

A Hearth's Warming Carol

By PonyToast

It was a lovely winter day in the small town of Ponyville. The sky was full of streams of fluffy white clouds, partially obscuring the sun and covering the ground in hazy fading sunshine.

The ground was full of fresh-fallen snow. The pegasi had overdone it just a little, and what was meant to be a few inches had turned into a full foot of snow. As such, most of the shops in Ponyville had closed for the day. The birds had long since gone south for the winter, the air was cool and crisp, and ponies spent their little daylight free time making snowmares in the fields and sledding down hills.

A few ponies did not share in the play, however, and instead spent the entire day relaxing. Among them was Rainbow Dash, perched lazily across a patch of floating cloud. Half-asleep and basking in the sun glaring down upon her, she absently listened to the noise below her.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the chill air "Hey Rainbow Daaaaaaaaaash!" Dash turned over and hung her head over the edge of the cloud to see a young purple-haired Pegasus filly wrapped up in a warm scarf and saddle.

"Hey Squirt. Whatcha need?" Rainbow yawned.

"Nothin..." she looked around innocently and then: "Think fast!"

A previously-concealed snowball sailed upward and exploded on Dash's face before she could react. Sputtering, she shook the snow from her mane and grinned. "Oh, you wanna do this? Let's do this!" She gathered a ball of clouds in her hoof and chucked it down towards the Pegasus. The clouds hit her, and sent her back into a snowdrift. Scoots giggled before gathering up more snow and batting it upward with her tiny wings.

Back and forth they went, clouds and snowballs, until Dash realized the patch of cloud she sat upon was slowly shrinking. Grinning in victory, she kicked the whole remaining cloud downward and sped off to the next cloud.

It floated, as if in slow-motion, sailing past Scootaloo toward some other ponies nearby. They ducked out of the way...all, at least, except—

"AGH!" Rarity shouted as the cloud knocked her over fully and scattered whatever it was she was carrying. She shook herself off, dripping with snow and looking wildly around for the source of her distress. "RAINBOW DASH!" She shouted.

Dash landed next to her. "Heh, sorry Rarity, I guess I got carried away a bit..."

"If you offer a Rain-blow Dry I will personally lock you in a box for a week," Rarity snapped as she gathered up her dropped items. Rainbow looked at one of them, sitting on the ground near her.

"What are these? They're just...balls of yarn"

"Just balls of yarn? *Just* balls of yarn? They *were* balls of cashmere, but now they're all wet which means..." tears welled up in her eyes and her voice squeaked, "they're going to *shrink!* This is a hundred bits worth of yarn! *Ruined! ALL RUINED!*"

"Oh. Uh." Rainbow laughed nervously. "I didn't mean to—"

"*I don't care!*" Rarity shrieked. "You just ruined *everything!* You ruined absolutely *everything!*"

Rainbow backed away. "I'm...sorry. Let me—"

"NO!" Rarity screeched, "You're done enough already...just leave me *alone!*"

Dash's face fell, and she flew off.

Dash landed near the Sweet Apple Acres barn, stirring up the soft fluffy snow on the ground. "Hey Applejack!" Dash called out, knocking on the barn door. There was some shuffling inside and then the door opened.

"Hey Dash," Applejack said, gesturing the Pegasus inside, "Good! You're right on time!"

"Yep." She did a double-take. "On time for what?"

Applejack stopped. "You promised to help me move the rest of the jugs of apple cider inside, remember? The ones from last week's festival?"

Rainbow scratched her mane. "Uh...I..."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "You forgot, didn't ya?"

Dash smiled. "Forgot? Are you kidding, of course not!" she lied.

"Well, in that case, let's get started!"

They headed outside to find a large stack of cider jugs waiting to be moved indoors. Applejack began to load up some of the jugs onto a cart. Dash just stared. "Come on, AJ, there's got to be a faster way."

"Ah don't care about getting it done fast. I don't wanna break any o' these jugs." She

tapped one of the glass jugs with a hoof.

"Sure, sure. But seriously? A cart?" She grabbed two jugs and sped them inside before returning. "See? I can get this done way faster than you can!"

"Rainbow, this isn't a competition," Applejack said, frowning.

"Says you!" Dash grabbed two more jugs and flew them inside.

"No, Dash!"

"Come on, slowpoke!" two more jugs disappeared inside.

"Dash! Slow down! Those are—"

"Stop whining just 'cause you're losing, AJ!" Dash called out.

"No, You're gonna—"

CRASH. Applejack ran inside, finding Rainbow on the floor. Broken jugs lay everywhere, with sweet apple cider spilling across the barn floor. Rainbow dash shook her head. "Whoa, I think I clipped one of the jugs with my wing, heh."

Applejack scowled at her. "I *told* ya not to do that. If there was an easier way to move these jugs dontcha think I'd have done it that way?"

Rainbow swallowed hard. "I—"

"But ya just didn't listen to me and now I've gotta clean all this mess up by myself *and* we've lost at least ten gallons of cider."

"Let me—"

"No, Dash. You go on now, I'll take care of all of this without your help." She turned and went to the wall to get a mop.

Dash got to her feet and walked to the door. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure you are."

Dash landed in the middle of Ponyville. Ponies darted here and there, to any of the few open shops, to do some last minute Hearth's Warming shopping. It suddenly occurred to Dash—tonight was Hearth's Warming Eve! Twilight's party was tonight at seven...at least that was guaranteed to be a fun time.

"Dashie!" a pink pony bounded out of the snowdrift, crashing into Rainbow and sending

her flat onto her back.

“Ow. Pinkie Pie!”

“Sorry Dashie! I’m just so excited because it’s Hearth Warming eve and I’m so excited because it only comes once a year—”

“Come on, get off me.”

Pinkie didn’t budge. “—and I saw you and I thought you kind of looked sort of sad and I wanted you to be excited like I was so—”

“Pinkie Pie! Come on! Get off me!”

“—I hid in the snow so I could surprise you and make you sm—”

“Pinkie Pie! Shut up!” Rainbow threw Pinkie off and got up. “Seriously! Just shut up! I’m already having a bad day and you’re...” Tears welled up in Pinkie’s eyes and she suddenly ran off through the snow-covered street. “...not helping.” Rainbow sighed. “Way to go, Dash. You’re three for three.”

Dash flew up high to her sky home, landing softly near the door. She went inside and dropped onto her couch.

She sighed. In an hour, she had successfully made three of her best friends upset. This was already turning out to be a pretty bad day.

Knock knock. Rainbow sat up and looked at the door. Rarely anypony ever came to visit her. Who could it be? She threw her mane back, setting it messily into place, and opened the door. “Fluttershy?”

The yellow Pegasus stood there, a sad look on her face. Fluttershy almost *never* came up to Cloudsdale, greatly preferring to stay close to the ground. It must be important.

“Rainbow, how could you?” Fluttershy said softly.

“How...how could I what?”

Fluttershy looked down. “I asked you to check on the animals for me while I was visiting my sister in Canterlot this week.”

Rainbow gasped. “Oh, no! I completely forgot! I’m so sorry! Are they okay?”

“Yes, they’re okay. It’s lucky I came back early.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good then...” Rainbow trailed off.

“The point is, Rainbow...” Fluttershy looked up at Dash with sad, puppy-dog eyes. “I trusted you. And you let me down.” She turned on her hoof, and glided down off the edge of the cloud.

Dash closed the door slowly and threw herself onto her couch, tears in her eyes. This was not a good day.

She woke several hours later. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, she glanced at the clock. It was almost eight-o’clock.

Wait, eight-o’clock? No, nononononono. Twilight’ sparty was at 7. She was *late*. Darnit, just when it seemed things couldn’t get worse... Twilight was sure to be mad. “Rainbow,” Twilight would say, “I can’t believe you were late! I could never be friends with a pony who’s *late*.”

“And I can’t be friends with a pony who breaks a promise,” Fluttershy would add.

“And I can’t be friends with a pony who yells at her friends,” Pinkie would grumble.

“Or cuts corners,” Applejack would interject.

“Or is oblivious to her own friends’ concerns,” Rarity would say.

“I think it’s pretty clear, Rainbow,” Twilight would say, pushing Dash out the door with her magic, “that you’re a terrible friend. You’re not welcome here anymore.”

A big tear dripped down Rainbow Dash’s face as she stepped outside and plopped down in the snowy cloud. All of her friends would reject her, all because she was a horrible friend.

She sighed. “I wish I’d never been born.”

A bright light suddenly appeared, surprising Rainbow and sending her reeling back towards the door. She rubbed her eyes a bit and looked. There, in front of her, was a large being Princess Celestia. Her hooves lightly touched down on the cloud. “Hello, Rainbow Dash,” she said simply.

“Uh...Princess...I...whata re you doing here?”

“I’m here to see you, Rainbow Dash. I heard your wish. I understand how you feel. I want to help you.”

“Well, I’m pretty much beyond help. I’ve ruined everypony’s day all at once.”

“Have you, now?” She giggled. “And you think Equestria would be better without you, is

that it?”

“Yeah.” She crossed her forehooves and laid down on the cloud, looking away.

“I think you’re wrong. And I could prove it to you.”

Rainbow looked up. “What do you mean?”

The Princess moved closer and lowered her horn to Rainbow Dash’s head. It began to glow, and the world was consumed by a blinding light.

It suddenly became very dark. “Hey!” Dash said, rubbing her eyes as they adjusted to the darkness. Dash looked around but could see nothing. “Where are we?” She asked the Princess, who did not reply. Slowly, the interior of the Carousel Boutique came into hazy view. It was different, however. It was not full of costumes and dresses as usual, but instead was full of jewelry; tables and countertops everywhere bore shiny pieces on display.

From a back room, a mare appeared. Rainbow immediately recognized her white coat and purple mane: “Rarity!” She called, but the mare made not the slightest hint of noticing her.

“She can’t see or hear you, Rainbow Dash,” the Princess explained.

Rarity looked over the jewels carefully and with a light, dreamy smile. “I don’t understand,” Rainbow Dash said, looking up at her companion, “Rarity is a jeweler? How is that—”

Crash! Rainbow looked back to Rarity and saw that she had smashed one of the cases, filled with diamond jewelry, and began to magic them out of the case and into a saddlebag Dash had not noticed before.

“Wa-ha-ha!” Rarity said, smashing another case and emptying its contents as well.

Rainbow’s eyes widened. “Wait, she’s not a jeweler! She’s a—”

“*Thief!*” somepony called as the door to the boutique swung open. Two city guards came in, shining small flashlights on Rarity. Rarity was not to be deterred, however, and in a single motion, delivered a sharp kung-fu kick to one of them. She bucked the other one across the face with her back hooves and sprinted out of the boutique.

“What’s going on?” Rainbow asked her alicorn companion, “Why is she a thief? How did |—”

“Your sonic rainboom, as you have already learned, helped your friends learn their special talents. But talents, as it turns out, are not always what they are first made out to be...In Rarity’s case, she was never able to apply her love of jewels to her love of making clothes until

after her family's boutique had gone out of business. When she finally did discover it, it manifested in the form of greed."

"But her element...her element of harmony is Generosity!"

"In a world with you, perhaps. But not here. Come along, Rainbow Dash, I've got much to show you."

Away they flew, far outside the border of Ponyville. They headed across to the other side of the mountains, to a large sprawling city. Tall buildings crafted a beautiful skyline in the darkness, lit with dots of candles in many windows. "Manhattan," The Princess said simply, as they dove toward a window high up at the top of one of the skyscrapers. They flew in an open window, and landed on a fine tile floor.

The office surrounding them was clean, and simple, and very large. A huge oak desk adorned with executive toys sat on the right, with a soft-looking couch on the left. Seated on that couch, in a sharp grey suit, with an amazingly well-styled mane, was none other than—

"Applejack!" Rainbow said, forgetting for a moment that her friend could neither see nor hear her. She watched, amazed, as Applejack got up from the couch and sauntered daintily over to the desk and pushed a button.

"Send in my next appointment," she said, with not a single hint of a southern accent, and sat down behind the desk.

The door opened, and two more familiar ponies entered: Big Macintosh and Applebloom. Her siblings took a seat in the chairs opposite Applejack.

"Macintosh. Applebloom." A long silence fell upon the room. Finally Applejack spoke again. "You understand why I've asked you here?"

"Eeyup." Macintosh gave Applejack a look of complete contempt.

"So when will I be expecting payment? Soon?"

"But Applejack," Applebloom said, "Nightmare Moon took away the sun! With no sunshine, the apple trees are all dead! There's no way we can—"

"Do I *look* like I care about your country problems? So the trees won't grow. So cut them down and make picnic tables for all I care. But the Apple family owes me. And it *will* pay up."

"But Applejack, you're our sist—"

"You understand," Applejack said coolly, "that if I gave family members preferential treatment when they default on loans what kind of precedent it would set."

Big tears welled up in Applebloom's eyes. "You wouldn't let us...you can't..."

Applejack retrieved a piece of paper from a drawer. "Your other option, of course," she said, "is to sign over the whole farm to me. I'll make some use out of it, I can assure you."

Applebloom looked at the paper and then to Big Mac. "But...what does that mean to us? Will we have to leave?"

Applejack smiled slightly. "Of course."

"But...but here would we go? Why would you do this to us? I mean, this is *Hearth's Warming Eve!*"

Applejack took out a pen. "Right. And that makes SO much difference to me. Now. Sign...or face the consequences."

Big Mac slowly picked up the pen with his mouth and scrawled a name across the bottom. He heaved a great, broken sigh, and stood, shaking. He looked at Applejack straight in the eye. "I hope you're happy where you are, AJ," he drawled, "Wherever that is."

He nodded to the sobbing Applebloom, and the two left the room.

Applejack coldly took the paper and put it away, as though she didn't have a care in the world.

"I don't understand," Dash said to her companion.

"Your sonic rainboom reminded Applejack of her strong ties to her family, and made her realize that Sweet Apple Acres is the place she was meant to be. Without that, she remained at the residence of her Aunt and Uncle Orange, who taught her about business. Applejack's stubbornness was then applied to the world of corporate politics. She succeeded greatly. And she looks very happy, don't you think?"

Dash looked at the orange mare. "No, she looks...cold. And empty."

The Princess nodded. "Time to go."

Dash was very quiet on the way back to Ponyville. "Is there something wrong, Rainbow Dash?" the Princess asked.

"I dunno," Dash said, "I never realized how much I affect my friends' lives."

"But...?"

"But I still think they'd be better off without me."

They landed in ponyville square. Most of the shops, as before, were closed...save for a single cart on the far end of the square. There, a salespony was trying to make some last-minute bits before closing time.

"Come and get em! So many uses!"

Rainbow dash swallowed hard, looked at the Princess, and approached.

Pinkie pie sat, shivering in the cold, her hair falling in straight locks around her face. She wore a very thin sheet, barely holding the bitter wind back. Her cart was full of rocks of all shapes and sizes.

"Polished rocks, sharp rocks, dull rocks, rocks of every color," she called out to passers-by.

None of them stopped.

"You see, Rainbow Dash," the Princess said, walking up beside the Pegasus, "without your sonic rainboom, Pinkamina Diane Pie never learned the value of a smile, and never took the leap of faith required to bring smiles to others. She never learned about the power of laughter. And now, here she sits, selling rocks in the cold."

Rainbow Dash bowed her head and turned away from her shivering friend, wishing she could help, but alas she could not.

The two winged ponies flew out far from Ponyville, out to a small cottage at the base of the mountains. There, they entered through the back door to a very small and quant kitchen. Seated at the kitchen table was none other than Twilight Sparkle.

Her hair was different—shorter. Despite the lateness of the evening, she still sat up, reading. Absently she made some tea with her magic as she read.

"Twilight..." Dash said, "What's she doing here?"

"Without the aid of your sonic rainboom, Twilight failed the entrance exam into my School for Gifted Unicorns. In her shame, she fled Canterlot and set up her home here, far away from everypony else, and became absorbed in magic, and nothing else. However, without the guiding hoof of Princess Celestia, she never made any friends, and thus never truly understood the power of magic."

"So in the end," Dash added, "She ends up alone." She turned away from Twilight sadly. "Just like everypony else."

There was a long silence in the stillness of Twilight's cramped kitchen as Dash reflected. Then, with her eyes watery, she looked up. There was still hope that one of her friends would

have turned out OK. "What would have happened to Fluttershy?" Dash asked the Princess.

The Princess raised a red eyebrow. "Are you sure you want to know?"

Rainbow Dash nodded.

It had begun to snow. Rainbow and the Princess walked towards the edge of the Everfree forest, leaving soft hoofprints in the fallen whiteness. They approached an evergreen tree that had been planted just off the path.

Dash laughed. "So without my help, Fluttershy became a tree?"

The Princess gave her a dark look. "Look closer."

Dash approached the tree and noticed a mound at the base, buried in the snow. She looked back at the Princess as though looking for instruction. The Princess gave none.

Slowly, shaking with trepidation, Rainbow Dash moved aside the snow to reveal a white marble slab that read simply, "*Here lies Fluttershy, beloved filly, lost so young.*"

Tears streamed down Rainbow Dash's face as she rounded on the Princess. "How did *this* happen? How did *I* change this?"

The Princess spoke softly. "Without you, there was no race at summer flight camp. But Fluttershy was still a very weak flier. It was an accident, of course—no pony's fault. But when she fell this time, there were no butterflies to save her."

Rainbow Dash's legs felt wobbly and they crumpled beneath her. Never in her wildest dreams did she think that she had had such a profound effect on her friends' lives. Without her, all of her friends had been left without knowing their true talent. Worse, each and every one of them had ended up alone.

"So what do you say, Rainbow Dash?" the Princess asked. "Do you still wish you had never been born?"

Rainbow wiped the tears from her eyes. "No. I want to go back. Please."

The Princess smiled. "I thought you might say that."

Just like that, they both stood on the doorstep of Rainbow Dash's residence. Rainbow dash shivered, but it was less from the cold than it was from the chill of her experience.

The Princess smiled warmly. "I hope you remember the things you've learned, tonight,

Rainbow Dash. I'm going to leave you now. Good Luck." She spread her wings to take flight.

"Wait!" Rainbow said, throwing her arms around the Princess. "I don't know how to thank you for all of this. I—"

The Princess returned the hug before letting Dash out of the warm, friendly embrace. "No thanks necessary. Have a happy Hearth's Warming with your friends." And in a flash of light, she was gone.

Knock knock knock. The door to Twilight's library home swung open, casting a bright warm glow on the snow outside and illuminating a visibly cold Rainbow Dash. Twilight was there, giving her a quizzical look. "Hi Rainbow. I was wondering where you'd gotten off to."

"I...I'm sorry I'm late, Twilight. I really didn't mean it. I sort of...overslept and I really didn't—"

"Come in, Rainbow. Or else you'll catch a cold."

Rainbow came in. Fluttershy and Rarity were in a corner singing Hearth's Warming carols. Applejack was playing some party game with Pinkie. The pets were all stretched out by the fireplace.

"Hey everypony! Rainbow's here!" Twilight said. They all looked over and ran over to greet their friend.

"Rainbow, darling, how could you leave the house without a scarf?" Rarity asked, throwing one around Rainbow's neck.

"Glad you could make it," Applejack added.

"The party would have been no fun without you!" Pinkie said, bouncing up and down.

"Have some cocoa," Fluttershy offered.

Rainbow looked sheepishly down. "I'm sorry I made you guys so upset today," Rainbow said, tears welling up in her eyes. "I guess I sort of took you all for granted there and I shouldn't have. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" Twilight asked.

"You're our friend, of course we forgive you," Rarity offered.

"It's just you being the way you are," Applejack said.

"You were just having a bad day, I'm sure!" Pinkie giggled.

"We still love you," Fluttershy said softly.

Rainbow dash wiped the tears from her eyes as she looked around at all of her friends. "I guess when you're such a big part of your friends' lives, it takes more than a bad day to keep them mad at you. Sometimes it takes looking past a friend's faults and forgiving them that makes them a real friend."

Twilight's eyes lit up. "You should write that to the Princess!" she squeaked.

"I've got a feeling," Dash said, "She already knows."