

The Pursuit of Victory
by Vimbert the Unimpressive

I stood confidently upon the cloud floor, looking over all the other pegasi. None of them had half my skills; they were just lucky they got to see a little Dash. My body quivered with anticipation as I gazed out at the interior of the Cloudsdale arena. I'd been dreaming of this day for so long, and now that it had come, awesomeness awaited.

A large crowd of pegasi had packed the arena, all with their eyes on the same prize: a chance to become a Wonderbolt! Ponies from all over had flocked at hearing the unprecedented news that the Wonderbolts had two spots on the team open, and even just the screening to get here had been tough. Those that were left were only the best of the best. With me there, none of them had a chance, of course, but I guess it was nice for the Wonderbolts to humor them.

I licked my lips in anticipation, suppressing the urge to make as much noise as possible. This was it. I didn't care how many other fliers I had to get through to lay my hooves on that awesome uniform. This was my one chance. No distractions today, just me and the goal: be the best Wonderbolt ever! I did kind of wish my friends had been there, though. I glanced around, as though my sudden longing could make them appear like unicorn magic. I knew I had to focus. In the end, it was up to me.

A sudden clamor caught my attention. Three Wonderbolts had alighted on the cloud stage, in costume and smiling down at the crowd. The Wonderbolts were **RIGHT THERE OHMYGOSH** but I didn't wanna seem like some crazy fanfilly. I just had stay cool, stay calm; ponies knew who I was. Unlike some of those wannabes, I didn't have to *try* to get attention.

Despite my attempts at self-discipline, I could feel my eyes widen as my idols trotted to the front of the stage. Spitfire lifted a hoof and removed her goggles, gazing over the crowd with a friendly, yet appraising look. "Hey there. We all know what we're here for: a few of you lucky ponies are going to have the chance to become one of us! We're really glad to see so many strong-looking fliers out there today. But just what is a Wonderbolt? Just a pony who flies and looks good?" She paused a moment, as though to let it sink in.

Soarin' muttered, "That's all I ever thought we were, 'Fire."

A quick chorus of laughter answered him as many in the crowd visibly relaxed. Spitfire shot a glare at Soarin'. In response, he just shrugged and offered a goofy grin.

"Now, as I was *saying*," Spitfire said as she returned her attention to us, "the Wonderbolts have been in Equestria for years, stretching back to the era of..."

I immediately tuned the lecture out. This was taking *forever*! Seriously, how could the buildup to something so awesome be so boring? I scratched my forelegs together unconsciously, betraying impatience. How in Equestria could everypony else can handle all this waiting?

"...And so, trying to join the Wonderbolts is a pursuit that should not be taken lightly." For a brief, horrifying moment, I was sure that Spitfire was staring right at me with a disapproving look. The Wonderbolt's eyes narrowed, and I could somehow feel the team captain's stare noting all my

weaknesses, all my failings in that brief moment. Spitfire soon directed her gaze elsewhere, but I was left shaken.

Oh, horseapples! Was that going to come back to bite me in the flank? Did she think I wasn't serious about the Wonderbolts? Did I blow it already? I gotta pay more attention! Battling my boredom, I bit back a yawn and stared at Spitfire so intensely, I could have been undressing her with my eyes. Er, not that I would, of course.

Spitfire continued, "...In any case, we're glad to see so many of you came out to give it your all." A few other costumed Wonderbolts flew down and started distributing numbers to the excited crowd. "You've all been selected as some of the most promising fliers in Equestria, but now you've got to prove you can soar above the herd. We'll be seeing each of you fly individually first. If you pass this round of auditions, then you'll fly with a few of us; see how you handle flying in formation. There's no I in team... or Wonderbolts." She paused for a moment, drinking in the anticipation of the crowd, before she and Soarin' flew over to the stands, sitting on a pristine cloud and chatting with each other.

I could have died right then, and I think I'd have gone out with a smile on my face. I'd get to fly with the Wonderbolts before I was even in **again**?! This was so *awesome*! Best day ever already! Eagerly, I shoved my way through the crowd, trying to grab a good number. "Come on, outta the way, Best Young Flier coming through!" I shouted as the mass of ponies arrogantly refused to give way.

I swiped a number from a bemused-looking Wonderbolt, hoping for a good position... My heart sank. Twelve. Twelve was soon. Soon was not good. My pupils narrowed in panic as I tried to estimate how many other hopefuls were present. "Oh, man, there's gotta be, like, two hundred ponies here..." I moaned, my mind racing with doomsday scenarios.

"Actually, there are two hundred and forty-one," a voice commented.

I turned, not nervous at the sound of that steady voice at all, to see a different Wonderbolt grinning at me. "Say, you're the one who saved us at the Young Flier's Competition... you nervous?"

I chuckled, praying none of my nervousness at talking to a Wonderbolt showed. Play it cool, Dash. I'd be one of them in no time. "Heh heh... m-me? N-no way! You're lookin' at the next Wonderbolt right here!"

The Wonderbolt chuckled. "Well, I know a few of the others are looking forward to seeing your routine. Got another Sonic Rainboom in store for us? Spitfire really seemed disappointed she was unconscious when you pulled it off." A few heads turned and gasps spread throughout the crowd as more ponies recognized me.

A wide grin spread over my face as I noticed the other ponies' reactions. They didn't have a chance; there sure was something to be said for star power. "Oh, well, you know... I was thinking I might try something a little cooler. The Sonic Rainboom's just getting a little old, you know?" I remarked, desperately trying to sound casual.

Another low murmur spread through the crowd near me at my words.

“Better than a Sonic Rainboom?”

“Who the hay does she think she is?”

“What's a Sonic Rainboom?”

“Oh no, she's here? I don't have a chance... I knew I never should have come here...”

The Wonderbolt's grin faded and he gave me a serious look that definitely did not make me break into a cold sweat again, and my knees weren't shaking at all. “That's quite a claim, Rainbow Dash. Here's hoping you can back it up.”

I felt my grin fade a bit as he flew over to the unoccupied Wonderbolts. The group started murmuring. A few goggled sets of eyes occasionally glanced at me. Suddenly, I felt very, very exposed and alone. Maybe I'd said a little too much? I was sorta banking on the Rainboom to impress them, now that they wouldn't **all** be unconscious when I did it would help. Even so, the fact that I saved the lives of Spitfire, Soarin, and the... other one. Why couldn't I think of his name? What was I thinking about? Come on, focus, focus, focus! I hit my head with one of my forehooves several times.

Summoning all my considerable acting skills to hide the unease I was only feeling just a little bit, I leisurely trotted into the contestant waiting room, joining a herd of others who were waiting anxiously. The minutes flew by as I paced back and forth, stretching out my wings in anticipation while mentally running through my planned routine.

I'm pretty sure I was talking to myself a little, because a few ponies gave me some odd looks. Then again, I was hardly the only one that was a little nervous. This was the **Wonderbolts**, for crying out loud! It was every pegasi's dream to join them. It may have been everypony's dream, but it was *my* destiny. Applicants came and went, and number eleven had just trotted off. Quite a few minutes passed as everypony began to gossip about what was taking this particular pony so long.

“Most of them were only in there for a couple of minutes!”

“D'ya think one got accepted?”

“Oh no, what if we're all out already?”

A slight panic came over the crowd as the whispers grew louder. I swallowed, trying to ignore anything that might break my concentration. Couldn't look weak. I plopped on a nearby part of the cloud floor, stuffing a few fragments of it in my ears to drown the foals out, but the murmurs were only muffled for the moment.

This was taking *way* too long! Oh no. What if one of the first few was so awesome, they just decided to not see anypony else try? No no no no no, they'd wait for me. A grin spread over my face. I was the best flier in Equestria. I just needed to prove it.

I gulped, suddenly noticing some members of aerobatic teams less prestigious than the Wonderbolts present. Sky Sprint of the Wonder Wings, Surprise from the Aerobatic Aces, and Hairpin

from the Sky Dancers were all there, standing somewhat aloof from the rest. I guess everypony really did want to be a Wonderbolt. Did I even have a chance? I looked at the assembled ponies with what might have been easily mistaken for fear on my face.

I gulped and shook my head to clear away my so-not-loyal thoughts. No. I could **do** this. I **had** to do this. So what if I was up against ponies who had been doing aerial shows for years? I began to sweat and shake slightly. So what if I wasn't quite as famous as the pros that were here? I bit on the cloud to muffle a scream of frustration at my mutinous thoughts. It wasn't like they had a massive advantage or anything from all that experience, right?

"Shut up!" I yelled, and suddenly it was very silent. I turned, expecting a horde of curious faces, and started to apologize. "Er, sorry about... that..." I trailed off as I saw what everypony was *really* looking at.

A Wonderbolt had stepped in, and the low murmurs that had been running through the tightly packed ponies had been immediately silenced. I knew I could do this. Nothing but me and the sky, the way it had always been. I knew I could do this. I quickly got to my hooves and removed my makeshift earplugs, a confident smirk spreading over my face. It wasn't just me flying: all my friends were cheering for me, even if they weren't here! My grin widened as I slowly pushed through the rabble. When I had those five ponies with me, nothing could stand in my way! I knew I could count on them all to be thinking of me. A warm feeling stirred within me. With those ladies backin' me up, I was unstoppable! Nothing was above my reach.

A blubbing, hysterical red pegasus with a thundercloud cutie mark stumbled past the door. "No! I am good enough... I'm... it's my... destiny..." The despondent pony exited the arena, eyes still brimming with tears. She'd get no sympathy from me, 'cuz I was a winner, and she seems to have confused her destiny with mine. I grinned.

"Rainbow Dash," the Wonderbolt said simply. I shot to the air, hovering over the other waiting fliers. Oh man, he called me by name, not number! That was a good sign! Right? If they knew about me already, that was going to be an advantage!

"Yep, right here!"

A small smile crept over the Wonderbolt's face. What was that supposed to mean? Was there something on my face? Did I do something wrong? "You're up."

I gulped in a totally not fearful manner, and I definitely was not feeling my knees wobble.

Just me. I could do this. My eyes narrowed as I gazed out at the now nearly empty arena, devoid of ponies except for Spitfire, Soarin', and I. I inhaled sharply, willing myself to taste everything in the air. No distractions. No hesitation. Just awesome. The sky was mine. A small twinge of panic ran through my body, unbidden. Could I really do this? I shook my head violently, not caring how nervous I looked. I just had to stop horsing around and fly, and the rest would take care of itself.

“Rainbow Dash!” a voice called out.

“Uh, I, yes?” I whirled to face the small cloud the two Wonderbolts were sitting at.

“Begin,” Spitfire intoned emotionlessly.

I gulped. Then, mustering all the bravado in my bones, I cried, “All right! Now prepare to witness a grand encore of history being made... uh... again!” Beads of sweat rolled down my forehead, stinging my eyes. **Focus.** No pony ever expected a Wonderbolt to give a speech, right? Well, except for Spitfire, and for Cloud Ray, their last captain, who served in Her Majesty's Guard, but that was clearly beside the point.

I shook my head and took off into the sky, weaving between columns of clouds. Phase one. I passed between the columns without a hitch, gaining speed the whole time. A low whistle sounded from somewhere. They must've noticed that I'd improved! Still, I had to start breaking out the new stuff.

Grinning, I wasted no time in gaining altitude and rounding some clouds in quick succession, making them spin. Phase two. I grinned, remembering the Best Young Flier's Competition, and kept my distance as I circled the clouds, but remained close enough that the clouds spun. Now, for the twist!

Flying near my impressive non-Rainboom top speed, I bucked each cloud toward a central location, making them combine into one cloud. Flying underneath it, I bucked the huge cloud—one that most pegasi couldn't have budged—at an angle that sent it soaring skywards. Time for the grand finale—Rainbow Dash, mistress of aerobatics **and** weather control! Double the threat, double the awesome!

A mad grin spread over my face as I soared high into the sky, zooming above the spinning cloud mass and gaining speed. Turning sharply, I felt my eyes water and cheeks flap as the sound barrier formed up around me. The cloud mass loomed beneath me, the other final obstacle for me to overcome. With a wild cry, I soared downwards with all my might, extending a forehoof before me and closing my eyes, only to find myself straining against the sound barrier, which refused to yield.

No! No no no no! Not here! Not now! My mind screamed at me and worked furiously at different backup tricks I could pull if this one failed as the barrier stubbornly refused to shatter. I put everything I had into driving forward, refusing to fail no. I felt the barrier start to yield, and opened my eyes with a grin, only to see the giant cloudball almost in my face, the timing of my entire routine thrown off by my sluggishness, as I hadn't moved forward at all.

Oh crap.

The cloud slammed into me with all the force of a cliff, halting my advance as the sound barrier simultaneously snapped back, catapulting me skyward with surprising speed. Dazed, I attempted to regain control, only to smash into an errant cloud. I screamed with pain as a few pinions tore off my left wing.

Was this how it ended? Me, a failure? In the blink of an eye, the countless hours I'd spent

practicing for the Wonderbolts flashed by me. My whole life had been in preparation for this moment. Would I give up? No. This didn't end here. As long as I was still breathing, I'd keep going. I'd faced *far* worse than this.

“**No!**” I shouted, throwing myself towards the arena below with new-found energy. The sound barrier began to form up around me, almost seeming to mock my failure from only moments before. “Not this time.” Then, raising my voice to a shout, I called, “Hear me, Cloudsdale! I am *Rainbow Dash!*” Just as I roared my name in challenge at the new barrier, I smashed through it, zooming downwards as a massive “boom” behind me signaled the start of a Sonic Rainboom. “Yeahhh! And don't you ever forget it, sound barrier!” I whooped, doing a quick loop as I rocketed through the air.

Whipping my head around, I spotted another cloud near the arena that I'd have to incorporate into my plan, to make up for my earlier failu—miscalculation. I flew around it a few times, setting it spinning at an unbelievable speed, then sliced through it while mid-Rainboom from multiple angles, creating a dazzling pattern in the sky accented by a few tufts of cloud left in my wake. That was only the beginning. I grinned as I spun around all the clouds, moving faster than I ever had and striking each. This must work. It had to work. There was never only option but victory for me.

I landed on a cloud fragment and halted just as all the mini-clouds flashed with lightning at once, outlining my confident figure. I stood, wings outstretched, as proud and as pleased as could be. I turned, hoping the other part of the plan had worked. A true work of art greeted my eyes: my cutie mark, made entirely of clouds and my own rainbow trail. The stunt had taken countless hours of practice, but now, seeing the fruits of my labor, I had never felt better. I turned, readying my best “humble” demeanor for the no-doubt amazed Wonderbolts. “No, no, I...” My words died as I saw their expressions.

The two lead Wonderbolts remained impassive as they stared at me. Even the normally friendly-looking Soarin' looked as stiff as a Royal Guard. After all that, nothing? I took a midair bow as I headed for the arena's center. “And there you have it! Pulling off a move most thought was a legend and making it something even better? All in a day's work!” I could've sworn I saw Spitfire crack a smile. That was a good sign. That was a good sign. If Spitfire was smiling, I was in for sure.

“Nice to see that while I'm conscious,” Spitfire remarked as an ecstatic smile spread over my face and I drank in the captain's praise like a dying pony would quaff water. “Alright, we'll let you know when the group tests happen next.” Group tests? That meant I did it! I moved on for sure! Aw yeah! Halfway there! As I saluted, whooped, and flew energetically back to the waiting area in the main building, I perked my ears to try to overhear their whispered voices.

“Well?”

“Definitely.”

“Really? Because...”

“...**Definitely**, she... earned.” My brow furrowed, frustrated my hearing wasn't good enough to pick up all of what they'd said.

Being a weather pony was never good for your ears; work a thunderstorm or three, and suddenly the deafening thunder stops deafening you. I'd gotten used to it, but I knew a few ponies who'd tried to claim disability after a few point-blank encounters with thunderheads. Not a bad idea... if I just wanted to sit on my flank for the rest of my life! I'd never understand lazy ponies. I yawned. After all that exertion, I could use a nap.

I paraded my elation with pride as I trotted back into the room, wings flared. "Well, ya may as well all go home, 'cuz I've got this one sewn up, guys!" I proclaimed, earning me a few dirty looks. I chuckled. "C'mon, lighten up. Though seriously, I pity whatever pony's on next. ...You can still probably see what's left of my trail from my latest *Sonic Rainboom* when you go out there. Consider it a 'good luck' from the one and only Rainbow Dash!"

A purple pegasus began to weep openly. I rolled on the floor, laughing. Victory was sweet.

A few hours and a lot of boring waiting around later, we all gathered in the arena to hear the results. Soarin' stood on a central cloud. I craned my neck, looking around for Spitfire, but she didn't seem to be in the arena, which I thought was a little strange. I quickly forgot about my concerns as Soarin' flashed his most winning smile at the crowd, causing a few fillies to sigh and faint. I just snorted and gazed on, unimpressed.

"We started the day with two hundred and forty-one brave fliers, all eager to prove themselves. We really wish we could use all of you, but we have to narrow it down to just twenty."

I felt my jaw drop. "Twenty?" I murmured. That was going to mean a lot of disappointed ponies. It would sure suck to be them! All around me, exclamations of concern were echoing from many suddenly nervous-looking ponies. The odds were against me, but that hadn't ever stopped me before. I relaxed a bit, snuggling into the cloud I was sitting on with a yawn. There was no better time to keep my cool than when everypony else was losing theirs.

Soarin' frowned, motioning for the crowd to quiet. Slowly, the panicked voices died down. "Right... anyway, the following ponies will be moving on to the second and final round of our auditions..."

My ears stiffened, the only outward sign of my giddy excitement. I felt like a schoolfilly waiting for a birthday present that she'd already found hidden under her parents' bed, so she already knew what it was, but was still excited for it all the same. Not that I'd ever done that. Nope, not me!

Soarin' looked down at a clipboard and began to rattle off names quickly, making sure to enunciate. "Sky Dancer. ***Rainbow Dash...***"

His voice quickly faded into nothing as time seemed to slow to a crawl. Yes! I made it in! Not that there was ever any doubt! Oh man, just wait until I told the girls about this! I clapped my hooves to my mouth, barely restraining a gleeful shriek of joy. This really was the best day ever. Eventually, I pulled myself away from my frothy glee and paid attention to Soarin' as he wrapped up his address.

“And so we wish you all the best, and, uh, hope to see even more amazing moves from those of you left! We'll start in fifteen minutes. Take a little break. You all deserve it.” Soarin' grinned again and flew off to join a few other Wonderbolts who were starting to file into the arena.

Oh, right. The second round. I pouted and sat on my cloud. Ugh, what a chore. He said my name second, so **clearly** I scored second best on whatever point thingy they were using to score us. Couldn't we just get skip to when I was appointed team Super-Captain?

Suddenly, I remembered the damage my left wing had taken and folded it over, examining it closely. “Well, it doesn't look too bad... If I could pull off a Sonic Rainboom with that injury, the rest of the flying should be okay.” Sure, I mean, I'd probably want somepony to look at it back in Ponyville, but it'd be fine. Yeah. A little thing like that couldn't stop me! I grinned.

I surveyed the few ponies that were left. Unsurprisingly, most of the ponies from other aerobatics teams were still in the running, as few as a few very nervous-looking amateurs. Without a doubt, I looked way more awesome than those rookies. I stopped my knees from shaking, not that I'd been nervous at all. It was an itch. “W-well,” I remarked, puffing my chest out, “soon, the whole world will know the greatness that is... Rainbow Dash. I mean... more than they do now.”

“Do you always talk to yourself?” a nearby voice said, clearly mocking me. I whipped my head up and glared at a blue-coated pegasus who was looking down at me with a foalish grin.

“Only because I'm the awesome-est flier here to talk to. And, really, why bother with second best?” I relaxed again, determined not to show the newcomer how nervous I totally was not.

The other pony, clearly intimidated by my casual awesomery, flew off, giggling for some reason that clearly wasn't connected to the rivers of sweat that weren't running down my face. I ignored him. I could totally see the pressure of competition getting to others. But not me! No ma'am. In no way was I worrying about looking like a foal in front of my lifetime idols, particularly since I already screwed up in auditions. I definitely wasn't worrying about whether or not my advancement was just out of pity, or from the fact that I saved the Wonderbolts' lives. Not at all.

So, when the time for the second round was called, I in no way looked like a shivering, incoherent, frightened foal about to have her hooves clipped for the first time. As always, I radiated coolness, awesomery, and attitude. Well, maybe I was just a teensy-weensy bit nervous. But only a little! Rainbow Dash did *not* back down from a challenge.

After the losers had left the arena, twenty of us lined up on a cloud, eagerly awaiting the Wonderbolts' instructions. Only five would advance. I knew I was going to be one of the five, of course, but I couldn't help but worry about all those other ponies whose dreams were about to be crushed and would probably invent some sort of crazy lie to delude themselves with. But I was different. I was going to win.

“Bring it on,” I muttered with a glare at the other competitors.

“Wow, Dashie! Sounds like you were super-duper-awesomeriffic!” Pinkie Pie cheered, giving me a warm hug as she dashed around to my seat at her table. I grinned.

“Thanks for coming, girls,” I said.

“Not at all, Rainbow Dash. I’m so happy that you made it in!” Twilight joined in the growing hug. The others quickly followed, and although I was embarrassed, this was kind of nice.

Eventually, the hug had to end, and we all went back to being crowded around a table in Pinkie’s apartment, staring at a large cake Pinkie had made. A pretty awesome icing drawing of me was beneath the words “Congratulations, Wonderbolt Dashie!” in Pinkie’s clumsy frosting writing. I chuckled. “Aw, this is all so nice, you guys...”

Rarity beamed across the table at me. “Well, darling, we simply could *not* let such a *momentous* occasion pass by without a delightful little celebration, now could we?”

I chuckled. “Well, guess not. It’s not every day I become a Wonderbolt!” I did a quick flip in the air.

“Hey, y’all ready for some cake?”

Not needing any further prompting, Twilight neatly sliced the cake into exactly six evenly-sized proportions and dished them up for us. Pinkie, of course, dug in face-first, over Rarity’s objections. I begged off most of my slice, saying I had to watch what I ate. I caught a kind of worried look from AJ, but most of the others accepted it without question.

We talked about how awesome I was without question, and I think that little squirt who looked up to me so much poked her head in a few times. It was a great end to a disappointing day. I went home last, offering to help Pinkie clean up some of the decorations she’d put up. I was about to leave, when Pinkie asked, “So, Rainbow Dash... where’s your Wonderbolts uniform?”

I froze. The uniform! “Uh, it’s gotta be delivered. Y’know, gotta make sure it fits me perfectly and everything. Can’t fly in a loose costume!” I turned and gave what I’m fairly sure was a confident smile to Pinkie Pie.

Her eyes narrowed briefly, but she soon replied with as much enthusiasm as ever, “Okey-dokey! Gotta say, seeing you in a Wonderbolts outfit will just be the greatest thing *ever*! I mean, sure, there was that time I actually managed to *make* my legendary, totally famous Chocolate-Raspberry-Almond-Peppermint-Blueberry-Walnut-Vanilla Cupcakes without blowing up the kitchen, but I mean, really, what could compare to something like that!”

“I, uh... sure?” As usual, Pinkie left me totally confused. I finished taking the last banner off the wall. “Well, that’s all of them, Pinkie!”

“Thanks!”

After taking home a slice of cake that Rarity had refused for fear of dirtying her precious coat, I

flew back home with a heavy heart. I knew the girls meant well, but that didn't change what had actually happened. I slowly entered my home and flopped down on the floor, lethargically staring at a small note. Normally, I'd have been thrilled to get a note from Spitfire herself, but this one was a little different.

Much as I didn't want to, I picked up the note again and read it. My brow furrowed in irritation. "Next year, huh?" I flung the note away with as much force as I could, but the note floated down slowly to the cloud floor of my house. I looked at the cake I'd brought home, then at my rejection notice, then at the cake again, and muttered, "Oh, why not," and started scarfing down the cake.

It was the most delicious, bitter slice of cake I'd ever eaten.

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