

Rainbow Dash's Big Adventure

By the dobermans

Chapter 2

Soon the ponies of Ponyville would be running, thundering through the country roads and trails, bringing down the leaves. Applejack would be there in the lead, her bright blonde tail bouncing like a friendly taunt. She would probably sell apple juice to everypony afterwards. Would they run the race in New Yoke too?

Rainbow Dash tapped her forehead against the window as she stared outside. The colorful blur of scenery had been slowing for a while as it passed, and the yellow fields and fiery trees were giving way to hotels, carriage dealerships, big fancy earth pony mansions, and paved streets.

The car jumped as the train switched tracks, and the maroon unicorn in the next seat let out an "Eep!". She stood and pulled her violin case from the overhead shelf, taking a moment to adjust her curly white mane. "MFA, you know. Third year," she had said with an odd accent when they had chatted an hour or so ago, or something like that. Like MFA was supposed to mean something. She hadn't even introduced herself.

Rainbow Dash was hungry, but she couldn't eat. Couldn't think straight either. The clouds weren't right. Wasn't anypony watching them? The one that looked like a dragon's tail would be great for training, though. Three loops, a dive, a loop while spinning, dodge the flagpole, wow the crowd. All that practice to get in before air freestyle tryouts. Her stomach rumbled, earning her an awkward look from Miss MFA. Whatever. Classes would start in just a few days – had to choose those soon. It would be great if Twilight were with her. She would actually enjoy picking them out for her.

She looked down at her pack, still bulging with the food and gifts her friends had given her at the station. She gently placed her hoof on it, feeling the round outline of one of Applejack's apples, and Pinkie's balloon squished next to it. The rolling hum of the train vibrated through them, and the bag was slowly rattling towards the edge of the seat. Something strange shifted deep in her chest. She pulled the bag closer.

"Uh, nice meeting you," said Miss MFA. She levitated her violin case and bags and left the car.

The checklist that Wings Wishes had given her said to report in to the Welcome Office at the Togetherness Center. A guide would come and take her and any other new students to the dormitories, whatever those were.

"Four years, Rainbow Dash," she said to herself, "Four years and you'll be somepony. A mare of the world. These geeks won't know what hit them! Then it'll be

just like that time with the Shadowbolts. They'll be begging me to make them awesome! Only it won't be the Shadowbolts. It'll be the real thing!"

The train jerked, then jerked again as it came to a full stop. Muffled voices rose from the other cars, and luggage cases could be heard thumping and scraping as they were brought out from under seats and down from the storage shelves.

Her stomach churned like it did at the start of a race. "It's go time." She slung her bag over her back, inched her way through the line of ponies ambling down the aisle, and stepped out into a sunny New Yoke afternoon.

Rainbow Dash passed through the broad glass doors of the Togetherness Center and stopped short, her eyes widening as she scanned what appeared to be the central room. Earth ponies, unicorns and pegasi of every color moved about in twos and threes, smiling and laughing as they talked. Hallways busy with preoccupied mares and stallions branched off into the dimly-lit distance. Tables decorated with banners bearing strange symbols were set up in a semicircle, and bored-looking attendants were calling to passers by much like Wings Wishes had back at the Weather Factory. The warm, still air was thick with the mingling scents of perfume, mane-sprays, food, and ponies.

Rainbow Dash had seen her share of scurrying and hustling ponies in the skies around Cloudsdale. It was the other students that had taken her by surprise. There were more alicorns than she had seen in her entire life, groups of zebra mares and stallions, all sparkling with heavy gold circlets and earrings like Zecora, haughty lone griffons eyeing the smaller ponies as they strutted through the crowd, mules, and far away down one of the hallways there looked to be a lanky draconequus lumbering under the low ceiling.

Out of habit, Rainbow Dash sized up the pegasi and griffons. A few of them looked like they might have some muscle, but otherwise no serious competition. "Double the money..." She grinned, then shook her head. "Snap out of it RD. It's time to get focused. Now where could that Welcome Office be?" She began to turn towards one of the hallways.

"Pardon! Did you say Welcome Office?" A light tan, yellow-maned pegasus gestured for Rainbow Dash to come closer.

"Yes. I'm new here, and I was supposed to meet up with some guide that's going to take me to my, uh, dormitory."

"Oh! Just turn around, go to the end of that hall and take a left."

"Thanks, I owe you one."

“It’s no problem, really. The pegasisters of the Iota Eta Pi sorority are committed to helping out ponies in need. Would you like a brochure?”

Rainbow Dash took a step backward. “Sorry, I don’t speak, whatever language that was. I got one of those already. Catch you later.”

She turned and trotted stiffly down the hallway. Ahead, a lime green unicorn was standing in an intersection, talking to somepony out of view. She glanced at Rainbow Dash a few times as she approached.

“Ah this must be Rainbow. Hi! My name’s Silken Sashes. Here’s your Welcome Packet. We were just about to leave for the dorms. Come on everypony! Tulip Tree Hill is just an apple toss away.” A large group of unicorns and earth ponies stirred behind her, hefting their bags and suitcases. “Finally,” grunted somepony.

“Uh, I think there’s been a mistake. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a pegasus? I’d think that the great Equestria University would have some cloud dormitories, or whatever you call them.”

“Oh, the Sky Dorms? Of course! But those aren’t an option for first year students. The Student Life Coordination Sub-Office tries to create an atmosphere of diversity, so that freshcreatures can have an immersive experience with other cultures and perspectives. You’ll have to wait until next year to enter the lottery.”

“Huh? Lottery? Freshcreatures?”

“Yes. Rooms in the Sky Dorms are limited, so it’s the luck of the draw. And freshcreatures are how we refer to the new class of incoming students.”

“Fresh. It’s kind of old school, but I like it. I’m a fresh pony!”

“OK, I think she’ll get the hang of it eventually,” said Silken Sashes to the rest of the group. Some of them snickered. “Now let’s go. It’s getting dark and I’m sure you’re all tired and want to get settled in.”

Silken Sashes walked backwards facing the newcomers as they left the Togetherness Center by a side exit. “OK everypony! On your left is the foundation for the new Administration building. If you look at the sign, you’ll notice that it’s going to be much more stylish than the old one. It’s a 20 million bit project. The lead architect is Manehattan’s own Pearl Supernova, and it will be the only building in all of Equestria to have a smoothie waterfall. We’re pretty much the cutting edge here at EU. Behind me on the right is Knowledge Square. It was partially a gift of last year’s graduating class. It’s got a statue of every Head Pony in EU’s history, as well as 17 species of tropical hardwood. A team of expert unicorns maintains them around the clock. Back to the left,

you can't help but notice the Tower. Every semester Tower emissaries search Equestria for new books and scrolls, make copies, and enter them into the Archive. Really a wonderful resource. Take a tour when you get a chance, because you'll be spending a lot of time there."

"And here we are. End of the line!" They had arrived at a small wooden stable that was open on either end. A single oil lamp hung from the ceiling in the center of the short hall. It rocked slowly in the breeze.

"You want us to sleep here? Outside?" shouted Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow, this is a University, not summer camp! Of course you're not expected to sleep outside. Look here." She led the group into the stable. "This is your standard dormitory. Ten rooms, two students per room. Check it out!" She opened one of the doors that lined the hall. "Unlimited hay, unlimited water, and twelve ounces of oil a week for your lamp. You'll have to share those. I recommend buying new ones for yourselves. Lavatories are right through there, that way." She pointed a hoof towards a squat cinderblock building several yards away. Three earth stallions were talking and joking outside.

"Unlimited hay? That's a sweet deal." Rainbow Dash looked inside the room. A pile of old hay lay in the center of a dirt floor. On the opposite side of the room a greenish wooden water bucket was nailed beneath a small window. The thin plank walls had been painted stark white.

"Not too shabby, eh?"

Rainbow Dash stamped her hoof. "Excuse me. Is this a closet? I thought we were ..."

"OK ponies! Your roommates' names are printed in your Welcome Packets. Remember, EU really does care! If you need anything at all, the Boutique is open 24/7! Enjoy!"

Silken Sashes's lavender tail swirled as she turned and trotted off, leaving the new stable-mates in an awkward silence.

"All right, so who's Pudding Cream?" Rainbow Dash read from her packet with difficulty in the lamplight.

"That's me," said a dark orange unicorn walking up to the group from the direction of the lavatories. Her styled red mane had a blonde streak running down the center. The word 'Sweet' was scrawled on either flank across her cutie mark, a pair of silver tins filled with pale yellow cream. "Hi! I got here about a week ago. I've been dying to meet you. Rainbow Dash sounded like such a cool name!"

"A cool name for a super-cool pony! Where are you from, Pudding Cream?"

"Oh, you know, Manehattan, just like everypony else at EU. What about you?"

"Ponyville. Well, Cloudsdale, originally."

"Ponyville. Cloudsdale. Hmmm. What borough is that?"

"Burrow? I thought we were talking about our hometowns."

"Hello, we are."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. What are you into, Rainbow?"

"Flying! And being awesome. Usually both at the same time. How about you?"

"Well, you know, I hang out at the mall sometimes. I hear the one here is lame, though. Other than that, I've been known to frequent the local watering holes, if you know what I mean. I'm here to study nursing, but the more I think about it, the more I want to try acting. Either way, the fat student loan check I just picked up is pretty cool."

"Nursing? Why would you want to spend your life doing something so boring anyway? I'm here on a scholarship."

"Scholarship? Sweet! What for?"

"Well, it's complicated, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to be picked up by one of the sports teams. Or all of them."

"That's so awesome! My roommate is an athlete! You might even be a pro someday."

"I'm thinking more like the Wonderbolts."

"Wow. The best of the best. You must be no joke."

"Yeah, when I'm in the sky, it's no laughing matter. Hey Pudding, not that I'm tired or anything, but you want to go inside and figure this dormitory thing out?"

"Sure. It's not exactly a luxury spa, but you get used to it. I call the half near the door."

“The window’s fine with me.”

They stepped into the room. After Pudding Cream lit their lantern, they worked together to spread the hay over the floor as evenly as possible to cover the dirt. When they were done, Rainbow Dash put her bag down on her side of the room and curled up next to it, trying not to touch the moist walls with her mane or tail. Her stomach growled so hard she could feel it in her spine.

“So, do you feel like hanging out tonight?” asked Pudding Cream.

“Uh, maybe. I’m going to stay here for a while and sort out some of the stuff I brought with me.”

“OK. Have fun with that.” Pudding Cream lingered for a few minutes fussing and checking herself over, then left.

Rainbow Dash opened her bag and looked down at its contents. Some of Pinkie’s pies had leaked, but everything else was intact. She picked out Applejack’s apple by the stem with her teeth. It was a golden delicious. Perfectly shaped and sweet-smelling, hoof-grown and given to her by a caring pony. She looked at it for a long time. Slowly she took the first bite, cringing just a little.

She awoke the next morning determined to make the room, however small and dingy, her own. At least her part of it, anyway. She muttered to herself as she unpacked her bag. “They’re trying to test me. They think I’m some fru-fru sugar-pony that runs away at the first sign of hardship, that can’t handle discipline!” She dug into the hay, trying to make room for her things. “Well not this pegasus! I am here to stay.”

“Huh?” Pudding Cream was standing in the doorway. Two earth ponies were looking in over her shoulder, hiding their muzzles with their hooves.

“Oh! Hi Pudding. I was just rearranging a little bit. Come on in. Who’s that you’ve got there with you?”

“This is Sugar Pea and Daisy Drops. We met at the Welcome Party last night. There were, like, a million ponies there.”

“Welcome Party? No pony told me about a Welcome Party.”

“Really? Oh, well, you just got here. Otherwise you definitely would have seen one of the flyers. They’re like all over the place.”

“When is the next party going to be?”

“You actually want to go to a party?” asked Sugar Pea.

“Duh? Who doesn’t?”

Pudding Cream, Daisy Drops and Sugar Pea looked at each other. “You must spend most of your time in the air practicing or something, Rainbow. Ponies pretty much don’t party so much as go out,” said Pudding Cream.

“Go out, like outside? Don’t tell me that all students do is sit outside and talk about books and scrolls and brainiac stuff. Totally lame.”

Pudding Cream laughed. “No, go out like go out for the night to a watering hole. Haven’t you ever gotten doped?”

“Doped?” Rainbow Dash searched their faces, looking for a clue.

“That’s what I thought. She’s never even heard of it. Rainbow, you’re coming with us tonight, and we’re making sure you get doped out of your mind.”

“I’ll buy you a stewed apple,” said Daisy Drops.

“Or two, or ten,” giggled Sugar Pea.

“Yeah! I don’t know what that is, but it sounds like a party to me! Hey, before we go, do you wanna get some stuff for this room? I’m just not feeling the slime on the walls.”

“Sure, if you want,” said Pudding Cream. “I’m always up for a trip to the Boutique.”

The four ponies left the stable and began walking toward the cluster of buildings at the center of campus. Daisy Drops and Sugar Pea soon became lost in a rapid discussion of stewed apple flavors. Pudding Cream led the way while Rainbow Dash kept pace with her, looking around.

During her short flyover on her way from the train station, she had been surprised that the buildings were styled much like those in Cloudsdale. Now that she was up close and on the ground, the differences had become apparent. The once-white columns on what looked to be the original buildings were water-stained and crumbling, and the decorative patterns on the trim were all but smoothed away. Some had been renovated with green, painted metal roofs and trim and simple brick additions. Each had tapering square motifs that diminished as they rose upward, suggesting a large but unfinished picture.

The only construction taking place now, other than the Administration building, was back in the direction of the stable. "Hey Pudding, I noticed some cranes a while ago. Do you know what they're building?"

"More dorms."

"More dorms? That's weird. Are they expecting more students? I thought they already had tons."

"They do. Just wait until your first lecture. I've heard they need to use magic just so everypony can hear the professor. If there even is a professor."

"Uh, how can you have a class without a teacher? That doesn't make any sense."

"Beats me. Maybe it's like, more of that free-form stuff they talked about in the Welcome Packet. I guess we'll find out. Look, there's the Feed Trough – the cafeteria. We'll hit that up on the way back from the Boutique. That over there is the Student Life Coordination Center. Rainbow, you'll want to check that out soon to get your OATS card and sign up for classes. And here we are!"

A weak blue aura surrounded the door. "Hurry up, I can't hold this all day!" said Pudding Cream, struggling with the spell. Rainbow Dash gave her a quizzical look as she and the earth ponies trotted forward and descended the zigzag staircase leading to the Boutique.

Inside, Sugar Pea and Daisy Drops resumed their discussion of stewed apples and headed off into what seemed like a labyrinth of shelves. Rainbow Dash stood for a moment and took in the scene. The Boutique was a far cry from Rarity's shop. It was both a variety store and a bookshop, and was in a state of complete chaos. There was almost no room to move. Students were hurrying everywhere, filling the aisles, yelling, talking and laughing as they inched forward in tense lines or pressed through the crowd.

"I wonder if they have any shelves for the dorm," Rainbow Dash said to herself, trying to ignore a budding headache. She wormed her way through the moving maze of horns, hooves, feathers and rumps. She gagged more than once when somepony turned and accidentally whipped their mane or tail into her face. It was getting hard to breathe.

Her reflection caught her eye as she passed by a row of mirrors. She needed a bath. Maybe a quick dip in a rainbow pool to wake up. Otherwise, she was her usual spectacular self. She stopped and posed, curling a foreleg and flexing her muscles. She soon became engrossed in finding intimidating postures, and didn't notice the massive griffon backing into her from behind. His claws raked her calf. "Ouch!" shouted Rainbow Dash. "Watch where you're stepping there, sweetfeet!"

"Oops, my bad," said the griffon, chuckling.

"Is something funny?"

"Whoa, shorty's got a temper!" Five earth stallions who had been nosing through the shelves nearby turned and surrounded Rainbow Dash. There was a restless look in their eyes, like they had just returned from the Everfree Forest after days of wandering. "You talkin' to Hardnails, filly?"

"I am if Hardnails is the cream puff with the beak. And what's it to you?" Rainbow Dash turned, then took a step back. They all had the same cutie mark. Or rather, where their cutie marks had been were patches of scarred, hairless skin.

"Hardnails kind of runs things around here, and he doesn't like foals like you disrespecting him." The other stallions grunted and muttered in agreement.

Hardnails lifted a claw, "Easy fellas. Like I said, it was my bad. I scratched her, and good too. Where are you living, Colors?"

"My name's Rainbow Dash, and it's none of your business." Not waiting for a reply, she pushed her way through two of the stallions and went in search of her friends. She could hear chuckling again from behind as she turned into the book aisles.

Sugar Pea and Daisy Drops were browsing a number of dark-colored hardcovers. Rainbow Dash looked over their shoulders at the book titles. "Introduction to Civil Engineering for Non-Majors? Let me see that."

"Oh, hi Rainbow. How's it going?"

"OK I guess." She turned the book over and read from the back cover. "The classic text for freshcreature engineering courses. New in edition 25, Chapter 5 now includes a detailed discussion of fish behavior in turbulent fountain water. A hundred and twenty-five bits? That's almost like what I made in a week back in Cloudsdale!"

"You mean you actually had a job?" Pudding Cream had found them. Two nursing textbooks and a candy bar floated unsteadily above her head. "Rainbow, what happened to your leg?"

"Nothing. Just had a run-in with some loser who wasn't watching where he was going."

"Does it hurt? Maybe we should get some ice. That's part of RICE isn't it, rest, ice, uh what was it?"

"No worries. It's OK, really. Besides, I don't need my legs so much in my line of work."

“Right, right, big flyer here. So did you girls find what you were looking for?”

“Huh?” asked Daisy Drops.

“Never mind. Rainbow, how about you, you want to get some lunch?”

“I was looking for some shelves, you know, for the dorm?” She glanced back in the direction of Hardnails and the stallions with the missing cutie marks. “I’ll come back for them though. My stomach’s telling me it’s lunch time.”

“Cool. Let me check these out and we’ll canter quick to the Food Trough.”

On their way to eat, Rainbow Dash flew quietly above the others while they talked. Pudding Cream was munching noisily on her candy bar.

“... isn’t that right, Rainbow?”

“Yeah, uh yeah, right on. Hey Pudding, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. I’ve noticed that some ponies around here, uh, did something to their cutie marks. What’s that all about?”

“That’s something some ponies started doing like a couple of years ago, from what I hear. Some take a hot lantern to their flanks. Others go to the zebras to have them altered.”

“Why?”

“Not sure. You don’t see freshponies doing it. You sometimes hear talk about Professor Pastiche when the topic comes up. Here let me get that.” Pudding Cream closed her eyes, concentrating on the door. Her books fell to the ground as the door slowly opened.

Rainbow Dash swooped down and picked up the books. “Professor Pastiche?”

“Jeepers, hold on.” Pudding Cream wiped the sweat from her eyes. “Thanks. We’ll be meeting him soon enough. Everypony takes his first semester course. He also teaches a mandatory senior year course. Like, Life Applications, or something like that. He’s quite a character, they say. Don’t know much more than that. Anyway, I’ll probably get my flanks done. I mean, look around. Pudding pies are like, the lamest thing.”

The Food Trough was busier than the Boutique. Four lines of students filled a wide central aisle. Somber older mares and a few mules in white uniforms mopped the floors and took the students’ money at the ends of the lines. A thin pegasus floated overhead, sprinkling hay across the floor and on the students. Some of the earth ponies

were looking up, mouths open, trying not to laugh. Tables covered with white tablecloths were set on either side, their middles dipping slightly under arrays of sweets and pastries stacked in sticky mounds, or displayed in polished ceramic cases. Rainbow Dash had to duck as a cupcake flew past her head. She frowned and landed. Her headache had spread and intensified. Pie slices, cookies, chocolates, and lollipops hovered or rose from the tables in bright clouds of magic as the unicorns chose their lunches. A brown earth pony was jumping, trying to catch a tart that was floating just out of reach.

Her leg began throbbing as she put pressure on it, and the room went out of focus as she stumbled. The zebra next to her was wearing too much cologne. "Hey, I'm not really in the mood for dessert right now. I'm going to go check out that table with the apples."

"Suit yourself," said Pudding Cream.

Rainbow Dash carefully made her way through the leftmost line, trying to concentrate on the brimming bowl of apples. As she got closer, she began to see that most of them were blistered with greasy bruises or bore telltale blackened holes. A small paper sign next to the bowl read

Fancy Apples
Imported from Prance
3 bits ea.

And next to it,

Gourmet Oats
2 bits

"Well, those look normal enough," she said to herself. The short, pimply mule standing behind the table gazed past her at the crowd. She picked up a bowl of oats with her mouth and headed back to her friends. On her way, she was forced to wait while a table of donuts was restocked. She bowed her head, fighting to keep her eyes open.

A serving mare swept by and entered a doorway on her right, skirting a row of boxes that were stacked on the floor inside. Each was clearly labeled

OATS
GRADE D

Rainbow Dash almost dropped her bowl. "Exclth me ..." she tried to call into the empty doorway. When nopony came out, she sighed and waited for the donut trays to be filled. Glaring at the floor, she continued back to her place in line.

Sugar Pea went first when they reached the cashier, an elderly, pale yellow mare, who checked over her items laid out next to the register. “Two large chocolate chips, cane syrup elixir? Four bits.” Sugar Pea dug into her bag and pulled out a worn piece of cardboard.

“Thank you sweetie. Who’s next?”

Rainbow Dash put her bowl of oats down next to the register. “Please hurry. I’m starving here.”

“Do you have your OATS card with you, dear?”

“Oh no!” cried Pudding Cream. “Rainbow, we forgot to pick up your card!”

“No OATS card? That’ll be 30 bits.”

“What? But it said only 2 bits at the table!”

“I don’t make the rules, sweetie. That’s what I pay every day when I get lunch here.”

“But, I didn’t bring that much money with me. What am I supposed to do?”

“Just go and get your card. You’d better run though, we close in fifteen minutes.”

“But...”

“Rainbow, don’t sweat it. I’ve got you covered.” Pudding Cream stepped ahead of Daisy Drops and gave her card to the cashier. “Sorry. This is pretty much her first day. She’s got to keep her strength up – she’s a top flyer, and tryouts start tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Rainbow Dash whispered. There had been nothing in the Welcome Packet about the tryout schedule.

“That’s very nice of you, dear. You two go on ahead, you’re all set.”

After lunch, Rainbow Dash went back to the dorm and spent the rest of the afternoon trying to focus on the Welcome Packet while gulping down Pinkie’s pies. Nothing she was reading was sticking in her head. As the sun began to glimmer between the trunks of the trees she could see from the window, she kicked the Welcome Packet aside and retrieved a pencil and notepad from her bag.

Dear Pinkie,

I ate all of your pies. I was really hungry, and didn’t want them to go bad. Thanks a ton.

*Your pal,
Rainbow Dash*

The door glowed and swung inward. "Hi Rainbow. What's going on?"

"Not much. Just writing to one of my friends back home."

"That's cool." She put her bag down and started digging through it. "So are you ready for your first stewed apple? It's like sinking into a pillow that just gets softer and softer."

"Well..."

"Come on Rainbow, I thought you were going out tonight." She stood in a corner near the door, brushing her hair and angling her face in front of her mirror.

"Uh, you know, I'd love to, but I've got to get up bright and early tomorrow to start warming up."

"Like a dweeb," muttered Pudding Cream.

"Huh?" Rainbow Dash started jogging in place and stretching her wings, her neck horizontal to the shadowy floor.

"Nothing. I was just going to say that you'd better get up real early. The air sprint tryout starts at 8 in the morning, and if you're late, you wait. Like, until next year."

"No prob. I'll be there with time to spare."

"Ha ha. I'll try to come watch, but I can't make any promises. There. What do you think of this ruby hair pin?" Pudding Cream flashed her toothiest smile, flicking back her red mane and posing.

Rainbow Dash stopped and looked up. "It's OK I guess. Not the coolest I would say, but, you know, it looks uh, pretty. Pretty's the word I'm looking for."

"Ugh, whatever. I'll see you tomorrow. Have fun by yourself turning the hay to powder."

The sun had already burned away the mist and smaller clouds of the morning, scouring the sky and tops of the clouds with fierce white light. Rainbow Dash shielded her eyes with her hoof and looked down from the starting cloud where the competitors were gathered. Far below, she could make out Pudding Cream kneeling, her head resting

on her forelegs.

The scratch on her leg was healing. Check. Headache almost gone. Check. The pies had filled her belly for a while, but the sugar had only boosted her for a few minutes last night. The oats may as well have been sand. Not good, but she'd raced on an empty tank before. She was limbering up away from the others, stretching as far as she could and rolling to relax.

The racers closest to her were looking her over and smirking. Rainbow Dash returned the favor. They were lean, their cutie marks rippling on their flanks. Comets, meteors, sticks of dynamite, forked lightning bolts and winged hourglasses all flashed and sparkled in the brilliant sunlight. "Hey filly, what's your deal?" called out a stocky, sea-green mare from a few spaces down the line. "You gonna stay on the cloud?"

"I'm Rainbow Dash. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"Um, no?" The racers gave each other looks, trying not to laugh.

A tall, dark pink alicorn wearing a sapphire ring on her horn left her place and sauntered over. "I didn't know that rainbows dash. I thought they just sort of sit there and look pretty. Before they fade out and disappear."

"Oh yeah? Well this Rainbow doesn't just ... she explodes, as in sonic rainboom! That's right! Bet you've heard of that!"

The sea-green mare snickered. "Rainboom, huh? That's cute. Isn't it true that fillies at normal flight schools break the barrier on their first day, Laser Chase?" The alicorn flicked her mane and nodded, taking a moment to admire her own cutie mark, a hexagonal array of intersecting laser beams.

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Sure they do. Sure, and I'm a pink manticore. I'll see you flight school fillies at the finish line."

As she took her place at the edge of the starting cloud, she counted out her competitors. There were twenty two sets of wings, each spread and primed for takeoff. The other pegasi looked too relaxed. Some were still giggling and whispering to each other. They weren't real athletes. She was already visualizing making an early break, then taunting them by flying in a lazy spiral for the last hundred yards. Hopefully a few of them would have at least a little talent, so she wouldn't have to completely carry the team all season.

"Flyers on your mark. Get set!" The coach blew her whistle. A wing hit Rainbow Dash in the face, forcing her out of her daydream. Before she knew it, the other flyers were heading out of sight, shrinking against the bright blue sky. She gaped after them for a moment, then sped as fast as she could to catch up.

She reached the rearmost flyer with only about a few hundred yards to go, already near exhaustion. She wasn't going to let it end like this. Defying the dark spots growing in her vision, she tucked in her chin and attacked the air. The burning in her wings faded as they became numb. Soon she was in the middle of the pack, then the front of the middle, and then, it was over.

She crashed into a roll, sending up wisps of cloud. After lying motionless for a few minutes, she propped herself on her elbow, gasping and trying to swallow. Her sweaty mane clung to her forehead and muzzle.

The other pegasi were chatting again. The coach had floated over from the starting cloud in the meantime.

"All right you gimpy foals, that was the warmup! Now show me what you've got!"

Rainbow Dash looked up. "Wha ...?"

The alicorn with the horn-ring caught her attention and winked at her.

"Flyers on you mark! Get set!"

The whistle was lost in a deafening roar as the racers bored twenty-two holes through the bright blue sky. Dazzling circles of color spread perpendicular to the horizon, laser bursts and comet trails, fire rings and glowing pressure waves sizzling and sparking where they met and interfered. In seconds, the other flyers were at the finish line.

Rainbow Dash sat and stared, shell shocked. She flinched again and again as they tore back and forth between the clouds, pounding her eardrums with the noise. They hadn't been bragging. She picked up her tail between her front hooves and studied it, trying to imagine her own rainbows expanding amongst them, adding to the show.

She wasn't the fastest. Not even close.