

**CHAPTER 3:**  
**TO DASH OR NOT TO DASH**  
*or*  
**LARGER THAN LIFE**

**A/N:** Warning! Readers may find this chapter somewhat disturbing. In addition to being significantly longer than the first two chapters, it's got unusual relationships, plenty of angst, and a few other bizarre twists. In short, there's a reason this story has the [Random] tag on ED. ;-)

But in any case, let me know how you feel! I devour your comments.  
They nourish me.

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**#7: AR—Industrial Mavens**

In the original barn at Sweet Apple Acres—one of the few buildings on the farm never to have been fitted with lightning tubes, for sentimental reasons—the slatted walls were aglow with a film of light, broken up by a spectroscopic array of colors from where a single lantern shone through Rainbow Dash's outstretched tail. The rest of her was curled up over a half-empty seed barrel whose contents sifted faintly as she rocked it back and forth in the course of trying to curtail her breathing. Against the barrel, she held an envelope—slate blue with a diagonal yellow streak.

Some distance away sat Applejack, perplexed and worried. Rainbow wanted to calm her nerves, but she just couldn't find the words. Sometimes there was just too much to say.

The farmer sighed. "How about I just take a stab at it?" she suggested, her tone grim.

Rainbow nodded. If things were grim, it was her own fault. She'd dragged Applejack away from a quiet supper with her siblings, one of the few relaxed parts left in her life. There'd been no other time to get

her attention.

Applejack leaned forward, her head coming into the light. "Well, looks like you've gotcherself some sort of official document there. Must be somethin' weighty, or y'wouldn't be broken up over it like this."

Rainbow groped for a way to broach the subject, but her stomach was clenched up and she simply couldn't talk.

"If it's bad news, Rainbow, you know ah'm here for ya. Me an' Big Mac, an' Granny, an' Applebloom, an' Turnover an' all the staff...we're in your corner. You know that, don'tcha?"

A tear slipped out, like a hailstone slipping past the guard of an exhausted goalie. "I know," Rainbow sobbed.

Applejack crept forward. "Oh, Rainbow. There, there!" The farmer daubed at Rainbow's eyes with a kerchief, and Rainbow's instincts took this as license to cry further, though that was the last thing she wanted. She smothered her face in the kerchief, trying to run herself dry. It made no sense to cry over something like this. Rainbow was supposed to be tough, able to face the future head-on. Yet here she was, sprawled over a barrel and sobbing into a hankey. Why couldn't she be happy?

Applejack sopped up the last of the tears and stood back, appraising her friend. Rainbow saw a thought come to her, a dark thought. "Dash," she said, "it seems to me ah've seen those colors before. Blue an' yellor? Why that's..." She froze. "It's the Wonderbolts, ain't it. They turned you down, didn't they? Oh, Dash!"

Still Rainbow clung to the barrel and snorted warm breaths through her nose. Still she didn't talk.

Applejack straightened. "Those bastards. Those halfcocked, oatbrained *bastards!*" Her head shook. "I mean...I'm sorry, Dash. I shouldn't talk about them thataway. They're your heroes. I dunno how y'feel about them now, but...they're still your heroes, and ah shouldn't say such things." She surged forward. "But how could they not take you? How?! You *told* me all about your audition, an' how y'*aced* it. You flew twirls tighter'n a beanpole, an' your formations were perfect, weren't they, Dash? That's what you *told* me. You flew it *perfect*, and they still turned you down. Why, Dash? What'd they tell you? They give you some cornball excuse?" As Rainbow remained silent, Applejack stamped the dirt floor in consternation. "Well, tell me

they gave you *somethin'*. They wouldn't just send you a form letter. ...Would they? No, they *wouldn't*. They wouldn't, Dash, not after you saved their cockamamie lives!! Durnit, Dash, what'd they *tell* you?!"

Rainbow was at the wall now, and there was no way but through.

"They said I'm in!!" she cried, shoving the barrel away.

Applejack, now holding the barrel underhoof, was staring. "You're in?" There were several moments of silence. "You're *in the Wonderbolts??*"

"If I say yes, then *yeah!*—I'm in!

Applejack rolled the barrel forward, her demeanor almost threatening as the seeds rattled. "*If* you say yes?? Rainbow Dash, why in Celestia's shinin' world would you not say yes?!"

Now Rainbow wished for tears, but they wouldn't come. "Well that..that's the problem," she whimpered. "That's what I don't know how to tell you."

There was no mistaking it now. Applejack's eyes were searing hot—she was furious. "You mean to tell me that you have *scored* your *dream*, Rainbow Miriam, and now you're afraid to take it?? An' you don't even know *why?!?*"

"I do know why!" Rainbow protested, stumbling back. "I just...I can't explain!"

Applejack kept advancing, shoving the barrel aside. "You can't, huh? Dash, you've been *yearnin'* to join that group as long as I've known you! And now that it's at your feathertips...you're turnin' out to be a *coward?*"

That was it. No one was allowed to call Rainbow Dash a coward, not even her best friend. "Take that back!!" she shouted, surging until her face was almost touching Applejack's. "I came to you because you're so good at *listening*, Applejack! Are you listening now?! I'm telling you, it's complicated!"

"Oh yeah? What's complicated about it?"

"That's what I'm trying to—geez, AJ, could you calm down? I don't need you yelling at me! I've had a tough day."

She snorted. "Oh yeah, *real* tough. While the rest of us toil for each

inch o' ground, earnin' our dreams bit by bit, you get a letter that says you're gettin' everything y'ever wanted! And *you're* the one who had a tough day?!"

That was an insult Rainbow didn't appreciate. "You think I didn't *work* to be the best?!"

"I'm not sayin' that, Rainbow. But you sure don't work like a regular pony does! You were born with speed an' flash. Do you think I was born with what I have? You think Rarity was born with wealth? She was an orphan, Dash! An' I worked hard every week o' my life, and I feel like cryin' sometimes, too. All for my dreams." Applejack huffed one last time and stood down. "So you tell me now, Rainbow—why would y'even *think* of turnin' the Wonderbolts down?"

Rainbow took a deep breath, tapping the envelope. "The training schedule's in here, Applejack. It's really intense..."

Applejack's eyes flared again. "An' you didn't think it would be?! This *is* the Wonderbolts we're talkin'."

"That's not what I meant! Listen, AJ! They sent me a note." She recited from memory: "As a Wonderbolt, your first and only allegiance will be to us. This is not a hobby. This is not a job. This is a way of life. You will be a Wonderbolt first and Rainbow Dash second. If you understand and accept the responsibilities of the enclosed schedule, then we welcome you on board.' And AJ, it's *all the time*. There are no vacations! If I join them, I'll be lucky to find *one day* to come back and visit. I won't...I won't have a home anymore. Not Cloudsdale, or Ponyville, or anywhere."

"But...but Rainbow." Applejack offered a tender hoof. "We'll still be your friends! There's no helpin' it—we'll be friends 'til the sun sings her last hurrah. If you can't come home, we'll go to your shows, wherever we can."

Rainbow swallowed and looked away. "It's not just that. Friends are great, but...look at you and Rarity! You weren't really happy 'til you had each other."

Applejack tilted her head suspiciously. "You worried about windin' up alone, Dash?"

"Winding up, nothing! I'm worried about *being* alone! How am I ever going to meet anypony if we're always on the move?"

"How are you—Rainbow, you're on the verge o' celebrity! How could you *not* meet somepony? You'll have fans stampedin' to get to ya! Take your pick!"

Rainbow cringed. "But what'll...what'll the Wonderbolts think? What'll happen when they find out...when they find out I'm..."

The farmer's eyes narrowed. "When they find out you're what, Dash?"

She swallowed. "That I'm...you know. Straight."

Applejack gritted her teeth and kicked the barrel with tremendous force, knocking it to the wall. "Is *that* what this is about?! Rainbow, we've been over this a hundred times! There is *nothin' wrong with being straight!* If there weren't no straight ponies, why, there wouldn't be no ponies at all!"

Why did this have to be so painful? "I know, but—"

"I don't *care* what yer parents taught you! Some of the greatest ponies in history were straight, even if they didn't admit it at the time."

"But none of the Wonderbolts are—"

"Ah had a phase when I thought I might be straight. I told you that, didn't I? Believe me, ah know how you feel. Ah was confused. But ah kept my head up an' stayed proud. Ain't you proud to be who you are, Rainbow Dash?"

Tragically, Rainbow wasn't so sure anymore. "I don't know! I'm so scared, Applejack. Now that's it's so close...I'm so scared!" The sobs were returning.

Applejack was quick with her kerchief. "What're you scared of, Rainbow?" she murmured. "Rejection? Lemme tell you—everypony around here already knows you're straight. The way you act so much like a stallion sometimes, it's clear you'd rather be with 'em in the sack. But we don't judge ya, Rainbow. We adore you. We admire you. An' if your fans don't feel the same way, they were never worth it! If the Wonderbolts kick y'out, you'll be no worse off than y'are now, will ya?"

"I don't know," cried Rainbow.

"Well, I'll tell ya. You'll be better off for havin' lived through it. But ah swear, Rainbow, if you tell them Wonderbolts no, they won't ask again. You'll be out of a dream, Rainbow, for good. And what'll you do then? Who'll you be without that dream?"

Rainbow closed her eyes. She felt like Applejack was right, but either one of them could have been missing something. Maybe she could make it on her own as a speed racer. Maybe she could assemble her own group, under her own rules. They could stay in Ponyville three months out of each year, and put less emphasis on formation flying, and more on daredevilry...and they'd be tolerant. Tolerant of everypony.

"Rainbow," Applejack continued, "y'gotta decide what matters more. Flyin' the dream, or meetin' that special stallion. Deep down, you gotta know you probably can't have both, not at the same time."

Rainbow fell into a loose hug with Applejack, muzzle buried in her shoulder. "I wish I knew," she mumbled. "I don't know if I'll ever have love. I don't know *how* to fall in love."

Applejack nuzzled her like only a country girl knows how. "Then ah reckon that's what you gotta learn."

"But how?"

The farmer glanced around the dimly lit barn. "Well. You ain't never stayed on for one of Rarity's visits, have you? You know out schedule?"

Rainbow nodded faintly. "She comes here for one day a week, and you visit her for one day a week."

"That's right. An' we both stay overnight. Now, tomorrow's Sunday, so she'll be here by late afternoon, an' I've got a slew of chores to oversee before then. So ah can't stay with you tonight, Rainbow. But if you show up tomorrow, we'll do our best t'explain to you how it feels to fall in love."

"Right," murmured Rainbow.

"An' maybe you should ask around, besides. Ask Lyra an' Bonbon how it went for them. Or heck, ask mah brother how he met Caramel, while yer at it."

Applejack was right—Rainbow's reply to the Wonderbolts could wait a few days. And this was something she had to know. Did she have a chance of ever finding love? If her prospects looked bad, Rainbow could join the Wonderbolts with a clear conscience, knowing she wasn't leaving any bigger dreams on the table.

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"Falling in love?" repeated the baby dragon, now verging on juvenile. His eager face fell with a sigh before Rainbow's eyes. "Yep, we've got a section. Follow me."

Rainbow noted the sigh and wondered what had spoiled the notion of love for the lovable tyke. But she followed him to a heart-shaped nook high in one of the walls. He clambered up a ladder and pulled out a tattered book, passing it to Rainbow. "This might be what you're looking for. Otherwise, you can take a look in here. Just...put 'em back when you're done, will you? I have trouble carrying books up this high."

Rainbow glanced at the volume she held. *Love: A Journey of Discovery*. "All right, but can't Twilight just float 'em back?"

Spike descended the ladder, looking sour. "She's busy with research these days. If I so much as knock, she snaps at me, and I'd better have a good reason."

"Aww. But wasn't she doing research the last time I came?"

Spike shrugged helplessly. "It's been months! She still works a shift now and then, but if the library isn't in good shape, it's 'What have you been doing down here, Spike?' 'Can't I leave you alone for a day, Spike?' It's frustrating!"

Rainbow was receptive to frustration. "No kidding! Think I should go have a talk with Twilight?"

"Be my guest. Just don't blame me if she yells at you for interrupting."

Rainbow glanced past the balcony to the hallway leading to Twilight's study. On second thought, she didn't really need any more strife in her life right now, and she knew how Twilight could be sometimes.

"Maybe later." She let herself sink to the floor. "I should try and get this book read by late afternoon."

"What happens then?" asked Spike as he returned to his place.

"That's when Rarity's going to visit Applejack. And I said I'd be there."

Spike looked at her oddly. "*That's* what this book is for? You're trying to fall in love with *them*?"

"Huh? No!" Rainbow started hovering reflexively. "I just want to know how to fall in love in the first place. And Applejack...said they'd help me work it out."

Again the dragon sighed. "Wish I were in your spot. Have a good time."

Oh, right. Rainbow remembered now. "You mean, you wish you were in *Applejack's* spot, don't you?" she asked sympathetically.

He gave her a doleful look. "Don't remind me."

Rainbow landed. "Hey, I've had crushes, too. I know they're not easy. Nine times out of ten, you haven't even got a chance."

All Spike's frustration came out then in a stream. "So why bother? Why do we even crush at all? Why not just fall in love with whoever's right for us?"

"You think I know?" rejoined Rainbow. "For all I know, if things had gone a little different, I could've ended up with Rarity *or* Applejack. Maybe there *is* no pony right for us. Maybe we just grasp at straws—a crush here, a friendship that boils over there—until finally something takes and we call it done. Maybe I'm doomed to be humiliated a hundred times before I can find true love. Maybe I won't even then." She pounded the book onto the counter. "Guess I'll find out."

Spike sighed again and entered the book into the ledger, passing it back to Rainbow. She tried to find some final words to soften her exit, but nothing came to mind. After a few moments of lingering, she slipped silently out the door.

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It was still strange for Rainbow, flying over Sweet Apple Acres and



seeing all the new buildings—the endless storehouses, the processing plants, the seed silo, the barracks. Just watching the gigantic gear-powered juicer in action made her skin crawl.

But it was worse on Sundays and Moondays. That was when they rolled out the red carpet, literally, for Rarity's arrival. The main paths through the orchards were sprinkled with baby straw, with canopies overhead if there was rain scheduled, and awnings from building to building. The house was festooned with flags and banners, and the glow of lightning tubes beamed from all the windows.

Rainbow had flown over the farm when it was like that, but never when coming for a visit. She hadn't wanted to get in the way..and moreover, all the changes disturbed her. Rarity's factory was even worse. Rainbow's friends' lives had changed so much, while hers had stayed the same—it was as if the more time passed, the less real everything became.

Yet here she was. She could see the coach carrying Rarity and her attendants smoothly up the path. There were curtains over its windows and ponies marching alongside playing gentle music—lyres, harps, and woodwinds rather than trumpets. The vehicle rolled up to the foot of the carpet and the attendants ceremoniously opened the doors. Out stepped Rarity.

When Rainbow saw Rarity during the week these days, she was more or less her old self, though busier and with a heavier manner. It was harder to push her buttons these days, and that was her business, of course—she couldn't afford to let anything get to her. Now, Rarity was at her most formal. She wasn't wearing much—just a light open jacket, an official-looking pendant and a neatly knotted coral bow in her mane. Even so, she almost looked like somepony Rainbow didn't know. She and her numerous attendants walked up the carpet, trading quiet words.

Rainbow looked the other way—here came Applejack, a slightly smaller retinue of farm workers fanned out behind her. As orchard owner, she was wearing a slightly fancier hat than normal, lacking a notch but bearing a proud red ribbon. She had on a shapely breast collar displaying a large yellow apple on a green field, and a over her haunches she wore a slim caparison with interlocking tree branches and notches that left her cutie marks on display. Rainbow always thought Applejack looked strange dressed up like that—almost like she was an ornamental possession of the very farm she ran.

The two groups were about to meet, so Rainbow dove to land beside them. Rarity's attendants seemed disconcerted, but Rarity faced her with a touching smile. Good—so she'd been warned Rainbow was coming.

"Madame Applejack," said Rarity.

"Madame Rarity," said Applejack, slurring the honorific.

They bowed to each other, as did their companions. Rainbow wondered if she should bow, but she didn't feel like it. She wasn't part of this charade, and she wanted to catch every second.

They all raised their heads together. "How have these last few days treated you?" asked the fashion mogul in a surprisingly gentle tone.

Applejack stepped forward, the two of them sharing an elaborate nuzzle. "Pretty well," she replied as they pulled apart. "Wouldja care to be my guest for the night? We could swap stories."

"I would be honored, Madame Applejack." Rarity bowed again, tossing her mane back. "Your hospitality is legendary."

Applejack smiled and turned back to the farmhouse, leading the way. Their two sets of companions merged behind and beside them, clearly familiar with the ceremony being enacted. Rainbow knew this was mostly for show—they must have a conversation like this one, if not *exactly* like this one, every week. But if it was for show, what was the point?

Applejack faced her as they walked. "Rainbow Dash?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you care t'come inside? Good friends're always welcome, after all."

"And the more, the merrier!" added Rarity, not even looking over.

Rainbow tried not to laugh. It was as if she hadn't been invited in the first place. "Sure, I'll come in!"

A pair of door ponies met them at the door, and then a valet greeted them all formally and went to lead Rarity off to her room. A cook bustled about, preparing tea. The others all bowed and

dispersed—returning to their *real* duties, Rainbow guessed. She knew Applejack was successful, but even she couldn't afford to keep a dozen serving ponies around just for show. This whole performance was for Rarity's benefit, a fact Rainbow found both touching and disturbing.

"So this is how you and Rarity get together," said Rainbow, slipping onto a chaise in the living room.

"Yep! Pretty weird, huh?" replied Applejack.

Rainbow hadn't expected her to admit that. "Well...yeah! I mean, it's like the two of you aren't even married."

Applejack settled herself on a rug. "An' I'll tell ya somethin', Rainbow. When she an' I started to realize that we liked each other—an' I mean *really* liked each other—it warn't easy fer either of us. I mean, can you imagine? Fallin' in love with someone who drives you crazy on so many levels?"

Rainbow wasn't sure. "Is it anything like wanting to eat sweets you really shouldn't be eating if you want to stay in shape?"

Applejack laughed. "Better ask Pinkie about that. Naw, it's not like anythin' else ah can think of. It's infuriatin'. And intense. Rarity's a preenin', glamour-obsessed prig, an' she almost made Twilight's first sleepover a livin' hell. But once we got past that—"

"Excuse me!?" Rarity was returning down the stairs now. "I suppose I did it singlehoofedly, did I? Are you forgetting your own slovenly, stubborn, mud-and-spittle-strewn hick ways?"

"Ah ain't forgettin'," said Applejack, not missing a beat. "But fer me, that's how things're done. You can't tell me y'don't love me for it."

Rarity smiled, reaching the floor. "It's your authenticity I love. Your brazen strength of heart, disguised by neither scruple nor modesty."

Applejack smiled to Rainbow, tipping her hat. "An' as much as ah complain about her prissiness, the truth is...Rarity coh-tour fascinates me. Always has. It's like she's some...enchanted creature, full o' magic an' mystery."

"Well, she is a unicorn," Rainbow pointed out.

"I am, at that!" agreed Rarity. "And so you see, Rainbow...the very

things that irritate us about one another became the qualities we most admire! Or at least...they *framed* those qualities. They drew our attention to each other."

Applejack nodded. "She was like a puzzle I hadta untangle."

"And *she* was like a lustful force I had to face...and tame."

The earth pony was suddenly in her spouse's face, grinning. "Y'ain't tamed me yet!"

"Perhaps I have," rejoined Rarity, drawing herself up, "and you simply don't recognize the tethers!"

"Well if y'all ask me," piped up a younger voice, "you two are plumb crazy!"

Rarity gasped, and Applejack spun around to find her younger sister peeking out from behind a couch. "Apple Bloom! Were you spyin' on us?"

"Ah we in here first," the child shot back.

"Well, we need the room now," said Applejack. "We were havin' an adult conversation."

"More like a mushy conversation!"

"Apple Bloom, could you find somewhere else to go 'til suppertime? Maybe if y'ask nice, Turnover'll let you run the apple dicer."

"Fine," said the filly. "But you better make it up to me tomorrah!"

Applejack plucked a smaller cowpony hat from a hatrack and placed it on her sister's head. "Ah'll see what ah can do. For now, Miss Rainbow needs mah help, so *skedaddle*."

"Seeya Rarity. Seeya, Rainbow."

The child left, and once the valet had brought in a tea service, he and the cook also departed, leaving the house empty but for the three of them.

"So why all the fooforah just to get together?" asked Rainbow.

"It's what mah sweetheart wants," said Applejack. "An' it's what our staffponies expect. They want to be workin' for big, powerful tycoons who do everythin' up grand, so that's what we give 'em."

"But don't they realize it's only for show?" asked Rainbow.

"Only for show?" exclaimed Rarity. "My dear, it's for our comfort as well! Our formality is an isle of stability in a turbulent business world."

Applejack kissed her. "It's true! Dressmakin's a crazy industry, an' farmin' changes with the weather patterns, as well as the regional economy. We never what curveballs we'll have to deal with next, but at least we know when we're gonna see each other, and how it's gonna happen."

Rainbow tumbled from the chaise and stood up. "But then, why not do what everypony does what they get married, and live together? Why is your marriage so weird?"

"You sound like mah sister," observed Applejack.

Rarity sipped her tea. "In a nutshell, Dash, it's because we're simply too different! We're *unable* to live together. If I had to dwell on a farm, amid dirt, dust, hard labor and the constant whir of machinery...I'd become a nervous wreck!"

"An' if ah had to live with racks an' rows of pretty lacey dresses an' smocks and shawls and such on all sides, an' shower every single morning, an' watch mah every step while outside so as not to get my hooves untidy," said Applejack, "ah'd go crazy as a punch-drunk weasel."

"You should see the ceremony we go through when *Applejack* comes to visit," said Rarity knowingly. "It's rather different from this one."

"It is?" asked Rainbow.

"We're very understandin' of each other," explained Applejack. "When Rarity comes, ah treat her to the red carpet, fancy dress and crew with all the trappin's, protection from the rain, tea and crumpets, an' generally just treat her like a princess."

"Whereas when my paramour comes to visit," said Rarity, "we greet her with a dingy old green carpet, a mud puddle for her to splash in, and a how do you do chorus."

"Howdy-do," corrected Applejack.

"Yes, precisely. Howdy-do. And then we treat her to dumplings, slaw, potato fries, shepherd's pie, or some other country dish."

"Her staff is very accomodatin'."

Rarity laughed. "Oh, yes, the workers find it all very amusing. I think they truly relish the variety."

"You sayin' we don't?" Applejack gave Rarity a peck on the cheek, and received a noserub in return.

"Not at all," said the unicorn. "A glimpse into your world is the highlight of my week—and in a sense, my life!"

Applejack beamed. "Couldn'ta said it better."

Rainbow frowned. She slurped up all her tea in one gulp and went over to the snogging couple. "So are you two gonna help me out, or what?"

Their eyes turned to Rainbow. "But my dear!" said Rarity. "I thought we *were* helping!"

"Helping? How?"

"By...showin' you how love's done?" said Applejack. "Ah thought that was what ya wanted."

Rainbow's eyes smoldered. "I want to know how to *find* someone! All this—it's great, if you've already got a girlfriend...or a boyfriend." She sat hard on one side of the chaise, nearly tipping it over. "But I've got no one, and I'm not even a Wonderbolt yet."

"But you will be, won't you?" Rarity gushed. "Applejack told me your big news, and it's so exciting! Just think—the announcer calling your name...the fans cheering for you...the glory of fame, and the thrill of knowing that your training is really going to count for something!"

"Yeah," sulked Rainbow. "I'll have a lifetime of thrills, and nopony to share it with."

Applejack gave Rainbow a pat on the back. "Aw, Rainbow, I'm *sure*

somethin'll work out! At the very least...you can try it out for a while, an' if it gets too depressin', you can just go back t'cloud kickin'. Then you'll have plenty of memories to share with the stallion of your dreams when you find him!"

Somehow Applejack managed to make everything sound so cut and dried. "You can bet they won't make me captain of the weather team again if I do that," Rainbow pointed out. "Regional says I'm lucky to keep the post, given how long a record sheet I've got. And we're not talking the good kind of records."

"Huh."

"Yes, well..."

"That's what I thought. You don't know what I should do, do you?"

"Well, maybe not, sugarcube. But I still think you'll be happiest if y'go for it. No one ever found happiness by abandonin' their dearest dream."

"Unless they find a better one," retorted Rainbow.

"And have you got something in mind?" asked Rarity.

Rainbow hesitated, recalling her notion of starting her own aerobatics group, but shook her head. "Nope. I've got nothing. And this isn't helping." She headed for the door.

Rarity called after: "Oh please, darling, be reasonable!"

"What's reasonable?" Rainbow snapped. "Living my life for the maximum profits? Are you torn because my choices are between staying here for reliable pay, or going off on a wild, high-stakes adventure and maybe losing it all? Not everything is about money, you know!"

"Now wait a minute, sugar. Who said anythin' about money?"

"Are you kidding? You don't need to say it, AJ. It's all around us. Sweet Apple Acres used to actually be something sweet! Not this industrial circus! You used to be a family business!"

"We're *still* a family bus—"

"Just 'cause you and Mac are in charge? Save it. You're a big business now. Practically faceless. And Carousel Clothing Inc. is even worse."

"Are you scorning us simply because we've chosen to focus on financial success?"

"No! I'm not scorning anyone. You did what you had to do. You've got your bucks in a row, you know just what you want. Big success. Big money. And a weird marriage that somehow works for you. But you've got no idea what's best for me."

"It's true," conceded Rarity. "Applejack and I were lucky enough to know each other from the start. We never had to go out searching for love. And it looks like you'll have to. But Rainbow..."

Rainbow turned back from the door to find them both staring sympathetically.

"We'll always be your friends," said Rarity. "No matter what you think of us, or choose to call us...we'll always be here for you. Please...remember that."

Rainbow felt a lump in her throat. She nodded. "I know."

And she left. This place was getting to her.

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### **#8: FP—Off the Rails**

Rainbow shoved the three-part door to the library open all at once, marching in. "Hey Spike? That book you gave me isn't any help. It's all about making relationships work, but there's nothing about *finding* relat—oh! Hi, Twilight."

Indeed, it was Twilight Sparkle behind the circulation desk—Spike was nowhere to be seen. "Hi, Rainbow! Were you looking for Spike?"

"Eh, not really. Just wanted to return this book. Maybe get a new one." She dropped it onto the desk.

Twilight peeked at the title and her expression became hard to read. Concerned, maybe. "Well...all right." She marked her ledger and levitated the book back into its place, wobbling all the way. "But...what



did you have in mind?"

"Eh." Rainbow shrugged. She'd been making enough of an ass out of herself that there wasn't much point keeping secrets now, especially from a good friend like Twilight. "I'm looking for something about...finding a soulmate. Something like, 'How Not to Be Sad and Lonely for the Rest of Your Life.' Got anything like that?"

There was an uneasy pause. "Rainbow," said Twilight cautiously. "Is this for you? Are you worried...about being alone?"

Was it going to be this painful with everypony? "Yeah, Twi. I'm worried. You wanna know why? I got word from the Wonderbolts yesterday."

The unicorn's eyes went wide. "Oh, Rainbow, I'm sorry! They turned you down? And now you're afraid no one will ever love you, if you can't—"

"Jeepers, Twilight, no! They want me! And they sent me the schedule, which is *crazy*, and a letter about how I've got to do nothing but be a Wonderbolt from now on—"

But Rainbow broke off when she saw Twilight's face jerk. "Y—you're in?" she asked. She paused. "You're a Wonderbolt!?"

Uh-oh. She was about to leap the desk and nuzzle Rainbow, or something. "Well not yet! I haven't answered them yet! I'm confused. And scared!"

That hadn't been easy to say. Rainbow probably wouldn't have said it at all if it hadn't been so quick, like ripping off a bandage suddenly.

Twilight came around to nuzzle her anyway, in sympathy. Rainbow didn't mind—it felt reassuring. "You're scared?" the unicorn asked.

"I'm scared I'll lose every single other thing in my life. My friends. My home. My career. My...my freedom."

"But...oh, Rainbow." Twilight stood back and sighed. "Isn't it worth it? I mean..." Her voice became subdued, as if straying into an area she hadn't studied. "What is freedom good for, if the best possible choice comes along...and you can't take it?"

"I don't know if it's the best choice!"

"Then what is?" When Rainbow didn't answer, Twilight continued. "It could be that you put so much stock in freedom...that keeping it is actually tying you down. It's making you *less* free."

Rainbow shook her head. "Look. Do you have any books, or not?"

There was a pause.

"Yes...I think I've got a few that might help." Three smaller books were extracted from the shelves via unicorn magic and fluttered down to Rainbow's bag, where they tucked themselves inside. "But Rainbow...please don't go without telling us. If you do go."

"I wouldn't do that, Twilight."

"If you do join the Wonderbolts—and I think you should—when will you have to leave?"

Rainbow was almost sorry. "The training schedule begins in five days."

"Five days?" Twilight's eyes went wide. "So soon?" She heaved a deep breath. "All right. Five days. I can do this. It's okay."

"Twilight?"

"Rainbow." The librarian hugged her friend. "If you're gone in five days, I'm going to miss you. I'm *really* going to miss you. But you *will* find that special stallion. One way or another, I guarantee it. You're not the kind who gives up, Rainbow. You'd never let loneliness get you down."

Yeah, right. "Isn't that what I'm doing right now? I sure don't feel cheerful."

Twilight assessed her from behind the desk. "Well, you probably *could* use some cheering up."

Rainbow threw up her wings. "So what am I supposed to do? Have Pinkie Pie throw me a party?"

Instead of treating this like the throwaway line it was, Twilight looked inspired. Uh-oh. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. Pinkie hasn't thrown any parties in quite a while."

"Huh? But I was only—"

"You've just had some big news, right? Earth-shaking, tremendous news you've been waiting your entire life for, right?"

"Well I guess, except—"

"Then that's the perfect excuse! Honestly, how could Pinkie *not* throw you a party? She'd be completely remiss in her duties! You've got to tell her! And if you don't, I will!"

This was not what Rainbow had been hoping for. In fact, it was exactly what she'd been hoping to avoid, which was why she'd been taking pains to avoid Pinkie all week. "Aw, Twi, c'mon!"

"No, Rainbow. A party is just what you need. Go and see Pinkie at the cottage. I insist."

"But—I mean—I don't want the attention! And besides, it's just so *weird* there!"

"You think being an openly straight Wonderbolt won't feel weird? You think you won't have to deal with attention? Think of this as practice, Rainbow! If you can't take the party, then maybe you're right. Maybe fame and glory *aren't* your best choice."

Twilight prodded Rainbow to the door with intermittent pokes from her horn. "Cripes, Twilight! You don't have to push—I'm going!"

The unicorn raised her head, and Rainbow noticed a surprisingly amount of weariness on her face. "Sorry, Rainbow," she said. "It's just...this is a lot to take in. I really do care—you know that, right? It's just..." She heaved a heavy sigh. "I have to get back to my research."

This was exasperating. "Fine! Don't let me keep you from whatever the hay's so important. I'll just go see Pinkie and...give up whatever dignity I've got left."

Twilight paused on the staircase back to her study. "And don't you *dare* leave town without saying goodbye," she added.

"Sheesh! I won't!" Rainbow pushed through the door, wondering just what Twilight's problem was. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been driven to so much swearing in one conversation.

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Was that a toy soldier *already* beside the path? It had to be. Rainbow didn't want to look, but she couldn't help herself. It was a pegasus in shining armor, armed with a pie cannon. And no, it wasn't her imagination—the figure smelled like banana cream pie.

The figures were showing up earlier and earlier every time she went to the cottage. At this rate, in a few more years they'd be hurling banana cream pies at visitors' ankles all the way.

Rainbow could have flown, of course, but something like morbid curiosity kept her walking along the path. The closer she got to the cottage, the more numerous the figures were. They weren't just soldiers—many were farmers, while some were quarry workers (propped up against crumbling boulders) or lumberjacks (poised in the act of felling saplings). Soon, little red and white houses began to appear along the path, each with their own little inhabitants.

Rainbow found herself trying to remember a time when Fluttershy wasn't crazy. Pinkie had always been crazy, sure, but Fluttershy? Rainbow seemed to recall that in the old days, she'd been more or less normal. Just really shy. But now?

When Rainbow came to the final stretch, she was met by miniature streets, buildings, fields, roads, vehicles, and ponies of all kinds, all colors, all occupations. It was all fake, of course, and downright dizzying to look at. Rather than trudge through like an inconsiderate monster, Rainbow flew straight to the front door. The cottage, at least, was mostly the same as it had ever been, except for the thick pink curtains on every window. They were drawn now: presumably the residents wanted their privacy. Well, they had plenty of privacy most of the time—they could do without for now. Rainbow knocked four times on the door.

A tiny sliver of the door's top section swung open, revealing Fluttershy's familiar frightened eyes. She was draped in shadow—apparently there wasn't much light in there just now. "Rainbow Dash?" she squeaked.

"Yeah. Good to see you, Fluttershy. Can I come in?"

"Um...um...I guess?" The rest of the door opened a crack. "But we're...kind of in the middle of something."

*You're always in the middle of something*, Rainbow wanted to retort. "It's kind of important. So Pinkie's here?"

"Yepperoonie!" called Pinkie's voice from some distant place within.

Rainbow slipped inside. There was, indeed, no light but what filtered through the thick pink curtains. The floor was covered with a gigantic mesh of loops and trestles whose purpose Rainbow at first couldn't fathom. But as an object came hurtling toward her leg, only to miss it narrowly while holding to its track with a familiar rumbling sound, she realized what she was looking at. "It's—this is a toy train, isn't it?"

"It's a *model* train," said Fluttershy proudly, her voice still hushed. "And it has all the features."

"Features?" asked Rainbow, stepping between the loops of track with wide eyes.

"Oh, yes. Features like functional crossing gates, rotary car dumpers, modular water features, bi-directional locomotives...cute little animals in the cute little boxcars..."

"Er..." Rainbow scratched her mane, peering at the various things Fluttershy pointed out. "But don't you have *real* cute little animals around here?"

"That's right!" said Fluttershy. "And they love to help out." With an outstretched wing, she indicated her bunny, Angel, wearing an engineer's cap and overalls, as he pulled the lever to activate a switch as the train barreled through. Gummy the alligator, in a conductor's cap, clamped his jaws onto the caboose and promptly began waving like a flag. A number of chipmunks gathered to unload the cargo as the train pulled smoothly into a station.

"I don't get it," said Rainbow. "What makes the trains go? They don't have anypony pulling them."

"Magic makes them go," said Fluttershy. "We have to get their magical cores recharged every week or so."

"Magic, huh?" Rainbow poked at one of the trains as it passed; it tilted for a moment, but found the rails again. "Pfft. We pegasus ponies don't need magic to go fast. Why should a train?"

"Well, actually," said Fluttershy, "according to Twilight Sparkle, many researchers think that pegasus ponies really use magic to—"

"Twilight? What does she know about pegasi like us? It's not like she ever flew anyplace."

"She does have a balloon," Fluttershy pointed out.

"A balloon? You think flying a balloon is like soaring through clouds, seizing thermal boosts, and daring the wind to get out of your way?"

"I'd rather ride a balloon," confessed Fluttershy.

"Did somepony mention *balloons*?!" The fervent voice of Pinkie Pie shot down the stairs, followed closely by its owner, who pounced into the room with a wide-eyed expression and, indeed, a shock of several balloons wrapped by their ribbons around her foreleg.

Rainbow jumped reflexively to face her. "Pinkie!"

"Rainbow!!" Without hesitation, Pinkie gave Rainbow a violet balloon, which she took awkwardly in her mouth. "I'm so glad you came out to visit! It gets kind of lonely out here, even *with* all our subjects to keep us company."

Rainbow had a bad feeling about this. "Your...subjects?"

Pinkie gestured to the panorama of figures scattered about the room, and drew open a curtain to indicate the even larger crowd outside. "They're everywhere! See?"

Rainbow blinked. "But...they're made of wood."

"Not *all* of them! They're also made of twine, and rubber, and clay, and bones—" She wiggled her forehooves ominously. "—and rabbit fur, and pebbles, and felt—"

"Whatever!" Rainbow shouted. "My point is, they're not real!"

"To be fair," said Fluttershy humbly, "no pony's perfect."

"What do you mean they're not real, Dashie?" Pinkie pressed. "They're made of their stuff, and we're made of ours! We're got bones and fur in us, too!"

"But—they're not living. They don't move!" Rainbow kicked a little clay pony figurine with a hat and plow; the pony and plow went tumbling in different directions.

There was stunned silence for a moment. Then Pinkie chirped: "*That* one moved!"

Rainbow didn't know if Pinkie was being serious or not. Either way, she wanted to sigh. "Because I kicked it!"

"Yep! And you kicked her because she made you angry! Face it, Dashie. Our subjects may not be quite like you or me, but they're as real as we are!"

"And they're *so* loyal," added Fluttershy, fluttering over to rescue the fallen ploughmare.

"I can't believe this," Rainbow moaned. "You two used to be cool. Fluttershy, you used to seem so wise out here...like you were one with nature or something."

She seemed hurt. "I'm not wise anymore?"

"Beats me! You've made a little imaginary city for yourself, so it's like you don't even *live* in nature anymore! And Pinkie...you were always crazy, but at least you used to be *fun*."

Pinkie was also taking it badly, her eyes watering. Rainbow suddenly realized how much like Gilda she sounded, berating her friends like that. And this wasn't the first time. She'd yelled at AJ and Rarity. She'd even yelled at Twilight. What the hay was she thinking, dreaming she'd be able to woo crowds of thousands? She couldn't even keep from insulting her closest friends.

Rainbow blinked back her own tears. "Hey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's just...Pinkie, ever since you moved in with Fluttershy, we hardly ever see you anymore! I miss you. And now...I might be leaving."

Instantly, Pinkie switched from dejected to distressed. "Leaving?! Dash, you're leaving us?"

Rainbow scuffed a hoof against the floor while another train sped by. "Maybe. Probably. The Wonderbolts sent a letter. They liked my audition. ...They want me."

Pinkie's gasp took her zigzagging into the air, glowing like an erratic rocket. At the height of her gasp, she flung herself toward Rainbow with a release of red hot steam, presumably for a hug. Rainbow dodged.

Pinkie landed instead in the heart of the train system, shattering layers upon layers of track. Figurines and landscape features went flying. Still, she didn't miss a beat as she flipped back to her feet, grinning at Rainbow excitedly. "You DID it!!! RAINBOW!! You're gonna be a Wonderbolt!!"

While Rainbow and Fluttershy watched in horror, Pinkie Pie gamboled around, crushing more of the railroad with each step. "Dashie's gonna be a Wonderboollt!" she sang. "Wonderboollt, Wonderboollt! Ev-e-ry filly and every colt is gonna be left quaaa-king!"

Fluttershy, eyes wide, leapt into the heart of the structure and scrambled to fix the mess Pinkie was making. She recruited a retinue of woodland creatures to help her rejoin the tracks, straighten tipped cattle, and so forth. But Pinkie's reign of destruction continued.

"But Pinkie!" shouted Rainbow. "I'm not even sure if I want to do it! There's so much wrong with me...I don't know if I could handle that kind of life!"

Pinkie turned on a dime, fury in her eyes. "Wrong with you?? WRONG WITH YOU?!?" She stamped her hooves as she answered, crushing more subjects with every step. "There's nothing wrong with you! You're *Rainbow Dash!* You leave rainbow trails when you fly! You've got attitude practically seeping out of your ears and burning icky holes in the floor!" Pinkie kicked a water tower, taking out an entire hamlet. "You're even cool when you're being lazy. And you know there's tons of ponies in town who look up to you! So don't you even THINK of DREAMING of PRETENDING to THINK of PRETENDING to DREAM of saying no to the Wonderbolts!! Because you are *better* than that!!"

Rainbow's mind was thrown out of her troubles by the rampant destruction she was witnessing. "Pinkie, you're—you're ruining your city! What about all your subjects? What about the trains?!"

"Oh, don't worry," murmured Fluttershy. A train zoomed off a broken track and crashed with a burst of magic before her nose, causing her to jerk back in fear, but she recovered a moment later. "She's just being Pinkiezilla. She does that sometimes."



"They will BOW before the Great and Powerful Pinkie!!" The frenzied earth pony seized a train and whipped it around to knock a stationhouse off its moorings. "When is the last time our subjects paid their TAXES?!?"

"Oh, um..." Fluttershy stammered, looking uneasy. "Not for a month, at least!"

"A *month*?! How can they be safe from wanton destruction if they don't pay their taxes?!" Pinkie picked up a wooden sheep and gnawed off one of its legs, tossing the rest to the floor. "One down, *thirty gazillion to go!*" Her tail whipped around like a floofy hurricane.

"Oh, no," uttered Fluttershy.

"Oh, YES!" bellowed Pinkiezilla, leaping onto the central station and scattering boxcars everywhere.

"Look, Pinkie...PINKIE!!" Rainbow was seriously disturbed by this spectacle. "I came here because I thought you might want to throw me a party! You know...like you used to??"

Slowly, Pinkie quelled her murderous rampage and turned to face Rainbow, the redness draining from her face. "A...a party?"

"Yeah! For...you know...my being accepted into the Wonderbolts."

Pinkie leapt straight from the epicenter of destruction into Rainbow's personal space, now acting like her old self. "A party with actual other *ponies*?! Dash, that'd be so much fun!! We should totally *do it!!*"

"Well...yeah! Sure! And I mean...if you wanna run things, I'll just stay out of your way..."

Now Pinkie zipped under the broken rails to lie beside Fluttershy, where she joined her in repairing the devastation. "Oh, that's okay! I know Fluttershy'll be glad to help! Isn't that right?"

Fluttershy looked relieved at the apparent end of Pinkiezilla's reign. "Oh, yes! I'll make some special streamers, and bake up some Carob Kisses, and do anything else you need me for."

Pinkie seized Fluttershy and kissed her hard on the lips. The yellow pegasus flailed, eyes going wide, and then seemed to melt in Pinkie's

grasp, surrounded by smoking trains and crushed scenery.  
"That's what I like about you," Pinkie breathed, just loud enough for Rainbow to hear. "No matter what mayhem I get into...you're always there for me."

Fluttershy blushed, and Pinkie zipped out from the wreckage again in an instant. "So, how does Sugarcube Corner sound? I miss that old place. How about Cometsday?"

Cometsday was four days away! Rainbow worked out the timing in her head. If the party went well into the night, would she be able to make it to the Wonderbolts' training grounds outside Whinneysburg by the following morning?

What was she saying? Of course she would! She was *Rainbow Dash!*  
"Uh—sure! Cometsday it is! I know I can count on you!"

Rainbow barely had time to realize she'd made her decision. Pinkie was on her immediately with ideas for the party, making suggestions from all angles, even draping streamers over her for no reason. Fluttershy, meanwhile, was enlisting an army of animals from outdoors to help clean up inside. Apparently, they were accustomed to the intermittent ravages of Pinkiezilla.

And, somehow, so was Fluttershy! Rainbow had never understood what had motivated the gentle pegasus to welcome Pinkie into her home almost two years ago, but now it seemed clear that the wildness and caprice of Pinkie Pie must satisfy a secret need in Fluttershy's heart. Rainbow could see it in the glimpses she caught through the streamers and the train tracks—Fluttershy was humming a tune while cleaning up the mess, as content as Rainbow had ever seen her.

This was ridiculous. If someone as random as Pinkie Pie could find a stable mate to love and look after her no matter what insanity she wrought, surely Rainbow could find someone on the road willing to put up with the celebrity life. Maybe a roadie with a heart of gold...or a pretty little boytoy with a sensible streak. Who could say?

She was gonna have hundreds of thousands of fans, after all! And here she was, worried that not even *one* of them would have what it took to keep up with Rainbow's lifestyle?

Hah. Anyone worthy of her in the first place would have more than enough energy for that! And if he needed a boost, Rainbow could lend him a little of her own.

The more she reflected, the more she decided this party was a great idea, after all. Rainbow was going to become a Wonderbolt!! What was there not to celebrate?!



### **#9: DT—Flying Sparks**

Cometsday. Dusk. Already, noise and light were spilling from Sugarcube Corner, and ponies in the streets were being drawn as by a magnet to this throwback to the days when Pinkie Pie lived in town and threw parties twice a week. A huge picture of Rainbow's face, in a Wonderbolt mask, was plastered to the front window. But Rainbow wasn't there. She was outside the Ponyville library, landing just as Spike, sporting his tuxedo jacket, hurried out.

"Rainbow!" he exclaimed. "What're you doing here? You'll be late for your own party!"

"Well," she pointed out, "it's not like the party *really* begins until *I* get there." It felt good to have her old swagger back. "Besides, Twilight wanted to meet me here for some reason."

Spike stared. "She did? She hasn't been seeing *anyone*!"

"Huh?"

"I mean, she's been like this for months, but all of a sudden it got way worse! She's been locked in her room for almost four days straight, and she won't even let *me* in!"

"Really? What's she doing in there?"

"Research! It's the same secret spell she started working on months ago, one that's supposed to be so difficult up until now *only alicorns* could cast it! But lately she's been acting like she's running out of time." He shook his head. "I just don't get it."

"Me neither. Is she even coming to the party?"

Spike took on a sulky demeanor. "Beats me. Probably not—I bet that's why she wanted to meet you. Just gonna say a quick goodbye and get back to work."

Rainbow sighed. Oh, well. She'd known she was going to have to summon up a bunch of goodbyes before the night was through—she just hoped this first one wouldn't be the hardest. "Well, guess I'd better go see her. I'll meet you at the party, Spike."

"Yep. I'll let 'em know they aren't having any fun yet."

"Not without yours truly!" winked Rainbow. Spike waved and hustled up the street, and Rainbow ventured into the great tree for what might be the last time.

It was dark inside, and quiet. No patrons. No sign of life. "Twilight?" she called.

There was a clatter of movement from upstairs. "Rainbow?" came Twilight's panicked voice.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm just on my way to the party. You know, the one that was your idea."

Hooves clomped from above, and then Twilight appeared on the staircase. "You're not dressed up."

Rainbow shook her mane. "Do I *ever* dress up, if I can help it?"

Twilight chuckled. "Well, you're going to have to start, soon."

Huh? Oh, right. "Ah, a flight's suit's different. It's on a whole 'nother level."

Twilight exhaled nervously. "It is indeed. Rainbow...I know the party's starting, and you don't want to be late, but...we should talk."

"Yeah, I know. You want to say goodbye and then get back to whatever you're doing."

"No—Rainbow—please." The unicorn came down to ground level and cleared a bench strewn with books so she could sit. To her surprise, Rainbow felt herself starting to tremble as she took a seat on the floor.

"So now you wanna talk," she said. "Now that I'm on my way out. Splinters, Twilight. I hardly ever see you anymore. It was bad enough when Pinkie left town, bad enough when Rarity bought all those buildings and went corporate. Bad enough when Applejack brought in all that staff and suddenly she was busy all day. But where did you

go? I come to the library and see Spike behind the desk—my friend Twilight's up being a recluse in her room! For months! And *now* you wanna talk?"

"Rainbow—you have to understand—"

But it was all slipping out, at last. "I'm sick of my friends fading away! What happened to what we had? Weren't we supposed to be a gang forever? The Elements of Harmony? The six best friends Ponyville ever had? And what happens? Rarity marries Applejack, Pinkie hooks up with Fluttershy, and for all I know, you're married to your magic. You want to know what, Twilight? Once, I would've looked at that Wonderbolt schedule, with its non-stop training and appearances and no vacation time, and I would've said: You're crazy! You may be the Wonderbolts, but if I don't get to spend at least a few weeks a year in Ponyville—with my *friends*—then you can go ahead and find somepony else for the job!! I would've said that, Twilight!"

"Rainbow, please! It doesn't need to—"

"But now?? Now that things are like they are? Who gives a fig?! Who cares?! I may as well pack up all the nothing I've got, leave town, and never look back! I may as well slip away, just like the rest of you. Only being who I am, I'll do it with flash. I'm not gonna be half here, half gone, making you wonder if I'm still around. I'm gonna be *gone*, like a shot, and you'll only see my face in the Equestria Daily. Because that's how I do things—when I'm driven to them. And the rest of you can just see if you miss me."

"Rainbow." Twilight was in tears now.

Rainbow bit her tongue. She hadn't meant to do that! She hadn't meant to let out all her frustrations in a big rant before the party... not when it would spoil her last meaningful moment with Twilight. Rainbow found herself wanting to cry, too. "I'm sorry," she mumbled.

Twilight's voice was cracked. "I have to show you something."

Rainbow stood back, puzzled. "Show me?"

Twilight rose from her seat, blinking away her tears. "You've probably been wondering what I've been working on so hard these last few months."

So this was about that? "Yeah? Yeah, I think everyone has."

"It's a spell. A very difficult spell, one Princess Celestia learned from her mother. She only uses it now and then, for friends in need. But when...when...when Pinkie threw you that big...coming out party..." Twilight paused, the tears returning. "...I started asking the princess about it. And asking. And asking." She hid her eyes, her voice hoarse. "And four months ago...she finally agreed to teach it to me."

Rainbow was utterly lost. "My coming out party? What does that have to do with...?"

"So she called me in to Canterlot, and she showed me the essentials, and left me with scrolls and books and exercises to do...and I did them. I read the original source material. I studied all the pieces until I knew them backwards and forwards. And these last few days, I finally put them together into a framework I know I can cast. I had to scramble, and I had to ignore poor Spike, but I got it done. I knew I had to get it done by tonight."

"Tonight? You mean you're gonna show me?"

Twilight heaved a tired, wispy breath. "Yes," she said, tears gleaming at the edges of her eyes. "Yes, Rainbow. I'm going to show you. Because it's all been...for you."

This was starting to freak Rainbow out. "For me?!"

Twilight nodded. She took another deep breath. And another. Rainbow could hear the pain in it. The fear. "What...what's going on, Twilight?"

"I just...I'm so scared," she whispered. She turned away. The darkness of the library hid her face, and Rainbow found herself scared, too. She couldn't look away, though. Her friend Twilight was counting on her...for something.

A ribbon of white seared through the air. Twilight's horn was glowing...glowing in two different colors now...sparkling. Another ribbon joined the first, this one baby blue. Sprinkles of white and gold filled the upper air. They settled over the two ribbons as they intertwined, and while Twilight closed her eyes, Rainbow kept hers wide open.

Now there were magical pulses on all sides of Twilight, and the ribbons curled to meet them on either sides. The sprinkles danced above

them, spurred by the vibrations of the magical pulse. They settled around Twilight, and the ribbons hugged closer, and the pulses grew tighter, wrapping themselves around the unicorn. Her whole body was engulfed in magic until she was jerking, half floating in the force of it, her horn now a sizzling bright white, her eyes tightly closed. The ribbons somehow found their way under her coat. Rainbow winced at the sight of it. They bulged under the guidance of the shimmering pulses, and with that, Twilight's body began to change. Her waist expanded. Her shoulders widened, her girth drew in tighter. Higher up, her crest stretched backwards, and her chin straightened, as did the bridge of her nose. Muscles grew subtly all over her body. Rainbow felt herself shivering, too. Was the spell taking her in?

But no. As the sparkles finally faded and the magical pulse subsided, Rainbow realized it wasn't the magic that was making her shake. Her body had recognized what was happening before her mind had. Twilight Sparkle had become a stallion!

The implications rushed like hormones through Rainbow's brain. *All for her?* Had to finish by tonight? "Twilight..."

Twilight was standing in a pool of light, the last thing to fade. Head raised, she—no, he—opened his eyes and raised a hoof. It returned gently to the floor; the head turned back. Rainbow couldn't say a word, nor could she look away.

"It worked, didn't it?"

Was that Twilight's voice? It was still fairly high-pitched, still precise and well-rounded, but now there was an all-different timbre to it. It was a male voice, and its owner had an unmistakably male body. Rainbow swallowed. Visions of her future did aerial stunts in her mind. "Yeah, it worked. Twilight? You...changed yourself?"

Twilight looked directly at Rainbow, freezing all her thoughts. "It's not permanent," he told her. "It lasts one day. And I won't be able to cast it again for a week. But that's enough...isn't it, Rainbow? Please...please. Tell me that's enough."

Rainbow stepped forward. She swallowed. She didn't know what to say. "Enough...enough for what, Twilight?"

Those amethyst eyes were locked on her. "Rainbow...you've won your dream. You're about to leave Ponyville...about to go off on the biggest adventure of your life. And all I want to say is...Take me with you! I

want to go too, Rainbow!"

Rainbow fell to her knees. She was so awash in emotion she could barely identify it as happiness. But that's what it was. "And...and to think...I was going to settle for some groupie, or roadie somewhere...but now..."

Twilight's eyes sparkled as he drew up with a smile. "...Now?"

"...I get to hook up with the most powerful unicorn in Equestria! And a friend of mine, to boot!"

"Only fitting for Equestria's most illustrious speedster! So you'll do it?" asked Twilight, tears glazing over his eyes. "You find me...attractive?"

Rainbow looked over the crevices and features of that new male body, but she couldn't even focus. "I...it's not even important if I like your body, Twilight. I'm sure it's fine, and we'll have plenty of time to find out, but...right now I'm just bowled over by the fact you did this at all! Four *months* of research...and pestering the princess before that...all for *me!*?"

The purple stallion smiled. "Rainbow, you have to realize...when you came out, it nearly broke my heart. I'd admired you so much, almost from the day I met you. You're amazing. A daredevil. A heartbreaker! I may not know much about love, but you? You won me over in ten seconds flat."

"So you went this far for me, huh? And you'll follow me through thick and thin, to Wonderbolt shows and photo shoots and parades and interviews?"

"Absolutely! I'll even be open about our arrangement, if you want me to. I have nothing to hide."

"What if the press starts giving Celestia grief over her favorite student going showbiz and changing sex just to please her Wonderbolt lover?"

"Believe me, Celestia knows," laughed Twilight. "We have her blessing."

Rainbow felt herself rising, and found she was fluttering her wings subconsciously. "Well, you've done it, Twilight. You've made me lighter than air. I've always liked you, and now I love you! I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you—" Rainbow broke off to chuckle over



a thought.

"What is it?"

She let herself settle back to the floor. "Something that occurred to me a few days ago. Our friends...they've paired up into their own weird worlds and gone larger than life. Rarity and Applejack...they've built little cities around themselves, surrounded themselves with employees...but they treat them as if they're toys. And Pinkie and Fluttershy...they've got a *fake* city, with tons and tons of toys...but they treat them like they were *ponies*. It's kind of the opposite!"

"I hadn't thought of that," acknowledged Twilight. "And us?"

"Well, we've got the chance to go really big," said Rainbow with a wink. "Big crowds, big cities...no two ways about it, we really *will* be larger than life."

"Huh! And yet," Twilight pointed out, "we'll be doing it while having fun. Entertaining ponies! When you get right down to it, *we'll* be the toys!"

Rainbow gaped, but then laughed. "You're right!" She shook her head, chuckling. "We just can't get away from those toys, can we?"

Not if we want to be larger than life," replied Twilight.

Rainbow felt her chest swelling and her heart pounding. She glanced out the window and noticed a flicker of light. "Oh gosh, I'd better get going. They'll be expecting me."

"You mean *we'd* better get going!" Twilight walked toward the door, opening it magically. "If I'm going to be leaving town suddenly, the least I can do is offer an explanation!"

Rainbow smiled hugely, picturing the impression Twilight would make. She extended her wings. "Twilight Sparkle, would you care to be my date for the party tonight?"

The well-formed stallion favored her with a graceful bow. "Nothing would please me more, Ms. Rainbow Dash."

They walked through the door into the night, letting themselves gravitate among with everyone else toward the festivities at the cake shop. The night air, slightly permeated with the scent of roman

candles, was enchanting.

"So what'll happen to Spike?" asked Rainbow. "Poor guy'll miss you."

~~"I know!" said Twilight. "He's getting completely shafted in all this! He's already been feeling vulnerable for the last few months while I was researching the spell and couldn't spend much time with him...and now he's going to lose me completely! He'll be an eleven year old in sole charge of an entire library who's just lost the only parent figure he's ever had. Add that to the fact that he's spent his whole life without a role model of his own species, and he's gonna need a loooooooot of therapy. I figure he'll probably wind up abandoning the library to Derpy and spend his nights after that in a bed in Rarity's factory, alone and adrift."~~

~~"So basically, screw him?" summarized Rainbow.~~

~~"Oddly enough, that's just what Celestia said," agreed Twilight with a grin.~~

"True, it'll be a shock for him. But he still has plenty of friends in Canterlot, and I think he's been missing them recently. I've arranged with my parents to take him back in, and Princess Celestia's offered to buy them all Wonderbolts season tickets."

Rainbow grinned. "Sounds like a plan." Another thought crossed her mind. "You know, if you're gonna be my lover on the road, you're gonna have to find some way to keep up. We Wonderbolts can travel pretty fast, you know."

Twilight swished his tail against Rainbow's haunch. "I figured you'd carry me," he teased.

Rainbow laughed. "You know, that might actually be the best way! You'd have to help, of course. I can't fly too fast while lugging a full grown stallion."

Twilight cocked his head . "How do you know? Have you ever tried?"

"Well, no but—" Rainbow gave another, bigger laugh. "I just figure. If I'm gonna be carrying one of Equestria's premier magicians around, I oughta get at least a *little* help."

Twilight leaned over to give Rainbow an intoxicating kiss. "Oh, you will, Rainbow. Believe me—while I'm in your grasp? Sparks. Will.

Fly."

And if the timbre of their ensuing kiss was any indication, that was no exaggeration.