

Grounded

“Good Morning, miss Rainbow Dash!”

The voice itself was merely a razor blade running along the back of her eyeballs – that was to say, not a concern. What was a concern was the white hot poker that ran through her head and exploded into her brain. It was so disorienting that it took her a few bites of empty air to get a grip on the covers and pull them up over her eyes. “Mrghfhayurduring” she mrghfed.

“It’s a beautiful day outside, Miss Rainbow Dash!” Said that bubbly voice, and she groaned under the covers as another window was opened, pouring more sunlight into the room. Even with her eyes squeezed shut and head hidden under the blanket it was still visible; a glow of thick, bloody red.

“What would you like for breakfast, miss Dash?” The voice continued, happily talking to itself in chirpy obliviousness to the agony the sunlight was causing. And while she was hungry – really hungry – she also felt sick and slightly nauseous and the idea of food made her empty stomach churn.

On the other hand, the idea snuck up inside her mind like an Asshorssin, someone else making me breakfast isn’t something to rule out this early in the morning.

“Yuhh fine,” she said, pulling the blanket down off her face and rubbing her eyes with her hooves. It was still way too early for coherent sentences.

“I’ll take that as a yes. You keep off that wing while I’m gone,” said the smiling white-red blur before walking off into the hideously bright sunlight. Wing?

Her vision finally began to adjust and she began to get a good look at the room she was in. A big bed, two huge windows, everything clean and packed away and strange machines and – she froze in place. This was a hospital. She had no idea how she’d got here.

Immediately, she jumped out of bed, and just as immediately crashed to her face when her wings failed to catch her. Dazed, she looked over her shoulder. One of her wings was encased in a series of bright white bandages.

It was kind of intellectually horrifying. She had no memory of it happening. It didn’t hurt. But she could feel a sort of dull, bare ache there. The kind of grating itchiness that came with a lack of feathers. She stood up slowly, looking over her shoulder at the bandaged wing. Partially blank staring, partially trying to remember how or what, and partly waiting for streamers to drop and somepony to shout “April Fools!”

What happened was the Nurse came back in pulling a cart full of food, gasped, and shunted her

back into bed hurriedly. “You’ve got to relax! You’ll pull your stitches!”

“What...” Rainbow Dash croaked.

“Well, as it was explained to me,” said the nurse, pushing down on the wing and stretching it out – not being gentle and causing a brief burst of pain, like a momentary cramp – “You were trying a hideously risky manoeuvre called the Comet’s Keelhaul and messed it up. Your friend carried you all the way here, and good thing she did. You’ve got a compound fracture there, young filly, and that cast’s staying on for a month.”

“Applejack dragged me all the way here?” Rainbow Dash said, for some reason only able to focus on the idea that she was going to have to work so hard to get one back over Applejack.

“Applejack? No, she’s out of town,” said the Nurse, doing something that made Rainbow bite her lip, “It was that quiet one. Pink mane.”

“Fluttershy?” Rainbow put the name to the description, but there was an outright disconnect between the word ‘Fluttershy’ and ‘Dragged all the way here’. There was no world where that was possible.

“Fluttershy, that’s right. She’s asleep outside. Waited here all night. Poor thing, I told her she’d catch a chill in that corridor but wouldn’t budge...” the nurse was beginning to natter on, but Rainbow wasn’t really following.

“Wait. Wait, wait you’re saying Fluttershy brought me here?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, isn’t it?”

“Fluttershy.”

“Yes.”

“Picked me up and carried me here.”

“I don’t see why it’s so surprising. Ponies can do incredible things when they’ve got the right motivation.”

Rainbow Dash couldn’t exactly deny that – her last Sonic Rainboom had kind of been just that – but she still couldn’t picture Fluttershy doing anything except running to find help. The nurse had to be mistaken. Maybe she’d talked an animal into it.

The nurse tugged on the bandage, which broke her train of thought. “There. Now no flying, no running, no stress on that wing at all. It has to have lots of bed rest.”

“A MONTH!?!” Rainbow suddenly shouted at the top of her lungs, leaping out of bed again, the delayed reaction finally sinking in.

“An entire month,” said the Nurse, giving her an ominous glare, “Of complete. Rest.”

“How am I supposed to go without flying for a month?” Rainbow said, starting to breathe too fast, “The Skyfire Competition’s in five weeks!”

“Then if you’re good you’ll be ready in time,” said the nurse happily. Rainbow Dash looked at her as if she’d just grown a second horn.

“READY IN TIME!? I’ve got to spend that time practicing! Every other pegasus is going to! I’ll be out of shape! I’ll be out of practice! I can’t go through my entire routine in one week!” She was already picturing it, hearing the voices. You’re a one trick pony, Rainbow Crash. You’re Rainbooms or nothing. You must really love hospitals, I can’t think of why else you’d crash that often... Without realizing it she’d started to curl up a bit, a familiar old shiver settling into place.

She was being patted awkwardly on the back. “It’s not all bad. You can go next year.”

Rainbow Dash let out a sound somewhere between a whimper and a squeak.

“Oh, there there, dear. Eat your food up and I’ll go and get your friend.” The nurse patted her on the shoulder again and walked out.

Rainbow looked over at the food, waited until no one was looking, then grabbed the hayflakes and started eating rapidly, trying to get as much down before anyone came back in. It was awful. It was so dry and sharp it scratched her mouth and throat, and left a tiny bit of skin hanging from the roof of her mouth that would irritate her all day.

She stepped away from the cart, brushing down just in time to see a very sleepy looking Fluttershy led into the room. She made sure she was standing straight – couldn’t show weakness, especially not now – despite the ugliness of the bandaged wing.

“Hey, Fluttershy,” she said, “Let’s get out of here,”

Fluttershy nodded, whispered a very soft “Thank you” to the nurse, and followed in Rainbow’s wake.

*

Rainbow Dash’s confidence slowly recovered as she walked home. “Oh yeah, it doesn’t hurt at all,” she was telling Fluttershy, who was listening closely and nodding along. “I’m fine. Better

than fine. I'll be out of this thing in five days, just you watch me," she said. If she closed her eyes when she bragged it sounded true even to her.

But when she opened them she was looking up at her house. Her house, fifty feet in the air. That she couldn't reach.

Her mouth opened quietly in shock. Looking up at that huge, terrible gulf that she had no way of crossing suddenly drove it home.

Stuck.

"I said, mmph mmph mm," she barely caught the mumble at all, and turned her head to look at Fluttershy.

"What?"

"I said..." Fluttershy looked down and pawed the dirt, "You can stay at my place while your wing heals up,"

"Nah, it's fine," Rainbow Dash said, looking back up to the cloud castle without a second thought, "I just need to figure this out. Maybe I could borrow that balloon..." She winced at the thought of having to fly the balloon home. She would never. Ever. Ever. Live that one down.

Fluttershy cleared her throat, a sound like a mouse coughing. Rainbow Dash looked around, still frustrated – but it *had* to be important if Fluttershy had decided to be audible.

"I've got a signed picture from the Red Stallion," she said in the course of a single breath.

"The Red Stallion?" That got Rainbow's full attention. He was a legend. The only reason he wasn't a Wonderbolt was because the Wonderbolts needed an archenemy. He led a team of Pegasi called the Red Stallion's Flying Circus, and contested Celestia's rule of Equestria as a sky pirate. Rainbow Dash didn't even think to ask why she'd brought this up now. "**The** The Red Stallion? How? Where? When?" Some distant part of her mind was vaguely aware she was being manipulated.

"This way," Fluttershy said, and began to canter towards her home. Rainbow Dash didn't hesitate in following.

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Rainbow Dash didn't come here often because it weirded her out. She'd often wanted to grab Fluttershy and ask her how she could live in such an enclosed space. The earth ponies, yes, sure, but it was a nightmare for anyone with wings. The windows on the ground floor were too

small to fly through, and the ones upstairs easily closed and bolted. The roof was also way too low. Why live in a place where you couldn't *do* anything?

Oh yeah, she thought uncharitably, it's great if you don't do anything.

"I'll go and get the picture," Fluttershy said, hopping up the stairs (Stairs! What was the point!?). Rainbow Dash was left alone in Fluttershy's living room. The wall clock clicked way too loudly. There was a kind of scratching noise coming from the walls. There were warbles coming from the interior birdhouse, and she snapped her head around when she saw something scurrying out of the corner of her eye.

She cautiously paced over to the wall and looked behind the chair she thought she'd seen it go behind. She shifted the chair with one quick movement and looked underneath. Nothing. She was imagining things – then she heard a pencil drop off a desk behind her.

She spun and lunged, jumping up on the table just in time to see something flash around a corner. Wings or no wings, she thought, you're not getting away. That was more or less her only reason; to prove she was faster.

She dived around the corner, hitting the ground in a skid and launching herself into a slide that took her under a chair and jumping over an intervening coffee table. She flapped her wings to stabilize her fall. It was only after she spun and crashed into the base of the stairs she remembered why that was a stupid idea.

Fluttershy hurried down the stairs at the sound of the crash to find Rainbow upside-down against the stairs. Immediately, Fluttershy was flying down, trying to help her up and get a look at the wing. Dash shook her off and backed up. "I'm FINE," she snapped, making Fluttershy flinch back.

There was a moment of silence between them. Fluttershy looked downcast, and Dash held her challenging posture even though it was gradually dawning on her that it was unnecessary. She had no idea how to break the impasse.

The mouse she'd been chasing raised its head up, and Fluttershy almost automatically extended a hoof to let it hop up and scurry up to sit on the top of her head. It glared at Rainbow Dash, and she glared back.

"How about I make some dinner?" Fluttershy said weakly, trying to avert the conflict. With another quick glance from face to face with a very fixed grin, she hurried off into the kitchen. Rainbow Dash kept her eyes on the mouse until it was out of sight.

Once it was gone, Rainbow Dash knocked her head against the wall. The sound of her face hitting something solid was becoming infuriatingly familiar. Even grounded she still found a way

to screw up and crash.

Dejectedly, she walked outside to watch the moon rise from behind the hills. There was a deep, throaty creak from hundreds of crickets and the sounds of clucking and shuffling from the chicken pens. Fireflies danced across the dry grass. The Everfree Forest loomed a short distance away. This house was closer to it than anywhere else in Ponyville.

She took a deep breath, rallying her spirits. She'd still practice. She'd just have to work on a new routine. She'd find a way to make it work.

Fluttershy approached from the side, pushing a tray full of food. Rainbow Dash looked up at the moon. Fluttershy kept her eyes on Rainbow Dash.

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The bed was insidious. Clouds were fluffy and soft, but the quilt had presence. It pushed her down and smothered her with so much warmth that she wasn't sure if she could ever get out.

And she needed to get out. Because that drone of crickets was driving her insane. They didn't quiet down, or change their tune. It was just one long, constant creaking sound. A single note that was impossible to ignore or block out.

After spending some time wrangling with her pillow to try and cover her ears, Dash finally kicked off the blanket. Instantly, the wave of cold air told her she'd made the wrong choice, but she wasn't going to back out just because of that. Shivering in the chill, she walked down the stairs and out the front door.

She could hear the points the crickets were coming from, and approached one such until it was so loud she couldn't hear anything else. Look as she might she couldn't see anything on the ground. It had to be underground, then. She began to dig at the earth, trying to uncover the sound. The earth was dry and hard and she made less progress than she would have liked, and the creaking stayed constant. She was getting angry. She just wanted these things to shut up so she could sleep. She started stamping on the ground hard, muttering "Shut up, shut up," from between clenched teeth.

A light came on suddenly, stopping her in her tracks. "Dash?" said a sleepy Fluttershy, who was holding a stuffed bear with one hoof.

"I was just – uh, just –" Rainbow Dash said, unable to look at what she knew would be judging eyes.

"Could you all please quiet down a little bit?" Fluttershy said, raising her voice just a smidgeon. In an instant, there was silence. Silence so utter and shocking and absolute that it was almost

scary. Rainbow Dash's jaw dropped. Fluttershy, still bleary, walked over to Dash, smiled and said "You should get back inside. You need your rest."

She gave in without another word and followed Fluttershy back to her bedroom. She had no idea how she'd get to sleep after that, but she somehow managed it almost instantly.

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The next morning, Dash went down to the kitchen. She rummaged until she found some cereal and began eating it straight out of the packet, as usual as fast as she could before anyone else came by and saw.

When she heard the creak of the stairs as Fluttershy started coming downstairs, she quickly sealed the packet and stuffed it back in the drawer, swallowing what was in her mouth as fast as possible. She thought she'd hidden it well enough, but the moment Fluttershy came through the door there was that look of disappointment on her face.

Immediately, Dash's thoughts went to explanation, but Fluttershy was pushing her towards the door. "You have to rest. I'll cook for you." The yellow pegasus was saying, nudging Dash into a seat at the table. She smiled brightly when Dash sat down and didn't fidget, and immediately walked off to the kitchen.

Dash immediately slumped against the table. Had she spilled some on herself? Maybe she'd heard? There was nothing else to focus on except the sound of Fluttershy humming to herself as she cooked. When she came back in, Dash straightened up and stared guardedly at the plate that was put in front of her. It looked good. Fried flowers with hayseed dip. A quick glance across the table saw Fluttershy sitting in front of a plate of her own, watching her. She had a slightly worried, encouraging smile on her face.

"So... Fluttershy..." Dash said, trying to change the topic, "You never showed me that picture."

"Oh!" The pegasus said, "I'll be right back with that," immediately hopping down and heading for the stairs. Dash felt briefly bad that she'd said that – her food would be cold by the time she got back – but she was more grateful that no one would be watching her eat. She almost inhaled a few of the roses before realizing that it was actually really, really good. She looked at the plate in genuine surprise.

But before she had time to have any more, Fluttershy was back with a card in her mouth. It had a picture of twenty Pegasai in bright red uniforms flying in a perfect V shape. It was signed, The Red Stallion in crimson ink. Rainbow Dash let out an awestruck breath.

"How'd you get this? Did you meet him?" Dash said, suddenly focusing on Fluttershy, "What was he like?"

“He mailed this to me,” Fluttershy admitted, “He sends me stuff.”

“He mails things to you?” Rainbow Dash said, eyes wider than the plates they were eating off.

“Yes... he’s my... don’t you like it?” Fluttershy said, dodging the question by looking at Rainbow Dash’s food.

“What? Oh,” now it was Rainbow’s turn to be evasive. She loved it but she couldn’t exactly say that. “It’s okay. I’ve had enough though,” she said, standing up. “I need to go work on my new routine!”

She hurried out of the house before the conversation got any more awkward than it already had.

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Rainbow thought her plan was a good one. She’d found a place with multiple tree stumps and she’d practice jumping between them and balancing. When she had her wings back she could start making it more tricky – use clouds, spin them before she started, and up the challenge that way. It was still technically aerial mobility, and it would be unusual enough to win some commendations from the judges.

After her second run through, which she did with only minor wobbles, she heard a very quiet “Yay” from the sidelines. Her confidence grew two sizes from that, and she immediately stepped up the complexity to match.

It wasn’t until she was mid way through attempting a double backflip dive into a one-hoof balance while juggling two spinning balls did she realize she’d perhaps gone too far.

She refused to crash. She refused to screw up for the umpteenth time while Fluttershy was watching. She opened her good wing and strained her bad one against the bandages. She managed to slow her descent just enough to come out of it in a graceful canter, making it look like she’d planned it all along.

The resulting “Woo hoo” justified the manoeuvre. She raised her head proudly until she heard a gasp.

“Your bandages!”

She glanced to the side, looking at where the bandages around her wing had ripped open. She felt dizzy. That was not happening. Not when she was finally getting the hang of this.

“I’m fine!” She said reflexively as Fluttershy galloped over to help.

“You are NOT!” Fluttershy said, genuinely raising her voice. “You had three hours sleep, two flowers for breakfast, have been exercising for three hours and you’ve got a broken wing! You need to be resting!”

Rainbow Dash cringed back reflexively in shock, and waited for the moment that Fluttershy would cave and apologize for being so loud.

It didn’t happen. She just kept glaring, looking like she was getting angrier and angrier. Barely comprehending what was happening, Rainbow Dash realized that she was the one apologizing out loud. “Sorry, Fluttershy.”

It was only then that the baneful stare softened. “I’m just worried about you,” she said. “Now hold still while I fix those bandages.”

Rainbow Dash lay on her stomach, wings spread, waiting for the pain to come. It wasn’t until she felt a soft breath of air on her exposed wing that she realized that Fluttershy had undone the bandages, and wasn’t until she felt the faintest of tugs at her shoulder that she realized that she’d done them up again. She looked over her shoulder, disbelieving that a fresh set of bandages had been put in place.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Fluttershy said nervously.

“No –“ Rainbow Dash said, immediately intending to finish that with some defence of her ability to take pain. She lost the thought midway through. “No,” she repeated, with a softer emphasis.

“Good. Let’s go home.”

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And again, Rainbow Dash found herself confronted by a plate of beautifully cooked flowers and vegetables, with Fluttershy sitting opposite and watching her like a hawk.

“Don’t you like it?” Fluttershy said, nerves creeping into her voice again.

“It’s fine. It’s just...” Are you going to throw it into my face? Call me fat? Make a Pigs Flying joke? Or a Pigs Crashing one? The echoes of the taunts were so deep she almost believed them.

“Just what?” said Fluttershy, eyes holding nothing but concern.

Rainbow Dash sighed, bent slightly forwards and took a bite out of the edge of the food. She chewed it slowly as Fluttershy watched, and swallowed. “It’s good,” she added ineffectually after

that.

Fluttershy looked happy and began to eat her own food. Neatly, with small bites, but not with the same level of nerves Dash had shown. Dash watched her for a moment and then, with the pressure of being watched directly gone, began to eat as well. She made sure to pace herself, eat it slowly. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been able to eat anything slowly.

It was so good she forgot to leave some on the plate afterwards. When Fluttershy asked if she wanted seconds she was mortified.

"Well, if you don't want seconds, would you like a bath?" Fluttershy offered with a smile. Dash nodded, and Fluttershy cantered off to pour it.

Dash sat in her seat for a few long minutes. She was full, and nothing bad had happened. Maybe she could put practice off for a day or two...

She saw a scurrying in the corner of her eye, but didn't even look around. She just knew it was a mouse and not someone stealing her diary. It was too safe here for it to be otherwise.

Fluttershy called the bath done, and Dash went upstairs to get in. She had used Zecora's bubble bath formulae, and Rainbow Dash began to relax entirely as she soaked.

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Some hours afterwards, when she'd finally gotten out and was drying off, she looked out the window. She saw Fluttershy waiting by the mailbox, saw Derpy fly down and give her a letter. She saw the crimson signature and saw the look of joy on Fluttershy's face as she read it.

And that made her angry. She didn't know why seeing Fluttershy that happy made her so angry.

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"Are you sure you don't want any help?" She asked the next morning.

"Oh no," Fluttershy chirpily called from the kitchen, "I enjoy cooking. Really," She emerged with a magnificent salad and set it in front of Dash. Dash still hesitated briefly before eating, but constant glances at Fluttershy's smiling face reassured her enough to keep going.

"I need to go and feed the chickens. You keep resting," Fluttershy said when they were finished. Rainbow Dash nodded, which made Fluttershy smile. Once she was out of the house, though, Rainbow Dash went up to Fluttershy's room.

She looked around until she found the large chest and opened it. It was full of Red Stallion stuff.

Pictures. Pictures of him and Fluttershy. Letters. A set of his goggles. As she nosed through it she started to realize exactly what was going on here.

She was an injured animal that needed kindness. That was all. Fluttershy had her own life and while she could take time out of it to indulge in charity, Rainbow Dash was not a part of that life. There was a part there she could never touch.

She felt sick to her stomach, and she closed the chest. It wasn't rejection if there had never been a contest. She should get out of here.

But she didn't want to.

She slowly walked to her room and collapsed into the bed. She was exhausted again, and didn't want to hide it as she normally did. She wanted to just lie down and wait until she was better so she could go home.

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For the next few days she was guarded and cautious with Fluttershy. She obeyed any instructions (though they were closer to polite suggestions), kept her head down and spent as much time as she was able out practicing. A few times she noticed Fluttershy hovering nervously around her but she excused herself to rest.

One time she went to Fluttershy's room to ask her where she kept the spare pillows to find her writing a letter and she'd lost her ability to speak and run back to her room.

She worked on her routine, but it was falling apart in her head. Every time Fluttershy cheered she felt a surge of adrenaline, and then a surge of guilt and self pity. It didn't make her crash, but it made her peter out and lose motivation. She began finding spots away from Fluttershy to practice, focusing until she was inevitably found and lost her focus again.

Over slow days, the Skyfire Competition began to close in, creeping up in the form of red X's on the calendar. Rainbow Dash lay awake in bed, staring at her Wonderbolts poster.

"I'm not a loser," she whispered to herself. "I'm going to win. I'm the best flier in Equestria. It doesn't matter what I'm not as long as I'm that."

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"You're clear to fly," said the nurse, removing the bandages from her wing. She nodded, but her mind was already in the competition, already scorching along at two hundred miles an hour, leaving the competition in the dust.

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“Fillies and Gentlecolts!” The Announcer’s impressive voice boomed over the stadium, “Give it up for the best of the best, the Wonderbolts!”

The crowd burst into cheering. It took all of Rainbow Dash’s mental fortitude not to try and pick Fluttershy’s voice out from it.

“And here, for the chance to win fame and recognition, the greatest young fliers of our generation!” Rainbow Dash spread her wings and joined the formation on its rehearsed path into the arena. It opened below them like a great maw in the clouds.

A crimson lightning bolt exploded down the centre. The crowd gasped and screamed.

A crimson V streaked through the centre of the arena, forming up into a perfect lance formation in front of the announcer. Immediately, the Wonderbolts were in the air and the clouds turned stormy. The leader of the crimson formation’s voice rang out across the arena.

“I am The Red Stallion,” horrified gasps came from the crowd. The red-suited figure flicked back his mane dramatically, black cape with red skull motif billowing behind him, “And I was wondering if it’s too late to enter this competition?”

“You’re a criminal!” Shouted one of the Wonderbolts.

“And you’re a lickspittle,” The Red Stallion countered in a bored tone of voice, “So rather than fighting it out and causing who knows how much collateral damage, how about we have a race? If any pony here can beat me, I’ll turn myself in. If they can’t, you give me the prize money.”

“...!” Emoted the lead Wonderbolt, considering rapidly. He soared right up to the Red Stallion’s face and snarled, “Deal.”

The Red Stallion held out his hoof, and the Wonderbolt brohoofed it to seal the bargain.

“Very well. Let’s start this show,” grinned the Red Stallion. “Anypony who considers themselves a match for the legendary Red Stallion, try to overtake me!”

And he was gone, blasting along a crackle of thunderous red lightning. Instantly, the Wonderbolts took off after him. The young fliers hovered nervously, not sure if they should follow or leave it to the professionals.

Derpy, lunging forwards screaming “FREEDOOOOM” at the top of her lungs, sealed the deal. Everyone took off after her. Trails of stormclouds, rainbows, sunbeams, and other effects burned along in the crimson thunderbolt’s path.

For Dash, this was about much more than catching a criminal and impressing the Wonderbolts. This was about more than any race she'd ever run before. This was her chance to prove, once and for all, that she was the best.

While she was watching.

What kind of sick animal, what kind of charity case, can trump the Wonderbolts and the Red Stallion at the same time?

She burned past Derpy and caught up with the thundercloud trails of the Wonderbolts. She managed to close in just behind them but wasn't able to catch up or overtake. No matter how hard she imagined overtaking them, she couldn't. They were just too good. Their stances were perfect, their training unbelievable. And she had spent the past four weeks on the ground. She lost her breath when she saw them starting to inch away from her.

She wasn't sure if she was hallucinating it, or if she actually heard it. But what her brain told her was that there was someone down in that crowd below who had whispered the word "Yay" under her breath.

She broke the barrier, blazing past the Wonderbolts, leaving them shocked in the wake. She closed rapidly in on the Red Stallion and flew alongside him. He was straining to match her Rainboom but, impossibly, he was managing it.

"You're... pretty... good..." he said from between grit teeth. The sky was shattering around them, rainbow keeping pace with thunderbolt.

"But you don't have what it takes," he went on, pushing himself a few inches forwards. "You need a reason to win... and I've got a better reason than you."

"I'm. The. Best." Rainbow Dash breathed. "That's all. The reason. I need."

Inch by inch she caught up.

Inch by inch she matched him.

With a final beat of her agonized wings, she swung in front of him.

Instantly, The Red Stallion came to a complete halt. Rainbow Dash had to spin wildly, curving and bleeding momentum before she was able to turn around to face him. The Red Stallion was smiling.

Almost immediately afterwards, the Red Stallion was surrounded by the Wonderbolts. "You're under arrest!" barked one.

There was a huge cheer going up from the stadium. Pegasai were flying up to cheer and congratulate her. For a moment she soaked it in, too breathless to comment or really comprehend. And then she saw Fluttershy.

Flying right for him.

She felt like she'd been kicked in the gut. Everything felt absolutely hollow.

"Daddy!"

She blinked. Looked up.

"Daddy!! Why did you do it?" Fluttershy was saying words.

"Mostly, I wanted to show these blue ponces up. And see if this Dash character was as good as you said," The Red Stallion was saying. Fluttershy glared at him.

"I TOLD you Dash was the best! I told you she was faster even than you! You should have listened!"

"I can't hear that kind of challenge and not follow up. What kind of sky pirate would I be if I let it get out I was the *second* fastest?" The Red Stallion said, shrugging.

"Okay, break it up, you can visit him in Canterlot Prison," said the lead Wonderbolt as they began to lead the Red Stallion away. He grinned and winked as he was taken.

Rainbow Dash hovered, staring dumbly. Fluttershy floated over, looking downcast.

"Sorry I didn't tell you."

"The Red Stallion's your dad." She said it without emphasis, just a clueless repetition of facts.

"Yes," Fluttershy squirmed a bit. "But you did another Rainboom! Without anyone in danger, too!"

"Yeah... why don't we talk about that later?" Dash suggested as she was dragged into a celebration lap by the other pegasai.

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The next morning, Fluttershy came outside to see Rainbow Dash sitting on the ground, staring upwards. The sky was still torn up with the remains of the race, filled with crackling lightning

bolts, rainbows, and bubbles.

“Your wings are better. You can go home now,” said Fluttershy quietly.

Rainbow Dash looked around. She was smiling.

“I am home.”

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