash and I have chosen to endorse officially, since it was their saddle that made this little adventure possible in the first place. We've decided to license the "Rain-Spark" name to them for their new line of racing saddles, for what the press release described as "an undisclosed sum." (Let's just say that it might be a while before I have to take advantage of my stipend again.)*

*But of course, the reason we started doing this in the first place was to get Rainbow Dash closer to her dream of joining the Wonderbolts, and on that matter, I'd have to say we were successful. Spitfire got in touch with her, and apparently, they're convinced she'll do well in*

*the teamwork department, as she now has an unofficial open invitation to try out for the squad – it would be an official one, but politicians are nothing if not stubborn. Spitfire is recommending that Rainbow Dash wait at least a year before requesting her official invitation, both to help make things go over smoothly with the "wait-in-line numbskulls" (her term, not mine) and so Dash can refine her routine until it's flawless.*

*As for me –*

"Hey, Twilight!"

The unicorn sighed as she opened the window in the library's main room to see her flying partner hovering expectantly. "Is something the matter, Rainbow Dash?"

"Uh, yeah, it's practice time."

"Go on ahead. I'll catch up to you when I'm finished writing my letter to Princess Celestia."

As the pegasus flew off, Spike looked up from the scroll. "You know, Twilight, we can finish this later."

"I'm almost done, Spike. All I need to do is add the friendship report."

*As for me, I have seen how the friendships I've cultivated here in Ponyville have created opportunities for me to do things that I never would have thought possible back when I spent all my time poring over obscure texts and esoteric spells. By simply being open to the new possibilities it presents, friendship can lead you down paths you never knew existed, and life will be all the better for it.*

*Your faithful student,  
Twilight Sparkle*