

Rainbows and Sunsets

by Sagebrush

It couldn't have been a more pleasant mid-afternoon in Ponyville. The sun hung lazily overhead, as the few clouds present drifted by slowly on a soothing breeze. Ponies perused the marketplace, loading burlap saddlebags with freshly picked radishes and strawberries, while others enjoyed a late lunch of clover and hay at the cafe. At the edge of town, the muted but unmistakable clanging of the Ponyville school bell could be heard, signaling a forthwith end to the placid scene.

As the timbre of the bell began to settle and fade, a haze of dust in turn rose from its direction. The plume of dust grew steadily, its source rapidly approaching town. Soon a low hum accompanied the the kick up of dust, starting as an imperceptible buzz, but growing louder and louder. Curious eyes turned towards the disturbance and nervous glances were exchanged. A number of ponies expressed terrified familiarity with the phenomenon and quickly scattered from the roads, a pair of pegasi taking flight in a hasty fluttering of wings and feathers.

“Yikes! I'm just glad those three keep it on the ground!” one of them commented to her partner as they roosted on a nearby cloud.

In a span of a couple of minutes the majority of the ponies had scrambled out of the streets, and not a moment too soon. An instant later an orange blur came tearing down the center of town, tailed by a bright red wagon whose two occupants were bracing themselves tightly against its sides.

“**MAAAAAAKE WAAAAAY!!!**” Scootaloo screamed at the startled citizens of Ponyville as she deftly maneuvered between vendor carts and those ponies too shocked to clear a path. Much less gracefully, but much more noticeably, the wagon behind her fishtailed, smashing into fruit stands and sending their poor owners scrambling to recover their goods.

“*Sorry about that~!*” Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom cried out, their voices too meek to be heard over the din of Scootaloo's mad dash. In moments the Cutie Mark Crusaders had cut a swath of mayhem through the priorly peaceful Ponyville afternoon, leaving a number of stunned faces and scattered merchandise in their wake as they sped towards Sweet Apple Acres.

Looking back towards the chaotic mess they had created as it shrank in the distance, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom each felt a small pang of guilt.

“Umm... Maybe we should slow down a little bit!” Sweetie Belle called over the rapid flapping

of Scootaloo's wings.

“Yeah! Remember what Fluttershy said about hurtin' somepony? Ah think maybe we could've!” Apple Bloom added.

“Ugh, fine...,” Scootaloo groaned. Maybe she had been just the smallest, tiniest, eensiest bit reckless. The thought of actually causing serious damage to somepony took the wind out of her sails. She slowed the fluttering of her wings, bringing the group down to a slower and more manageable speed. The three Cutie Mark Crusaders allowed themselves some pride at this show of responsibility, each of course blissfully disregarding the fact that they had already trashed Ponyville proper. Scootaloo came to a stop at the base of the Crusaders' tree house, and the three quickly raced inside, the incident in the market already forgotten. There was work to be done.

The trio had had a productive day of brainstorming, imagining a number of promising ideas to help them earn their cutie marks. They probably could have come up with an even bigger list if it weren't for their teacher Cherilee harassing them about less important things during class. Apple Bloom ducked her head into her saddlebag and retrieved a rolled up sheet of paper. She opened it up in front of the others.

“Alright! Ah reckon we can start at the top of the list an' work our way down! Lessee what we got here... Acu-what?”

At the top of the list was a sketch of a sewing needle accompanied by a word they had never seen. Scootaloo and Apple Bloom exchanged confused glances, then looked towards Sweetie Belle for an explanation.

“Acupuncture! It's really neat! If you're sick, or hurting, or have anything else wrong with you, all you need to do is stick a needle or two in just the right place to fix it! I saw a picture of it in one of my sister's health magazines!”

“How the heck is pricking yourself with a bunch of sharp needles supposed to make you feel better?” Scootaloo frowned.

“Ah know! Ah bet if you've got a buncha needles stickin' in ya, you'd completely forget 'bout whatever else was ailin' ya!”

“Why would anypony want to do something as stupid as that?! I'd rather just go see Nurse Redheart and get some medicine or bandages or whatever.”

“Haven't ya ever heard of mind over matter? Heck, with as hard as yer head is, Ah don't see why ya need to wear that helmet of yers everywhere!”

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes as her two friends started to fall into another argument, and in a well-practiced motion stepped between the two before they could really get into it.

“Nononono! The way it works is that there are these tiny little spots on a pony's body that you can poke to make the body heal itself even faster... I think. If you do it right, it doesn't even hurt at all!”

The side of Scootaloo's mouth scrunched up in doubt. Sweetie Belle pursed her lips, trying to think of an appropriate analogy.

“...Like, you know how you can scratch your hoof against a rock and not feel anything? It's kinda like that... I think.” Sweetie Belle grinned nervously, not sure if Scootaloo would accept her theory. To her relief, Scootaloo looked upwards in thought.

“Yeah... I guess that makes sense. And if it gets us any closer to getting our cutie marks, I'm all for it!”

“Yay!” Sweetie Belle bounced up and down in place, eager to put her plan into motion. “I borrowed a bunch of pins from my sister's boutique before coming to school, we can get started right away!”

“Won't yer sister mind?” Apple Bloom asked uneasily. “Remember the last time ya 'borrowed' all of that fabric to make our costumes? Rarity wasn't none too keen on that...”

“Oh don't worry, big sis has tons of needles and notions! She won't notice a few missing items like that.”

Meanwhile at the Carousel Boutique, an irate, ivory unicorn was turning over tables and sifting through drawers, and in the process upsetting a very prissy cat who was trying to nap nearby.

“Oh, where in Equestria could I have placed those pins?! A last minute order from Hoity Toity and I'm unable to even begin cutting the fabric!”

Glancing by chance at one of her ponniquins, Rarity was able to find one of her pins. It was being used to hold in place a hastily scrawled I.O.U.

An infuriated, though nevertheless ladylike scream could be heard as far as the Sugar Cube Corner.

“So who wants to be the first to get acupunctured?” Sweetie Belle asked with a wide smile on her face. Scootaloo and Apple Bloom shot each other nervous glances.

“Err... Actually I feel A-OK right now, Sweetie Belle! I really don't think an extra needle or two would do anything for me.”

“Yeah, uh, hehe... Ah'm feelin' as fit as a fiddle! Maybe... maybe we oughta try this on somepony with thicker skin?” Apple Bloom suggested, rubbing the back of her head as she avoided Sweetie Belle's fading grin.

Sweetie Belle put a hoof to her chin in consideration. Although she knew that Scootaloo and Apple Bloom were more than likely just making excuses, they did have a pretty good point about point placement.

“Hmmm, thick skin, huh...?”

In the Ponyville library, Spike was enjoying a far too rare moment of free time, having completed the majority of his chores for the day earlier than normal. Few patrons had come in that afternoon, so he'd spent the lull in activity sweeping, dusting, and replacing the books Twilight had left strewn about the hollow tree. It was an impeccable scene: the hardwood floor had an uncanny gleam to it and every book was in its place, save for a journal on dendrology that Twilight had taken on a research excursion through the Whitetail Woods. The baby dragon had settled down to a light lunch of amethyst and turquoise, when there suddenly came an energetic knocking at the main entrance.

Spike grumbled and wiped a bead of drool from the corner of his mouth, storming towards the

door.

“Yeah, yeah, it's OPEN, come in! ...*Jeez, can't a guy enjoy his lunch-*”

Just as Spike reached towards the door knob, the door swung open, sending the poor dragon flying headlong into a giant bookcase, negating most of his earlier efforts.

“Enngghh... Where's Pinkie's freaky twitchy sense when a guy needs it...”

Once the stars in Spike's eyes had spun and danced to the periphery of his vision and finally out of sight, he looked up to see three wide-eyed filly faces staring down at him with concern.

“Ohmigosh, we're so so sorry, Spike!” Sweetie Belle cried.

“Are ya alright? When ya said 'come in' none of us figured ya'd be right on the other side of the door!”

Spike stood up unsteadily, a fresh set of stars forming whole new constellations in front of him as the blood rushed from his head.

“Ooof... Standing up so fast might not have been such a hot idea... Could the six of you give me a bit of space... And maybe stop spinning the room so fast...” Spike groaned before collapsing onto his stomach and losing consciousness.

“Aww, poor lil' guy... Ah wish there was somethin' we could do for 'em—”

As the words left Apple Bloom's mouth, all three fillies' heads perked up with inspiration. They had just the thing to fix up the baby dragon, and to earn them their cutie marks in the process!

Spike tentatively opened his eyes, slowly blinking away the sand and bluriness. Through a half-lidded gaze he noticed something curious: he had seemingly grown a set of multicolored quills along his arms during his stupor.

“Hey look, he's waking up! It worked, it worked, it totally worked!” A white and purple blotch

seemed to be cheering above him.

“...R-Rarity...?”

“Alright! Who'd have thought this 'act you puncture' stuff would be the real deal?!”

Looking over his left shoulder, Spike's vision began to resolve itself. He recognized the voice as coming from a familiar pegasus filly. Hazarding a glance back towards his arms, he identified the quills and felt a warm nostalgia: they looked like the pins he had bore for the lovely Rarity when she was preparing for that photo shoot with the bizarre earth pony, Photo Finish. Turning towards a third voice on his right he saw Applejack's little sister, Apple Bloom, apparently chasing her tail.

“Check mah flank! Did Ah get it?! *Did Ah get it?!?*”

The Cutie Mark Crusaders looked eagerly at their flanks, only to let out a collective groan of disappointment. It seemed that even a preternatural talent for medicine didn't constitute a special talent. With heads hung low, the three girls trotted out of the library. At least they were able to fix up Spike after he was careless enough to stand in front of a swinging door. Their moods brightened knowing that they still had done a good deed, and smiles crept back onto their faces. Besides, they still had plenty of great ideas!

Taking a deep breath, Spike rose to his feet much more easily than earlier. Dusting himself off, he took stock of what had just transpired. The door to the library was open.

“Ooogghh... Oh yeah, that's what sent me flying into-”

He turned towards a now barren bookcase, its contents scattered all over the floor of the library.

By the time the three fillies had returned to their clubhouse, the day was coming to an end. The sun had begun to set, a blazing red beacon that washed the western horizon in a gradient of crimsons, tangerines, and purples and cast long strokes of shade from the budding trees of the Sweet Apple Acres orchard. In the distance, the mountains had lost all color against the intensity of the sun's light and loomed in shadow like the blackened teeth of an ancient beast.

Scotaloo paused on the clubhouse steps behind her friends to observe the phenomenon. Although they signaled an end to a day's adventures, she loved sunsets. In that brief juncture between

day and night, between seas of blue and star-speckled ink, it was as if the sky was dedicated to her. Orange kissed the land and ascended into magenta, much like her coat and mane. It made her feel special.

Scotaloo was broken from her rumination by Apple Bloom's voice at the top of the steps.

“Are ya comin' Scoots? We need ta figure out what we're gonna do tomorrow!”

“Oh! Yeah, I'm coming guys!” Scotaloo trotted up the stairs to join her friends as the sun continued its descent, leaving just enough light to muse over the Cutie Mark Crusader's list once more.

“Hang gliding?!” Sweetie Belle narrowed her eyes into an incredulous glare at Scotaloo. Why was this filly always coming up with such dangerous ideas?

“Aw come on, doesn't it sound fun? The wind in your mane as you soar over valleys and trees, how could it get any cooler?! I bet the only thing more awesome would be the cutie marks we got from doing it!”

“That's assumin' we even stayed in the air, and trust me: that's easier said than done! Ah still have sap stains on mah bow from when we tried ziplinin’!” In her argument, Apple Bloom realized an even greater oversight on Scotaloo's part: “Sides, I could see a unicorn or an earth pony hang glidin', well maybe other earth ponies hang glindin’..., but isn't that kinda silly for a pegasus?”

Scotaloo hesitated. After all, Apple Bloom had made a very good point. Pegasi owned the sky. They tamed the fickle forces of the weather itself. Furthermore, they did it all with the wings they were born with, not some metal contraption. Sweetie Belle chimed in before Scotaloo could think of a response.

“Say Scotaloo, now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever seen you fly. As incredible and fast as you are on your scooter, I bet you can do all sorts of neat tricks!”

Scotaloo's cheeks flushed bright red. She bit her lower lip and stared down at her fidgeting front hooves. She really did not care to make this admission.

“Err hehe... Funny thing about that, see... Erm...”

As she struggled to say the next three words, Apple Bloom beat her to the punch.

“Ya mean to say that ya can't fly?”

Scootaloo shut her eyes tightly and grimaced. Not only was she a blank flank, she was a blank flank pegasus that couldn't even fly. She mentally steeled herself against the incoming peals of laughter.

Which seemed to be taking an inordinately long amount of time to come.

Daring to open an eye, she was surprised to see two sincere smiles on her friends' faces, consoling rather than mocking she had expected

“Aww, that's no big deal! I still can't use my magic for more than lifting scraps of paper.”

“And Ah can't hardly buck apples yet! Ah doubt anypony thinks less of ya. Still, yer wings seem pretty strong if they can pull all of us around all day, Ah wouldn't be surprised if ya turned out to be one of the best fliers around!”

Scootaloo blushed once more, but for an entirely different reason. Rather than teasing her, Scootaloo's friends had instead commiserated and encouraged her! She almost wanted to just wrap her hooves around them and pull them into a giant hug. The urge to gag at the thought still proved just a bit stronger, however.

“Heh, I suppose these things aren't too shabby,” Scootaloo ventured as she gave her two wings a couple of flaps. “Still, it's not like Miss Cheerilee is going to be giving flying lessons any time soon. Maybe if I can get my parents to spring for Junior Speedsters camp this Summer...”

Scootaloo let out a heavy sigh. Summer was still a few months away, and there was no guarantee her parents would even fly for the idea. It could be so frustrating being a landlocked pegasus.

“Well, what if you got somepony else to teach you?”

“That's a great idea! And Ah know the perfect pony that could get ya airborne!”

“Really? Who?! Tell me tell me!” Scootaloo's wings started flapping at the prospect of some special tutoring.

“The fastest, most bravest pegasus in all'a Equestria of course! Honestly Scoots, Ah'm surprised you didn't think of it first!”

“Wait, are you talking abou- NO WAY! Nonononono! A pony as cool and awesome and incredible as Rainbow Dash would NEVER waste her time with some filly like me...”

“But Rainbow Dash is really nice Scootaloo! I'm sure she'd be happy to help another up-and-coming superstar flier like you. You never know until you ask!”

Maybe Sweetie Belle was right. Rainbow Dash could be brash, but she really was a great pony. Besides, lessons from Rainbow Dash would definitely be far cooler than anything Junior Speedsters could provide. Nevertheless, when Scootaloo thought about asking her idol for help, about bugging her and wasting her time, she couldn't help getting a knot in her stomach. She stifled a gulp and gave a nod in agreement to her friends.

Scootaloo was awoken from a fitful sleep by a pair of courting songbirds outside of her window. Blinking the sand from her eyes with heavy lids, she forced herself from the warm sanctuary of her covers and ridded herself of the rest of her drowsiness with a hard shake of her mane. Her night had been plagued by dreams of her upcoming confrontation with Rainbow Dash. In some Rainbow would be overwhelmingly eager to take on a promising new protégé, in others her eyes would burn with contempt at the audacity of the little filly. In one particularly disconcerting dream, upon receiving a request for a lesson, Rainbow Dash had given an odd look to Scootaloo's withers. When Scootaloo had looked back at the source of her idol's confusion, she discovered with horror that her wings had disappeared. The one unifying theme between all of the dreams was that Scootaloo was never able to get a foot off of the ground.

She walked into the bathroom and stared into the mirror. Her disheveled and nervous reflection attempted to pep her up.

“Well, I might as well give it a shot. After all, what's the worst that could happen?”

She tried as hard as she could not to think of what that could be. After a quick breakfast of carrot juice and oats, she took a deep breath and walked towards the door, as ready as she'd ever be to

search for Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash was not as difficult to locate as Scootaloo imagined she would be, and her mood straddled a line between relief and reluctance. After stepping from her doorstep and taking a cursory examination of the sky, she had spotted a rainbow streak in the distance, zipping through a group of cumulus clouds. Her mood settling on resolve, the little pegasus flipped her helmet onto her head, hopped on her scooter, and raced towards her hero.

Wiping a bead of sweat from her brow, Rainbow Dash grinned in self-satisfaction. She had gotten in practice for a new routine, and probably set a new personal record for cloud clearing in the process. In her section of sky there was blue as far as the eye could see, save for a single cloud she had set aside for a post-workout nap. Rainbow landed on the fluffy white surface and lay back, kicking one leg over the other. It was hard work being this awesome.

No, that wasn't quite right.

It was hard work for other ponies, but it was only second nature to *the Dash*. She closed her eyes and drifted into the world of dreams, as her cotton chariot scudded across the sky.

—

The crowd erupted into a frenzy as the Wonderbolts streaked overhead in a tight diamond formation. Dash nodded a command to the rest of her squadron, and the three formed a triangle around her, beginning a spiral around the pegasus. The effect was a thunderous triple helix twisting around a rainbow axis cutting through the atmosphere. The response of the audience was a roar of excitement that sent a palpable tremor through the air, a wave of sound that was felt more than heard.

“Ha, if they thought that was good, wait until they get a load of this!”

Dash flicked her ears, indicating that it was time for the climax of the show. The helix made a sharp turn upwards, heading perpendicular to the plane of the earth below. High enough that they could only be identified below by the contrails they left behind, the Wonderbolts ceased their ascent. Rainbow held her place in the air, as her three partners continued their circuitous path around her, widening the radius. Once the orbit about her had tripled in size, Dash pointed her nose towards the ground and began her dive. The other Wonderbolts began to narrow their spiral once more as they followed her plunge. The triple helix tapered into a cone as the performers accelerated to unfathomable speeds, with Dash's signature rainbow trail just barely keeping ahead. The audience collectively held

its breath as the air bent around the four pegasi. They knew what was coming next.

There was a cacophonous crack as a rainbow halo exploded across the sky and each of the Wonderbolts darted in the four cardinal directions. Although the distance between her and the audience was large, and only growing larger, Dash could still hear them chanting.

“Dash! Dash! Dash! Dash! Dash-”

Rainbow Dash grudgingly awoke from her dream and was surprised to still hear her name being called. Peeking over the side of her cloud, she spotted a familiar filly calling up to her.

“Hi, Dash! Um, are you busy right now?”

“Just trying to take catch up on some beauty sleep.” Rainbow glided down to Scootaloo and gave her a friendly nudge in the shoulder. “What's up, squirt?”

This was it, it was now or never. The moment of truth. The most important day of Scootaloo's life. The day that she was going to-

“Uh, hello?” Dash waved a hoof in front of Scootaloo's face. “Do you want something, Scoots, or can I go back to sleep?”

Oh no, she was wasting Rainbow's time! She knew she was going to be a bother, she should just go home and let her hero get her sleep. Still, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom were so encouraging, she had to do this for their sake.

“Well I was just wondering, you know, you're a really good flier -heh, yeah of course you know that- and I was thinking, if you're not, like, super duper busy, which you probably are because you're so awesome and all, if you would maybe teach me how to fly? I mean, if that's ok?”

Scootaloo's face stretched into an awkward grin. She had put it all on the line and asked for Rainbow Dash's help. But why did Rainbow's face look so blank? Had she been right about what her reaction would be? Had her friends been wrong?! Maybe she could still slink away and save herself the embarrassment of getting shot down. Maybe if she was super lucky her parents would let her go to Junior Speedsters camp in the summer. What Rainbow Dash did next she could not have expected.

She said, “Sure!”

“OK, first things first, pipsqueak! If you want to be a great flier, the first thing you need to realize is that form is *everything*. Let me see what you've got.”

This was a dream come true: instruction from the legendary Rainbow Dash! Scootaloo did not want to disappoint her mentor. Gritting her teeth, she flexed her wings, closed her eyes for focus, and began flapping as wildly as possible. However, instead of achieving lift off, Scootaloo buzzed across the ground like a hummingbird whose legs were fastened inside of a roller skate. Rainbow held back a laugh as the little pegasus cut a serpentine track across the grass like a rogue lawnmower. Putting a hoof to her lips, she whistled sharply, bringing Scootaloo to a sudden stop in front of her.

“Well you've got speed, I'll give you that, kiddo,” Scootaloo's eyes lit up at the praise. “BUT! Like I said, form. Is. *Everything!* You're not going to get an inch in the air if you don't have control. Check this out, and keep an eye on what I do!”

Rainbow raised her wings and with one well practiced stroke propelled herself a yard into the air. Scootaloo gasped at the older pegasus's grace.

“Hehe, not too shabby eh? Now you give it a shot.”

Scootaloo honestly had no idea how Rainbow's form had differed from hers. It looked like she had just lifted her wings then brought them down as hard as she could. Scootaloo timidly raised her wings and then did just that. She managed to lift up an inch or two, not something that could yet be called flight. What in the heck was she doing wrong?

“There's more to it than just up and down, you know,” the blue pegasus teased. “I'll do it slowly so pay attention. Watch how I roll my wings out as I lift them.”

Rainbow gently unfurled her wings upwards. Scootaloo noticed how widely she fanned her feathers, pointing them up and behind her.

“Then, little one, as you bring them down you *catch the air!*”

As her wings came down, Scootaloo saw how they rotated into her body, scooping air in the process. It was done so slowly that Rainbow didn't leave the ground, but the concept seemed to make

sense.

“OK, your turn, and don't worry about taking off yet. I want to see it slow and controlled. Remember: form, form, form!”

Scotaloo mimicked Dash's movements to the best of her ability. First slowly rolling her wings outwards and fanning her feathers, and then rolling them into her body as she brought them down. The movement felt different, but not unnatural.

“Well, well, well, not bad at all! Now keep at it until your muscles remember the motion, burn it in and don't rush it!”

The little filly was ecstatic! Not only had she learned a secret technique to flying, she apparently wasn't half bad at it! She followed Dash's instruction to the letter, slowly opening her wings and slowly closing them. Though tempting, she made sure not to beat her wings faster, putting her heart and soul into her technique. Into the practice, however, she found she had to blink several times to keep the sweat forming on her brow from rolling into her eyes. The motion was still alien to her body and she found herself getting tired. It confused her; how could such slow actions be more wearying than her earlier rapid beating of wings? Still, performing such deliberate, focused actions, rather than relying on momentum, was taxing her physically and mentally. Breathing more heavily she started to fall into old habits. Naturally, Rainbow Dash was right on top of her.

“*Tsk tsk tsk*, that is EXACTLY what we're trying to hammer out! If you want to be one of the best, you gotta work at it! Now, Correct. Those. Wings!”

Scotaloo groaned, she had no idea it was going to be this hard! Still, she didn't want to wuss out in front of Rainbow. She was tough, and she was going to prove it! Against the protests of her body, she resumed the additional motions that she had been taught. If it weren't for the sweat rolling into her eyes, she might have seen Rainbow smiling.

“Alright, that's good enough for now. Take thirty!”

By the time Rainbow Dash finally allowed Scotaloo a break, the sun was directly overhead. The exhausted filly slumped to her belly, her legs splayed out and her wings drooping weakly to her sides. She panted hard, desperate to get oxygen back into her blood and muscles. Still, if nothing else, she felt like she had committed the wing technique to muscle memory. Maybe she had. To be honest with herself, at the moment she didn't really feel anything else but sore. Scotaloo just lay there for

several moments, letting her body recover. Finally having resumed normal breathing, she made an attempt at conversation.

“Hey, Rainbow Dash? How come you're a weather pony? I bet you could be touring all over Equestria with your rad moves.”

Rainbow Dash cocked her head to the side as she thought about her response. It was true that a pony of her talents would take any venue by storm, no doubt about it; she had planned to do so by joining the premier flying team, and her number one heroes, the Wonderbolts. However, as much as she would deny it if asked, she didn't yet feel ready to make her professional debut. Of course she was a superb flier, winning the Best Young Flier's competition proved that, thank you very much. Still, deep down Rainbow Dash knew that the theatrics of her heroics that day must have played some small role in her triumph. She had slipped up during the first two parts of her routine, and even if the rest of Equestria may have forgotten about it, she had not. Botching up like that in a routine was unacceptable to her. No, when Dash took center stage it was going to be flawless!

In the meantime, as a job cloud kicking wasn't half bad. It kept her in excellent shape, and Ponyville was a pretty cool place.

“Now hold on, don't be so quick to knock weather work! Clearing the sky is actually a GREAT way to get practice in on stunts, and get paid in the process.”

Scanning the sky, Dash searched for a way to hammer home her point. Spotting five well spaced altocumulus to the east of her assigned section of sky, she set herself for take off.

“And actions speak louder than words! Keep time, kid!”

Scotaloo was nearly sent tumbling backwards in Dash's wake as she bolted towards the clouds. Rainbow's words came back to her and she immediately started counting the seconds.

“One, two...”

Rainbow Dash reached the weather pattern and burst into the cloud low and to the left of the rest of them, before banking hard towards the rightmost cloud.

“Three...”

Obliterating the second cloud, Rainbow did a hairpin turn as she dashed towards her next

target, the cloud on the far left.

“Four...”

Another sharp turn later and Dash had evaporated the third cloud and closed the distance on the fourth. There was an eruption of vapor, and she was off towards the highest cloud.

“Five...”

With an explosive kick, Dash eliminated the final cloud and darted back to the location of her first target. At this point Scootaloo had forgotten to keep time, being so awestruck by what Rainbow Dash had just done. In Dash's wake a rainbow-lined, five-pointed star remained in the sky in place of the five clouds, gradually wisping away. Dash returned more leisurely than she had left, and as she landed she had a very smug look on her face. Scootaloo went into fan girl mode instantly, squealing and stamping the ground.

“Keeping the air clear for ponies and looking *good* while doing it. That's just one nice thing about being a weather pony,” Dash preened.

“That was *spectacular*, Rainbow Dash! Ohhh, I wish Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom were here, that was soooooo sick!”

When Scootaloo mentioned the two other fillies, close knit companions of hers together in the search for their cutie marks, Dash's face softened imperceptibly. That right there was the biggest reason for still kicking it around Ponyville.

“That's another cool thing about being a weather pony. You get to stay close to your friends.”

Scootaloo quickly quieted down; she hadn't even considered what touring Equestria might mean for Rainbow's friendships. She thought about what she would do in the same situation. Of course, it'd be totally awesome to see the world and have strangers cheering your name. But what about those times when you didn't want bleachers full of anonymous ponies celebrating your tricks, but rather a few intimate friends to share in your joys and sorrows? The thought of not being able to see Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle whenever she wanted didn't seem very fun.

Rainbow thought back to her very first adventure with her six closest friends. They had ventured into the Everfree Forest to put a stop to the designs of Nightmare Moon, Celestia's younger sister Luna who had been under some terrible possession. At the onset of that adventure, Rainbow hadn't been that close to the some of the other girls; heck, she thought that Twilight was a spy for

Celestia's sake! Yet, as they traveled together, supporting each other during that journey with their unique strengths, Dash had quickly developed a fondness for the others.

She recalled the offer she had received from the mysterious Shadowbolts, and the condition that came with it. The chance to captain her very own elite flying team! And all she had to do was abandon her friends and their mission to save Equestria. She knew now that it was only a deception by Nightmare Moon, but back then she had been convinced that those ebon pegasi were the real deal.

“You know, I was once offered the chance to command a flying team like the Wonderbolts,” Dash said, deliberately sparing Scootaloo all of the details of her encounter.

“Really?? Why didn't you take it?”

“Well for one, they weren't the *Wonderbolts*. ...Also, they wanted me to abandon my friends. At a time when they needed me the most.”

“Jeez, that's awful! Who'd want to join a bunch of jerks like that?”

“Heh, not this pony, that's for sure, kiddo! At that moment, I realized that no amount of fame would be worth forgetting those that I care about, and if anypony has a problem with that, they can stuff it!”

Rainbow Dash thought back to when she had been on the other side of that bridge, listening to the Shadowbolts' pitch. As sweet as the deal had sounded, there hadn't been a single smidgeon of doubt in her heart about choosing to help her friends.

“Okay, enough with the sappy stuff, back to work, kid!”

Although a still bit stiff, Scootaloo stood easily. The rest had reinvigorated her, and Dash's fantastic stunt had inspired her. She waited for the next command.

“This is where it really starts to come together! Now that you've got the technique more or less squared away, try putting some of that speed of yours into the down stroke.”

Scootaloo closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened her wings into the air and spread her feathers wide. Exhaling sharply, she brought her wings down with the additional roll that she had been practicing for hours earlier. For a second or two the cool sensation of the grass on her hooves left

her.

Wait a second, had she really done it?

Opening her eyes, she saw Dash give her a nod of approval. Okay, she had to see this for herself. She performed the exact same motion and watched as the ground sank a foot below her then rose back to meet her. Holy manure, she HAD done it!

“Equestria's best young flier, weather pegasus extraordinaire, AND master coach? How *do* I keep all of this concentrated awesomeness in this lean, mean body of mine?”

Shrieking in elation, Scootaloo didn't hear Dash's boast as she continued her wing-propelled hops into the air. She didn't have to be told the next step. Bringing the speed into her upstroke as well, she found that with a bit of concentration she was able to suspend herself in the air, albeit a bit shakily. If she was of the personality to do so, she'd be crying tears of joy. She was actually flying!

“That takes care of the basics, I guess,” Rainbow grinned at the orange pegasus wobbling before her, “Now let's see if we can get you moving in some direction instead of just hovering in place.”

For the next few hours Rainbow Dash drilled Scootaloo on the basics of body control in the air. Although she was a quick study, adding an additional dimension of movement took a lot of getting used to for the little filly. She found herself pitching uncontrollably when Dash tried to teach her forwards and backwards movement. Even when holding a position in the air, Scootaloo noticed she had a slight clockwise yaw that would spin her slowly in place. However, despite all of her fumbles and slips, Dash proved to be a surprisingly patient teacher, never once giving up on her pupil. She really did embody the element of Loyalty.

Free of most, though not all of the twitches in her flight, Scootaloo was feeling pumped. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom were going to flip once they saw what she had learned over the weekend! She briefly wondered if they could attach some balloons to their wagon and terrorize the sky as they so often did the land. That's when an idea struck her. She had spent most of her life planted on the ground, and now she had just been introduced to a whole new world for exploration! Pumping her wings, she decided to see just how high she could go.

Now more comfortable with the proper form of flying, Scootaloo found that the original power she exhibited in those breakneck dashes with her friends in tow wasn't so worthless. With each wing beat, she rose higher and higher, the buildings and roads of Ponyville dissolving into colorful paisleys before turning into a singular multicolor smear. Yet, it seemed that at some point the scenery below her didn't get any smaller no matter how much harder she flapped her wings, like they weren't finding

purchase. Furthermore, it felt like she wasn't getting as much air into her lungs with each inhale as she had been before. Exhausted and with hazier thoughts, she closed her eyes in contemplation of this strange development. At least a refreshing breeze had kicked up to cool her off after her exertion. On top of that, the wind rushing over her body felt wonderful. Maybe she could just stay like this for a while: enjoying the cooling sensation, letting her wings rest and-

-Wait. What was that last part?

Suddenly Scootaloo felt something slide under her legs and the direction of the wind changed. Opening her eyes she saw that the ground had grown terribly close, close enough to discern individual bushes and stones, and that only a pair of blue legs were keeping it from growing closer still. With blank horror, she realized that she had unwittingly gone into a free fall and had very nearly fallen to her death. The thought made Scootaloo go numb. She heard a voice shout just above her.

“Yeah, I probably shoulda mentioned that the air gets thinner the farther up you go! Next time you decide to climb that high, make sure there's a cloud or something beneath you!”

Rainbow Dash gracefully slowed her flight and gently placed the little orange filly on the ground, moving around to face her. Meeting her mentor's eyes, Scootaloo turned away in embarrassment. Her legs were shaking from fear, and she didn't want Dash, her hero, her savior, to see her like this.

“I- I guess I shouldn't have been so reckless... Sorry for making you rescue me.”

Dash placed a hoof to the trembling filly's mane and ruffled it.

“Aw, cheer up! It was no big deal, and you're a lot lighter than Rarity and three Wonderbolts! Besides, did you see how high you got up before you spazzed out?! That was pretty sweet!”

Scootaloo's trembling stopped and her head whisked up to face her rescuer. Dash's face was earnest. She thought that she had done something 'pretty sweet'? That was, well, pretty sweet! Dash put a hoof to Scootaloo's shoulder, stopping her before she could go into fan girl mode again.

“Still, that was a pretty close call, squirt. You've got a lot to learn, not only about technique, but your body's limitations as well. I'd hate to teach you something, only to have you leave a crater in the ground due to not being able to use it right, you know what I mean?”

Weighing Rainbow Dash's words, Scootaloo gasped at their possible meaning. She was

surprised to get one lesson from her idol; was she really receiving on offer for more?

“Hold up, does this mean that you wouldn't mind teaching me more stuff?!”

“Yeah, if I'm not busy clearing skies or kicking flank with the gang, I wouldn't mind giving you a couple more pointers. Keep at it, and I can see you becoming a really rockin' flier, Scoots!”

Realizing what she had just said, Rainbow Dash's eyes widened in dread at what would come next; she put her hooves to her ears and braced herself. Scootaloo's ecstatic outcry echoed as far as Sweet Apple Acres, causing Winona to howl in answer.

A few years, a few victories, a healthy share of frustrations, and but one part of a greater friendship later..

As she stepped out into the open air arena, Scootaloo struggled to keep her heart from beating out of her chest. With her entrance, the ponies in the stands above her erupted into applause for the final performance of the day. Searching through the audience she spotted two familiar mares who were rather out of place amongst the pegasi spectators. Apple Bloom was waving an orange and pink flag in her mouth while, in the glow of her magic, Sweetie Belle supported a large banner with the phrase 'GO SCOOTALOO!!' in bold, purple letters. The unicorn had gone beyond lifting simple paper scraps, having learned the cloud walking spell from Twilight just so that she and her earth pony companion could support their friend.

Scootaloo grinned at the two, not sure if they could see it, but certain that they'd feel it. She turned towards the platform for the honorary judges, the Wonderbolts, and spotted a familiar rainbow mane and tail sticking out of one of the blue and yellow uniforms. This Wonderbolt had a stern look on her mouth, but upon meeting Scootaloo's face one corner of it bent into a smirk. She made the subtlest of nods.

All of the reticence that Scootaloo had felt left her in that instance, and she stepped into the cloud field. A slow-paced rock number began, cuing the start of her routine. Unfurling a powerful pair of wings and fanning her feathers wide, she paused for show. The music then shifted to a rapid tempo, and with a down stroke she shot into the air like a missile.

Jetting through the air, Scootaloo effortlessly performed a practiced combination of Cuban 8s, snap rolls, and loops. The audience was enraptured by the tortuous strokes that she painted overhead, uttering surprised gasps and delighted trills with every twist and turn. Of course, by now all of these

stunts were second nature to Scootaloo: she had, after all, learned from the greatest teacher and flier in all of Equestria. Absentmindedly moving into a Lomcevak, she thought about the very first lesson she had received. That day, in her overconfidence she had flown too high and accidentally gone into a free fall.

And now she was about to do it deliberately. She allowed herself a grin.

The noonday sun rested directly overhead. Squinting her eyes, Scootaloo sighted on it with a hoof and soared towards it. In little time, she reached the apex of her ascent and prepared herself mentally for the coup de grâce, the reward of many struggles, many bruises, and an indomitable will. The arena was just a white dot below her, a bright pin prick on a dull wash of green. She thrust her front hooves towards it, pulled her wings into her side, and began her dive. As she gained speed, the wind whipped her mane and tail around wildly, lashing them against her legs and body. Soon she could barely keep her eyes open as tears poured in rivulets at the corners, whipped away too quickly to keep them moist. Gritting her teeth, she pulled her body in as narrowly as possible to reduce the effect of what she had learned to call form drag.

Heh, so many types of drag. Rainbow Dash: flier fantastic and aerodynamics genius.

The arena was rapidly expanding into her view, dominating her field of vision. This was it, time to make history! Scootaloo felt the familiar invisible layer trying to repel her. She felt it resist, trying to sling her back like an elastic band. It stretched unwillingly, tightening and pulling against her. She fought against it and it fought back, straining, and straining, and *STRAINING* and-

BOOOOOOOM!!

The sky erupted in an explosion of colors. Oranges and tangerines, mauves, maroons, and burgundies flooded the sky. Although it was the middle of the day, all of the ponies in the audience would have sworn they had just witnessed the setting of the sun.

—

To no pony's surprise, Scootaloo had won the Best Young Flier's competition handily. Separating herself from a group of enthusiastic fans and fellow competitors, she cantered to where her two best friends were waiting for her.

“Wow, Ah ain't never seen flyin' like that before! Ya really pulled out all the stops, didn't ya?!”

“That was incredible! The way you dashed, and zipped, and zoomed! It was so amazing! And that last trick, I had no idea you could do anything like that!”

“Hehe, I guess it was pretty cool, huh? Rainbow Dash drilled me for months to get that one down. 'Gotta have a kick-flank finale to show them what's up!' she told me.”

As if on cue, Rainbow Dash and the rest of the Wonderbolts landed beside the three friends. Dash approached Scootaloo and lifted a hoof to her. Scootaloo bumped it with her own.

“I told you you'd be a rockin' flier, kid! Heh, reminds me of a certain somepony a few years back, if I do say so myself!”

“Maybe, though I didn't have four other ponies on top of me.”

“You can work up to it. 'Sides, you're being too modest, that's another thing we need to work on,” Dash said with a wink. “Anyways, I do believe your performance has earned you the privilege of hanging out with the *illustrious* Wonderbolts! Shall we?”

Before leaving with Rainbow Dash and the others, Scootaloo turned to her friends. “I'll catch you guys later alright? We need to celebrate!”

“Sure thing!”

“Y'all can count on it!”

Scootaloo took off with the Wonderbolts, readying herself for the greatest trial the Best Young Flier's competition would have to offer. The after party.

A few days later, Scootaloo settled into a tree, taking a well-deserved break after having spent the earlier part of the day practicing a new stunt routine. She had shut her eyes and was just losing consciousness, when she heard a squeaky voice from below.

“U-um, h-hi! Y-you're Scootaloo, r-right?”

Looking down, she saw the source of the tiny voice. It was a small emerald pegasus filly with a lime colored mane.

“That's me!” Scootaloo called down. “What can I do you for?”

“*Eeep!* Um, I know this is f-forward of me, b-but I don't know how to f-f-fly yet, and I was um, th-thinking, since you're so g-good and t-t-talented, and all.... c-could you maybe... give me some p-pointers?” The terrified filly smiled meekly at the mare, who hadn't stirred from her spot in the tree.

Scootaloo yawned and stretched out her legs, before hopping down in front of the filly who leapt back in shock.

“Sure. What's your name?”