

Moonspire Run

Titan Rising

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PONY FICTION VAULT



A split second before the white lump could knock her from the sky, Rainbow Dash rolled from its path. She let the projectile come within inches of her cyan flank, then with a subtle flick of her pegasus wings was spiraling away, grinning at her own theatrics.

Her rainbow mane fluttered back in the wind as she arched her neck in self-satisfied pride. Her smug moment was cut short as two more blobs streaked up from the ground below, white blurs against the clear, afternoon sky.

She grunted and flipped sideways. The blobs changed direction in midair, darting away from each other to skirt around in a wide circle. Her eyes jumped from one to the other, her wings tense, ready to shift her momentum any direction. She spun a quick barrel roll, pausing upside down to sneak a peek at the ground.

A pony so pristine white she seemed tinged in silver glared a look of steely determination up from the bright green grass of the field below. The pony's purple mane, curled like thick lengths of silken ribbon, bounced when she shuffled her hooves to widen her stance. A shimmering glow of magical energy pulsed around the little unicorn horn perched on her forehead.

Rainbow Dash stifled a laugh. Ever since she was a young pony, even before she earned her cloud-and-rainbow-striped-lightning-bolt cutie mark, unicorn-pony horns had always made her giggle a bit. A little forehead bump sure did look kind of goofy when compared to something as totally awesome as pegasus wings. But in the fraction of a second she took to scout below, she saw nothing humorous in the way the power in that horn was floating dozens more of the white lumps into an orderly queue, all primed and waiting for their chance to take her down.

Flipping upright, she reoriented on the two blobs prowling through the air like wingless birds of prey. "What is she waiting for?" she asked in her tomboy rasp, sandpapered from years of high altitudes and hurricane-force headwinds. "This is getting..."

Then she felt it. Her body tingled, thickening as if she were suddenly flying at ten thousand feet. She blinked in surprise and looked down. The ground was still close. Too close. Her sky pony instinct for altitude seemed to be malfunctioning in a major way. Her wings flailed, struggling to find purchase in the thinning air. The previously sweet, green-scented afternoon refused to fill her lungs. She pumped furiously to maintain her flight path.

"Hailstones!" she said as she remembered the other, very magically gifted pony down below assisting the first. She looked back through her own thrashing pinion feathers to pick out the second pony on the ground.

A violet and pink unicorn stood beside a pile of leaves near the edge of an apple orchard with her eyes heavy-lidded in concentration. For some reason, the horn on this particular

unicorn never made Rainbow Dash want to laugh. She had seen it take on an Ursa Minor. And win. A feat that even she, Rainbow Dash, brave and fearless as she was, might struggle with.

The pink-striped forelock of the violet unicorn slipped further down over her eyes as she lowered her head and let out a girly groan of exertion. The already respectable magical corona around her horn flashed and doubled to twice the size of the pony wielding it.

The air around Rainbow Dash changed again. She suddenly felt as if she were flying through pudding. Before she could pull her wings in to compensate, five of the white blurs attacked in unison.

Rainbow Dash grinned. "That's more like it." She pumped her wings. The thick muscles along her spine already burned at their limits, but she ignored the pain and pushed harder. She ducked one white blur. Jerked her hooves tight to her underside, zipping over another. Slapped her wings flat to her sides to slip between two more. The air thinned in a prickling wave, but the white shapes came even faster.

She dodged; over, under, between, and still they came. She deflected one with a hoof, batted another with a wing, but the relentless attack continued amid the ever-changing air. She angled straight up toward the cresting sun with wings, chest, ribs, and neck all screaming as she fought to gain altitude. Ropes of mist and thickened air swirled around her. Bubbles of alternating high and low pressure attacked, causing the lift generated by her wings to fluctuate wildly.

Something approached fast from behind. She ducked just as a white blur grazed the length of her spine, plowing through every hair of her multi-colored mane. The air thinned once again as she laughed and turned back to shout, "You'll have to do better than-"

Wham.

A large, lumpy missile blindsided her, slamming into the side of her face and flipping her mane-over-tail. Feathers exploded in a downy cloud. A clear, musical, "Ahaha!" floated up from the grassy field below.

Rainbow Dash hacked and wiped at her eyes, trying to rid her face of the clinging fluffiness. She flapped frantically but didn't realize she was falling until somepony shouted, "Rarity, catch her!" Rainbow Dash tried to sputter out that she didn't need help, but was too busy coughing up feathers.

"Oh my! I have her," a singsong voice said a moment before Rainbow Dash slammed into a heap of soft lumps.

Thundering silence engulfed her. Her breath came in ragged gasps. She felt hot all over and slick with hard-earned sweat. Her back and wing muscles hummed silently, but all

else was still. She groaned and curled into a tiny ball of pony. Everything was dark and muffled inside the pile and smelled of lightly perfumed linen. Her head still felt like she was spinning, but the ground was solid beneath her. She worked her tongue around her mouth and managed to hawk out a glob of soggy feathers. The staccato rhythm of approaching hoof beats reverberated through the ground.

"Rainbow!" a voice called out. "Rainbow Dash, are you okay?"

Rainbow Dash let out a small whimper that only she could hear. She pictured herself sinking into the ground where no one could find her to comment on her wipeout. If she held still, maybe they'd forget she was there and go away.

"Goodness," the musical voice said. "I hope I didn't hurt her!"

The weight pressing around Rainbow Dash disappeared as the lumps shimmered with a magical glow. They lifted away, exposing her once again to the bright afternoon. She blinked and looked from the concerned violet face staring down at her, to the white one wearing a similar expression.

"Hey, Twilight," she said to the violet pony. "Hey, Rarity," she said to the white face. She forced herself to grin and popped up to her hooves, masking her wobbly balance with a wing flap. "Me? All right?" she said, putting a hoof to her chest and raising her chin. "Of course I'm all right! Takes more than that to keep the greatest flier in all Equestria down."

The other three ponies let out a sigh of relief. Wait... three? Rainbow Dash shook her head and blinked. Another pony with a cotton candy pink face and a fluffy shock of magenta mane blinked her bright, blue eyes and grinned.

"Hi Rainbow Dash!" the pink pony said, so fast it almost sounded like one word.

"Pinkie Pie?" Rainbow Dash said. "What are you doing here?" Two ponies seeing her humiliated was bad enough, why did this one have to show up, too?

Pinkie Pie whipped up a hoof with a caramel covered apple stuck to it. "Eating candied apples. I had some caramel but no apples. So I came here!" She licked the hazel glaze near the base of the stick, managing to somehow land a glob on the end of her nose. "But then I saw you flipping around in the air, and stuff flying, and Twilight Sparkle going all 'grrrrr', And Rarity going all 'Fwip! Fwip! Fwip!'" Pinkie Pie tossed her head, throwing invisible things.

Rainbow Dash covered her face with a hoof. "Pinkie Pie...."

"And the winds swirling, and you were going all 'Whoom! Whoom! Whoom!'" Pinkie Pie hopped side to side as if dodging flying objects.

"Pinkie Pie!" Twilight Sparkle said.

"And then Spike was all 'we're never gonna make it!' And Big Macintosh was all 'Eeeeeeyup!'"

"Pinkie Pie, please!" Rarity said.

"What the hay is all the commotion about?" a voice called out from behind Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash spun, feeling her cheeks heat. "Applejack! What are *you* doing here?"

A light orange pony wearing a cowgirl hat over her blonde mane trotted to a stop. "This's mah farm, ah live here!" She pointed a hoof at a red, rickety farmhouse in the near distance.

Rainbow Dash's head and tail drooped. "Great." She hadn't realized they were so close to Sweet Apple Acres.

Pinkie Pie bounced in a circle around Applejack like she had springs stuck to her hooves. "Did you see that, A.J.? Huh? Wasn't it amazing?" Rainbow Dash picked her head up, one side of her mouth trying to smile.

"Ah sure as sugar did!" Applejack said, crossing her forelegs. Rainbow Dash's smile widened. "Rarity knocked her fer a loop! I ain't never seen nothin' like it! Amazin' ain't the half of it."

Rainbow Dash's stomach clenched. Her mane and tail suddenly felt as if they weighed five hundred pounds. "Rarity was amazing?" she muttered.

The white unicorn in question raised her perfectly coiffed head, closed her eyes and touched a velvet hoof to the hollow of her throat. "I was amazing, wasn't I? Ahaha! Imagine... me, Rarity, vanquishing the greatest flier in all Equestria..." a white lump jumped up next to her face, floating in a magical aura, "with a pillow!" Every pony besides Rainbow Dash started laughing. Her head drooped further, her nose almost touching the ground.

"Now I guess we know Rainbow's weakness," Twilight Sparkle said between laughs.

"It was just a lucky shot," Rainbow Dash mumbled.

"It most certainly was not luck," Rarity said in mock offense. "I was doing exactly what you asked me to, you simply didn't expect me to do it so well."

Rainbow Dash felt her wings trying to rise on their own. Despite common misconception, pegasus wings are closely tied to all strong emotion and don't rise only when a pegasus is excited, but also for surprise, fear, anger, and embarrassment. Which is what they were responding to right then: the desperate desire to depart. She kept them locked firmly in

place to hide her mounting shame, but could do nothing to abate the burning in her cheeks and ears.

Pinkie Pie stopped bouncing and slapped her candied apple to her forehead with the stick pointing out like a horn. She tilted her head back, and in a surprisingly accurate imitation of Twilight Sparkle said, "Spike, take a note, please. Dear Princess Celestia, please send us a new champion flier, because if Ponyville is ever overrun by evil, winged pillows... we're doomed!" The others burst out laughing even harder. Rainbow Dash felt like she was about to burst into flames.

"Everypony, wait a minute," Twilight Sparkle said. "Rainbow's not laughing." They all quieted.

Applejack put a hoof on Rainbow Dash's shoulder. "Easy, sugar cube, we didn't mean no harm."

"Of course not," Rarity said. "Sorry if we took it too far, we were only horsing around with you. You *are* the greatest flier in Ponyville, after all."

"And you won the Young Flier Competition!" Pinkie Pie said.

A nearby pile of leaves erupted as a small orange face topped with a dark-pink forelock burst from it. Two tiny, orange wings flipped up behind, sending a second spray of leaves skyward. "And you can do the Sonic Rainboom!"

Rainbow Dash squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. "Not her, too." Her entire body started quivering.

"That's right! Thank you, Scootaloo," Twilight Sparkle said to the little orange pegasus in the leaf pile. "The Sonic Rainboom!"

"Yeah! The Sonic Rainboom!" the other ponies said in unison.

Why did Scootaloo have to bring up the Rainboom? It was a nearly impossible trick Rainbow Dash had been trying to recreate ever since she accidentally did it once as a little filly. It happened when she flew so fast that the very air around her detonated in a multi-colored sonic boom. She recently pulled it off again, saving her friends and winning a competition in the process. But since then....

"It's only the most spectacular thing ah've ever seen!" Applejack said.

"And you are the only one who can perform the Sonic Rainboom," Rarity said.

Rainbow Dash's jaw was clenched so tight she thought her teeth might shatter. Her entire body was taut, stretched like a rubber band about to snap.

Pinkie Pie lifted her back leg and looked down at it. "Umm... girls? My foot feels knocky... that means something's about to blow up."

Little Scootaloo liberated herself from the leaf pile and pranced over to the group with her wings upright. "Seriously, if I could do the Sonic Rainboom," she said, "I would-"

Rainbow Dash spun and thrust her face down, bumping foreheads with Scootaloo, their eyes millimeters apart. "Sonic Rainboom?" she said through gritted teeth. "Sonic Rainboom?" she said again, anger flaring.

Scootaloo's eyes doubled in size. She pulled her head back and stepped away. Rainbow Dash followed her retreat, punctuating every few words with a pounding step forward. "So what if I can do the Sonic Rainboom? What's so great about it? I don't even care about it anymore! And I'm not going to teach you, and I'm not giving flying lessons, so stop following me around already!"

Eyes quivering, Scootaloo's face scrunched in toward her nose as she bit her lower lip. Rainbow Dash turned back to the other ponies when Scootaloo streaked away leaving hiccupping sobs in her wake.

"Sonic Rainboom," Rainbow Dash said again, spitting out the words. "Sonic Rainboom, Sonic Rainboom... that's all anypony says about me anymore. 'Oh look," she pointed into the distance at nothing in particular, "'there goes that Sonic Rainboom pony!'" She touched her front hooves to her cheeks and squeezed until her lips puckered. "'Oooh, I wonder what's next for the Sonic Rainboom pony?'"

She looked at each of them in turn. "Apparently nothing, because I can't even out-fly a stupid pillow!" She kicked one of the offending objects, sending it spinning high into the air. She glared at the other ponies, breathing heavily, until the pillow thumped back down on the top of her head with a muffled 'poof'.

No pony said a word.

The pillow slid from her head and plopped to the ground.

She glared harder, daring any of them to speak.

They stared back with blank expressions.

One corner of Applejack's mouth quivered, pulling out to the side and letting a small snicker escape her strained face. Rarity slapped a white hoof over Applejack's mouth without the slightest change in her own expression.

Twilight Sparkle snickered.

"That's it!" Rainbow Dash shouted, rearing up with wings and hooves flailing. The others all jumped in fright and leaped together in a group hug. "Everypony just... just leave me alone!" She scanned the perfect sky. Of course the sky ponies would make it a clear day the one time she desperately needed a cloud.

But luck hadn't completely deserted her. Nearby, a lone, puffy cloud drifted lazily above the treetops. She was off the ground and flying before she even knew she had spread her wings.

Rainbow Dash plowed straight through the cloud instead of bothering to go around. On the other side, she flared her wings to a stop, pulled them tight against her sides, and fell with her back to the soft, springy surface. She lay supported by her sky pony magic, panting and waiting for the snug, comforting feeling that lying on a cloud always brought. It didn't come. The bubbling brew of fuddled feelings roiling inside her only worsened.

"This is all stupid Rarity's fault and her stupid pillows," she said to the sky. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and groaned; it wasn't Rarity's fault. Nor was she stupid. Neither was Twilight Sparkle for that matter. Rainbow Dash had asked them to help her train... but train for what? An invasion of giant parasprites?

She groaned again. Ever since winning the Young Fliers Competition by doing the Sonic... that *trick*, she didn't know what to do with herself anymore. She was afraid to even try it again because... because.... Well, she didn't know why she was afraid, she just was. But everypony had to keep bringing it up when they watched her train. She used to bask in the attention whenever ponies came to watch. She used to train right smack in the middle of Ponyville. Now she felt nervous with even a one-pony audience.

She opened her eyes to address the empty blue above. "What is wrong with me?"

She groaned again, louder and longer. It wasn't enough. She rolled over, mashed her face into the cloud, and unleashed a wordless scream of anguish. When she was done, she lay for nearly a minute breathing in the fresh, rainy smell.

"It's not easy, is it?" a voice asked.

Rainbow Dash yelped in surprise and bounced to her rear legs, punching her hooves out in front of her like a boxer. "Who's there? Show yourself! Come on, I'm ready for ya!"

"Easy there Rainboom girl," the voice said with a sarcastic edge. Whoever it was sounded friendly and confident, as if they were ready to tell a joke at any moment and expected laughter to follow.

Rainbow Dash dropped to all four hooves and raised an eyebrow. The voice also sounded very familiar. "Who is that?" The cloud was divided by a giant heap of cumulus, hiding the other from view.

"Always having to be the best," the voice said. "It's not easy, is it?"

Rainbow Dash climbed to the top of the dividing heap and peered over. She sucked in a gasp; the cloud was on fire! After her initial fright, she gave her head a quick shake and looked again. Where she had thought a fire was burning, a bright yellow pegasus with amber eyes and a fire-orange mane stood blinking back at her through a pair of very old,

blue goggles. The wind ruffling the long, spiky hair of her mane and tail had created the illusion of flickering flames. Rainbow Dash frowned. She had never seen this pegasus before, why did she recognize her voice?

The yellow pegasus pushed the goggles up to her forehead and grinned. "I don't live in my Wonderbolt uniform, you know. I do have to take it off to wash it."

Something clicked in Rainbow Dash's head. And then shattered. Her mouth fell open as her lungs drew in every cubic inch of breath they could hold. It took every iota of control to squeak out, "Sp... Spitfire?"

Spitfire lifted a hoof to her chest and beamed. "The one and only!"

And the one and only team captain of the normally blue-clad Wonderbolts; the elite aerial flying team Rainbow Dash had been trying her entire life to get noticed by. She felt her wings struggling to rise. Her back quivered with the effort of holding them down. Twilight Sparkle claimed that unconscious wing rise was a literal expression of the 'fight or flight' response all creatures had. Rainbow Dash couldn't care less *why* it happened, she just knew that it was really annoying when one was trying to play it cool. Like when a pony was standing on a cloud talking to their absolute greatest hero in all Equestria. Thankfully, her wings obeyed.

"Ohmygosh... Spitfire!" Rainbow Dash said, fighting back her overwhelming giddiness. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "Umm... what are you doing here?"

Spitfire looked disappointed. "Only one 'ohmygosh' this time?" She smiled and tapped her chin with a hoof. "Well, since it's kind of pointless to pretend otherwise... I guess I was spying on you. You weren't supposed to know," she gestured to the cloudless sky, "but there weren't many hiding spots."

Rainbow Dash felt light-headed. She took a few steps to steady her balance. "Why are... what are... me? You're spying on me?" Her voice quivered with each word. "Why?"

"After your little stunt at the Young Flier's Competition, we all agreed we should keep an eye on you."

"What does...? Does that mean...? You want me to be... a... a... a Wonderbolt?"

Spitfire shook her head with a laugh. "Hold your horses there, Rainboom girl. There's about fifty or so pegasi we regularly keep an eye on. What it means is we think you might have potential."

The humming in Rainbow Dash's body quieted. "Fifty? I'm only in the top fifty?"

"Yes. And it's my day off, so I thought I'd see what you were up to." She trotted to the edge of the cloud and looked down. "And you put on quite the show, yelling at your friends like that."

All elation flooded from Rainbow Dash like water from a broken trough. "Oh. Yeah."

"You sure let that little pegasus have it."

Rainbow Dash's ears drooped. "Yeah."

"What did she do to deserve such a tirade?"

Rainbow Dash groaned and rolled her eyes. "Scootaloo? Ugh. She's always following me around, trying to get my attention and give her tips on flying. She's like a little... total... lunatic!"

Spitfire looked at her sideways. "Does she spout 'ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh' every time she sees you?"

Rainbow Dash squinted and cocked her head. "What's that mean?" Her eyes popped open wide. "Hey! That's different! You... you're a Wonderbolt!"

"True." Spitfire looked back down at the ground. "At least you didn't send all your other friends running away in tears."

Rainbow Dash shoved her face into the cloud and out through the bottom. Scootaloo was nowhere to be seen, but the other four were standing in a circle, talking.

"Why would that make her so upset?" Twilight Sparkle asked.

Applejack pushed her cowgirl hat back on her head and shrugged. "Don't know, but she has been a might twitchy ever since that competition."

"I feel so awful," Rarity said. Her ringleted mane and tail sagged. "I only did what she asked me to. What if she has run away? What if she never comes back?" She raised a hoof to her forehead as if about to swoon. "Oh, I would never forgive myself."

"It ain't your fault, Rare," Applejack said, patting her with a hoof. "We need to go find Fluttershy so she can fly up and tell Rainbow we want to apologize fer givin' her such a ribbin'."

Pinkie Pie inhaled a giant, squealing breath. "I've got it! Girls, you know what we should do?" She grinned and blinked her huge, blue eyes at them.

"Throw her a party?" Twilight Sparkle asked in a low, sarcastic voice.

Pinkie Pie leaned away from Twilight Sparkle so far that it seemed she should topple over. "Whoa. That's just scary... you didn't even need a hint!"

Rainbow Dash yanked her head back up, smiling. She had just yelled at them, less than five minutes ago, for no apparent reason, and they had already forgiven her. She had the coolest friends ever. Cooler than anyone else's in all Equestria. At least twenty percent-

"So," Spitfire said, interrupting Rainbow Dash's thought. "You look like you have some energy you need to burn off, and I don't have anything else planned for today... so how 'bout it? Wanna have a race?"

Rainbow Dash's eyes slowly widened along with her incredulous grin. Her wings fluttered. "Me? You? Me race? I mean, race you? I mean-"

Spitfire clomped a foot to Rainbow Dash's mouth. "Yes!" She pulled her hoof back. "So what do you say? You up for it?"

Rainbow Dash leaped up from the cloud and flew several quick circles around it before landing again. "You bet I am! Let me go tell my friends, they're not gonna believe this!" She launched into the air again, but Spitfire chomped the end of her rainbow tail before she made it over the edge. With a loud 'gack', she snapped back like a tethered ball hitting the end of its string and fell flat on her stomach.

"No," Spitfire said, letting go of her tail. "Just you and me. No friends, no audience, no distractions. No need to show off."

Rainbow Dash reached back and rubbed her rear end. No matter how many times somepony grabbed her tail like that it never hurt any less. "Okay, fine. You could've just said so." She climbed to her feet. "Well, then, what do I get if I win?"

Spitfire slowly turned to her with a look somewhere between incredulous and amused. "A Wonderbolt has just challenged you to a one-on-one race... and you're worried about what you get if you win?"

"Well," Rainbow Dash said, looking sheepish. "It's just that if my friends can't watch, how do I prove that it really happened? No one will believe me! They'll all just think I'm trying to look cool! They'll just laugh some more!"

Spitfire slapped a hoof to her face. "You are so worried about how others see you." She lifted her chin and made a slashing motion. "No bets. This will just be...." She trailed off and looked toward the edge of the cloud where she had been spying from earlier. "Unless...." She looked back to Rainbow Dash and smiled. "You know, on second thought, I might be able to do you some good." She looked up toward the sun and tapped a hoof to her chin as if performing a difficult calculation. After several seconds she looked back to Rainbow Dash and gave her a succinct nod. "Okay, fine. If you win..." She looked up toward her forehead. "I'll give you my goggles."

Rainbow Dash cocked her head and squinted at the blue-rimmed lenses. She frowned; they looked pretty old and beat-up. If Spitfire had been wearing her Wonderbolt goggles Rainbow Dash would have been ecstatic, but the ones perched above Spitfire's eyes weren't even close to those. But still, something was better than nothing.

"Okay, I guess," Rainbow Dash said.

Spitfire's small smile turned into a mischievous grin. "And if *I* win, then you have to give that little pegasus, Scootaloo, a flying lesson."

Rainbow Dash took two quick steps away. "What? No way! Not gonna happen!"

Spitfire shrugged. "That's the deal."

Rainbow Dash waved a hoof in dismissal. "Forget it. I don't want your goggles, anyway. Let's just race."

Spitfire mimicked her dismissive hoof-wave. "Too late. Those are the terms. You wanted stakes, now they're non-negotiable." Rainbow Dash glared at her. Spitfire grinned wider and glared back. "You don't like it? Then don't lose."

Rainbow Dash glared harder, then straightened with a smug smile, raised a hoof, spit on it, and held it out to Spitfire. "Fine. Let's do this! You won't even know what hit you!"

Spitfire didn't hesitate to spit on her own hoof and bump it against Rainbow Dash's. "The only thing that's gonna hit me is the confetti when I win."

Rainbow Dash's skin started tingling as every hair on her body tried to stand. She narrowed her eyes and grinned. "So where we doin' this? Race around Ponyville?" Spitfire yawned and shook her head. Rainbow Dash blinked and looked up. "Cloudsdale stadium? The ring course?" Spitfire dropped her head and snored. Rainbow Dash scratched her chin and shrugged. "Quarterhorse Canyon?"

"Boring, boring, boring," Spitfire said. "If we're gonna do this, let's do it right."

"Then where?"

Spitfire winked and beckoned with a flip of her fiery mane. "Follow me."

"The Pinebone Forest?" Rainbow Dash said when the sea of chalk-white, skeletal shapes loomed into view. "But that's... that's...." Her jaw worked up and down silently, trying to form the word. She eventually managed to whisper, "Forbidden!"

Spitfire chuckled. "That's just what they tell all the little colts and fillies to keep them from getting any big ideas. It's really more... strongly cautioned against. 'Enter at your own risk', so to speak. Hey, if you don't think you can handle it and want to chicken out..."

Rainbow Dash swallowed hard and looked again at what until now she had only seen in pictures. An ancient forest of leafless, dead trees stretched far into the distance, ending where an ominous red glow began. She had the impression of an army of giant skeletons, all half-buried and clawing up toward the sky to escape the grave. Limbs thrust out at improbable angles, reaching like grasping claws from their twisted trunks. Even amongst the smaller trees at the edge of the forest, she didn't see a single one under a hundred feet tall. It must have been a beautiful sight when they were alive and had foliage. Now, it looked like a massive briar patch, and she was a tiny field mouse about to enter.

"Me?" she said. "Ch-chicken?" She tried to laugh, but it came out sounding more like a cough. "That's a g-good one."

Spitfire gave her a comforting smack. "Hey, no worries! I was a little scared the first time I flew the Moonspire Run, too."

Rainbow Dash halted in midair as if she had hit a brick wall. "The... Moonspire... Run...?"

Spitfire stopped and turned with her forelegs on her hips. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of it."

Rainbow Dash gulped and nodded. "Of course I have."

Every sky pony had, not only for the hazards one had to navigate to reach the end, but also because of the nature of the finish line itself. The Moonspire Run ended at a mysterious relic left over from the conflict between Nightmare Moon and her sister, Princess Celestia, a thousand years ago. The Moonspire was by far the most enigmatic remnant from that time, as only the two sisters knew what dark forces still survived within the ten thousand foot high obsidian pinnacle. Several such artifacts remained throughout Equestria, but the Moonspire was the only one to still have very active, and very dangerous, magic surrounding it.

Whispered rumors claimed the Moonspire was anything from a focal point for Nightmare Moon's magic, to a prison once intended for Princess Celestia. While its true purpose may never be revealed, the dangers surrounding it were certainly well known. Flying the

Moonspire Run meant racing through barriers Nightmare Moon erected around the spire specifically designed to keep all types of ponies out.

Rainbow Dash squinted, staring through the heat-distorted air on the far side of the Pinebone Forest. A thin, black needle rose high above the horizon as if it were trying to pierce the heavens. When she was little, she had often boasted that one day she would fly the Moonspire Run. She also claimed she would wrestle an Ursa Major to submission and then be the first pegasus to fly around the world without stopping.

Spitfire laughed. "You should see the look on your face right now." Rainbow Dash snapped her mouth shut with a loud click. "Hey, relax. I've been assured it's safe enough as long as you don't go *inside* the Spire. Apparently, Princess Luna's having trouble shutting off some of her spells from her Nightmare Moon days."

"It's not the Spire I'm worried about," Rainbow Dash muttered. She gritted her teeth and gave her mane a quick shake. She puffed out her chest and flapped to catch up to Spitfire who was touching down at the edge of the Pinebone Forest. When they landed, she craned her head back to ogle at how much bigger the trees looked from ground level. "I have a bad feeling about this."

The silence was the eeriest part. There was no life in or amongst the trees like there was in The Everfree Forest. Not even birds or bugs seemed brave enough to enter. The air smelled strange, too. Dead. If she had to describe what a rock smelled like, that's how she would describe these trees; like a big pile of ancient minerals.

According to what few books she actually read in school (when she wasn't busy carving Wonderbolt symbols into the clouds), Nightmare Moon created barriers specific to each type of pony. In her own dark, warped way she was actually protecting pony lives by keeping them out in this fashion.

The Pinebone Forest was made to deter earth ponies, who could easily get lost and never come out if they dared enter. It wasn't much of a deterrent to any unicorn who could cast a simple locator spell or a pegasus who could easily fly over; their barriers came next. The third barrier, the sky pony barrier, was what made Rainbow Dash nervous. It was why only the best fliers ever attempted The Run.

"You know the rules, right?" Spitfire asked. "If you have to be rescued, you forfeit. If you fly above the treetops, you forfeit. After the forest, the sky's the limit. No pushing, no shoving, no crying. And the first pony to put a hoof on the Moonspire wins."

"Heh... no problem," Rainbow Dash said. "Easy as p-pie." She suddenly felt cold even though it was very warm out.

"Okay then," Spitfire said, grinning and bending her forelegs until her chin almost touched the ground. "Three-two-one-go!"

A quick burst of wind tossed Rainbow Dash's mane to the other side of her neck. Where Spitfire had been crouched a moment before, a vaguely pony-shaped mist of imploded air was drifting away. She blinked to try and clear the afterimage of Spitfire's fiery contrail from her vision.

"Whoa!" Rainbow Dash said. She sat down and stared in stupefied disbelief until Spitfire zoomed back out from the forest and bopped her on the nose with a hoof.

"Hey, what part of 'go' didn't you understand?"

Rainbow Dash popped up to her hooves. "Oh! Right!" She crouched, flared her wings, and leaped into the air after Spitfire.

As soon as the first tree whipped past, she went into racing mode. Head forward, hooves outstretched, eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. She rolled and banked around a scarred behemoth blocking her path, then angled to begin a drifting weave like she was taught on the Unusual Obstacle Course at Junior Speedster Flight Camp. She rounded another. Then another. Roll in, bank, roll out. She was thinking how easy it was going to be, how she could do this in her sleep, when she nearly slammed into three trees growing together in an uneven spiral. She yelped, twisted her wings into air brakes, stretched out her feet and left four hoof-shaped impressions in the trunk as she vectored off and around it.

"Sheesh! Three seconds in and I almost crash! Keep it together, Rainbow." She stayed on Spitfire's trail, flying low and swinging wide around the massive trunks. The yellow and orange pony was easy to track among the sharp shadows and stark white trees of the forest, so Rainbow Dash decided to stick with her for as long as she could.

Spitfire pulled up at a right angle, skimming vertically along a tree's surface. Rainbow Dash cranked her wings hard, copying the maneuver and barely avoiding leaving her teeth embedded in its petrified bark.

Spitfire banked right and cut back to a horizontal plane. Rainbow Dash followed, her wings groaning at the stress. Finger-bone branches whipped by, rattling against each other in the rush of Spitfire's trailblazing. It was difficult enough dodging and weaving like an insane hummingbird through the smaller branches, so when Spitfire started rebounding off of the larger ones like a fiery pinball to set them swinging, Rainbow Dash yelled in frustration.

"Hey, that's not fair!"

Spitfire looked back over her shoulder with a smirk. "Then stop following me!"

"I don't know which way to go!"

"Finding the fastest route is part of the race! You'll never win if you follow!"

Each branch Spitfire bounced against swung back before snapping forward into an undulating dance. She zipped from branch to branch so fast that the entire forest in front of Rainbow Dash quickly turned into a gauntlet of thrashing needle teeth. A branch clipped her wing, nearly yanking out a pinion feather. She yelped and looked back. Her wing was intact, but that was too close; for a pegasus, losing main flight feathers was like pulling a muscle for an earth pony.

She flapped erratically, darting forward to avoid one swinging branch, then back to escape another. She shot left, then was forced back to her right. Forward again. Two flaps backward. She was hemmed in. She flew a tight circle, locked in a repeating pattern by the bobbing branches.

A pattern. She narrowed her eyes and stared in Spitfire's direction. The branches swayed in a continuous wave; in the same order Spitfire had hit them. If she could time it just right, she might be able to use it to her advantage. Her ears pricked up as she saw her opening. The first branch in the sequence was bending backward again.

She lunged forward and touched all four hooves to the nearest branch as it bent away. It swung forward again, propelling her toward the next in the sequence. She landed, shifted her weight, and leaped as it threw her to the next branch. Then the next one. And the next. Faster with each bounce. She added wing power between branches, and soon was speeding through the whirling maelstrom and out the other side. She let out a quick victory laugh and scanned the dappled shadows of the trees, searching for her yellow and orange lifeline.

Nothing but shadows and stark, bare trees glowered back. Spitfire was gone. Somewhere racing toward the finish line without her.

The sun was high overhead, so while it wasn't pitch-black among the alabastrine trees, the encroaching tangle of naked limbs created sporadic patches of ominous darkness. She flapped a slow turn, taking in all of the dark hollows staring at her like empty eye sockets. She stifled a shriek when a branch moved, making it look as if a tree had just winked. Being in the Pinebone Forest at all was bad enough; being there alone was terrifying.

For some reason, a pink and magenta face singing a silly song surfaced in her mind. However silly the song was, it made the icy lump inside her melt a little bit. She looked at one of the shadows, forced herself to smile, and said, "Ha... ha... ha." The darkness didn't go away, but it started to look less like a face and more like a plain, old, petrified tree. She took a deep breath and spun again, this time looking for any sign of which way to go. Shadows, tombstone trees, and more shadows.

A hollow feeling in her chest blossomed and grew. She was lost. She sighed. "I guess that's it, then."

Two options remained: fly aimlessly through the trees looking for Spitfire who was long gone by now, or fly up and out and forfeit. Her chin dropped to her chest. She flapped upward, beginning her ascent to failure. Her eyes burned. She wiped at them with the back of a hoof and sniffled. "Must be allergies," she said, sniffing again. "Why did I think I could ever beat a Wonderbolt? She's in a whole other league. I didn't even last two minutes against her."

As she climbed, the branches thinned in size, but multiplied exponentially in number. She understood why Spitfire had been flying so low; trying to speed through this spiky tangle above would strip the hair and feathers from a pegasus in ten seconds flat. Her forelock rested only a few inches below the tops of the highest branches when she stopped ascending. She sighed and gave a weak smile. At least she kind of got to hang out with her hero for a little while. She squinted through the branches and frowned. Something wasn't right; one of the branches looked a little too straight. And too vertical. And too black.

She gasped. "The spire!" She slapped a hoof over her face. How could she have been so stupid? She wasn't lost, she just had to slow down and take a look.

A yelp of pain rolled through the trees to her left. A hundred yards away through the branches, she caught a brief flash of yellow and orange. "Horse apples!" Spitfire said sounding irritated. "Worked so hard on losing her... I'm too clever for my own good." The hollow feeling in Rainbow Dash's chest vanished. Spitfire raised a hoof to her forehead to block the sun. "Where is it?"

Rainbow Dash's mouth dropped open. "She's lost, too?" she mumbled. "But she's a Wonderbolt!" A huge grin claimed most of her face. "This race ain't over." She slowly sank back down into the shadows like a swamp-gator preparing an ambush. "Not by a long shot."

After dropping twenty feet to where the branches were less like needles and more like fingers, she halted to scout a path. As if in presentation, an errant shaft of sunlight lanced down across a pegasus-sized corridor through the trees. She tensed, gathered her strength, let the strain build in her wings, and exploded forward through the gap. When she passed under where she had seen Spitfire, she rolled to her back and yelled, "Get moving or I'll have to call you 'Quitfire'!" She rolled to her front again and giggled, briefly wondering if it was a good idea to taunt her hero. She shrugged and smiled; either way, it was done. Where the cold hollow had been in her chest a few minutes ago, a new fire burned. It felt like her usual confidence, but far more intense, like exhilaration mixed with anticipation.

A comfortable rhythm set in: swing around a trunk, loop, roll, and scissor. Every move was executed at maximum speed, as usual. She looked back over her shoulder often, but Spitfire was nowhere in sight. The shadows ahead began to lighten, more gray instead of black. She slowed, squinting ahead cautiously. The gray turned to white. She sucked in a breath. A wall of branches so entangled it almost looked like a solid mass blocked her path. She flew close and tapped a hoof against it. It didn't give in the slightest.

Groaning in frustration, she sped to her left and stopped after a few hundred yards. It was no use; the wall continued, curving far away into the distance. Her teeth ground as she rushed back the way she came, only to be faced with more impenetrable wall stretching into the shadows.

"Guess I go up," she said and bolted skyward. Through the thin, needle branches above she could see where the wall ended, but it was higher than the treetops. She grunted her annoyance. It was easy to get past by going over, but if she did she would forfeit the race. She looked back over her shoulder. If Spitfire didn't actually *see* her go over the wall it didn't count, did it?

She shook her head and clapped her front hooves to her face. "No! Applejack wouldn't cheat, and neither will I!" She sped back toward the ground, searching the expanse of the wall for any kind of passage or imperfection to exploit. No matter where she looked, it was the same: tighter than the fence Fluttershy kept around her chicken pen. More like thousands of layers of that wire fencing.

A strange, rhythmic, thumping noise echoed up from below. Spitfire erupted from the shadows, cantering along the ground in bounding strides propelled by powerful wing thrusts. She looked up at Rainbow Dash as she power-pranced past. "Super Speed Strut!" she said and stuck her tongue out to blow a raspberry.

Rainbow Dash gasped when Spitfire didn't slow down and simply vanished into the base of the wall. She stared in confusion for a moment before screwing her face up and shouting, "Hey! That's my move!" She flailed her hooves in front of her. "How do you know my move?"

She growled and angled down to where Spitfire disappeared. Her hooves thumped as one when she touched down in front of a manticoresized break in the base of the wall. An unnatural tunnel stretched through to the other side where an angry, red glow like the inside of a blacksmith's forge pulsed at the far end.

Feeling like she was entering a dragon's maw, she stepped in to the piece of untold history. The walls were a mass of uneven breaks and torn edges as if something very angry, and very strong had blasted their way through with magic.

The display of power she was traversing dwarfed her. She ran quickly with her head down as if her presence would summon whatever monster had bored its way through. The far side dumped her out onto an open plain, but not one of grass, trees, or anything living.

The first barrier was breached.

It was like walking into a blast furnace. Rainbow Dash's eyes instantly brimmed with tears, making it that much more difficult to see through the heat-distorted air. Rivulets of sweat started running down her already damp fur. Her wings automatically began pumping a cooling breeze across her body.

And then the smell of rotten eggs mixed with crushed brick hit like a physical force, burning her sensitive nose. Grit scraped between her teeth. Her throat hitched as her stomach clenched, making it painfully clear that whatever was fouling the air disagreed with her system.

She hacked and spat and tried wiping the blurriness from her vision to see what was creating such intense yellow and red glows, but the heat and steam made it impossible. Her throat hitched again, refusing to take in the polluted air. White sparkles ate away at the edges of her vision. She needed to find clear air, fast.

Her wings took on a life of their own, pumping skyward as if trying to detach from her sides. The steam thinned. The heat lessened a bit. She could finally blink without tears flooding back in. When she could breathe without retching, she hovered and looked down.

"Brimstone Lake," she said, awestruck. The entire length of her rainbow mane tried to stand on end. "I'm actually looking at Brimstone Lake." Her insides tingled, swirling hot and cold, fright and excitement.

A massive expanse of shifting, scorched earth roiled and rumbled below. Cracks opened and closed in rhythmic waves, releasing small geysers of molten rock and steam. Jets of white, yellow, and red flared upward through the vapors like curtains of solid light, dancing along the crackling waves. This was why the Moonspire Run was legendary to sky ponies; the shifting lava below the surface created intense air currents normally found only over active volcanoes. And nopony was crazy enough to fly into one of those.

The constantly moving lake of stone and flame below was meant to be impassable for unicorns. The foul air and intense heat made it a herculean task to concentrate and focus on magic. Even if a pony came prepared with a teleportation spell, it was impossible to judge the distance to the far side through the haze, and materializing in the middle of an active lava field was not an attractive concept.

For pegasi, it was different. The cycling updrafts over Brimstone Lake's tide provided a way for an expert flier to conquer the third barrier, if they were brave enough to fly that low. Rainbow Dash looked toward the Moonspire. It seemed much larger than it had from the Pinebone Forest. She could just make out a large, silver crescent moon on its surface through the heat waves. A faint haze swept out in a wide circle at ground level around the dark pinnacle.

"One chance," she mumbled. She remembered a snippet from an old camp song about the Moonspire Run. "Surf brimstone waves, go straight, don't turn; fly too low and you'll get..." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Burned." She pressed her lips together in a tight frown and took a deep breath. "But if Spitfire did it, then I can too! Wait, where'd she go off to?"

Rainbow Dash scanned the lava field for the yellow and orange streak of her opponent. Nothing. She looked up through the haze. A tiny, flickering yellow speck circled high against a sky tinted red from volcanic dust. It was weaving in an odd, elliptical pattern: slow, turn, fast, turn, slow again. She looked back down. A bright wall of translucent yellow and red light was racing across field toward her.

"Oh no," Rainbow Dash said. That's why Spitfire was circling strangely; she was timing her approach to the wave. Rainbow Dash didn't have much experience with thermal surfing, but she did have enough to know she was too close to the ground to catch this wave; she needed a steeper angle. If Spitfire caught it and she didn't, the race was over.

Rainbow Dash couldn't peel her gaze away from the lightning-fast wall of hot air churning toward her on streamers of yellow and white light. The sheer magnitude of it made her dizzy. The tiny thermal waves she once tried riding out in the Snowsand Desert were nothing compared to this. They were like riding Scootaloo's scooter, whereas this was like trying to rope a wild dragon.

If she wanted to win, she had no choice. The incredible speed the wave would give was required to make it through the high winds over the third barrier, the Quicksalt Flat. She shuddered. Just thinking the name gave her chills. In her peripheral vision, she saw the circling yellow speck of Spitfire suddenly stretch into a long, fiery streak toward the wave front.

"Hailstones!" Rainbow Dash said. She flipped and dove toward the same point where Spitfire was aimed. She pumped her wings and concentrated on her sky pony magic, willing it to boost her speed even more. She strained, putting forth every ounce of effort she could, but Spitfire's angle was steeper and faster.

Spitfire crossed the boundary of Brimstone Lake two pony-lengths ahead, just as the wave ebbed and reversed direction. Her yellow wings flared and caught the leading edge of the rolling thermal.

"Yee-ha!" Spitfire shouted. She threw a look back at Rainbow Dash. "Tough break, Rainboom girl!" The words dwindled away, drowned out by the rising hiss and roar of the wave carrying her away like a cork on a rampaging river. Rainbow Dash was only slightly behind, but was battered by the full updraft of the thermal's main body. She blinked and suddenly found herself a thousand feet in the air, and rising.

Seeing Spitfire streaking away should have been devastating. Rainbow Dash should have screamed. She should have shouted. Should have cried. Ranted. Raved. Anything.

Instead, her mind went blank. No words or discernible emotions existed inside her. It was as if pure instinct had become a separate personality and evicted her from her own skull.

Her wings flattened against her sides, spilling the updraft and leaving her in the stonehearted grasp of gravity. At the apex of her climb she flared her tail, letting the drag turn her to fall headfirst. Her sky pony magic swelled and expanded out, pushing her toward the ground faster than freefall. Her wings snapped out and began flapping, shoveling, attacking the air as if it were a mortal enemy.

The world around her jittered and shook as she accelerated through the rising turbulence. Details in the ground sharpened; the gritty texture of the charred earth, the brilliance of the glowing cracks, the swirling clouds of mist hissing up as if thousands of teakettles were buried under the surface. The only thing Rainbow Dash could see more clearly was the white cone of compressed air forming in front of her outstretched hooves.

A small part of her realized she was shouting, "Come on, come on, come on!" but she didn't remember starting or even care that she was. Electricity crackled around her. Wisps of color fluttered at the edge of her vision like tiny rainbow ghosts. The ground was only a hundred feet away but her mind screamed to go faster.

The pressure of the air coursing around her was forcing her outstretched hooves together. She resisted, pushing back both physically and with her sky pony magic, driving the air aside. Parting it.

The world around her exploded. Every color of the spectrum burst out in a flat pressure wave. The noise and deep, physical thud jolted Rainbow Dash back to awareness. She yelped in surprise and wrenched her wings, forcing her body into a horizontal flight path a mere three feet from impacting the surface.

Glowing cracks of yellow and white flashed past on the ground below, flickering like an old movie projector. She realized she was moving fast. Very fast. She had flown this fast before, but only when she'd done the Sonic Rainboom. She risked a quick look back over her shoulder and saw a brilliant, glittering rainbow contrail stretching away behind her.

"Whoa!" she said. A colossal half-moon of rainbow flames flared several hundred feet into the sky from an enormous crater in the lava lake. It roared like an angry giant, the ends of the flame jets dancing like multi-colored faerie fire. "That's new!"

She was only given a moment to admire her unexpected feat, as a huge wall of distorted air was chasing her, eating up her rainbow wake. A second thermal wave, larger than the first, was expanding outward from her Rainboom's detonation point at a terrifying rate. Whether by instinct or luck she managed to angle her wings at the last moment and catch the front edge.

The world became a blurry tunnel as the wave added to her breakneck speed, intensifying it beyond anything she thought possible. A spiraling cone of red, yellow, purple, orange,

blue, and green light formed in front of her hooves. The wispy filaments swept back, orbiting around her body and outstretched wings. Her cheeks fluttered in the assaulting gale. Her eyes were as wide as dinner plates. A combined scream of fright, surprise, and exhilaration rattled her clenched teeth.

A moment ago she hadn't even been able to see the far side of Brimstone Lake, but now she was even less time than that from crossing it. The dusty haze whirling at the edge finally registered; she was on the verge of The Quicksalt Flat. She had a monumental decision to make: bank away and forfeit... or risk everything.

The Quicksalt Flat was a sky pony's worst nightmare brought to terrifying life, due to the nature of their magic. Pegasus magic works in large part with moisture; the more humid the air, the stronger their magic is. It is how they can fly with such proportionally small wings and treat clouds as solid objects. In extremely dry air, sky ponies struggle to fly at all, and The Flat was worse than dry, it was negatively wet. A single grain of its magic sand would sap every drop of water from a pony in minutes. The entire sea of the beastly stuff in front of Rainbow Dash stripped all moisture from even the air above, effectively clipping the wings of any pegasus foolish enough to fly across.

And then there were the winds. A constant barrage of unrelenting downdrafts pushed everything toward the thirsty sand below. Flying across was impossible. All a pegasus could do was build up enough speed and hope it was sufficient to slingshot across like a stone. Rainbow Dash was confident she had more than enough speed, but at only twenty feet above the ground she was far too low to be sure of success.

An alarm in her head was blaring, "Abort! Abort!" and she was about to do just that, but a line of yellow and orange streaking high over the sand in front of her changed her mind. "No way," she said through her chattering teeth. "I'm not quitting!" She narrowed her eyes and angled up.

The force of the wind hit as if she had flown under a waterfall. Any upward momentum she gained in that last second was killed. Sweat from exertion, fear, and heat from the lake had drenched her a moment ago, but as soon as she crossed the boundary onto The Flat her coat was as dry as a pile of dead leaves. She tried to swallow, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her throat rasped with every labored breath.

Panic began bubbling out from her chest when nearly all feeling vanished from her wings. She flapped like a maniac but met almost no resistance. It was as if the air had ceased to exist. For the first time, she felt like she was falling. She hadn't ever really considered the word before, as falling was a normal part of flying. She had crashed plenty of times, tons actually, but that was different; during a crash she could still twist, turn, or angle her wings to help govern the impact. This felt absolutely out of control. Was this how wingless ponies felt all the time? She did not like it. Not one bit.

The crystal grains of the Flat inched their way up to meet her. She never knew something as benign as sand could look so sinister. She flailed her wings and hooves uselessly. The

edge of The Flat separated itself from the distant haze at last; it ended abruptly where a lush field of green grass began. The dark curve of the Moonspire's base thrust up from the field a mile further in, but Rainbow Dash didn't think she was ever going to touch a hoof to either.

The sand was only three feet away, and rising faster.

She pulled her hooves up as high as she could and closed her eyes. "This was a stupid idea!" she said.

Two feet away.

She had done a lot of stupid things in her life: attacked a manticore, adopted a parasprite, sent Ditzzy Doo to retrieve birds, and, of course, kicking a full-grown dragon in the face had to take the cake.

One foot away.

Cake! She would never get to eat cake at a Pinkie Pie Party ever again. She never apologized to Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, or Rarity for yelling at them.

Two inches.

And little Scootaloo... she only wanted a flying lesson, would it really be that-

Air filled Rainbow Dash's wings.

She gasped and opened her eyes just in time to do one Super Speed Strut on the fringe of the grassy field and rebound into the air. She let out a rowdy cheer of triumph and was rewarded with a glint of sunlight from Spitfire's flight goggles as they turned her way. Rainbow Dash had closed the distance between them enough that she could easily make out Spitfire's open-mouthed look of shock.

Rainbow Dash grinned and spurred her wings even harder, more than she ever had before in her life. Spitfire's lead shrank, but even though Rainbow Dash was setting new personal speed records, Spitfire wasn't exactly poking along. At the rate she was going it looked like she was going to reach the Moonspire only a wing-length or two ahead of Rainbow Dash, but first was still first.

Rainbow Dash flattened her ears, stretched her neck, and reached deep into her willpower well for just one more ounce of speed. The twirling cone of rainbow light flared to life around her once again. She inched closer. If she reached out right then, she could have flicked Spitfire's tail.

The Moonspire grew, its dark, faceted surface of carved obsidian seeming to rise up out of the gently rounded field. A wide, carved balcony curved around the side facing her,

resting under a massive rectangular doorway into darkness so absolute it seemed solid. A silver representation of Nightmare Moon's insignia blazed across its face large enough that most of Ponyville would have fit inside its circumference.

One quick glance was all Rainbow Dash gave the spire, since she was almost shoulder-to-hindquarters with Spitfire and still inching further forward. She closed until they were neck and neck, the wind making Spitfire's image dance against the jittering background. They locked eyes in a sideways glance and blew past the spire, wingtips touching. A double rap of hooves sounded. Two clacks; one right after the other. Rainbow Dash knew she only touched with one hoof, but was hers first? Spitfire twisted and soared high above, turning in tight loops and laughing euphorically.

"Oh my gosh!" Spitfire said. "You made your own thermal wave! That was awesome!" Laughter gripped her again as she sputtered, "I-I've never seen anything like it! I can't believe you did it!"

At first Rainbow Dash frowned, but then smiled and started giggling as Spitfire's infectious laughter filled her. The race was over, and whatever the outcome was, the exhilaration of what she had just accomplished was overwhelming.

"I mean, look at that thing!" Spitfire said, gesturing toward the multi-colored wheel of fire still burning through the haze. "What are you going to call it? 'The Sonic Flamebow'?"

Rainbow Dash looked back, but her eyes refused to focus. She let her forward momentum fade, and with it went the adrenaline rush that had been fueling her since the moment she entered the Pinebone Forest. Every muscle in her body went slack as tension flooded away. Her legs went limp, drooping down and back into the slowing slipstream. Her wings ceased flapping and flattened into a gliding posture. She didn't remember ever feeling so drained. Or thirsty.

Whoever won the race suddenly didn't seem half as important as finding a cloud to take a quick nap on. She looked around through half-lidded eyes, but didn't see anywhere to land except the soft, lush, delicious-looking green grass below. She hated grazing like a cow, but right now she'd eat anything. She dipped into a gentle descent and let her eyes flutter closed.

"Rainbow!" Spitfire yelled. "Look where you're going! You're getting too close to the-"

Rainbow Dash forced her eyes open just as the air left her wings. A monstrous gust of wind shoved her toward the ground. The crystalline sand of The Quicksalt Flat rushed up hungrily to say hello.

She flailed her legs and wings but couldn't stop or turn toward the safety of the grass only a few feet away. She really, truly, hated falling. Really.

Everything went white.

Being mummified felt strangely good. One side of Rainbow Dash was pressed against something soft, cool, and sweet smelling while the other was nice and warm. Toasty-warm. Sunshine-on-a-perfect-day warm.

Her whole body hummed like it did after a great workout. It trembled with the smooth, calm bliss that a hard flying session brought. She remembered flying... a lot of flying, but it was hazy. Her brain felt fuzzy. It didn't hurt, she just felt slow. Lazy in a good way. She definitely had been flying. And Spitfire had been there.

She tried to open her eyes, but it felt like her eyelids were cemented shut. They felt so dry. She opened her mouth to yawn, but a filmy paste stuck everything together. It took every muscle in her face working in conjunction to force her eyes to blink several times and clear away the cloudy gunk.

Thick blades of emerald grass covered most of her vision. She rolled her nose into the greenery and sniffed. It smelled so sweet it could have easily been sold as candy at Sugarcube Corner. Despite her personal aversion, she cropped several mouthfuls of the lush greens. The moisture cleaned her mouth a bit, but she desperately needed a good, long drink of real water.

As if it were a divine gift, a crystal pool rested less than ten feet away, twinkling, asking her to drink from it. It was deep, but she could see all the way down to its dark, blue-pebbled bottom.

"Jackpot," she said, her voice more of a croak than a declaration. She sat up and planted her front hooves. The world suddenly felt as if it were tilting left and right and spinning all at once. She flopped back to her side and the spinning stopped. A bright flash of white light popped beside her and Spitfire was there, wobbling unsteadily until she thumped down next to Rainbow Dash.

"Princess Luna's protection spell sure packs a punch," Spitfire said. "I recommend crawling to the pond." Too tired to focus on anything else, Rainbow Dash rolled to her stomach and inched her way to the water with her belly scraping the grass. "Soarin' thinks it's fun," Spitfire continued. "He crashes into Brimstone Lake all the time on purpose." She shook her head and laughed. "He's a great flier, but so weird sometimes."

Rainbow Dash jerked her head up from the pond and gasped. "Crashed! I crashed into The Quicksalt Flat!" She turned back to Spitfire. "Didn't I?"

Spitfire pursed her lips to the side of her mouth. "Sort of. Princess Luna cast a protection spell for us when she found out we train here sometimes. But it only kicks in and dumps you here, back outside the Pinebone Forest, if you get into serious trouble. Which you were."

Rainbow Dash frowned. Visions of a fiery lake and a swirling field of terrifying dust solidified in her mind. "That would have been nice to know earlier."

Spitfire batted her eyes innocently. "Did I forget to mention that? Silly me. But it made for a great race, didn't it?"

Rainbow Dash grunted, leaned down, and drank about a gallon of water before crawling back to Spitfire. She rolled onto her back so her underside could soak in the warm sunshine. She leaned her head back and got an upside down view of the outer border of the Pinebone Forest. A giant arc of rainbow flames rose high above it, burning steadily. The ancient forest still looked intimidating, but not quite as scary as it had when she first saw it at the start of their race.

"The race!" Rainbow Dash shouted. She tried to hop to her hooves but only managed to overbalance and slam her face into the grass. "Mmmph mmmph!"

Spitfire wedged a hoof under Rainbow Dash's forehead and pried her free. "Say again?"

"The Race! Did I win? Who touched first? Did-I-win-did-I-win-did-I-win-did-I-" Spitfire let her head thump back to the grass. Rainbow Dash rolled onto her side and fixed a starry-eyed stare at Spitfire.

"You really want to know?" Spitfire asked. Rainbow Dash nodded so fast it made her dizzy. "Wasn't it enough to just get out and have some fun?" Rainbow Dash shook her head with equal vigor. "Okay, then." Spitfire smiled sadly and held her front hooves up about six inches apart. "This close, Rainboom girl."

Rainbow Dash's mouth slowly fell open as her brows pinched together. She squeezed her eyes shut, covered her face with her hooves, and let out a long, mournful moan. "After all that! I was so close. And I actually thought for an actual second I might actually be able to do it! I was so close to beating an actual Wonder-"

Something landed on her stomach. She opened her eyes to find Spitfire's blue flight goggles lying across her chest. "Huh?"

Spitfire held her hooves up again, six inches apart. "This close. That's how far behind I was when I touched the Moonspire."

Rainbow Dash's wings quivered. "Huh?"

"You won."

Her wings flared an inch out to her sides. "Huh?"

"You beat me."

Her wings shook as her id fought her ego. "Huh?"

Spitfire smiled and waved a hoof. "Oh, go on."

Rainbow Dash popped up to her feet with her wings fully flared and started racing in circles, all fatigue and weariness forgotten. "Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!" Spitfire sighed through a small smile. Rainbow Dash leaped into the air, flying tight circles and loops around her. "Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!"

Spitfire let her continue for almost a minute before quietly saying, "I hate to imagine what you must think of me now."

Rainbow Dash fluttered to a halt and landed next to her. "Huh? What's that mean?"

"You beat me," Spitfire said. "You must think so much less of me."

"What!" Rainbow Dash reared up, pawing at the air with her front hooves. "Are you kidding? You're a Wonderbolt! I barely... I mean... it took everything I had! And I got really lucky! I don't think I could do it again!"

"So let me get this straight," Spitfire said, furrowing her brow, "you beat me, but you still think I'm cool?"

"How could I not? I was all the way at my maximum, past it, really, and you were just being normal! If things hadn't gone perfect for me, I wouldn't have stood a chance."

"Hmm," Spitfire said with a contemplative smile. "I wonder if that's how your friend felt when she managed to hit you with a pillow?"

Rainbow Dash froze. Her wings flattened to her sides as she slowly sat down. "Rarity? When she hit me? She... she did seem pretty pleased with herself."

"Shouldn't she have been?"

"Well, It was pretty awesome how she had five of the things whizzing around all at once."

"Yes it was."

"And she had help. Twilight was making the air all funny."

"Mmm hmm."

"So... when they got me... they weren't making fun of me for losing, but were just... proud of themselves?"

"Imagine that." Spitfire rose, easing her wings out to keep her balance. "Like I said; it's hard having to be the best *all* the time. Sometimes letting another have the victory can be a win for you, too. Haven't you ever helped someone just because they needed it?"

The first time Rainbow Dash met Twilight Sparkle and helped her out of a mud puddle played in her memory. And then there was the time they all helped Applejack with her apple-bucking. "Well, yeah, of course, but...."

"There's lots of ways to help others. You can even help without them knowing it."

"Yeah, I guess. I never really thought about-" Something smacked Rainbow Dash in the face.

"Mail!" a bubbly voice said.

"Ow!" Rainbow Dash said. "What the hay!" She opened her eyes to find a dark blue envelope pressed against her cheek, held in place at the end of a gray-blue hoof. A pegasus with a lime-yellow mane fluttered gently to the ground, grinning proudly under her amber, off-kilter eyes. One seemed to be looking slightly up, the other down, but Rainbow Dash knew from experience that she was the focus.

"Ditzy?" Rainbow Dash said. "What are you doing here?"

Ditzy Doo pushed the letter against Rainbow Dash's face harder. "I got a letter to deliver and it's marked 'urgent!'" she said, chanting like an excited teenager. She leaned sideways, peering around Rainbow Dash at the mammoth front line of chalk-white trees. "Ooooh, creepy! I've never seen it up close."

Rainbow Dash pushed Ditzy Doo's hoof away. "Ditzy, couldn't you just, oh, I don't know, leave the letter at my house?"

Ditzy Doo let her hoof drop to her side. Her ears drooped as the letter fluttered to the grass. "But... but it's 'urgent!'"

Rainbow Dash groaned. "Fine!" She picked the letter up with her teeth and opened it. "How'd you find me, anyway?"

"Hello, Ditzy," Spitfire said.

"Oh, hi Spitfire!" Ditzy Doo said. "She said you might be here, too. How goes the Wonderbolt... ing?"

Rainbow Dash paused, wide eyed. "You two know each other?"

"It's great, Ditzy, thanks." Spitfire looked at her sideways. "So, when am I going to finally get that race?"

Ditzy Doo's blue cheeks turned a light shade of pink. She bounced the mailbag strapped across her back. "Umm... I gotta lotta letters to deliver today. Some other time?"

"What?" Rainbow Dash said. A light blue slip of paper fluttered from the envelope to the ground. She looked down and trapped it under a hoof. "Why do you want to race-?" When she looked back up, Ditzy Doo was gone. A tiny cyclone of uprooted grass was swirling where she had just been. "Where'd she go?"

Spitfire shrugged. "To deliver letters?"

Rainbow Dash scanned the horizon but saw no trace of the blue and yellow pegasus. "How'd she do that?"

"Did you even stick around to see who took second place in the Young Fliers Competition?"

"Well, no, but...." Rainbow Dash frowned. "Don't tell me *she's* in the top fifty, too!"

"Okay, I won't."

Rainbow Dash stared at Spitfire. Spitfire stared back.

"Well?" Rainbow Dash said. "Is she?"

"You told me not to tell you."

"Oh, come *on!*"

Spitfire waved a hoof at the letter on the ground. "What's so urgent?"

Rainbow Dash huffed. "Augh! Fine!" She looked down and cleared her throat. "It says: 'Oh, you have a quill. I really only need delivery, I was just going to use my magic to... but never mind, I guess. Okay, then, take a note, Ditzy. Wait, what are you writing?'" Rainbow Dash stopped reading and held the letter up into the light. "Then there's some stuff crossed out with a frowny face... oh, here we go: 'Dear Rainbow Dash, a.k.a. Element of Harmony 'Loyalty' - It has come to Our attention that you have recently made contact with my Moonspire.'" She gasped and looked up at Spitfire. "It's from Princess Luna! I haven't heard anything about her in, like, over a year! I thought she went back to the moon or something."

Spitfire arched an eyebrow. "Go on, keep reading."

Rainbow Dash turned back to the letter. "'We suppose a sort of congratulations are in order, as passing the barriers is no easy feat. However, We must insist that you do not attempt it again, as the magic within the spire is beginning to unravel and is becoming difficult to contain. We are searching for ways to nullify the... um... scratch that, Ditzy.

Until We are sure that it is safe, please stay clear of even the outer barriers. We ask that you pass my warning on to Spitfire if she is still there with you. Signed, Princess Luna. I wonder if I should tell her we may need her and her friends to... no. Not yet. There's still time. Did you get all of that, Ditzzy? Then rush delivery, please. Yes, 'urgent'."

Spitfire looked thoughtful. "That doesn't sound good."

"I wonder what she needs us to do?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Spitfire shook her head. "I wouldn't worry about it. She and Princess Celestia probably already have it under control." She flapped her wings, testing them. "Well, Rainboom girl, time for me to go." She motioned to the blue flight goggles on the grass. "Take care of those, they're one of a kind. And don't lose 'em 'cause I plan on winning 'em back. Soon." She winked and crouched, preparing to leap into the air. Yellow and orange light sparked across her coat in a spider web pattern. "You might want to cover your ears."

The light flashed again, brighter, sending out lances of color so intense they were almost white. Rainbow Dash slapped her hooves over her ears a split second before a white halo of energy detonated where Spitfire was standing. Counter-spinning concentric rings of yellow and orange brilliance washed across Rainbow Dash, bathing her in tickling sheets as a momentary burst of hurricane wind knocked her from her hooves. She rolled once and hopped back to her feet in a wide stance.

"Whoa!" Rainbow Dash said.

All around her, light waves expanded outward. Twirling tendrils twisted and danced, slowly dying out over the crater where Spitfire stood a moment ago. The only indication of what had happened to her was a thin, sleek line of yellow and orange stretching into the far distance, past the clouds on the horizon.

"Whoa!" Rainbow Dash said again.

She scooped up Spitfire's flight goggles and looked from them, to the Pinebone Forest and the still-burning arch of rainbow flames beyond, back to the goggles, then back to Spitfire's fading contrail.

"If she could do that... from a standstill... at any time... did I actually...? Did she...?" A flashbulb popped in her head.

"She let me win."

Rainbow Dash plopped down to the ground with a thump, remembering what Spitfire said a few minutes ago. "Sometimes letting another have the victory.... Lots of ways to help... without them knowing.' Was she helping *me*?" She lifted a hoof to push her rainbow forelock from her eyes. Spitfire's battered goggles bumped her nose. The yellow

elastic band eclipsed her vision, revealing faded letters inked along the inside in angled script.

She squinted and looked closer. "Captain...." She gasped, unable to get the rest of the name past the lump in her throat. It was a name from pegasus legend; a name that was synonymous with absolute awesomeness. "This isn't real, is it?" she asked as her mind scrambled to link history to the present moment. "These belonged to the founder of the Wonderbolts?" The light reflected off of the tiny lightning jags etched around the edge of the goggles. "I can't keep these!" She looked again to where Spitfire had disappeared, to the point where legend collapsed back into reality. "Maybe I won't get to." A warm glow flared in her chest. "She said she's going to win them back." She grinned. "She can try!"

A sobering thought washed over her as she thought once again about Spitfire's impressive departure. Obviously, Spitfire had been holding back during the race, but did that mean that she, Rainbow Dash, *hadn't* won? No, even if Spitfire actually *had* let her win, it still counted as a win. She looked down at the goggles again. She had the prize, so that meant she won, right?

Of course it did.

Right?

Rainbow Dash frowned. Either way, not everything was all right for her. She felt like there was something she needed to do even though she had won the wager. A sense of guilt had taken root, not because of something she had done, but something she hadn't. She let out an amused sigh. Deep down she knew this day would come, and this was a perfect day for that day to happen.

"Time to go help a pony," Rainbow Dash said. "Like a 'Bolt.'" She strapped her new goggles over her eyes and leaped into the air.

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Scotaloo slammed her helmet down over her purple forelock and snapped the strap under her chin. She hopped onto her scooter and leaned forward as her fledgling pegasus wings whirred to humming life. They buzzed like a bumblebee, zooming her down the trail. The apple trees whipping by faster and faster only deepened her angry scowl. She looked back at the rickety old farmhouse shrinking away and the dwindling shape of the pale-olive pony with a big pink bow waving a hoof goodbye.

"Applebloom has apple-bucking practice," she said, spitting the words out. "And Sweetie Belle has to help Rarity fold cloth. I hate today!" She leaned hard to the left to swerve around an apple tree stump. She looked up at the sky and stuck her tongue out at the one cloud above. "Who needs to fly when you have a scooter? I don't care what Rainbow... what *she* thinks; I'm just fine on my own."

She swerved toward a low-hanging tree branch, ducking as if to slip under. At the last second she leaped, pumping her diminutive wings, soared over it, turned a graceful back flip, and landed on her scooter on the other side with one front hoof in the air, grinning. "I'd like to see *her* do that!" Another apple tree stumped loomed, begging to be jumped. She angled toward it, crouching and hooking her hooves under the handlebars.

A cyan blur slammed down on top of the stump. Scootaloo yelped and whipped her scooter sideways, leaning and digging the wheels into the dirt. She skidded to a stop a foot from crashing into the stump.

A blue pegasus with a rainbow mane grinned down at her. "Hey, Scootaloo! Sweet back flip!"

Scootaloo felt her wings try to flip up from her sides, but the feeling quickly passed. "Oh," she said, looking away. "You."

Rainbow Dash lifted her chin and put a hoof to her chest. "The one and onl.... Oh, uh, yeah. Me."

Scootaloo scowled at her. "What do you want?"

Rainbow Dash cleared her throat. "Well... I..." She groaned. "Look, I want to apologize."

Scootaloo felt her wings twitch upward again, but she held them flat. "Oh. Why?"

Rainbow Dash sighed. "Well, you know, even us awesome pegasus-ponies can have a bad day."

Did she say *us* awesome pegasus-ponies? "So?" Scootaloo said, working hard to keep sounding angry.

"And," Rainbow Dash said, "I was having one. A bad day. It was just horrible timing when you showed up. I didn't mean to yell at you."

Scootaloo slowly turned to look at her. Rainbow Dash certainly looked sorry with her mane all droopy and her ears pointing straight out to their sides over her goggles. Scootaloo gestured toward the uncharacteristic accoutrement. "Where'd you get those clunky old things?"

Rainbow Dash looked up at the blue frames perched on her forehead. "Oh, these?" She paused for a second as if making a decision, then waved a hoof in dismissal. "Eh, found 'em." She hopped up from the stump and fluttered to the ground in front of Scootaloo. "But I want to make it up to you." Scootaloo's wings trembled harder, fighting like tethered Diamond Dogs. "So how 'bout it?" Rainbow Dash said. "Wanna have a race? Just you and me?"

Scotaloo straightened and gasped. "Really?" Her wings rose an inch, the pinion feathers trembling.

Rainbow Dash nodded. "Really. And if you win," she twirled a hoof in the air toward the sky, "I'll give you a flying lesson."

Scotaloo felt her entire body droop, her helmet almost bumping the handlebars of her scooter. "That's not fair, I can't beat you; you're the greatest flier in all Equestria! I can't even fly for more than a few minutes without getting tired!"

Rainbow Dash jerked her head down, eyes darting to either side as if making sure the two of them were alone. "Heh, heh... greatest flier in all Equestria... yeah, that's me." She performed another quick scan around them, then straightened and tapped Scotaloo twice on the helmet. "But who cares if you win? Let's just have some fun and maybe you'll learn something."

"Learn... something?" Scotaloo's wings flipped up with a double 'fwip' as she realized that a race against Rainbow Dash *was* a flying lesson! She felt herself grinning uncontrollably but didn't care as she hopped off her scooter, unclipped her helmet and tossed it aside. She dug all four hooves into the dirt, crouched, and shot a look of defiance up at Rainbow Dash.

"Bring it!" she said.

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On a cloud high above, a light blue pegasus in a dark blue flight suit emblazoned with yellow lightning bolts on his chest and ankles looked down at the two pegasi below. He turned to the yellow and fire-orange pegasus lying on her back next to him and prodded her with a hoof.

"Hey," he said. "Wake up."

She snorted and blinked several times. "Huh? What's up, Soarin'?" She rolled to her stomach. "Did she do it?"

Soarin' nodded. "Yup. Went straight to the little pegasus. I think they're gonna race. You might be right about her after all, Spits."

Spitfire tried to smack him, but failed, letting both her hoof and her head fall back down to the cloud. "Don't call me 'Spits'. Good for her, though. Now fly me home. I can't keep my eyes open."

Soarin' dug his hooves into the cloud and started flapping his wings, pushing the entire thing away with both of them on it. "Sheesh, what the hay exactly happened?"

Spitfire chuckled. "I had to Laserboom out of there."

Soarin' gasped and stopped flapping with his wings pointing straight up. "What? Why? You know how dangerous that is! You're gonna pulverize your pony brains if you keep doing that!"

She waved a hoof at him as if he were an annoying insect. "Trust me, I had to make a point."

Soarin' laughed. "Don't tell me she actually beat you?"

Spitfire rolled onto her back and scoffed at him. "Please. I'm Spitfire, captain of the Wonderbolts."

Soarin' squinted at her, but didn't press the issue of her non-answer. He resumed pushing the cloud. "You sure you told her she's in the 'top fifty'?"

"Definitely."

"You didn't tell her *where* she is in the top fifty, did you?"

"Celestia's beard, no! That pony has a big enough head as it is."

"Good."

"Yeah. And by the way, I'm taking tomorrow off. And probably the day after."