Chapter 5

Spitfire walked over to her big brother and sat down.

“Hey,” she said. Her gaze became lost in the flurry of activity in the sky as Rainbow Dash rehearsed a section of the show with the team.

“Hey,” he replied. “What’s up?”

She didn’t say anything. There was so much she *could* say, yet none of it came out. The dazzling colors and explosions in the sky held her eyes in place. Rapidfire read her like an open book.

“Something’s wrong,” he said as he turned towards her. “What’s wrong?”

A warm breeze casually and carelessly drifted through her mane. She sniffled.

“Nothing.”

Rapidfire scoffed. “You know I know you better than that.”

Spitfire suddenly dove for her brother and pulled him into a desperate hug.

“Woah! What is it?” he said.

Spitfire took in a deep breath, and slowly released it.

“I miss them so much.”

At a loss for words, Rapidfire tentatively returned the embrace. “Hey. It’s ok.”

They stood in each other’s grasp for what seemed like an hour. To Spitfire’s surprise, her eyes stayed dry. Finally, Rapidfire spoke up.

“I’m curious.” He released her. “Why are you bringing this up now?”

She had wondered if she should tell him. He *is* her big brother, after all.

“It’s Rainbow Dash.”

“What about Rainbow Dash?”

“She’s just...”

A rainbow-colored bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and exploded in a shower of blue sparks as Rainbow Dash flew overhead.

“...amazing.”

“Soo...” Rapidfire began, trying to make light and humor of the situation. “Dash reminds you of mom and dad?”

“No, it’s what she *does* that reminds me.”

Rapidfire’s expression turned incredulous.

“I mean, all of her moves and tricks she does, her *style.*”

“I don’t follow.”

“The sonic rainboom! It *does* something to you. I don’t know how to explain it... it’s like nostalgia. Like really, really strong nostalgia.”

Rapidfire had begun to look worried. “Interesting. So Dash’s sonic rainboom makes you *nostalgic* for mom and dad?”

Spitfire sighed and returned her attention to the scene in the sky. She spoke as if speaking to herself. “And I just blurted it out, too.”

“Huh?”

“On the way over here, we were having a perfectly normal conversation, and I went all loopy, and just randomly brought up the fact that our parents died saving our lives.”

“Uh. You did?”

“I have no idea what the hay I was thinking. It was so random. Nothing made me do it, it sort of just *happened*. Even being around her makes me feel... strange.”

Rapidfire silently pondered his sister for a moment. “Do you need to go see somepony? That whole therapist thing doesn’t seem like such a bad idea now.”

She laughed. At least he was taking it lightly. “The rainboom made me cry, you know.”

Rapidfire turned and looked at Spitfire as if she had just punched him square in the face. “*You*

cried?" He looked up as Dash sky-wrote her name in cursive. "Wow. I've gotta see this."

Suddenly, Silvertongue's silvery voice boomed out from behind them.

"SPITFIRE!"

He flared his giant wings and shook the ground as he landed next to her holding a rolled-up newspaper.

"I think we have a bit of a problem." She took the newspaper from him, unrolled it, and came face to face with a huge headshot of Rainbow Dash, under a line of giant bold-print text.

A NEW WONDERBOLT

"Oh, great."

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The day before the Manehatten show, Rainbow Dash was on top of the world. She felt like she could do anything. She had perfected the show routines into virtuosic displays of limitless talent and ability. She moved with the Wonderbolts in perfect synchronization through the sky. She reached a level of visual excellence that she herself never thought possible.

It was no longer a sport. It was art.

Spitfire sat with a hoof on her chin in thought. “This is going to be the best show we’ve ever done.”

The Wonderbolts sat in a circle, water bottles in hoof, all eyes on their fearless leader.

“No, seriously,” she continued. “You have no idea how awesome it looks.”

“Splendid,” said Tyco, his Trottingham accent thick as ever. “At least somepony believes so. If it’s a complete disaster, we will have your opinion, dear Spitfire, to un-depress ourselves. As it were.”

“Hey!” piped up Fleetfoot. “That crash in Saddlesburg wasn’t totally *my* fault.”

Tyco put a hoof over his forehead in dramatic fashion. “Oh, the tragic end to the performance! In this act, dear Fleetfoot once again denies any and all responsibility to everything!”

Fleetfoot smiled. “You wanna take this outside?”

“We *are* outside, dear Fleetfoot. And spare me the quarrel, I can win over you in no more than one bout.”

“Oh really? Let’s see then!” yelled Fleetfoot as she dove for Tyco.

Dash sat and watched the altercation from the sidelines. They were just kids. The public figures she had idolized and adored, the ponies who had everything, and they seemed only about as mature as she.

Fleetfoot and Tyco wrestled to the ground, the others laughing and cheering them on.

“Alright, alright, knock it off,” said Spitfire. “We should actually *accomplish* something today.”

Fleetfoot released Tyco from a headlock and punched him on the shoulder before returning to her spot in the circle.

“So we haven’t practiced the finale yet,” said Spitfire. “I think that’s a good place to start.”

“Le piece de resistance,” added Soarin’, and he bumped Dash on the shoulder. “Miss impossible over here.”

Dash smiled as Rapidfire whooped in response to Soarin’.

“Oh, we get to see it now?” said Fleetfoot. “The rainboom?”

“Alright, Dash. Ready to amaze us?” said Spitfire.

Dash smirked. “I dunno. If I’m feeling like it, maybe.”

Spitfire rolled her eyes. “Alright then, you’re with me. Everypony else, terminal-delta. Start the grouping at dead-center.”

The rest of the Wonderbolts took off into the sky and gathered in a group.

“I’ll be with them,” said Spitfire. “You’ll need to start a few miles out of the stadium, so leave yourself plenty of time to get away.”

“Ok.”

Spitfire signaled to the group. They began flying in a tight circle, a point of red light growing brighter and brighter at the center.

“That light is your cue. You’ll have all the time you need to get there, but you’re gonna time the rainboom so that you break the barrier right through the center.”

“Easy peasy.”

“Awesome, let’s try it. Oh, and do it horizontally instead of vertically.”

“Sure. Wait- what do you mean?”

“Go sideways instead of towards the ground.”

Dash’s stomach shrunk to half its size.

“Ho- horizontal?”

“Yeah, we want the shockwave to expand perpendicular to the ground. Is that a problem?”

She had never considered this before. How could she have missed it? *Could* she do the rainboom horizontally? Gravity had *always* aided her in gaining speed, but was it enough? She had never tried it. Her mind suddenly in a maelstrom of questions and scenarios, Dash could only stutter.

“I- I- I think- I mean- well, if-”

Spitfire raised an eyebrow. “You *can* do it horizontally, right?”

“Y- yeah, of course!”

“Alright, then. Give yourself some range, and when you see the light, punch it.” She flew off to join the rest of the team. Dash took off in the opposite direction, sweat beginning to accumulate on the back of her neck.

“How the hay have I never tried this before?” she told herself as she flew away. “I mean, if I can do the sonic rainboom plus hundreds of other amazing moves nopony else can do, theres no *way* I can’t do it horizontally.”

She flew for several minutes, racking her brain for any time in the thousands of attempts at the sonic rainboom that she had done horizontally. Finally she turned around, and the Wonderbolts were a barely visible, tiny dot in the distance.

“It’s fine, it’s fine.” She wiped the sweat from her forehead. “There’s nothing I can’t do. I can do *everything.* I’m *Rainbow Dash*.”

The red light began to shine. Dash took in a deep breath and exhaled. With all of her might she shot forward, clawing at every bit of air in front of her. Immediately, it became clear. She wouldn’t even come close.

“COME ON!” she grunted through gritted teeth. The cone began to form around her as she rocketed toward the field. The wind ripped past her face. The ground became nothing but a light-brown blur. Her eyes watered as she squinted harder and harder. Every ounce of strength she could muster propelled her toward the target.

“COME ON, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” she yelled as she pushed harder and harder against the sound barrier. The bright, silvery cone around her had begun to move further and further away from her grasp. Lost in her stressed thoughts, she almost forgot to look up. The target was practically in front of her. She timed the jump, made a last push through the barrier, and time stopped.

Everything went completely still. Sound became non-existent. Dash un-squinted one eye. She had stopped moving completely.

“Oh horseapp-” She shot into the opposite direction, flailing around without control. Her face ate the dirt as she went head over hooves into the ground.

“Ugghh..”

“Dash! Are you ok?” said Soarin’ as he and the Wonderbolts landed next to her.

She snapped back up to her hooves, trying her absolute best to act as if nothing had gone wrong.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

Everypony stared at her with nondescript expressions. Such an expression on Spitfire’s face was almost unbearable. Dash looked away as she made eye contact.

“Um,” Spitfire began. “You *can* do it. Right?”

She couldn’t let Spitfire down. She wouldn’t do it. Nor would she sap her own pride. She *could* do the sonic rainboom sideways. She *had* to.

“Of- of course! I was just, you know. Messin’ around.”

Spitfire raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. Kind of a weird way to mess around. We kinda wanted to see it.”

Dash held her breath, her heart about to blast through her chest.

“Well, as long as you do it tomorrow,” Spitfire finished.

“It- It’ll happen,” said Dash. She had signed her own death warrant, and there was no taking it back.

“Teasing us, eh?” said Tyco. He cracked a grin. “I like your style.”

Spitfire sighed, subtly yet obviously disappointed. “Alright then, we’ll wing it.” She looked up at the setting sun as it rested on the horizon. “I think we’ll call practice. Go home, get a lot of sleep. We have a hay of a show tomorrow.” She flew up into the air. “We’ll take the jet to Manehatten, so be at the HQ at noon.”

Dash’s insides squirmed around. She felt like puking. She took long, heavy breaths.

“Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.”

“You sure you’re ok, Dash?” said Soarin’ as he took off after Spitfire. “You’re whiter than a ghost.”

“YES!” she suddenly yelled as she cracked a ridiculous smile. “I’M FINE!”

Soarin’ chuckled. “Kid, you really are a gem. See you tomorrow! Don’t party too hard.”

“Actually,” said Spitfire. “You guys go ahead, I want to talk to her.”

“Mkay,” said Soarin’. “See you later.” He flew away and the Wonderbolts followed.

Dash looked at Spitfire and her legs froze in place. She wished she could fly away, far away where she couldn’t disappoint Spitfire any further.

“Hey,” she said, her voice cracking.

Spitfire smirked. “Listen. About earlier, what I told you about my parents.”

“Y- yeah?”

“I’m really sorry. It was totally uncool, I have no idea what I was thinking.” She took a few steps toward Dash.

“No, it’s- it’s fine.”

“I hate to put you in this position, but that’s something that’s not supposed to get out. Even Soarin’ doesn’t know.” She took a few steps closer.

“Wow, r- really?”

“Yeah... yeah.” Her voice trailed off. She came even closer. She looked at Dash as if desperately searching for something, and expecting to find it in the most peculiar of places. She stopped in front of her, just on the edge of comfortable conversation distance.

Silence befell them. Dash felt the urge to speak, but something else matched it.

After an eternity, Spitfire looked away and finally spoke.

“You have no idea. What this means to me. What you do means to me. What...” she trailed off into silence for several seconds.

“...What *you* mean to me.”

She turned to face the orange setting sun and let out a deep sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m doing it again. I’m doing it *again!”* She turned back to Dash. “Ok, I’ve got to leave before I do something *really* drastic. I am having some serious issues right now.” She chuckled in an obvious attempt to laugh it off. “Can you get home ok?”

“Um. I guess.”

“Remember, the secret is out. Everypony in the world will know who you are by now.”

“O- ok.”

“Sleep like a rock. I’ll see you at noon tomorrow, no later.” She took off into the sunset, becoming lost in the orange sky.

Dash’s rump hit the ground.

“Oh buck.”

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Mane Arena: a worthy testament to the age of modern unicorn engineering. Visible for miles in every direction, its giant, concrete walls towered above the Manehatten skyline and spanned nearly half its width. Titanic, golden pylons extended out from the walls and curved into the sky, meeting at a single point above the field where a golden crest hovered in mid-air, shining bright in the sunlight. Rows upon rows of seats lined the inside walls, many of which were already filled. Crowds stood around the entrances, waiting and hoping for their chance to witness history.

Dash stared out of her airplane window. The sheer size of the structure crushed every bit of feeling inside her. She had only seen it on TV. In person, it seemed much larger.

“Quite a sight, huh?” said Soarin’. “Biggest field in the world. Quarter mile in diameter, capacity five hundred thousand.”

Dash shrunk into her seat as a shiver ran up her spine.

“Soarin’ would of course like to think of it in numbers,” said Tyco. “I find Mane Arena to be a stunning example of modern art.”

Soarin' rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

"The golden *pylons,"* said Tyco as he shot Soarin' a look. "Represent the marvelous wonder of magic and the infinite possibilities it holds, extending upward into the sky with indefinite end. Princess Celestia herself placed the spell keeping the crest suspended in mid-air."

"I hear she might even be at the show," added Soarin'.

"Great," said Dash. "Awesome."

"'Awesome?' You mean fan-freakin-tastic! If your rainboom can do what it did to me and Spitfire, just think how that crowd is gonna react."

Soarin' continued explaining to Dash everything there was to know about performing to "ultra-large" audiences, each little fact and detail smashing her confidence to pieces. Scenario after scenario ran through her head, each one ending with apocalyptic circumstances. There was no escaping. There was no turning back.

They reached the side of the arena, where two large doors began to open. The jet slowed to a hover and slowly drifted inside. A crowd of camera-flashing ponies stood outside the entrance, taking as many pictures as possible before the doors closed.

Out of the total darkness and silence inside the cabin came Spitfire's voice.

"Well. We're here."

Then came Soarin's voice, much louder and much more enthusiastic.

"GAME TIME!"

The Wonderbolts yelled and hollered in response.

"Grab your bags," said Spitfire. "Let's go be famous."

Rainbow Dash followed the Wonderbolts out of the jet and into a cavernous aircraft hangar lined with steel walls. The doors closed behind them and several overhead lights flashed on. A group of pegasi wearing suits and sunglasses stood next to a doorway in the corner. One of them stepped up and checked his watch.

"Half an hour." He looked at Dash from behind his sunglasses and pondered her for an uncomfortably long period of time. "If you would, fillies and gentlecolts, come this way."

The Wonderbolts followed as he turned on the spot and trotted towards the doorway in the corner. Dash's saddlebag carrying her flight suit hung around her like a lead weight.

They moved through a long, steel corridor through which several pegasi flew back and forth, frantically making preparations for the show. Every few seconds, one of them would stop and stare at the Wonderbolts in awe as they walked by. The further they walked, the more Dash began to realize that they were staring at *her.*

"Is that... that's... Rainbow Dash!"
"It's her, the new Bolt!"
"DO A SONIC RAINBOOM!"

Soarin' nudged her and grinned. Dash attempted a smile back. She never thought being famous would be so awful.

"The locker room is just around here," said the escort.

They turned a final corner, and Dash's legs froze. A bright light led out into the field at the end of the tunnel, and the sound of a half-million fans as they cheered over the filler rock music.

This was it. She was going to die.

"You coming?" said Spitfire from a nearby doorway. "Or are you too excited to move? I know that feeling."

Dash slowly followed Spitfire through the door, no longer making any attempt to hide her distressed demeanor.

"You ok?" said Spifire. "You seem a bit... anxious."

Dash waved her hoof. "I- I'm fine. Just a little- uh- nervous."

Spitfire laughed. "You'll be fine. Just have fun!"

They walked into a small, square room lined with lockers. Misty, Rapidfire, and the other Wonderbolts slipped into their flight suits without hesitation while Dash struggled to stretch the fabric over herself, her forelegs trembling profusely. She made occasional glances at the others as they talked to each other, laughing and joking without a care in the world.

Dash pulled the mask over her head and looked in the mirror. She didn't deserve to wear this.

"Dash, are you ok?" said Spitfire.

Dash jumped. “NO! YES! I mean- yes, I’m fine! Why?”

Spitfire recoiled slightly. “Well... it’s just your ears have been flopped for the last two hours. You’re sure you’re ok?”

Dash scoffed with small, maniacal chuckles.

Spitfire shrugged. “Ok then.”

Suddenly, an extremely animated voice came over the loudspeakers in the stadium. Dash jumped a few feet off the ground.

“FILLIES AND GENTLECOLTS!”

An impossibly loud roar echoed the voice. The floor shook, the lights flickered, and the ceiling tiles rattled in their sockets. Dash clenched her head in her hooves.

“Oh no. Oh no no no no no.”

“Woohoo!” yelled Soarin’, barely audible over the roaring and trembling stadium. “Listen to that!”

Dash looked up at Spitfire as dust began to fall from the ceiling. They made eye contact. Spitfire just smiled at her. She smiled as if nothing at all was wrong. The entire world could have been falling apart, and she wouldn’t have cared at all.

Then, the crowd began chanting. Each word shook the stadium like a giant bass drum.

RAINBOW DASH! RAINBOW DASH! RAINBOW DASH!

“That’s you, kid,” said Soarin’.

The escort opened the door. “Three minutes.”

“HERE TO PERFORM DAZZLING, GRAVITY-DEFYING ACTS OF AEROBATICS!”

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