



Rainbow Dash



and

The Daring Do Double Dare

by G. M. Berrow



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For the two stallions who make my life 20% cooler: Gareth and JM

CHAPTER 1



The Latest and Greatest



It was almost midnight in Ponyville, but nopony was tucked into bed yet. They all had the same very good reason for staying up past their bedtime: There were only four measly minutes to go until it was *time*. Time for the most epic adventure ever to be released—*Daring Do and the Volcano of Destiny*!

“Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh!” said Rainbow Dash, a blue Pegasus pony with a rainbow-colored mane. She bit her lip and began to pace around the patch of grass outside the Ponyville bookshop. Even though she would have the precious book in her hooves in less time than it took for her friend Pinkie Pie to throw together a party (her current record is four minutes, seventeen seconds), Rainbow Dash still felt so fizzy with anticipation that she thought she just might explode. As awesome as a rainbow firework would look, however, Rainbow didn’t have time for it. Not now. Not on the release night of the most incredible adventure book *ever*! Plus, if she exploded, she’d lose her place in line.

Three more minutes, she thought. Hardly any time at all! Yet it seemed like an eternity for the biggest fan of Daring Do in all of Equestria.

“Can’t you ponies hurry it up in there?!” Rainbow whined as she peered through the window of the bookshop. “I *need* that book right now!” The light was on and there was some movement inside, but the CLOSED sign had not been flipped around to OPEN just yet. Giant posters of Daring Do adorned the shop windows. They showed the famous adventurer Pegasus wearing her signature outfit—a khaki pith helmet and an olive green shirt. On the new book cover she was shown standing at the mouth of a volcano bubbling with fiery red lava. The words above bore the book’s title: *Daring Do and the Volcano of Destiny*. Below the cover, the poster read MIDNIGHT RELEASE PARTY! GET YOUR COPY BEFORE EVERYPONY ELSE!

Rainbow snickered as she glanced at the large crowd behind her. It had grown a ton in the past few hours. It looked like two hundred ponies were there. Thank Celestia, she was first in line! Nopony else loved Daring Do as much as Rainbow Dash did. To prove it, she'd been camping out since the morning. She brought all of the Daring Do books with her and had spent the day rereading them so she could have the stories extra-fresh in her mind. When midnight struck, she wouldn't have to wait a single tick of the clock longer to find out what happened to Daring next. It. Was. Going. To. Rock!

The Daring Do series of books had become extremely popular lately, and Rainbow Dash suspected it was mostly because of her. After all, she was a major trendsetter in Ponyville. Other ponies looked to her for anything extremely awesome or cool. So it was only natural that the bookshop had decided to make it a special event. It had closed early in the afternoon to prepare for the festivities. Some of the ponies in line wore homemade Daring Do costumes, and some munched on goodies from Applejack's treat cart. But they all had one thing in common—they were beyond excited to continue reading about Daring Do and her thrilling adventures.

"Get yer Apple Fritters... of Destiny!" Applejack said, trotting up and down the line with a tray of treats for sale. "Fresh Caramel Apples... of Doom?"

"Hey, Applejack?" Rainbow asked her friend. They just looked like normal treats to her. "Uh... what are you doing?"

"Figured I'd try to make my treats from Sweet Apple Acres sound as Daring Do as I could," Applejack explained. She picked up a mini apple pie and passed it to Rainbow. "Apple Pie of Fate? It's my last one!"

"Thanks, but no," Rainbow said, pushing the treat away. "It's almost time!"

Plot Twist, the yellow Earth pony with an orange mane who owned the bookshop, poked her head out of the door to count the ponies in line. "So many readers!" she observed with delight. It was fun to see so many young fillies and colts interested in reading.

"We're almost ready, everypony!" Plot Twist shouted at the line. She was glad she had recruited Pinkie Pie to help her with the party. They had expected a large crowd, but nothing like this. She needed all the help she could get.

"Oh, man!" Rainbow squirmed. "This is taking for-ev-er!"

"Hiya, Rainbow Dash!" Pinkie Pie chirped, poking her bushy fuchsia mane out of the window. "Are you, like, so totally excited that you feel like you're going to burst into a rainbow firework of happiness and super bubbly joy now that you're going to get the new Daring Do book first?! Are you?! Are you?!"

"Exactly!" Rainbow nodded. "Now, can we get this show on the road? I have a story to read! I just have to know what happens with Dr. Caballeron! Is the Volcano of Destiny his secret lair? Or is it just a decoy to distract Daring from finding the Secret Stables of Crickhowell?" With each word, Rainbow inched closer to Pinkie's face like she was interrogating her.

Pinkie shrugged and smiled wide. "I don't know, but it won't be long before you do! We're just putting the finishing touches on the replica of Ahuizotl's temple we made. It's built completely from books! Isn't that totally readeriffic?!" Her eyes sparkled with delight.

"Yeah, yeah. Very cool. But hurry it up!" Rainbow said, jogging in place. She'd been waiting outside for a long time. Her legs and wings were starting to majorly cramp up. And since she'd been waiting alone, she hadn't even had one chance for a flying break.

Rainbow had tried to get her friends to come, but none of them had wanted to wait all day long. Fluttershy and Rarity had stopped to visit but had to go tend to some newborn goats and finish sewing hats for them, respectively. Twilight Sparkle loved Daring Do, too (she was the one who'd originally introduced the series to Rainbow Dash), but she had decided to wait until her copy arrived in the mail the next morning. She mumbled some nonsense about needing sleep so she could get up early to do some studying before her Daring Do book arrived. She said reading would "distract her," so she'd better get her work done first.

It was so silly! What could be more important than this?! At least Applejack and Pinkie Pie were there, even if they were both working.

"Only one minute left, everypony!" Rainbow Dash shouted to the line. Her call was met with cheers. The sound of the crowd triggered something inside of her. Hundreds of ponies watching? Excited fans? One minute left? It was more than enough time to make a grand entrance into the bookshop! If she flew at the door at just the right angle... yeah, she could do this. She would do it for Daring Do!

Rainbow Dash turned to Applejack's big brother, Big McIntosh, who was in line behind her. He was wearing a Daring Do helmet and chewing on a piece of hay. She'd have to trust him to keep her place. "Watch my spot, Big Mac!" Rainbow shouted.

"Eeeyup," he said, nodding his light orange mane.

"Hey, Daring Do fans! Watch *THIS!*" Rainbow hollered. The ponies all started chattering. What crazy thing was Rainbow Dash going to do now? The store was about to open!

Rainbow bolted into the air, beating her blue wings as hard as she could. She shot off into the distance, a rainbow trailing behind her that was so bright it was visible in the night sky. It happened so fast that if a pony had blinked they would have missed it.

"Hey, where'd she go?" asked Apple Bloom, pointing to the sky. "I don't see her anywhere!"

"There she is!" squeaked Sweetie Belle in her little filly voice. "She's headed straight for the door!"

Up in the sky, Rainbow Dash could see the sign on the door flip from CLOSED to OPEN. The door was still closed, but if she'd calculated the timing correctly, everything would work out perfectly. She'd be the first to get the book and she'd do it with style.

"Daring Do, here I coooooome!" Rainbow shouted as she completed a perfect triple barrel roll across the sky, leaving a corkscrew rainbow in her wake. Rainbow Dash swooped down like a kamikaze pilot. Everypony in line held their breath. She was getting dangerously close to the shop! Would she crash into the door? Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle shielded their eyes with their hooves.

Several ponies gasped as Rainbow hurtled herself forward, about to make contact. Then, at the very last second, the door opened!

"Iiiincomiiiiing!" Rainbow Dash hollered as she dived through, narrowly missing Plot Twist, who had come to greet the eager fans.

Bang! Boom! Crash!

When the dust had settled, all that was left of the grand towering replica of Ahuizotl's temple was a big pile of books with a rainbow Pegasus in the middle. Even though Rainbow's stunt had ruined the display, it was a good thing the books had been there to soften the landing. At least that's what Rainbow told herself as she looked around at the destruction. Sometimes it took a little sacrifice to do something impressive, so the trade-off was totally worth it. Plot Twist frowned. Clearly she didn't agree.

"My display is ruined!" Plot Twist cried, throwing her hooves in the air.

Rainbow gave a weak laugh as she stood up, books falling off of her. "Whoops, sorry about that. I know it looked great." Then Rainbow snatched up a book, dropped her bits on the counter, and took off for Cloudsdale to read through the night.

CHAPTER 2



Patience Is an Issue



“And then what about the part where Daring swooped through the massive barricade the henchponies had constructed?! I couldn’t believe she made it! Even though they were blocking the path to the secret stone that unlocked the hidden gates that led to the road to the Volcano of Destiny!” Rainbow Dash yelled.

She spread her blue wings out wide in excitement. Her voice was so loud that anypony within a mile radius of Ponyville Park could have heard her. The only other times she got this worked up was when she was flying, performing a Sonic Rainboom, or when she saw one of the Wonderbolts do a sweet new trick.

“Spoiler alert! La, la, la...!” Twilight sang as she held her hooves over her ears. She shook her head back and forth in protest.

“Uh, Twilight? What are you doing?” asked Rainbow Dash, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “Don’t you want to talk about how so totally awesome the book is?! Especially the part where—?”

“No!” Twilight yelled. She softened her tone and added, “Sorry. I mean, no. No spoilers, *please*?”

“You’re not finished yet!?” Rainbow whined, doing a dramatic twirl before falling to the ground. “This is the worst! I thought *you* of all the ponies in Equestria would be done reading it by now! Don’t eggheads like you just, like, *look* at books and absorb what’s in them, anyway?” She groaned.

Twilight smirked. Sometimes Rainbow said things that sounded harsh but were really compliments in disguise. Whenever she called Twilight an *egghead*, she really meant that she thought Twilight was smart.

“Well, I *can* speed-read, but this is a book I really want to savor and enjoy.” Twilight held up

her copy. "A new one of these doesn't come out every day, you know."

Of course Rainbow knew! She'd only been waiting for this Daring Do adventure for what—months?

"Hey! What is that and why didn't I get one?" Rainbow pointed to the Daring Do bookmark stuck in between the pages, about a third of the way through. It was shaped like the famous relic from the first book in the series, the Sapphire Stone. It was actually pretty sweet.

"They sell them at the bookshop. You can have this one if you want," offered Twilight. She passed it to Rainbow, clearly trying to make up for her disappointment.

"Nah, it's okay," Rainbow said, handing back the bookmark. It was a nice gesture, but Rainbow Dash's number one problem still wasn't solved. She needed to find somepony who had finished reading the book so she could go over all the new awesome stuff that had happened in the story! Now. "How am I supposed to talk about the coolest parts of the story if nopony has finished yet?" Rainbow groaned.

"Sorry, Rainbow," Twilight said, taking a seat on her favorite bench on the perimeter of Ponyville Park. "But I'm going to take my time." Then she opened her book and got settled for a slow, relaxed reading session.

"I guess reading is just another thing that showcases how fast I am and how slow everypony else is," Rainbow Dash mumbled before taking off into the clouds. "Story of my life."

Fluttershy, who was leading a group of ducklings to the pond at Ponyville Park, happened to walk past just as Rainbow Dash took off. Fluttershy noticed the look of dismay on Twilight Sparkle's face, so she made a detour. "Hold it right there, little sweeties," the yellow Pegasus cooed to her feathered followers. "I'll be just an itty-bitty moment, and then we'll go for that little paddle like I promised." The ducklings responded with tiny, happy quacks.

"Hi, Fluttershy," Twilight said, still looking to the sky in concern. Up in the sky, Rainbow kicked a cloud in frustration. It disappeared with a poof. She frowned and looked for another puffy cumulus to take her anger out on.

"Is something wrong with Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy asked, looking toward the sky. "She seems... a little down."

"She wants to talk about the new Daring Do book, but nopony's finished reading it yet," explained Twilight. She furrowed her brow in concern.

"Oh, I just started reading it," said Fluttershy. "But I had to put it down to take care of my daily duckling duties. It's quite good so far!"

"I just wish there was something we could do to help her. It's so great to see a pony so excited about reading." Twilight sighed. "If I had it my way, everypony would read all the time! Then, we'd have meetings and discuss what we'd learned and exchange ideas."

"So why don't you do that?" asked Fluttershy. "It seems like fun!"

"Fluttershy, that's perfect!" Twilight replied, standing up. "We'll plan a Daring Do book club, and we can hold it at the library. Then Rainbow can talk about the books all she wants!"

Rainbow flew down so fast that Fluttershy and Twilight didn't even see her coming. "Now THAT'S what I'm talking about!" she cheered as she did a little backflip. "By the way, I was totally listening to your whole conversation."



CHAPTER 3



The Golden Oak Library Society



A few unbearably long days later, Rainbow Dash's wish was about to come true. Book Club Night! It would be nothing but talking about Daring Do all evening! By the time Rainbow arrived, Twilight Sparkle's home was already bursting at the branches with ponies who had recently finished reading *Daring Do and the Volcano of Destiny*. Everypony had come prepared for the very first meeting of the newly established Golden Oak Library Society. One by one, they filed into the library clutching their copies of the book and chattering excitedly about its contents. Rainbow Dash took a seat at the front and watched the room fill up. This was going to be awesome.

Plot Twist and Berry Punch walked in together, followed by their friends Lyra Heartstrings, Bon Bon, and Wild Fire. They all poured themselves cups of cider from Applejack's refreshments table and took their seats.

"Daring Do is such an exciting hero! I just love her!" said Berry Punch.

"This was the best book yet!" said Plot Twist. "We completely sold out in the first hour at the shop."

Bon Bon nodded in agreement. "The next book release will have to be even bigger."

"Totally," Wild Fire added, her voice monotone. The brown-maned pony wore straight-edged bangs that hung over her eyes and a chilled-out expression. It was still the most excited she had ever looked. Pinkie Pie popped up out of nowhere. "Name tags, anypony?!" She passed each attendee a little red sticker that said: HELLO, I'M... _____. Pinkie was already wearing one, except instead of her own name, she'd written HELLO, I'M... EXCITED!

"You're *Excited?*?" asked Bon Bon. The pony scratched her blue-and-pink mane in confusion.

"Sure am!" Pinkie replied with a smile. "Aren't you?!"

"I'm confused," Bon Bon replied. She already knew Pinkie Pie. "You're—"

"And I'm excited you're here, *Confused!*!" said Pinkie, passing her and Lyra some name tags. The two ponies shrugged at each other.

"Sorry I'm late, darlings! I wasn't sure what one wears to a library society," announced Rarity, waltzing in the door. "But I managed to rustle something up." She was decked out in a collegiate ensemble, consisting of a sweater over a collared shirt and horn-rimmed glasses. Her saddlebag was filled with quills and notebooks. She definitely could have passed for a student at Mythica University. "I never tried the bookish look, but I think it really works on me, no?"

"I think you look great, Rarity!" said Spike, popping his head out from the other room.

Before Rainbow Dash could add her two bits on Rarity's look, Fluttershy stepped inside. A little green inchworm followed her. He was wearing glasses and a tiny Daring Do pith helmet. He scooted in, moving almost slower than Tank, Rainbow Dash's pet tortoise. "I hope it's okay that I brought my friend William Wormsworth," she said in her gentle tone. "He's a bookworm. He loves books ever so much and begged to come along." William smiled and scooted to the top of a stack of Daring Do books.

"Of course," said Rainbow anxiously. "And it's nice to meet ya, Will. But please sit down now so we can get on with it!" It felt like everypony moved slow on purpose to frustrate her. Where was the hustle?!

But still, Rainbow was happy to see that all her friends had shown up for the meeting. The discussion was bound to get really heated and not just because they were going to talk about the Volcano of Destiny. She was going to impress everypony with her new theory. Rainbow was pretty sure that the Volcano of Destiny would become the Hollow Hideout of the prophesied Stalwart Stallion of Neighples in the next book. Surely, nopony else had made the connection between the newly recovered ancient map of the underground fortress of Mount Vehoovius in chapter four and its similarity to the one mentioned in *Daring Do and the Griffon's Goblet*. It had to be the same one! She just knew it.

"All right, everypony. Find a seat and we'll get started!" Twilight announced. There was a twinkle in her eye. Clearly, anticipating a whole evening of talking about books with her friends had brought her to almost the same level of enthusiasm as Rainbow Dash.

Twilight had certainly worked hard to make the event very official. The room was arranged so that the ponies could sit in a semicircle. It was a little bit like a classroom but more casual. The book-lined walls of the hollowed-out tree set the mood nicely. A big chalkboard listed the order of business for the meeting.

"Welcome!" Twilight chirped. "I'm so glad you're all here to share in the joy of reading with me! In my opinion, there are not enough events in Equestria purely for celebrating books, especially the Daring Do series!"

For once, Rainbow Dash wholeheartedly agreed. She didn't even care if it made her an egghead.



CHAPTER 4



The Double Dare



Pinkie Pie squirmed in her seat next to Rainbow Dash like she was sitting in a pile of ants, except she had a huge grin on her face.

“Oh my goodness, Rainbow! You must be so thrilled! I mean, Daring Do is, like, your favoritest pony character ever, and we’re about to spend *hours* talking about her! What are you thinking right now? What are you feeeeeling?” Pinkie leaned in until she was about an inch from Rainbow’s face.

“I’m thinking I want to talk about Daring Do and I’m feeling annoyed that we aren’t yet,” Rainbow deadpanned.

“Great, great. Okay, that’s great.” Pinkie nodded as she scribbled something on a notepad. “And how does *that* make you feel?” She propped her chin on her hoof.

“Pinkle Pie!” scolded Twilight. “We’re starting! Shhhh.”

“Consider my lips zippified!” Pinkie procured a zipper out of thin air and taped it to her mouth.

“So...” Twilight motioned to her blackboard, which was filled with tons of writing and diagrams. “I’ve done some extensive research into how to run a book club meeting,” she explained excitedly. “Number one on the agenda should be introductions of each member of the group.”

“I think we all know each other already!” Rainbow shot back. “Moving on!”

“Nuh-uh!” said Pinkie Pie, the zipper falling off her mouth. She pointed to Bon Bon. “Have you all met *Confused* yet?!” Bon Bon shook her head in defeat.

Twilight ignored the exchange. “Okaaay, so if we skip that part... next should be a quick recap of each chapter in the book to refresh everypony’s memory. Then, we’ll move on to general interpretations of the text and its meaning, and last we’ll go through the list of discussion questions. We’ll have one ten-minute snack break in the middle, so please wait to visit Applejack’s treat table

until then.”

Rainbow Dash looked around the room. A quick survey of the skeptical faces confirmed that she wasn’t the only one who didn’t think Twilight’s schedule sounded all that fun. Rarity was busy inspecting her new hooficure, Bon Bon was staring out the window, and Lyra Heartstrings was slouching down in her chair with her hind hooves dangling in front of her. She looked indifferent.

Rainbow jumped in before things got worse. “I think I speak for everypony here when I say we can cut straight to discussing the ridiculously sweet action sequences.” Plot Twist nodded her wavy orange mane in agreement.

Applejack interjected, trying to be a bit more gentle, “I think what she means is maybe we should giddyup on gettin’ this thing goin’.”

Twilight had the best of intentions, but sometimes she was an overplanner. And right now she looked pretty disappointed that her Library Society agenda hadn’t gone over so well.

Fluttershy felt bad. She raised a hoof and said, “Twilight, if it’s okay with you, William Wormsworth and I would love to stay after and discuss all your talking points. He usually has a lot to say, the little chatterbox!” William sat on his chair, smiling but not saying a peep. He hadn’t said a single word yet. He tipped his pith helmet to Twilight like a gentleman.

“It’s all right.” Twilight sighed. “Rainbow Dash, maybe you should take over.” Twilight found an empty seat. She was a good friend for trying, but Rainbow was more than happy to take the reins of this meeting. Now they might actually get somewhere.

“First things first: I can’t believe that move Daring Do did where she hitched a ride on the back of that dragon and let go right when she was over the middle of Ahuizotl’s encampment! I can’t wait to try that out sometime! Of course, I’ll need help finding a dragon....”

“At your service!” said Spike proudly. It was silly because he was still just a baby—and far too small to pull off a stunt like that. It was better to change the subject before he got his feelings hurt.

“Riiight.” Rainbow clapped her hooves together. “Anywaaaay, how about I tell you all my amazing and totally brilliant theory on the ancient map of Mount Vehoovius?!?” This was her moment to wow them. “So, you know how in book two—on page one hundred sixty-three, to be precise—Daring Do is looking for the griffon’s goblet when she happens upon a tablet that refers to an ancient map? I think that—”

Wild Fire raised her hoof, interrupting Rainbow’s flow. “Um, excuse me?”

“Yeah?” Rainbow replied, trying to hide her annoyance. She didn’t like being interrupted. Especially when she was about to say something so epic that it was going to blow everypony’s minds.

“I like Daring Do as much as the next pony, but do you *really* think that all those daring things she does are *realistic*?” Wild Fire flipped through her copy of the book, frowning. “No way could a pony ever really do them in real life!”

“She has a point,” said Lyra. She nodded and bobbed her mint green mane.

“Some of it is pretty far-fetched,” added a blue Unicorn seated in the back. A couple of other ponies murmured in agreement.

“Like the part where her wing injury is acting up, so she has to step out onto an invisible rope bridge to cross the canyon?” said Bon Bon, flipping to the page of the scene in her book. “No way would anypony risk that.”

They were clearly missing the point of a fun adventure story. Twilight chimed in with a serious counterpoint. “I don’t think the purpose of the books is to—”

“Are you guys kidding me!?” Rainbow shrieked, interrupting Twilight. Her eyes grew as wide as a couple of Granny Smith’s prized giant zap apples. “Of course, all the stuff she does could be real! Daring Do is the bravest pony ever. I wouldn’t be surprised if she *were* real!” Rainbow puffed up with pride.

Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie each shot Rainbow a warning look. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to say too much.

“I guess I’d just have to see it to believe it, is all,” Wild Fire said, giving a little shrug.

“Well... maybe you can,” Rainbow Dash said, walking up to Wild Fire. The expression on

Rainbow's face was a familiar one—determination. She'd looked the same when she saved Rarity by performing a Double Rainboom in the Cloudsdale Best Young Flyer competition. Just like nothing would have gotten in the way of saving her friend from falling then, nothing was going to stop her from proving her point now.

"Oh yeah?" replied Wild Fire, standing up to challenge her. "And just how are you going to do that?"

Applejack stood up and positioned herself between the two ponies. "All right now, everypony, why don't y'all just slow yer trot for a second? This is just a book club."

Rainbow Dash and Wild Fire stared at each other. Even though things were getting heated, it was a friendly challenge.

"Oooooh, I sense a dare coming on! This meeting is already way more exciting than I expected it to be!" Pinkie Pie said, jumping up and down. "And I was already excited." She pointed to her name tag. "See?"

Rainbow turned to the rest of the ponies in the room. She climbed on top of a chair for dramatic effect. "I... I *dare* anypony here to dare me to do anything Daring Do could do!" She put her hooves on her hips in triumph.

"And I... dare you to do so!" replied Wild Fire. She narrowed her eyes. "No—I *double* dare you!"

Everypony gasped. To Rainbow Dash, a dare was unbreakable. But a double dare? That was a whole new crate of apples.

"Called it," said Pinkie.

CHAPTER 5



The Daring Dash-Board



The next day, there was a big stir in the Ponyville town square. Everypony was gathered around the center, trying to catch a peek at something. Pinkie Pie had taken the lead in helping Rainbow Dash carry out her dares.

Pinkie Pie stood proudly next to a giant rainbow-colored scoreboard, making grand motions with her hooves and urging ponies to come up and write their challenges on it. The frame was surrounded in decorative glittery clouds made of cotton balls and said DARING DASH-BOARD in bubble letters at the top. The proud expressions on the faces of the Cutie Mark Crusaders—Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle—were dead giveaways as to who had helped make it. Those three little fillies loved arts-and-crafts projects. Their teacher, Cheerilee, who had many hoof-made cards from them at home, could vouch for that.

Rainbow Dash trotted up and waited for the ponies to start showering her with words of praise and adoration. But they were all so busy admiring the Dash-Board that they hadn't even noticed the guest of honor had arrived! Rainbow cleared her throat loudly to get their attention. "Umm, guys? Bravest pony in Ponyville present. You can all chill out now, because I'm here." She turned her nose up to the sky and closed her eyes.

"Oh wow, it's Rainbow Dash!" shouted a small green Unicorn filly, jumping up and down in glee. "Is she really going to do whatever anypony dares her to do?"

"She's here! She's here!" shouted Scootaloo. She was Rainbow Dash's number one fan; a rainbow-colored hat was pulled down over her short pink mane. "Come on, Rainbow!"

"Or you can all go wild," said Rainbow nonchalantly. "That's cool with me, too."

Everypony watched as Rainbow Dash parted the crowd with her confident trot and took her place next to Pinkie Pie. Rainbow now saw that the board had a bunch of lines where ponies could

write their names and dares, and a spot for a check mark if Rainbow completed the dare successfully. Even though she hadn't read any of the dares yet, Rainbow had no doubt that every row would have a check mark next to it soon. She was fearless, after all. Just like her hero, Daring Do!

"Thanks for coming!" Rainbow shouted to the crowd. "I'm pretty pumped to see you all see me do some awesome stuff!" She took notice of Twilight, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Applejack entering the town square. They all had funny looks on their faces. What was the big deal? She was just trying to prove how brave she was.

"Pssst, Pinkie, will you do the honors of reading the first dare?" whispered Rainbow Dash. "It looks cooler if I have an assistant."

"Sure thing, Rainbow!" Pinkie chirped, and then faced the crowd. "Fillies and gentlecolts! The amazing *Daaaaaring Dash* will now take on all these extremely difficult challenges to prove that her hero Daring Do could also *do* these dares that she will *do*!" Pinkie made a grand sweeping motion toward the Dash-Board. "Then she will defend her title as Ponyville's very own most brave, most fearless, most DARING pony!"

The townsponies cheered. Rainbow smirked.

"Daring Dash's first dare is..."—Pinkie paused for effect—"to cross the Ghastly Gorge..."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. That was hardly a challenge. If she was going to make her point, these ponies needed to get a little more creative than that.

"... on a tightrope..."—Pinkie continued, making a dramatic face—"without using WINGS! Over the lair of the quarry eels!"

"All right!" Rainbow shouted, flying up into the air. "Now that's more like it! Everypony follow me to the gorge!" Rainbow shot off into the blue sky, leading the way. The crowd dutifully followed, trotting below. Would Rainbow chicken out and use her wings? Or would she make a misstep and risk falling into the jaws of a giant, scary quarry eel?!

Twilight, Applejack, and Fluttershy followed but stuck to the back of the herd.

"Is this all really necessary?" Twilight asked her friends, walking at an easy pace. "We all already know how brave Rainbow Dash is, but sometimes she takes it a little too far." Twilight thought of the time Rainbow had become boastful after saving some townsponies and becoming a local hero. Her friends had devised a plan to remind her to keep her hooves on the ground and be modest. Clearly, that lesson was beginning to wear off.

"Don't you fret, sugarcube!" assured Applejack. She trotted alongside Twilight. "I reckon she'll do a couple dares and it'll all be over in two shakes of a filly's tail. Now come on!"

Rarity trotted up to join them. "Well, if anypony understands the allure of attention, it's me. But somepony ought to tell her that if she's going to be famous, she should look the part. A costume would really add a certain something."

"Rarity, I don't think that would do much to discourage the whole thing," scolded Twilight.

"I was just *saying*," Rarity huffed. "Besides, it doesn't look like she's giving up her new persona anytime soon."

Up front, Rainbow was doubling back through the crowd, hoof-bumping anypony she passed. She did a corkscrew flip and flew to the front of the group. "Ghastly Gorge, watch out!"

"It looks like she's having fun," said Fluttershy, walking alongside her friends. "I just hope she's careful."

"Me too, Fluttershy," said the concerned Twilight. She watched as Rainbow dived straight toward the ground. At the very last second she did a one-eighty and flew up into the sky, full speed ahead. "Me too."



CHAPTER 6



Heating Up



It had been a busy day for Rainbow Dash and the ponies who had been following her daring escapades. They'd been all over Ponyville and back again, watching as Dash took on a multitude of crazy challenges. Some were totally thrilling—like when Snips and Snails had dared her to swim to the bottom of the disgusting swamp, Froggy Bottom Bogg. Rainbow had gotten completely covered in green slime and gook, but everypony had been impressed.

Others were not quite *as* exciting—like Pinkie's dare for Rainbow to babysit her favorite yellow balloon for an hour. ("So many things could happen if he's left alone! It's very risky," she'd insisted.) But still, Rainbow Dash had completed each and every task, no matter the level of difficulty.

Rainbow took off into the air and felt the cool rush of the wind in her mane. "What else ya got for me?!" she shouted to the ponies below.

There was only about an hour left of daylight before Princess Luna would be lowering the moon over Equestria. But that was more than enough time to get a few more dares in. Rainbow Dash's friends had been following her all day, but as the hours wore on, they were getting more and more worried. She'd proved her point; why didn't Rainbow just put an end to the madness already?

"What was it you said again?" Twilight turned to Applejack. "Just a few dares and she'll be done? Look at her—she's been doing daring things like Daring Do all day!"

Applejack shrugged. "Maybe we can try a different approach to get her to give it up." She trotted up to Pinkie and whispered something in her ear. Pinkie nodded and scribbled a new dare on the board.

Rainbow Dash landed and trotted to the middle of the dwindling crowd, nose turned up to the sky. "Pinkie Pie, let's go over all the amazing feats I have completed so far."

"Oooh, fun idea!" Pinkie said, turning to the Daring Dash-Board. She pointed to each item with a long, glittery wand. "First, you tightrope-walked across quarray eel dwellings at Ghastly Gorge with no wings." The crowd murmured their approval.

"Piece of apple cake!" said Rainbow, hoof-bumping a nearby stallion.

"Then, you went inside the scary, old abandoned barn filled with bats...." Pinkie touched her pointer to the dare.

"I wasn't scared for a single second!" Rainbow assured her fans. "If anything, those bats were afraid of *me*."

"Awww," said Fluttershy, thinking of the poor little bats. "I hope they're okay."

"Then..." Pinkie took a long, deep breath and then said very fast, "... you swam in the bogg, babysat my balloon, spun around in a circle two hundred times until you were totally dizzy, gave Rarity's kitty-cat, Opal, a bath, knocked on Cranky Doodle Donkey's door during his bridge game, performed a Sonic Rainboom through the tree obstacle course at Sweet Apple Acres, and now you're about to eat the hottest chili peppers in all of Equestria!"

"Woo-hoo!" Rainbow smiled, satisfied with her success. Then the last part registered. "Wait—did you say something about chili peppers?" Rainbow disliked hot peppers more than any other food in existence. And there was only one pony she'd told that secret to: Applejack!

"Yeah, she sure did," said the yellow country pony, stepping forward. "Peppers from South Amareica. I just got some down at the Fillyadelphia market last week when I was making my pie deliveries. The pony who sold 'em to me carried them across the San Palomino Desert. He said a couple of those guys around the orchard would keep out pesky pests," Applejack explained. She leaned in close to Rainbow Dash and looked her straight in the eyes. "He also said that one lil' bite of one of 'em would make fire shoot straight out yer ears."

"TO THE BARN!" shouted Pinkie Pie, bouncing up and down. "Let's get the fire peppers!"

"But... but..." Rainbow Dash began to protest. Beads of sweat started to form on her forehead. What had she signed up for? "I don't like—"

"Yeeeeeah?" said Applejack, giving a little wink to her friends. Twilight looked hopeful. Maybe her plan to get Rainbow to quit all this darepony stuff might just work. There was no way Rainbow Dash would ever eat a chili pepper.

Rainbow looked around at her audience. Suddenly their faces seemed to be bearing down on her. It was like they knew she was about to be defeated by some tiny, little, itty-bitty hot peppers. But that couldn't happen! Not now, after she'd done all that other stuff. To quit now would totally disprove her point.

"What I *meant* was..." Rainbow forced herself to stand a little taller. "I don't like how long you're taking to give me those peppers!" She smiled nervously and looked around. That seemed to satisfy the onlookers.

"What?!" replied Applejack. "Are you sure? Well, color me surprised and call me Golden Russet!" Applejack felt a little silly now that her plan was literally going to backfire.

"She's gonna do it!" A yellow Pegasus with a blue mane shouted.

"Go, Rainbow!" added Bon Bon. "Rain-bow! Rain-bow!" she chanted. It wasn't long before the whole crowd was egging her on.

"That didn't go quite as planned," Applejack admitted to Twilight, stifling a nervous laugh. Apparently, Rainbow Dash was on a roll, and she wasn't going to cool it for just anything. Not even a hot, hot pepper.



As soon as Rainbow Dash bit into the pepper, all sorts of weird things started to happen. First, she felt like her mouth was on fire. Then, she could have sworn she saw Daring Do herself in the crowd. Finally, her ears began to feel hot and she heard the booming laughter of Ahuizotl telling her she could never defeat him. It was kind of awesome, in a way.

Rainbow coughed, and a few multicolored flames burst out.

"Look at that!" Spike laughed, clapping his claws together. "Rainbow can send all the letters to Princess Celestia now!" He found it particularly funny, since he was the only one who could breathe fire, as well as use its magic to deliver messages across Equestria.

"All right, now. That's it. Drink up, sugarcube!" Applejack patted Rainbow Dash on the back. She had insisted on bringing Rainbow an endless supply of water and cider to calm her tongue. She obviously felt very guilty about challenging Rainbow. Her plan had gone up in smoke.

"Thanks," said Rainbow, taking a big gulp. Everything seemed almost normal again, other than the fact that her tongue was now 20% cooler.

"I've never seen anything like that." Fluttershy shook her head in disbelief.

"Your face turned as red as an apple!" added Applejack.

"I'd say it was more of a deep crimson hue," said Rarity. "But it was dreadful."

"What about those rainbow flames that were shooting out of your ears?!" Pinkie squealed.

"That was so awesometastic!"

"Was it?" Rainbow groaned, sipping from her cup. "At least it impressed everypony, because those peppers were brutal!"

Twilight gave Rainbow a stern look. "That's just what we're worried about. Your daring ways are starting to put you in danger!"

Rarity, Fluttershy, and Applejack all looked at Rainbow in concern. Pinkie slumped down with the realization that she'd been encouraging her all along.

"What?" Rainbow Dash took another sip of cider. "I'm totally good. And plus, I thrive on danger. Rainbow 'Danger' Dash! Now let me go back outside and greet my fans."

"Rainbow, my dear," Rarity chimed in. "I think what she's *trying* to say is that nopony expects you to be as brave as Daring Do. Maybe you should just focus on being Rainbow Dash. Hmm?" Rarity batted her long eyelashes and swished her purple mane. Unfortunately, her charm was lost on Rainbow, who was now standing up and brushing herself off.

"Uhh, as nice as that is, guys, I think I'll just stick to being the bravest pony in town and being the best." Rainbow trotted to the door. "But thanks for all the cider! Now I'm ready for even more action."

"I liked this whole Daring Do thing better when it was just about reading books," said Twilight with a sigh. Rainbow Dash could have used that Sapphire Stone bookmark right about now. She was starting to lose track of her place.



CHAPTER 7



The Talk of the Town



The next morning, Rainbow Dash awoke to the sound of a loud thunderclap. She popped her head out the window of her home in Cloudsdale. All the other Pegasi were darting around in a tizzy and jumping on the thick, gray clouds to drain them. With each push, big raindrops began to fall on the landscape below. It was pouring!

“That’s funny,” said Rainbow Dash, still a little groggy. “I don’t remember a heavy thunderstorm being scheduled for today.” Usually, Rainbow Dash knew when all the weather changes were supposed to happen. But today, she was distracted and out of the loop.

Glitter Dew, a purple Pegasus with a blue mane and a starry cloud for a cutie mark, heard her and flew over. “We changed the schedule yesterday, but nopony could find you!” She darted off to join the efforts. “It’s only a morning rainfall.”

“What was I doing yesterday that was so important that I’d miss the weather schedule?” asked Rainbow Dash, scratching her head. Her brain felt a bit fuzzy. She’d had a weird dream about walking on a tightrope and then eating some insanely hot peppers. Unless... that was real! Rainbow touched her hoof to her mouth. Her tongue still felt a little numb. *Oh my gosh!* she thought.

The events of the previous day came flooding back to her. “That was no dream—that *is* what I was doing!” she said aloud. Rainbow Dash had spent all day zipping around Ponyville, showing everypony in town that she was the bravest pony ever. Now, she was known as Daring Dash—undeniably, unquestionably... unstoppable! “Great job, me!” she said, patting herself on the back with her right wing.

Suddenly, Rainbow Dash couldn’t wait a single second longer to get down to Ponyville to greet everypony, especially her friends. Even though Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, and Fluttershy had been totally skeptical before, there was no way they wouldn’t have come to their senses by now.

They'd have to admit that she kicked serious flank on those dares and nothing bad had happened! They really could be such a group of worry-ponies. All Rainbow Dash had to do now was sit back and wait for their apologies. And in the meantime, she would enjoy the praise that came with the title of being Ponyville's bravest.

"Sorry, guys," Rainbow shouted to the other Pegasi. "I've got somewhere to be!" Rainbow stretched her blue wings and smoothed down her multicolored mane. She gave herself a quick wink in the mirror and took off for Ponyville below.

Rainbow soared down from the sky and immediately noticed how full the town square looked. Apparently, word of Daring Dash's amazing feats had been spread across Ponyville by Wild Fire. There were twice as many fans as yesterday. They all gathered excitedly, chattering and recapping their favorite dares. Some of them were even wearing their Daring Do costumes from the book party, but had added rainbow-colored wigs to the look.

Wow, thought Rainbow. There sure are a lot of ponies here to see me.

"Are you all excited for Daring Dash?!" Pinkie Pie shouted to the herd. She was standing on the platform in front of the Dash-Board. Her outfit of choice was a rainbow-colored "Daring Dash" T-shirt and a hat that looked like a giant hot chili pepper. A few other ponies were wearing them, too, so there must have been a merchandise booth somewhere.

For some strange reason, Rainbow was starting to feel a little bit panicked. It was confusing. The scene certainly had a ton of things she loved—a crowd cheering her name, her best friends watching, and new, thrilling challenges to take on. Maybe it would be better to keep her entrance low-key this time. She landed in an alleyway and crept onto the scene, unnoticed.

A few more ponies trotted up, and Rainbow quickly darted behind a shop to listen to the conversation.

"I'm gonna dare Daring Dash to hoof-wrestle with Snowflake—the strongest Pegasus in Cloudsdale!" said a pink pony with a curly teal mane.

"Well, I'm gonna dare her to fight a manticore!" added an orange Unicorn with a cutie mark of a cactus. "With her bare hooves!"

"How about daring her to get a hooficure?" suggested their purple Earth Pony pal with a giggle. Rainbow cringed. She didn't like the sound of that one. If there was anything Rainbow hated more than chili peppers, it was beauty treatments at the Ponyville Day Spa.

"Ooooh, a hooficure?!" whispered Pinkie into Rainbow's ear. "How are you going to do that, Rainbow? You hate the Ponyville Day Spa!"

"Whoa! Where'd you come from?" shouted Rainbow, jumping back in shock and landing in the town square. Rainbow looked up at the platform in confusion. Sometimes Pinkie Pie seemed to move faster than Rainbow! Pinkie shrugged.

"Is something wrong?" said Fluttershy, floating down to meet the two of them. "You seem a little jumpy today, Rainbow Dash."

"Of course not!" Rainbow shot back in defense. "Everything is perfect! Look at this place. Everypony loves me!" She took off toward the stage, leaving a rainbow trail behind her. But as soon as she landed, a large mass of dark clouds began to drift over the town square. Then a bright shock of light zigzagged across the sky. Rain poured down and began to drench the ponies.

"Aw, come on, guys!" Rainbow shouted up at the sky. "Couldn't you wait just a little longer to do that? We are sort of in the middle of something here."

"Sorry, Rainbow Dash!" Silverstream, a gray Pegasus with a blue mane, shouted. "Carry on!"

"Thank you!" she shouted back, satisfied. Even the Pegasi did what she said.

Finally the clouds parted, and a strong ray of sunlight pierced through onto the crowd. One spot in the square was immediately lit up, drawing everypony's attention.

Standing in the middle was none other than Zecora—Ponyville's resident shaman! She wore lots of gold necklaces and a set of shimmering hoops in her ears. Her left foreleg was adorned with shiny bangles and she wore her black-and-white-striped mane short.

"What's up, Zecora?" said Rainbow Dash casually. In truth, she was a little nervous about the worried look on Zecora's face, but Rainbow couldn't let anypony see that. Zecora did have a taste

for the dramatic, and the whole clouds parting, personal-spotlight business had not helped the situation. Maybe whatever Zecora had to say would be no big deal.

“Citizens of Ponyville!” she bellowed in her rich, deep voice. Zecora paused, like she was struggling to find the strength to carry on.

“Is everything okay?” Twilight stepped forward, her voice doing little to hide her alarm.

Zecora continued, “I’ve come to summon the pony who has proved bravest...”

“Oh, well, in that case, I think you’re looking for me. Bravest pony in town right here.”

Rainbow pointed to herself and puffed up with pride.

“... for only she can be the one to save us!”

On the other hoof, maybe it *was* time to panic.

Zecora’s gold hoop earrings glistened as she nodded her head. “Of course, Rainbow Dash should be the one! Her skills and courage are second to none.”

The zebra made her way toward the platform. A few ponies jumped out of the way, scared. It was silly. Rainbow Dash and her friends knew that Zecora wasn’t actually an evil enchantress like they’d originally thought. She may have been lots of things—mystical, magical, and mysterious—but malicious was definitely not one of them. Too bad some stubborn ponies still held on to that fear.

“Anything you need, Daring Dash will do,” Rainbow assured her with a salute. “So... uh, what is it I’m doing?”

Zecora looked around at the group of ponies, her blue eyes full of worry. “A token that provides us protection was stolen for another’s collection.”

“Okay,” Rainbow Dash nodded. “So you’re saying it’s pretty important and stuff. Got it. What is it?”

“The precious relic of a golden hue resembles the hook of a horse’s shoe.” Zecora waved her hoof toward the crowd, and a three-dimensional image of the relic appeared out of wispy green smoke. It spun around slowly in the air so that everypony could see it. One side of the horseshoe was completely gold, and the reverse looked rusted and beat-up.

Twilight Sparkle gasped and stepped forward. “You couldn’t possibly mean... the Half-Gilded Horseshoe?!”

Rainbow Dash looked around to see if anypony else knew what Twilight was talking about, but their faces were all blank. Twilight knew a lot about a wide range of topics from all her studies on magical history.

“The what?” Applejack cocked her head to the side.

“Did she just say something about *gilded* shoes?” Rarity trilled. “Now you’ve got my attention!” She trotted up to the rotating image of the horseshoe and started fussing over it every time she saw the gold side. Rarity couldn’t help herself around anything shiny.

“It’s not *really* a shoe, it’s... it’s—the Half-Gilded Horseshoe is like a key of sorts. To the Spirit Circle,” Twilight explained. “The myth says that the pony who unlocks it will find a room full of treasures, but at a great cost.”

“Treasures?” asked Spike, his eyes sparkling. “Like gems? Big ones?”

“Maybe... but nopony really knows,” said Twilight. “Honestly, I really thought the whole thing was an old pony’s tale.”

“Much of the legend is a mystery, and most regard it as ancient history,” said Zecora. “But, I have failed as the key’s protector, and so must prepare to face these specters.”

“Am I missing something here?” Rainbow Dash asked. “An old rusty shoe was stolen and now somepony’s gonna score some treasure.” She lifted an eyebrow skeptically. “And this puts us in danger how exactly?”

Zecora swatted away the green smoke with her hoof. “The ghosts will be free when key meets lock. If you want to save Ponyville, fly fast, don’t walk!”

Rainbow wasn’t too sure about legends or ghosts, but if there was one thing she knew, it was flying fast. Rainbow stepped forward without another thought. “I’ll do it!”

The shaman sighed and patted Rainbow on the shoulder. “It is a great relief that our best flyer

will be the one to put out this fire.”

“You bet! Never fear, Ponyville. Daring Dash is here!” she shouted, flying up into the sky. Finally, Daring Dash had her own real book-worthy adventure to star in. All that other stuff had just been practice.

CHAPTER 8



Well Suited



The carousel boutique was an absolute mess. Swatches of green fabric lay on every surface, and pieces of thread and ribbons littered the floor. Half-drunk cups of tea sat on the sewing table. But it was crunch time.

Rarity paced around Rainbow Dash, deep in concentration. “Stretch your left wing out again, please. And stop moving around so much.” Rainbow sighed and did as she was told. Standing still was the absolute worst.

“I don’t see why you need to add anything to it,” groaned Rainbow. “My Daring Do costume from Nightmare Night is totally fine as it is! In fact, I can’t wait to wear this baby on my quest to recover the Half-Gilded Horseshoe.” She looked at herself in the full-length mirror. With her green shirt and pith helmet on, Rainbow was the spitting image of her hero. Well, almost.

“Because I *insist*,” Rarity said, measuring the shirt again. “If you’re not going to let any of us go with you, you have to at least let your friends help you prepare for your journey. You are seriously lacking in utility pockets.” Rarity shook her head, shuddering. “Now *there’s* a sentence I never thought I would say!”

“You know, Rainbow,” Applejack chimed in. “You can still change your mind about the whole thing. We’ll all be ready to go with you in a jiffy—just say the word.”

Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Twilight nodded.

“Yeah! It’ll be like a party!” Pinkie Pie added. “But instead of streamers and balloons, there will be scary beasts and spiky hedges!” Pinkie stood up and waved her arms around like she was trying to scare them. “And I’ll bring cupcakes. There’s always room for cupcakes.”

“Thanks, guys,” Rainbow replied. “But if I’m going to maintain my image as the fastest and bravest, I can’t have a bunch of other ponies slowing me down. Nothing personal.”

“Well, in that case, we better go over all my research on the Spirit Circle.” Twilight used her horn to magically carry over a large stack of books. They landed in front of Rainbow with a thud. “I think you’ll be interested in what I discovered.”



"So let me get this straight—" said Rainbow. She was looking through one of the Daring Do books, hoping to memorize some more cool moves. "The entrance to the Spirit Circle can be found by..."

Twilight sighed. They had been over this a few times already. She was trying to make sure Rainbow knew everything that Twilight had found regarding the Spirit Circle, but the Pegasus wasn't making it easy. "By the Dual Stronghold—whatever that is—and is only visible once every five seasons... on the seventh day of the... third week of the year."

"That's so random," Rainbow said coolly, flipping a page in her book.

"It's tomorrow!" Twilight shouted, pointing to the calendar on her wall. "It's likely that whoever took the Half-Gilded Horseshoe will be there, waiting for the entrance to appear."

"Well, I'll be ready with the move that Daring Do used in the final scene of book four—the old switch 'n' fly. This is going to be totally easy!" Rainbow said, conjuring up an image in her mind.

She pictured herself getting to the entrance of the Spirit Circle just in the nick of time. Then she would distract the Half-Gilded Horseshoe thief with an awesome stunt, snatch the relic by switching it with an item of equal weight and size, and then zoom off into the sky to return it safely to Zecora all before it was time for dinner. She would be miles above the thief by the time he noticed what had happened. No problem.

"Rainbow, don't forget the most important part," warned Twilight. "If whoever took the Half-Gilded Horseshoe opens the entrance, the spirits will get out!"

"Yeah, yeah," Rainbow Dash replied. She was already thinking of her homecoming party. Maybe Mayor Mare would give her a medal.

Twilight came up close to Rainbow Dash and tried to look her in the eye. "And if they do, they will be freed for another whole season. You have to make sure the entrance is closed! Don't let the spirits out!"

"Yeah, yeah... got it..." Rainbow answered mindlessly. "Closed and stuff. It's all good." But, unfortunately, Rainbow Dash's head was still in the clouds.

CHAPTER 9



Enter the Everfree



The six ponies, Zecora, and Spike all stood at the clearing that led to the Everfree Forest. Rainbow Dash was wearing her new costume that, thanks to Rarity, had a ton of new pockets and a new, matching lightweight saddlebag. A picture of her cutie mark—a cloud with a rainbow lightning bolt—was embroidered on the collar of her shirt, and the fabric on her helmet was rainbow-colored. She certainly looked the part. Now it was all up to her.

“You sure you don’t want company?” asked Applejack. “I feel mighty funny sending you out there alone.” The six of them had been to the Everfree Forest more times than Applejack had liked, but at least they’d been together. It was a spooky and unpredictable place.

“For the last time, *no*,” Rainbow answered. “Being the bravest means you don’t need any help.”

“Everypony needs help sometimes,” offered Fluttershy.

“I know I do,” Applejack insisted. “Remember that time I tried to buck all the trees in Sweet Apple Acres on my own?”

Zecora bowed her head. “It is time, Rainbow Dash, and I hope you are ready. May your wing beats be strong and your hoof beats be steady.”

“Thanks. And don’t you worry, Zecora,” said Rainbow. She patted the pocket Rarity had added for the relic. “I’ll have the Half-Gilded Horseshoe back in no time. No ghosts will haunt Ponyville if Daring Dash has anything to say about it.” Rainbow twisted into an action pose—right arm up to the sky, wings spread out.

Zecora looked slightly reassured.

Rainbow Dash gulped and took a step forward. “See ya later, everypony.”

“Wait!” shouted Twilight Sparkle. “We didn’t even get to show you your tools yet.”

“My what?” answered Rainbow, growing impatient.

“Each of those dreadfully practical new pockets has a little something from one of us to help you on your way,” explained Rarity, smiling warmly. “Go ahead and look.”

Sure enough, Rainbow Dash emptied the pockets to find a piece of rope from Applejack, a mini teddy bear from Fluttershy, some green cupcakes (and one pink one) obviously from Pinkie Pie, a pair of horseshoes from Rarity, and a Sapphire Stone bookmark from Twilight. They were the

weirdest group of adventure “tools” she’d ever seen. Rainbow Dash wasn’t sure how any of these things was going to help her, but her friends looked so proud. It was a nice gesture, so Rainbow played along.

“I told you there was always room for cupcakes!” squealed Pinkie Pie. “The pink one’s for you.”

“Thanks,” said Rainbow, who was already planning to ditch the items as soon as she was out of their sight. No need to have anything extra weighing her down—that went for extra ponies *and* random gifts. She stuffed the presents back into her pockets. “Now I’m off for real!” Rainbow announced. Then she flapped her wings and soared straight toward her destiny.

As soon as Rainbow Dash was out of sight, Twilight turned to the other girls. “Are you all ready to go?”

“Yes!” Applejack, Fluttershy, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie said together.

Zecora bowed to them and Spike gave a little wave. “Be careful out there! Good luck!” the dragon said as the five ponies trotted toward the dangerous forest. He was pretty sure they were going to need it.

CHAPTER 10



In the Thick of It



Rainbow Dash took a deep breath as she flew off. The humid air filled her lungs. It was a hot day, and the sun hung low in the sky. The gentle light illuminated every rock, tree, and bramble on the edge of the Everfree Forest. It was serene, but it was a false sense of calm. In a second, Rainbow would be deep inside it—the most wild, unpredictable place in all of Equestria. Other than Pinkie Pie's head, of course.

Mysterious bugs trilled and exotic birds cried out from the treetops. They seemed almost like they were saying “Do Not Enter!” but there was no way Daring Dash was going to heed the warning. She was the bravest pony in town. And she was on a mission to save Ponyville. Now where to start?

Rainbow Dash looked around and surveyed her options.

There was no visible path up ahead. Every direction was dense with green foliage that seemed to fade into black. It looked so... dark and cold. Rainbow Dash shuddered but then quickly shook off her doubt. “I can *totally* do this. I’m Daring Dash!” she said out loud to nopony. Her words fell flat against the bushy trees, and she started to realize just how alone she was.

Suddenly, the sound of deep, booming laughter echoed through the trees. It sent shivers up Rainbow’s spine. Maybe she wasn’t so alone after all.... No, it was probably just a trick of her mind. She had to keep moving.

Fifteen minutes later, however, Rainbow Dash hadn't gotten any farther. When she saw the same purple tree with gnarly roots, she realized she had been flying in a giant circle! She needed a better plan if she was ever going to find the entrance to the Spirit Circle before the relic thief.

Rainbow found a safe spot and landed. She hadn't heard the scary laugh again and there had been no signs of anypony else. Something told her that it wouldn't stay that way for long.

"Now where did I put that map of Equestria?" Rainbow said to herself as she rifled through her saddlebag. "I know it's in here somewhere with all this other stuff." Rarity's pair of shoes clanked together and squished into one of the green cupcakes. What had her friends been thinking?

"Yuck!" said Rainbow. She took one of the shoes and flung it behind her carelessly. She expected to hear a thud, but instead she noticed a low gurgling noise, followed by a loud *SNAP!* It sounded like a huge set of teeth.

Rainbow Dash got the funny feeling that she wasn't alone anymore. Her body froze, and she turned around slowly, unsure of what fate had in store for her. What she saw was worse than she'd imagined.

"Ahhh!" Rainbow screamed at a huge pack of Colossa-gators. They had iridescent, scaly green skin and red eyes and were each almost the size of an Ursa Minor. They were like normal alligators, except much stronger and a whole lot different than Pinkie Pie's toothless baby alligator, Gummy, back home. He was so cute.

Rainbow was completely surrounded. She stood frozen in place and watched as they crept toward her. The Colossa-gators were very hungry; they snapped their massive, sharp-toothed jaws and looked her in the eyes. Did they like to eat ponies? She couldn't remember. All signs pointed to yes.

Finally, she got hold of herself. Rainbow flew up into the air, but the thick canopy of low-hanging trees prevented her from getting enough clearance to be safe. She was still within reach of the gators!

"Oh no, you don't!" shouted Rainbow, starting to get angry. She flew around, trying to annoy the giant gators like a tiny pesky housefly. Maybe if she could make them dizzy enough, they'd leave her alone and she could escape! As she weaved through the spiky tree trunks, the gators snapped and chomped. They narrowly missed her rainbow tail more times than she cared to admit.

"Watch this, you ugly gators!" she yelled, flying as fast as she could around them. It looked like a rainbow-colored tornado with random scaly alligator limbs flailing around inside. "That'll teach you to mess with Daring Dash!" Rainbow landed on the back of a huge gator to do a little victory dance. "Ahhh!" she yelled as the big gator swung around, flinging her into the branches of a nearby tree.

She picked herself up and tried to take off again, but her tail was stuck! She yanked and pulled, but nothing worked. The biggest gator of the pack was getting close. He crawled up slowly, like he was savoring his victory. If she didn't break free soon, he would be savoring his lunch—a rainbow Pegasus!

Rainbow looked around for something, *anything* to throw at him. She reached into her saddlebag and grabbed the first thing she could find. It was one of Pinkie's green cupcakes. "If you're so hungry, eat this!" She chucked the baked dessert right into his mouth.

The alligator swallowed the cupcake, burped, and simply walked away. Rainbow couldn't believe her eyes!

What was in those things?! Rainbow reached for another one and gave it a closer look. It had loopy icing that said the words GATOR CUPCAKE on it. Rainbow Dash threw another at a different gator. The same thing happened. They were... gator treats?!

"Pinkie Pie, you're a genius!" Rainbow shouted into the air.

Pinkie popped her bushy pink mane out of a nearby tree. "Awww, thanks, Rainbow!"

But luckily, Rainbow was so caught up in the action that she didn't notice her overeager friend almost blow the cover of the other ponies. Rainbow wasn't supposed to know that they were following her. That would ruin the whole plan!

After Rainbow Dash had gotten rid of all the alligators, she only had one cupcake left. It was

the pink one, so she ate it. She hadn't even realized how hungry she was until then. She guessed Pinkie was right about the whole "making room for cupcakes" thing.

It was a minor victory. Even if she was no closer to finding the Half-Gilded Horseshoe, at least a giant creature wasn't eating her for lunch right now. But Rainbow needed to buckle down if she was going to make it to the Spirit Circle by nightfall.

It would help if she had some idea where she was going.

Rainbow finally found her map of Equestria and began to search for any sign of something called a Dual Stronghold like Twilight had mentioned. All she could see beyond the forest were old castle ruins. Rainbow suddenly found herself wishing that Twilight were there. She would have definitely had an idea about where to find the entrance. Or maybe she already had, and Rainbow just hadn't listened... which was entirely possible. Either way, it was too late now.

Rainbow rolled up her map and soldiered on into the unknown.



CHAPTER 11



A Sinking Feeling



There was a hint of something glowing and red in the distance. Rainbow watched with curiosity as the glowing mass drifted and swirled through the branches before escaping behind a large shrub. It looked a lot like the green magic smoke Zecora had used to show them the Half-Gilded Horseshoe. Maybe this meant Rainbow was on the right track!

She took off in the direction of the smoke, hoping that it would lead her closer to the Spirit Circle. “Hey, wait up!” shouted Rainbow as she flew along, relieved that she had a direction to go. Soon she’d find the entrance and retrieve the relic, and Ponyville would be safe once more.

Rainbow reached a large oval-shaped clearing that looked like a lake. But instead of water, the ground below was covered with soft white sand. That was strange. Rainbow hadn’t seen sand like that anywhere except at the beach or the swimming hole. She had certainly never seen it in a forest. But the Everfree played by its own mysterious rules, so it made sense in a backward way.

The red smoke hovered over the sand momentarily before continuing to the other side and disappearing into the woods. Rainbow was about to run after it, when she got a feeling that she shouldn’t. She leaped into the air, beating her wings like normal. She soared across the expanse. “Wait up!” she shouted, though she wasn’t sure whether blobs of bright red smoke could even hear anything.

She was halfway across when, suddenly, Rainbow felt herself falling! It was as if her wings were frozen in midair. She looked down at the sandy ground. It was approaching fast and there was nothing she could do. Rainbow braced for impact.

“Rainboooooow!” she heard a voice shout. It sounded like... Applejack? It had to be the forest playing tricks on her.

Wooompf! Rainbow Dash landed in the soft sand.

It was a nice cushiony landing. She found herself slowly sinking into its embrace, so she rested a moment. Then, she reached out her right hoof and pulled her body up. Her hoof disappeared into the pale grains of sand. Rainbow tried her left hoof and the same thing happened. Every step she tried to take brought her deeper and deeper into the sinking sand.

"It couldn't be..." Rainbow Dash said aloud, "...quicksand?!"

She tried to spread her wings, but they didn't work. They were still frozen in place by some sort of magic. Now, Rainbow was in up to her knees. If she didn't act fast, the sand would soon swallow her up completely. "This is probably the only time I will ever say this, but—I wish this would go slower!"

Her announcement was met with the familiar sounds of evil laughter, echoing across the sandy clearing. Rainbow looked around in desperation for something to grab. The edge of the sandpit was about ten trots away. She scanned the foliage and zeroed in on a low, sturdy bush with wiry brambles. If only she had something to reach it... maybe she could pull herself to safety. But what?

"Applejack's rope!" Rainbow yelled out, brightening. "Of course—it's a lasso!"

Luckily, the sand hadn't swallowed Rainbow's saddlebag yet. She reached in, grabbed the lasso, and pitched it up into the air with all her might. She swung it around in a circle like she'd seen her friend do so many times.

Rainbow Dash grunted as she tossed the rope toward the shrub. It bounced off the branches and fell to the dirt. "No!" Rainbow shouted, now waist-deep in sand. It was a lot harder than it looked. She made a mental note to compliment Applejack on her lasso skills when she got home. *If* she got home.

The thought of never seeing her friends again filled Rainbow with a new resolve. There was no way she was going to let that happen! She pulled the lasso in again and gave it another shot. This time, the loop hooked around the bush. Rainbow mustered all her strength and pulled. Inch by inch, she reeled herself back to the solid dirt. By the time she reached the bush, she was exhausted. She collapsed into a heap. This Pegasus had never been happier to have her hooves firmly on the ground.



CHAPTER 12



Finding Your Place



After what seemed like an eternity of trotting through the forest, Rainbow finally stopped herself. She wasn't going toward anything, and she had no leads on how to find the Dual Stronghold or the Spirit Circle. She was beginning to wonder if they even existed.

"Dual Stronghold..." Rainbow Dash said out loud, allowing herself to sit on a mossy log. "Dual Stronghold? Hmm. *Dual* means 'two,' so... two stronghold?"

Rainbow scratched her head. What in Equestria was a two stronghold? Maybe she was getting further from figuring it out than before.

It was starting to get dark.

Time was running out, and Rainbow was starting to feel weary and very alone. She wondered what her friends were doing right now. Applejack was probably having a yummy dinner with Apple Bloom, Big Mac, and Granny Smith. Maybe Fluttershy was reading Angel Bunny an early bedtime story. Twilight might be studying a new spell with Spike. Rarity could have been busy designing a new line of dresses involving utility pockets. And Pinkie Pie was *definitely* baking a giant cake to pop out of—just for fun.

All those things sounded better than being stranded in a scary forest on an aimless mission to retrieve a relic from an unknown thief. Rainbow grabbed Fluttershy's teddy bear and curled up into a ball. She started to drift off when she heard a voice softly whispering.

"Don't give up, Daring Dash!" it said. "You're supposed to be the bravest pony in Ponyville. You don't want to embarrass yourself, do you?"

"No!" Rainbow popped up and rifled through her saddlebag for her map. She pulled out the Sapphire Stone bookmark that Twilight had given her and stared at it. Why this instead of something useful like Applejack's lasso or Pinkie Pie's cupcakes? Twilight was usually the most

practical one of the bunch. Her gift didn't make any sense.

"I wish this was over!" Rainbow shouted, throwing the bookmark on the ground. She looked down at the gift from Twilight. "I wish I was back with my friends," she whimpered, picking it up and holding it close to her. Why had she pushed them away again? If they were here, this would have been so much easier. She would have already retrieved the horseshoe and Ponyville would be safe. But now she was lost and alone.

"I wish... I were at the Dual Stronghold right now!" And suddenly, a bright white light blinded Rainbow.

Rainbow Dash blinked and rubbed her eyes with her hoof. When she regained her sight, she saw that she had been magically transported! Instead of being surrounded by spiky, dark trees and low-hanging vines, Rainbow now found herself in front of a large, crumbling stone structure. She knew this place!

"The Castle of the Two Sisters!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. So that's what *Dual Stronghold* was code for. *Stronghold* was just a fancy word for "castle." If she had figured that out sooner, Rainbow could have saved herself a lot of time and trouble—sneaky Twilight and her enchanted bookmark aside. But there was no time for regrets now.

The Spirit Circle had to be nearby. Rainbow could feel it.

She took off toward the castle, searching for any signs of life. A puff of the swirling red smoke was just ahead. "Aha! I see you!" Rainbow shouted in triumph, taking off and flying after it. It led her through a maze of winding corridors and staircases that she didn't even know existed. Finally, she ran outside into a grassy clearing. The smoke joined a massive cloud of the same substance. It churned and spun like a slow, red tornado.

"Rainbow Dash!" a voice cried out. "She's here!"

"Don't worry about us!" cried another. "Close the entrance!"

"Fluttershy? Twilight? Is that you?" Rainbow would recognize her friends' voices anywhere. They sounded like they were in trouble, but where were they?

"Finally Daring Dash has arrived!" a deep voice bellowed. "I wasn't sure if you had survived."

A figure stepped forward but was still shrouded in red smoke. The dark outline heaved with laughter, and a shiver went up Rainbow Dash's spine. It was the same laugh she had been hearing all along.

"Show yourself, you... you... *coward!*" Rainbow squeaked.

"Prepare yourself to be amazed!" the voice cackled. The red smoke parted and out stepped a massive zebra. "For you are graced by the presence of Braze!"

He had blood-red eyes and an earring made of orange-and-yellow phoenix feathers. He had stripes, just like Zecora, only his weren't black-and-white; they were red, orange, and yellow and looked like the flames of a raging fire. It was a bit intimidating.

"I'm not afraid of you, Braze!" Rainbow Dash lied. She narrowed her eyes at him and adjusted her helmet. "Who are you and what have you done with my friends?!"

Braze stepped forward and slowly walked to Rainbow. He looked down at her with a wicked smile. "I knew they would be useful in this endeavor. Open the door, or they're mine forever!" He made a sweeping motion with his hoof to reveal Twilight, Applejack, Fluttershy, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie all tied together with a magical red fire-rope. They were all wearing pith helmets and shirts just like hers.

Rainbow gasped and flew over to them. "What are you ponies doing here?!"

"We're sorry for following you, Rainbow," Applejack said. "Honest. We just wanted to make sure you were safe!"

"We tried to let you have your adventure..." Fluttershy added. "But..."

"But then this big meanie zebra caught us and brought us here!" Pinkie Pie pouted, squirming around. Her mane was messier than usual, poking out of her helmet, and she had painted lines across her cheeks like a warrior. "And also, we're all out of cupcakes." Her stomach grumbled loudly. "Which is the worst part!"

"This fire-rope is really frying my mane!" Rarity cried, touching her purple locks. "It's awful!"

"Don't worry, guys! I'll have you free in just a second," Rainbow reached for the fiery rope, but it burned her hoof. "Ouch!"

Braze laughed. "Did you really think I'd make it that easy? Come here, Daring Dash, this choice will be breezy!" The zebra waved his hoof, and Rainbow found herself being dragged toward him. He turned her around to face a large, freestanding stone door.

It had all sorts of ancient pony carvings across it that seemed to tell a story. There was a Pegasus, who looked a lot like Rainbow Dash, soaring through the clouds with a striped trail behind her. The paint had long since worn off, but it could have been a rainbow. In the middle was a large U-shaped slot. Perfect for a horseshoe. The Half-Gilded Horseshoe. The key that could unleash a ton of scary spirits into Ponyville.

She hated to admit it to herself, but Rainbow was actually nervous.

"Hand over the horseshoe, Braze!" Rainbow demanded, trying to hide her shaky voice. "And release my friends! This is between you... and me!" She stood up a little taller and gritted her teeth. Nopony, or zebra, was going to mess with her friends.

Braze nodded his head, his feather earring swishing back and forth. "Yes, dear Dash, *you* are what I need! It's the only way for your friends to be freed. The spirits will only open the room for the one who can do a Sonic Rainboom."

He tossed the Half-Gilded Horseshoe into the air to show off. It twirled around just as it had in Zecora's green flames. As it glistened and sparkled in the light, Rainbow noticed that the edge caught one of the fire-ropes, cutting it slightly. It was subtle, but it gave Rainbow an idea.

"You want me to open the door to the Spirit Circle for you?" Rainbow asked, playing along. "And then you'll untie your fire-rope and let my friends go?"

Braze circled around her, little flames escaping from his hooves with each step. "Yes! Yes! Then I'll disappear with my treasure, and you can leave at your leisure." He smirked. Everything was falling into place perfectly.

"Deal!" Rainbow nodded her agreement. A look of horror flashed across Twilight Sparkle's face. Clearly, she thought it was a trick. But Rainbow had a plan.

"Look at that! Aren't you clever? Now insert the key and pull the lever!" Braze salivated, rubbing his hooves together greedily. He tossed Rainbow the Half-Gilded Horseshoe. The ponies all held their breath as Rainbow caught it. Was she really going to open the door? What about the spirits getting out?

If only she could distract Braze somehow....

Rainbow gave a sly wink, and Pinkie Pie seemed to get the hint. "Hey, Mr. Braaaaaaze?" she chirped. "Do you have any snacks?! I'm sooo hungry!"

Braze turned around and growled in rage. "I know nothing of your pony diet! Stop talking for once and just be quiet!"

It had been just enough time for Rainbow to make the switch and slip the Half-Gilded Horseshoe into her saddlebag.

"One haunted room full of treasure, coming right up!" Rainbow said, inserting a regular horseshoe, the gift from Rarity, into the slot. She reached her hooves onto the lever and slowly pulled down.

CHAPTER 13



The Dash to Safety



“See? Guess you were wrong!” Rainbow shrugged as she pushed down on the lever again. “It doesn’t work.” Rainbow Dash’s plan was going even better than expected. Braze hadn’t noticed the horseshoe had been switched.

“No! No! This cannot be!” Braze looked toward the sky and let out a deep, angry growl. “I have secured both the Pegasus and the key!”

“Maybe you should just let us go and git along now, Braze,” Applejack shouted, struggling against the fire-rope. “Looks like you won’t be openin’ any spooky doors today.”

“Give it up, Braze!” shouted Twilight. “The entrance is going to close any minute and you’ve got nothing.”

“No!” Braze shouted, and began to pace back and forth. He started mumbling to himself, presumably in rhymes. It was the perfect time for Rainbow to make her move. She crept over to her friends, careful not to let Braze see what she was pulling out of her bag....

“The Half-Gilded Horseshoe!” Twilight exclaimed. “It’s been in your bag this whole time?”

“What?!” Braze galloped over and stood between Rainbow and her friends. “I knew that you were being phony! Give it back now, you deceitful little pony!”

Over Braze’s shoulder, Rainbow Dash could see that the door was starting to lower into the ground. She just had to buy a little more time and keep the Half-Gilded Horseshoe away from him until it was gone. Then, she would cut her friends free and they could escape!

“I’ll never surrender it to you, Braze!” Rainbow shouted. “And in case you forgot—I am the fastest Pegasus around!” Rainbow shot up into the air just as Braze threw a fire-rope at her. It singed the bottom of her tail. Rainbow dived back toward her friends, hoping to cut the rope, but Braze was in the way. He reached out for the horseshoe and almost got it. It was too close.

Rainbow was going to have to do this from afar.

“Hey, Braze! Watch this!” Rainbow hollered. She held the horseshoe up and narrowed her eyes to aim. Then, she flung it like a boomerang—right at her Ponyville friends!

Braze dived for it.

The shoe flew through the air, landing perfectly out of Braze’s reach and exactly in position to

slice through the fire-rope. It doubled back to Rainbow, as if it were under her control. She caught it with a smirk and blew the residual smoke off its surface. She put it safely away and gave her bag a pat. The girls broke free and cheered.

“All right, Rainbow!” Pinkie Pie squealed, jumping up and down. “Wahooooo!”

“You did it!” said Fluttershy.

“Thank you, darling,” said Rarity, smoothing down her purple mane. It still looked perfect.

“Now let’s get the hoof outta here,” said Rainbow. “This dude is creeping me out.” Braze was standing over the door, which had only a few inches left aboveground. He was shaking his head with a pained expression on his face. Finally, the door was sucked into the earth and disappeared. Now, there was just grass. He let out a sob.

“You may have won this time, Daring Dash...” Braze pulled himself up. He looked over to Rainbow, his eyes aflame. “But I will be back to claim my stash! And when the door is back anew... I will not stop till I find you!”

Braze cackled and vanished into a burst of flames.

“And I’ll be ready for him,” said Rainbow. She wasn’t going to let some greedy zebra put her friends or her town in danger again. But maybe next time, she would agree to some help from the get-go. She smiled at her friends. “I mean—we’ll be ready for him.”

“And so, with Braze defeated and the Half-Gilded Horseshoe secured...” said Twilight, quoting a famous line from the Daring Do books, “Ponyville was safe and sound once again, thanks to Daring Dash!”

“...and her friends!” said Rainbow Dash proudly. “Thanks for being there, even when I said you shouldn’t be. Plus, I couldn’t have done it without those gifts! What was with that bookmark?”

“It’s a placeholder,” Twilight blushed. “I enchanted it to help you find your place.”

“And aren’t gator treats the best?” Pinkie Pie sighed. “Gummy just loves them.”

Rainbow laughed. “You guys really saved my tail.”

“It looks a little burned to me,” commented Rarity. She inspected where the fire-rope had fried it. “But a trip to Ponyville Day Spa will fix it right up.”

“Anything but that!” said Rainbow Dash, shaking her head.

“And you’re supposed to be the brave one?” Twilight joked.

CHAPTER 14



The Bravest Thing



Miss Cheerilee's classroom at the Ponyville Schoolhouse was packed with students from all over the school. The fillies and colts were all buzzing with excitement for today's visitors. The local heroes, Daring Dash and her loyal friends, were going to talk to the class about their adventure in the Everfree Forest. All sorts of crazy rumors had been flying around about exactly what had happened out there, but today they were going to set the record straight.

"My big sister Applejack was there when Daring Dash defeated the evil zebra, Braze!" Apple Bloom bragged to Diamond Tiara, who turned up her nose.

"And so was mine!" said Rarity's little sister, Sweetie Belle.

"Well, I knew Rainbow Dash before she became Daring Dash!" offered Scootaloo, who was wearing her own mini Daring Dash costume.

"All right, let's calm down, my little ponies," Cheerilee said, taking her place at the head of the room. "Let's all give a warm welcome to... Daring Dash!"

"Hey, kids!" Rainbow trotted in and gave a nervous wave to the students. Everypony's hooves shot up into the air. They all had questions for the bravest Pegasus in Ponyville. But before Rainbow answered any of them, she had something important to say.

"Remember, it may seem cool to be brave and daring—and it totally is awesome—but if there's one thing I learned as Daring Dash, it's that..."—Rainbow looked to Rarity, Applejack, Twilight, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy, and they smiled back—"... sometimes the bravest thing a pony can do is accept help from her friends, even when she doesn't think she needs it!"

Rainbow put on her pith helmet, and the students cheered. "Now who wants to hear a play-by-play of how I was wing-deep in quicksand and used a lasso to pull myself out?!"

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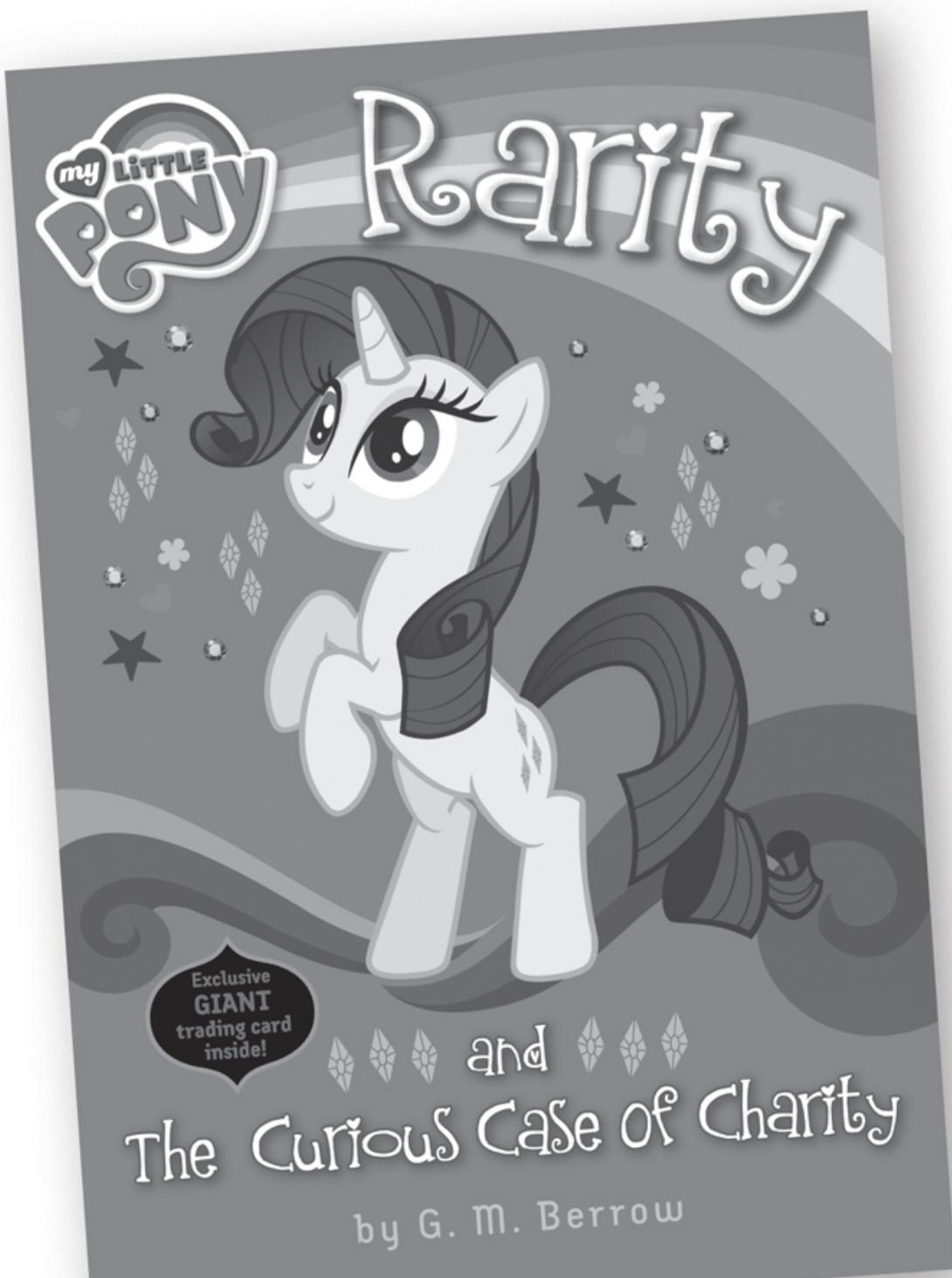
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Darling, don't miss

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