

Thicker Than Water
By Somber

Rainbow Dash faces the preliminary try outs for the Wonderbolts. Piece of cake, right? But when she has several unexpected visitors it draws questions about her past and her future.

Today was a day for winners! A blue streak trailing a rainbow launched through the skies over Ponyville in swoops and banks that dared the eyes of every pony to simply try and follow her. One last lap brought her completely around the lap to flash past Fluttershy so quick that Dash's jetwash almost blew her from Rainbow Dash's cloud home. Digging in with her hooves, Fluttershy was almost unable to hit the stop watch button in time.

"Did you get it? Did I get it?" Rainbow Dash said as she flew back and snatched the watch, jerking poor Fluttershy by the neck as her rose eyes picked out the time. "Yes! Two seconds off my time!" She said as she danced on the clouds, pumping her hooves enthusiastically in above her.

"Yay," Fluttershy joined in with a warm smile, "Woot."

"This is my best time yet, I think. I'm going to nail that preliminary try out for the Wonderbolts tomorrow for sure." She said with a laugh as she looked at her carefully arranged cloud loops. "I think I got the whole Misty Falls course laid out in perfect detail." She said as she put up her hooves to judge the positions... well, it worked for Pinkie Pie.

"Why are they having the try outs there? I mean I'm glad our friends can come without magic, but it seems a little out of the way." Misty Falls were the highest water falls in all of Equestria just south of Ponyville.

"Well they can't have every trial and try out in Cloudsdale. This is just a little test to make sure I'm worth the Wonderbolt's time. If I can't even finish the course then what good am I?" Rainbow Dash asked as she flicked her mane out of her eyes.

A gray and blond pegasus swooped in on Rainbow Dash's home, smacking into the side of the clouds with a soft 'whump'. Then a hoofful of mail popped up over the edge. "Mail!" The pegasus called out cheerfully.

"Thanks Ditzzy," Rainbow Dash said as she took it in her mouth while Fluttershy helped pull Ditzzy Doo up on to the cloud. Rainbow Dash flipped through the mail, looking at the stamps. "Jeeze, Ditzzy. Some of these are from last month. What happened?"

"Muffins?" the gray pegasus with walleyed expression suggested with a sheepish smile and shrug.

"Junk. Junk. Junk." Suddenly Rainbow Dash froze as she lifted one envelope. "Oh... oh no... they found me..." Her pupils contracted as she tore open the top and pulled out the letter. "Dear Dashie... uh huh... uh huh... wait... When? On..." Her entire body went rigid. "Oh no. No no no no! They can't! Not today!" And with a yell she took off over Ponyville like a shot.

The letter fluttered down and Fluttershy scooped it up. Her eyes scanned the simple letter. Ditzzy stretched up to peek at it as well. "Okies?"

"No Ditzzy," Fluttershy said softly. "Not okies."

The blue blur streaked from Ponyville and out to Happy Apple Acres. Applejack was loading up some crates of the red and gold bounty into a wagon when Rainbow Dash flashed past and into the barn so quick that Applejack whirled, flinging apples in all directions with the crate landing atop her head. "Land sakes! Was that you, Rainbow Dash?" She asked as she took off the crate and trotted inside.

She found Rainbow Dash cowering in the back of an empty cow stall, buried in hay and shaking. "They won't look for me here. No one would look for me here. Nope... not here..."

"Rainbow Dash, what's the matter?" She asked as she pushed open the stall door. "You're acting like ya owe money to the Herd and they're coming to collect."

Rainbow's rictus grin and high pitched laugh made Applejack's skin prickle. "Oh I just wish it was a little thing like that." Suddenly she lunged and grabbed Applejack, pulling her close. "You gotta hide me, AJ. I need sanctuary. You hear me? Sanctuary!" She yelled, shaking Applejack in desperation.

Applejack pushed her off as she said, "Well all right! You can hide out here if you gotta, but I hope you'll tell me what's going... wait?" Her ears perked as she raised a hoof to her ear. "Is that... singing?"

"Oh no..." Rainbow dashed whimpered, eyes contracting to pin points. She launched herself into the air over Applejack and with a scream flew out the door. Applejack picked herself off the floor and walked after her, but aside from a single errant cloud in the sky and distant singing, she couldn't for the life of her why some pony singing '99 bottles of milk on the wall' would send Rainbow Dash running for the hills.

Her wings zipped her through Ponyville so quickly that she left blurring lines hovering in the air behind her before flying to Rarity's boutique, opening the door, and leaping inside. Rarity's mouth hung open as Dash flashed from outfit to outfit. "Rarity! I need a disguise. Right now! Something girly. Something super girly so that no one would ever think that it's me. Do you have a dress like that, Rarity? Tell me you have a dress like that!" Rainbow Dash begged as she knelt before the white Unicorn, hooves clasped.

Rarity just stared into her eyes and a slow smile of profound bliss crossed her features. Despite herself, Rainbow Dash gulped.

The lady that stepped from the boutique was draped in silk and lace from a bygone era. Rarity's powdered wig sat atop her head, elegant wide brimmed hat with a veil, and a fine lace parasol clutched under her demure pink wing. She walked with elegance, poise, and dignity. No one could have imagined this stately Pegasus to be a competition obsessed filly named Rainbow Dash... except... perhaps...

"Hi Rainbow Dash!" Pinkie Pie called from behind her, making her jump and round of her friend. "Whatcha doing dressed up like my grandma, Rainbow Dash. Oooh, is it a costume party? Tell me it's a costume party! Oh... I should throw a costume par-"

She was silenced by Rainbow Dash grabbing her with her hooves and pressed against the wall. "Pinkie Pie." She raised her head to look at Pinkie Pie from under the bridge, a yellow gleam in her eyes as if possessed. "I will never ask you for this again, but promise me... whatever happens... whatever excuse you need to make up... do not throw a party today. Do you understand, Pinkie Pie? Do you promise?" She hissed softly, grin taut on the verge of snapping.

"Well, yeah, sure. I guess I could do that. Could you stop acting like you're going to eat me now?"

Rainbow Dash gave a hysterical little laugh, but then froze. From above someone called out 'you-whoa...', but it wasn't what they called but that voice. She screamed and launched down the street so fast that Pinkie Pie was left spinning in a cloud of makeup and powder; rarity's fancy dress now on her! "What's going on?" Pinkie Pie asked as she looked up, but aside from a sole cloud in the sky moving the same direction as Rainbow Dash there wasn't sign of anything amiss.

No more evasion. She crashed through the door of Twilight Sparkle's library with a wingful of planks and dozens nails in her mouth. Twilight Sparkle looked up as Dash unloaded her wings and then flashed to a window, hammering planks over it. "Dash?"

"OhhiTwilightSparkleyoudon'tmindifIhangouthereawhiledoyouwenevergettohangouttogetherandI thoughtohlookweneedmoreboardshere," Rainbow Dash gasped as she nailed boards over every window and pushed all of Twilight's furniture against the door in ten seconds flat. Twilight's jaw dropped in stunned amazement. Rainbow Dash then flashed to her with a desperate grin on her face, her rainbow mane frizzling in every direction.

"HeyTwilightSparkleIwasthinkingI'veneverbeenaunicornbeforedoyouhaveaspelltoturnmeintoaUnicornor maybejustaregularponythatlooksnothinglikeRainbowDashheckI'lldotimeasapottedplantaslongasyouturnm

ebackintimeforthe preliminariestomorrowplease TwilightSparklepleasepleaseplease!"

Twilight Sparkle just looked at her flatly, "What's going on, Dash?"

Suddenly there was a knock on the door and Dash went from rambling to silent as her eyes turned slowly towards the door. "Don't answer that."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her flatly and with a glow of her horn moved aside the furniture. She opened the door a crack, and then gave an annoyed sigh. "It's just Fluttershy, Dash." She pulled the door open wide and Dash warily approached the opening. Then she froze as she saw the white cloud settling down just outside the door. She screamed and leapt into the air, but Twilight's Magic grabbed her. "Do you know what's going on, Fluttershy?"

"Um... yes..." Fluttershy said softly. She stepped aside, looking back at the cloud.

"I'm doomed," Rainbow Dash whimpered as Twilight Sparkle drug her from the library. The cyan Pegasus' hooves left four gouges in the floor. The cloud was attracting a fair number of residents of Ponyville.

Suddenly the side of the cloud kicked open and gave a lurch and from the dark opening emerged the heaviest Pegasus Twilight Sparkle had ever seen. "Wooooo... I guess going through that cloud bank wasn't such a good idea after all, was it honey?" The white Pegasus with a bright rainbow mane declared as her wings fluttered to lift her over the cloud and she flicked away the clouds with her tail, uncovering a shiny metal trailer shaped like a lozenge. "Honey? Honnnney... where are you?"

"Over here sweetie plum, ay?" replied one end of the cloud and the mare flicked away the clouds to uncover a cyan pegasus that was so stout he barely fit in the harness attached to the camper. "Woo... I tell you that was quite a flight, eh? I thought my wings were about to fall right off there a couple of times."

"Aw, who's my big, strong pegasus of steel?" She said fondly as she nuzzled him and smooched him as he took off the harness.

"And who's my little sweet cheese cake, eh?" He replied back.

"Little?" Spike asked skeptically. "Who's he calling little?"

Rainbow Dash was trying to shrink to the point of disappearing. Implosion would be preferable to this. But then the pair spotted her and grinned widely, "Oh! Oh! Honey! There she is! Our little Dash!" The white mare said as she waived towards her. "You whoo... Dashie Pony!"

"Dashie... Pony..." Twilight Sparkle murmured in bafflement. She stepped aside to look back at the desolate Rainbow Dash. "Rainbow, who are these Pegasi?"

"They're... my parents..." Rainbow Dash groaned as they swept past Twilight Sparkle to give her a hug that almost crushed her between them. "Hi mom... dad..."

* * *

Sugarcube Corner was quite busy to celebrate the arrival of Rainshadow and Lightdancer, and there were lots of ponies who wanted to meet the parents of their own Rainbow Dash. For their part, Rainshadow and Lightdancer were kind, happy, boisterous ponies not afraid to show their affection for each other, nor for their love of the many cakes and pastries presented. Applejack found herself the unexpected recipient of Lightdancer's recipe for apple cheese casserole and Rainshadow talked Rarity's horn off about the fashions, or lack thereof, in Fillygo, way to the north.

"Yah know, in the wintertime it can get so cold that by the time we get home we got icecicles on our wings! Wish we had a little missy like you, but I don't know how we'd be able to have such a drop dead gorgeous mare in our little town, eh?" Rainshadow said, grinning as he glanced to his wife.

"Oh, you should have plenty of experience with me!" Lightdancer replied, with a toss of her rainbow curls.

"Oh, I gots plenty of experience with goddesses o beauty, for sure," he replied with a little nicker

and wag of his eyebrows. There were plenty of laughs from the onlookers.

“Oooh, you’re just buttering me up!”

In the corner Rainbow Dash was in a slow burn and Twilight Sparkle was hesitant to approach her with Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy. “So... your parents are... um... nice.”

Rainbow Dash’s rose colored eyes slid over to the purple unicorn’s, “Of course they’re nice. They’re from Fillygo. Every pony is nice there,” and her voice shifted to match that of her parents, “Oh don’t ya know?” She pointed a hoof at Pinkie Pie, “And you told me no parties today!”

“Me? Oh no no no, Dash. This isn’t my party. Fluttershy is throwing this party. I’m just helping her with all the details.” The pink pony said as she gestured to the pale yellow pegasus, who looked embarrassed.

“Fluttershy? What did I ever do to you?” Rainbow Dash protested. Suddenly Fluttershy looked even more uncertain. Even upset as she trotted off. Twilight frowned sternly at Rainbow Dash and the Pegasus covered her head with her hooves. “Arrrgh... I just can’t win.”

“Maybe you could explain why do don’t like your parents it would help?” Twilight Sparkle said she stood beside her.

“Yeah, they’re a blast compared to my parents.” Pinkie Pie said with a laugh as she pointed, “Look, they’re dancing.” And to the glee of onlookers, the pair was in fact tangoing across the bakery. It was also clear that if either of them once had a talent for dancing, they’d lost it somewhere. Rainbow Dash buried her face in her hooves.

Twilight Sparkle looked at Rainbow Dash, then at her parents. “So, you don’t hate your parents?”

“No. I don’t hate them. I like them just fine when they’re somewhere else.” She said as she sat up with a sigh. “They’re just... just...”

“Funny?” Offered Pinkie Pie.

“Affectionate?” Suggestion Twilight Sparkle.

“Dorks.” Rainbow Dash muttered as she flicked her half eaten cupcake with a wing tip.

“Wait? That’s why you don’t like them?” Twilight Sparkle sat up in shock. “Your parents aren’t cool enough for you?”

Rainbow Dash grumbled. “They’re not just ‘not cool’. They suck everything cool and awesome out of everything around them! They wouldn’t know cool if it bit them on the wings.” She pointed a hoof at Twilight Sparkle, “And don’t give me that look. I know it shouldn’t matter, but it does. There wasn’t a day in Fillygo when we were out that people wouldn’t snicker and laugh. My sisters-“

“You have sisters?” gasped Pinkie Pie with a wide, excited grin.

The look Rainbow Dash gave Pinkie Pie could have stripped paint. “Yes. *Nine*. And don’t bother asking about them because you will never, ever, EVER meet them.” Rainbow Dash looked so ready to bite a head off that Pinkie Pie backed down.

“But what’s wrong with having family like that? I mean I don’t recall my parents being exactly cool...”

Rainbow Dash sighed, “It wasn’t like that. I never had a single friend in Fillygo. I was a joke because my whole family were jokes. Folks would see us coming and yell to make way for the ‘rainbow herd’. And mom and dad just took it in stride. They liked it. And it wasn’t like they went out of their way to try to embarrass me; it’s just the way they are.”

She looked over to where Rainshadow extended his wing to Apple Bloom. “Hey, kiddo, pull my wing, eh?” Rainbow Dash closed her eyes with a little shutter.

Twilight Sparkle flushed; glad to see Applejack had intercepted Apple Bloom before she took him up on his offer as she looked back at her friend. “Look, I can see how this is awkward for you. But look at it from another perspective; they care enough to come visit you. I haven’t even seen my parents in...” Twilight Sparkle suddenly frowned, feeling a little guilty.

“I would have been fine if they’d shown up after the try outs,” Rainbow Dash groaned. “I should

be practicing now.”

“Well go ahead and practice. We’ve got your parents taken care of.” Twilight Sparkle said, and was glad to see a thankful smile appear on Rainbow Dash’s face.

“So who wants to see little filly Dashie?” Lightdancer asked, much to the glee of Dash’s friends as her mother produced a photo album.

“Oh my, how adorable!” Gushed Rarity at a picture of Dash in a pink baby bonnet next to... Dash? Indeed she was a perfect copy of the cyan equine.

Pinkie Pie pointed at a picture of Dash’s rump stuck in the wall of a cloud. Lightdancer chuckled, “Oh yeah, Dashie certainly could make a hole. She could go from zero to dash in the blink of an eye.”

Then they got to pictures of Dash in the tub and Rainbow Dash just snorted.

“Right. I’m outta here. I’m just glad it’s only mom and dad.” She said as she walked quickly to the door. “I couldn’t handle it if the whole...” she froze for a second before a storm of Pegasi surged through the door and buried Rainbow Dash in a squealing giggling mass of ponies. All of them had the same cyan coat of Rainshadow and the rose colored eyes of Lightdancer, but each had a mane of a different color.

“Girls! Girls! So glad you could make it. I was getting worried ya might have gotten lost in Canterlot,” Rainshadow said as he stomped his hoof twice and the laughing flock of Pegasi climbed off Rainbow Dash, who looked on the verge of an attack of some kind. “Now, why don’t cha all fall in there and introduce yourselves to every pony?”

With practice ease they assembled themselves from oldest to youngest, and Twilight Sparkle tried not to laugh as Rainbow Dash got in line. Then she noticed how unhappy Rainbow Dash appeared with her head hanging somewhat.

“Ivory Star,” said the first formally, who aside from her white mane looked identical to the second in line. Her cutie mark was of a white eight pointed star.

“Onyx Star,” said the second black maned mare, casually crossing her legs beneath her with a casual ease. Her cutie mark matched her sister’s in everything save color.

“Diamond Flash,” said the third, whose mane was six intermixed colors of red, orange, yellow, green blue, and purple, but it gave her mane a shimmery white appearance. Her resemblance to Rainbow Dash was equally uncanny. Her cutie mark was a multiray burst of rainbow light.

“Rainbow Dash,” she said sullenly, earning looks from a number of her siblings. She let out a long sigh and muttered, “Beryl Dash.” Applejack mouthed the name silently. Twilight had to agree. *Beryl?*

“She’s always doing that. Oh! Ruby Flare,” gushed the red maned filly with the scarlet shooting star on her flank. “I’m the nice one.”

“Citrine Stare,” said a pony with an orange mane and an easy going smile that matched her orange sun cutie mark.

“Topaz Flare,” said the next, her spiky bright yellow hair sticking straight up as she looked sharply at her siblings.

“No it isn’t Topaz! You’re Topaz Glare,” snapped a green maned filly about the same age as Apple Bloom, “I’m Emerald Dream.”

“Sapphire Stream,” murmured a blue maned pony that took a half step behind her green maned sibling.

The last one blinked, screwed up her face, “Am... Ami...the... is... um... Beam!” she finished brightly, and then looked at her mother, “That right, mamma?”

“Amethyst Beam, yes sweetie. Nicely done.” Lightdancer said to the youngest filly, who smiled at her accomplishment.

Rain Shadow leaned towards Twilight Sparkle and said from behind his hoof, “Trust me, it pays to have a naming plan worked out ahead of time, eh? Twilight Sparkle hoped the blush would eventually

fade away as the nine new fillies fanned out and started to chat with the rest of the occupants. Ivory and Onyx chatted with their parents. Ruby and Citrine seemed to have taken a shine to Pinkie Pie and Rarity. Topaz seemed to have latched on to Applejack while Sapphire and Amethyst gravitated towards Fluttershy on the edge of the crowd. Emerald at once started to discuss potential cutie marks with the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

Twilight Sparkle then frowned, wondering where Rainbow Dash had disappeared to. Then she heard her say from behind the purple unicorn, "Looking for Beryl?"

Diamond Flash looked so alike Rainbow Dash, sounded so alike that the Unicorn had to take a second to confirm her multicolored mane was the sparkling iridescence rather than the more solid bands of color. "Actually, her name is Rainbow Dash."

Diamond Flash just shrugged coolly. "If you're looking for her she's skulked off."

"Oh no. She was all ready upset with her parents here," Twilight Sparkle frown at the cyan Pegasus, "All of you dog piling her didn't help."

"Yeah, that was one of Ruby's ideas. She gets a new one a minute," Diamond Flash sighed and walked towards the exit, "Well let's see if I can find where she's holed up this time. Is there a water tower around here?" She asked as she flew up, shielding her eyes with a hoof as she looked around.

"At Apple Acres," Twilight Sparkle replied.

"Well that'd be the place to start," Diamond Flash said as she landed besides Twilight and together they walked along towards the Farm. After exchanging names, Twilight Sparkle was brimming with questions. Unfortunately Diamond Flash didn't seem nearly as open and friendly as her sibling. She walked calm and collected with a strange focus that seemed oddly unnerving.

"So you're Rainbow Dash's sister?"

"Twin, yeah. Except for the mane, thank goodness."

"You seem... different."

"Yeah, that's the cliché, isn't it?" Diamond Flash said with a little sigh. "Dash is flying through walls. Flash is thinking through how to fly. Dash is getting in trouble. Flash is a good girl. Dash is the flyer. Flash the thinker. Our parents ate that garbage up."

"I don't understand," Twilight Sparkle said with a little frown.

"Let me guess. Only child?"

Twilight nodded.

"Then no surprise. Your parents knew you. I mean really knew you. You never had to wonder if your parents would remember your name if you didn't have a mane color that corresponded to their naming gimmick. Or a name that was so uncool that you made one up just to have a name that was yours."

"Well, it's just that you seem... ah..."

"Like I'm not going to try to get stuff done in ten seconds flat?" Diamond Flash said with a small smile. "Like I'm not obsessed with recognition or being cool?"

"Yeah," Twilight admitted.

"You haven't seen me problem solve. It's my talent. I think about things and come to a solution. And I'm really touchy when people don't agree." She said with a sweep of her shimmery rainbow haired tail. "And I can be just as impatient."

"So you are alike?"

"No. I am me and she is she and we are who we are." She gave a soft huff, "Of course everyone wants to compare us, and Dash always gets the short end of the stick. She's always been compared to all the rest of us."

"So why does all of you being here at once freak her out?"

"Wouldn't you be a little freaked out if you had to compete with nine sisters to prove you're good at anything besides messing up?" Flash shrugged, "Dash is who she is because of us. We all are. But it

was always harder for Dash. She got saddled with the dorky name. I wonder if we'd had different names would I have been the one to run off just to be my own pony? Calling myself 'Rainbow Flash'? By the time she was born we all ready had Ivory and Onyx as the calm and collected sister and the temperamental sister. I was supposed to be the smart one, according to mom and dad. So that made Dash..."

"Ouch..."

"Still I think we could have been okay with that if the triplets hadn't come along a year later. By that point all of us were desperate to be special. We were loved; we know that, but none of us were really sure we mattered. We'd try and carve out whatever little personality niches we could but that weren't enough for Dash." She said as they crossed the bridge and walked towards the farm. "What really killed her though was when mom and dad couldn't keep us straight. Dash wanted to make a rainbow for mom and dad. She got the materials and painted it. Got the green and blue reversed, but still... do you know what mom and dad said?" Twilight Sparkle just shook her head. "Oh, that's such a pretty rainbow, Diamond Flash. You should try and make one with your sister."

Twilight stopped in her hooves. "They thought she was you?"

"It was just a stupid little mistake, but I think that's when Dash didn't want to be a part of our family any more. She sure didn't want anything to do with me." Diamond flash looked at the clouds with a small smile, "We used to play for hours. She would charge at a cloud and just slide along its surface before flying out the far side. But after that she wanted to be 'Rainbow Dash'." She sighed as they continued past the gate. "This was all a mistake."

"What, looking for Rainbow Dash?"

"No. My family coming here. Dash doesn't want us here. I tried to explain it to mom and dad, but as soon as they saw Rainbow Dash won the Young Flyer's Competition, they just had to come and bring the whole herd with them," she paused and she scanned the Apple water tower. "There she is," she said as she pointed at the rainbow tail drooping over the edge.

"Huh, I'd have thought she'd picked a cloud or something," Twilight Sparkle said, impressed.

"You don't hide from a Pegasus family in the clouds. First place we'd look. She'd always find some nice high perch she could hide behind," Diamond flash said as she brushed her spikey mane out of her eyes. "I should probably go. Let you two talk."

"But..."

"Trust me. I'm the last pony Dash ever wants to see."

Twilight Sparkle watched her go away and looked up at the water tower. She teleported to the top and appeared next to the sour looking Rainbow Dash. Three apple cores lay besides her. The cyan pegasus didn't even start out of her funk as she sulked. "Little much all at once?"

"Little much," Rainbow Dash muttered as she kicked an apple core negligently off. "So how'd you find me?"

"Um... a little bird?"

"Tsh..." Rainbow Dash closed her eyes as she turned away. "It was Flash, wasn't it?"

"She was worried about you," Twilight Sparkle said as she waved her hoof towards Ponyville.

"No. You were worried about me. She just did what she always does; be perfect." Rainbow Dash said glumly. "I wish I didn't even have a family sometimes, you know?"

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight said, but then spotted Rainbow Dash's miserable look, "This is a lot more than your parents, isn't it?"

Rainbow Dash sighed and leaned back to look at the stars. "You know the best day of my life? Going to Summer Flight School alone. Flash said she didn't want to go, so for the first time ever I was my own person. And you know what? It was awesome. I was a natural flyer. I could be cocky and no one would see my siblings and snicker. I met Fluttershy and..." she stopped and let out a long groan, "Fluttershy..."

“What?”

“I just realized why I hated seeing her getting teased. It was exactly the kind of teasing I always faced in Fillygo.” She tossed out the second core off the edge. “Now I’m just angry. Angry at mom and dad for being here. Angry at Fluttershy for showing them where I was running to. Angry at my sisters for crowding me out, even here in Ponyville.” She covered her face with her hooves, “I’m never going to win the try outs.”

“Oh come on, Rainbow. I know you’re upset but...,” she paused as she saw the serious look in her friend’s eyes.

“You’re not a competitor, Twilight. If you’re going to win you got to be in ‘the zone’. It’s more than being fit and in shape. It’s focus. It’s seeing every move you have to make to win.” She said as she flicked the third apple core away. “Right now I’m so out of the zone that Fluttershy could probably beat me.”

Twilight sighed as she stood on the roof of the tower. “Well I may not be a competitor or a sister, but I’m pretty sure that you’re not going to get back in the zone hiding out here and feeling sorry for yourself.” She put a hoof on Rainbow Dash’s shoulder. “I’m sure that if you really focus on what you’re feeling, you’ll be back in the zone in ten seconds flat. That’s what Rainbow Dash is capable of. See you tomorrow,” she said with a friendly smile before she closed her eyes and teleported away in a flash of magic.

Rainbow Dash sighed as she looked at the rising moon and closed her eyes. “Ten... nine... eight...” she counted, trying to lock up her resentment to get through tomorrow. “Three... two... one...” She opened her eyes, looking up at the stars before she grunted and thumped the back of her head against the tower, “Nuts...”

The knock on Fluttershy’s door was quite out of place for this time of night, and she opened it a crack with candle in her mouth. When it illuminated Rainbow Dash she hesitated, then pulled it open and set the candle down on a table. “Sorry,” she said at once.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry, Fluttershy. I want to know why you helped my parents find me. Why you threw that party knowing I didn’t want to be there,” Rainbow Dash answered, trying to keep firm as she saw just how unhappy Fluttershy was about this.

“I...” she started but then closed her mouth. Rainbow Dash wanted to throttle her, more than any other pony. She was her friend. She could see Pinkie Pie trying this, but coming from Fluttershy the whole thing was intolerable. “Family’s important...”

“If you want to be around your family, then be around them. Don’t meddle in mine...” Rainbow Dash began, wanting desperately to chew some pony out. Unfortunately then Fluttershy started to cry silently and Rainbow Dash wanted to tear her mane out. “What? What is it?”

Fluttershy just looked at her a moment, “I... I can’t.”

“You... can’t...? Can’t what?”

Fluttershy turned away from her and walked to a desk. She opened a drawer and carefully took out a stack of photographs. Two ponies stood firmly on either side of a Fluttershy a little younger than when they’d first met at Summer Flight School. The stallion that could only have been Fluttershy’s father stood regally on her left and on Fluttershy’s right was a beautiful mare with long pink hair. What was most fascinating was that the young Fluttershy seemed so excited with her ear to ear grin that her mother was actually holding her still.

“What’s this?” Rainbow asked, but Fluttershy didn’t say a word. The next picture had Fluttershy staring in almost shock with her father standing beside her, his lips a firm line. After that Fluttershy seemed to shrink before her eyes even as she grew older in each photo, her mane growing long to hide her from view. Her father only seemed to grow harder with each year until he stared at the camera with undisguised anger. Finally Rainbow Dash recognized her father. “Wait, this is Radiant. Fluttershy, your father’s the head Pegasus of Cloudsdale?”

Fluttershy didn't say a word. She only nodded once.

"But, your mother. What happened..." Rainbow Dash began as she looked back at the first. There were smiles and joy that were on each of their faces in that first photograph. It didn't matter what happened. She wasn't in any of the other pictures. "Fluttershy..."

The yellow Pegasus gave a soft sniff. "Family is important," was all she could say before she drew a shaky breath and rubbed her nose, "I wanted... I just wanted..."

Rainbow Dash set the pictures down, the tiny Fluttershy waving enthusiastically at the camera. She put her hooves around Fluttershy's neck and hugged her tight, getting a hug in return. "Shhh... It's all right, Fluttershy. I know you meant well," and after seeing that, she had to admit a good deal of her anger had left her.

When Rainbow Dash left Fluttershy returned to the desk. Her hoof carefully lifted the last picture in the desk. Her friends, all in ruined Gala dresses, posing for a final picture of the night. With Spike on the left raising a mug of cocoa in salute, Princess Celestia on the right, Rainbow Dash's hoof across Fluttershy's shoulders with that ever confident grin and Fluttershy smiling despite the horrid night, she couldn't help but smile and touch her own image; an image of a ghost of a filly that might have been.

Misty Falls, the highest waterfall in Equestria, roared over its cliff in a spectacular crescent that sent up a perpetual mist from the rocks below. All around the falls the course had been laid out in rings of clouds kept in place by the qualifying team. At the top of the falls, dozens of ponies assembled themselves in bleachers to cheer for their friends. Rainshadow and Lightdancer and all her sisters sat with Twilight Sparkle and her friends. Applejack and Pinkie Pie unpacked their treats while Rarity unfurled a banner cheering on Rainbow Dash and passing out little flags with Dash's rainbow cutie mark sewn on it.

"How are you feeling? In the zone yet?" Twilight Sparkle asked Rainbow Dash looked at the course laid out.

"Not yet, but this is as close as I'm going to get," she glanced behind her at her family, "I think it was easier performing in front of the Wonderbolts."

"You'll be fine. Just go out there and do what you do best!" Twilight Sparkle tried to pass as much confidence as she could in her smile.

"Yeah, but what if my best isn't good enough?" Dash muttered as she took her place in line. Each pony would get three trials. Best time of all the trials would get the formal try out positions. Dash had practiced this course for months outside her house; it had one killer hairpin turn that she'd have to power through or it'd would kill her time.

Suddenly it was Dash's turn. She gave one glance at her family and friends waving their flags, closed her eyes, crouched, and clawed her way into the zone. The kick signaling her start sent her like lightning into the course. Each turn was accompanied by a powerful snap of her wings as she powered around each turn. Her fear melted away as the simple thrill of racing focused her thoughts into the action of flying like mad.

She approached the hairpin turn, her wings beating furiously. From above she barely made out Diamond Flash yelling something, but by then she was in the turn, wings powering her as quickly as possible. On the practice course she'd shoot past the ring, turn as tightly as possible, and reverse to punch through.

Her practice course didn't have a waterfall. Rainbow Dash slammed through the rising mist and falling water and bounced right off the stone wall. For several seconds she tumbled uselessly, stunned, before shaking off the impact enough to recover. Her time for her first run was completely shot, however.

Landing back at the top she tried her best not to shake. The impact would leave some interesting bruises in the morning. As her family crowded around her in concern, Dash found it in her to smile and wave a wing. "Ah, just a little slip up. I'm fine."

"Dash, about that turn, if you-" Diamond Flash began quickly before Rainbow cut her off.

“I said I’m fine! Just took me by surprise is all. I’ll power through it like it’s nothing this time.”

“But...” Diamond Flash began just as Rainbow Dash took her place back in the queue.

“I don’t need her help. I’m the best flyer in Equestria. I know it,” Rainbow Dash almost convinced herself. Every other pony slowed way down to make the turn, but she knew she could do it. She just had to do it faster.

The approach on the hair pin had her launching at the waterfall and as soon as she was through the cloud ring her body turned ninety degrees and flapped her wings so fast she thought they were going to tear right off. She started to make the turn when she crashed into the rising mist and had to kick off the stone beneath. When she finished the second run her wings ached and she gasped for breath. Her time was good, but not the best. Not by three seconds. “Darn it! Why can’t I do this?”

“Dash!” shouted the one pony she did not want to talk to right now. She folded her ears and started back towards the queue. “Dash, will you knock it off and talk to me?”

“About what? How I’m messing up?” Rainbow Dash snapped as she whirled on her twin, “If you know so much about flying why don’t you do my third trial for me? You’d probably nail it too. Perfect as always.”

“I don’t care about flying a race, Dash.” Diamond Flash said as she pointed down at the hairpin. “I just want to help you!”

“I don’t need your help!” Rainbow Dash shouted back at her.

Diamond Flash looked hurt as she backed away. “Rainbow Dash, please...”

Rainbow Dash turned away from her and then paused. Diamond Flash was just trying to look good. Prove how much better she was at everything. She didn’t need her.

Family is important...

Just need to focus and... not think about a photograph of two Pegasus being miserable together.

“Ten seconds,” Rainbow Dash said softly.

Diamond Flash blinked, “What?”

“You got ten seconds. What do I need to do?”

Diamond nodded and pointed down at the face of the waterfall. “You’re trying to fly straight at the second ring at full power. The angle is too sharp and it’s putting you in the wall. Fly away from the turn instead.”

“That’ll take me off course and into the wall anyway. How is that better?”

“Dash, the mist coming up the falls. It’s just like a cloud! Remember?” She said as she gestured along the curve of the falls. “When we were kids?”

Dash stared down at the falls and her eyes went wide. “My sister is a genius!” She gasped, grinning widely.

“You can do this, Rainbow. No pony can fly like you.” Diamond Dash said with a nod as she backed away. “Now really show them how it’s done.”

When Dash took her place, she felt calm. Sure. This was the zone. She could see every turn in the course laid out one after the next. She saw her sister’s plan like flipping through a stack of photographs.

When she hit the start of the hairpin, she didn’t try and cut in tightly or slow down. She went out till she felt the wet kiss of the rising waterfall mist pushing against her hooves and belly. Her wings pumped furiously, accelerating her along the face of the waterfall as she skimmed mere inches above the wet rocks. Suddenly the turn completed and she launched through the second ring with blinding speed. She finished the rest of the course like a blue blur.

She crossed the finish line not just with the best time of the day, but the best time she’d ever run on this course even with her practice. Instantly her family and friends swarmed her, and her many colorful sisters picked her up with a cheer. They tossed her in the air, catching her with their wings, till Dash cheated and started flying. Incensed at her breaking the rules her sisters piled on her, laughing.

Pinkie Pie, not one to let family get in the way of fun, jumped in as well.

Finally she disentangled herself and ran to her friends, “Oh my gosh, did you see that? I mean I know you saw but did you *see* that? Those rocks were like right there and I was like, oh no, but I stuck in the zone and...” She seemed in a complete daze of accomplishment. “I can’t believe I won that.”

“I can,” Diamond Flash replied with her sure little smile. “Rainbow Dash can win anything. She might occasionally need a little advice though.”

Dash smiled and brushed her mane down, “Yeah well, occasionally she needs a little reminder to listen to her family, no matter how ticked off she might be at them.” She looked over at Fluttershy and the yellow Pegasus flushed. She trotted over to her, looking into her eyes, “You know... I’m probably at the legal limit with nine, but if you want you can be my sister anytime, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy smiled broadly and then lurched forward to hug Rainbow Dash. She sniffed softly, hiding her face in Rainbow’s striped mane before she composed herself. Then she straightened and looked at her sister. “Come on, Flash! Let me show you some other moves I’ve been working on. You and Fluttershy can tell me how to improve them even more.” With a laugh the three Pegasi took to the skies together.

* * *

That night, after Pinkie Pie’s celebration for Dash sticking the preliminary try out, Twilight Sparkle started to write her letter. “Dear Princess Celestia...” but the pen stopped in front of her, floating in her magical grip. Then she frowned softly as she thought a moment. The paper was wadded up and a new sheet floated in front of her. *Dear mom and dad... How have you been? I know it’s been a long time since we’ve seen each other or I’ve written. My friends reminded me today that family is an important part of who we are. I wanted to let you know that I wouldn’t be the pony I am today without both of you caring for me. Thank you. I love you and hope I see you soon.*

Your loving daughter, Twilight Sparkle.