Rainbow Dash knew she was in trouble. The “Daring Do Dive Bomb” had gone spectacularly wrong. As soon as she had clipped that tiny cloud at nearly the speed of sound and had her balance and line completely thrown off, she had known it wouldn’t end well. The foliage below was approaching far too fast, and all of her efforts to pull up wouldn’t prevent the inevitable. All she could do was try to make the crash landing as soft as possible, hope she didn’t do anything too permanent to herself this time, and let her mind wander as time seemed to slow down.

One would think she would be past getting into wrecks of this magnitude by now. Seven months had passed since she had been accepted into the Wonderbolts as a junior member, and most of her time was spent training with the team, not dreaming up new tricks. Even when she could spare the time, she couldn’t seem to get away from her fans. Young pegasi followed her relentlessly to watch her practice, hounding her for tips and autographs. Only by sneaking away could she find solitude.

Of course, the flip side of that arrangement was that nopony would be around to help her back up after this crash. Rainbow grunted under the strain of trying to pull up from her dive. Her wings felt like they were on fire, and she spared a passing thought for how bad they would feel after she finally hit the ground.

What would happen if she seriously hurt herself now? Before, the only ponies who cared about her recovery were her friends, and there wasn’t any pressure on her schedule. Now, though? Her coaches would hound her in the hospital, taking cuts out of her salary and show fees for the time off. They might forbid her from practicing away from the Academy altogether, and she’d never know another waking moment away from the public!

Rainbow threw her hooves in front of her face, trying to protect her goggles as much as herself as she broke through the top layer of the trees. The passing sticks and leaves lashed at her body and wings, throwing her into a spin. She tried to curl herself up, bracing for the impact with the ground.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like the fans. Far from it. She adored the attention—needed it, really. The cheer of the crowd was like food and water to her. She could probably survive for a week off the high she got from performing in front of thousands of ponies. But it wasn’t everything to her. The more she flew with her squadmates and for the benefit of other ponies, the more she began to miss the simple joy of flying by herself—*for* herself. Little moments like this were all she could afford anymore.

The stuntpony’s mind returned to the moment just in time for her to flinch before landing. Her desperate attempt to pull up had done just enough to turn her deadly plummet into an uncontrolled glide, so instead of leaving a crater, she slammed into the ground at a shallow angle, furrowing the soil where she hit. She could feel the thump of impact and the sensation of deflecting off trees and rocks, but the experience was oddly painless.

After what seemed like an eternity, Rainbow finally came to a halt. Raising her head gingerly, she spat out the chunks of loam that had collected in her mouth. She waggled her various limbs to take stock of her injuries and realized she was going to be quite bruised tomorrow morning. She probably had a sprained knee in one of her back legs, but her wings were intact. The thought drew a long, agitated sigh from the downed pegasus; she was grateful that a hospital stay wasn’t in her near future but frustrated at the crash all the same.

She let her head drop back down into the dirt. Why was she still doing this? It wasn’t like she had to prove herself any more; she was just one step away from being a part of the greatest flight team in Equestria. So why was she out here pushing herself? Why was she still failing so spectacularly? Rainbow sat up and took off her goggles, turning them over in her hooves sadly. One of the lenses had been popped out and lost somewhere along her fifty-yard skid, and the whole assembly was battered and scuffed. She sighed, dropping the goggles into her lap. Her squadmates would never let her hear the end of it. She already had a reputation of flying on the edge of control as it was.

Why was she in the Wonderbolts at all? Nopony ever heard about Soarin’ or Fleetfoot going snout-first into the dirt. Did they ever have these sorts of days? Was she truly good enough to belong? Rainbow moved her rear leg gingerly, wincing at the tweaked joint’s protests.

Was it all worth it?

She slumped onto her back and stared up at the sky. Was she really worth the Wonderbolts, or was she just killing time until some other, better pegasus could replace her? For her whole life she had wanted to make the top tier, the major leagues. Was it really all it was cracked up to be? All the other members of the junior squad seemed to come to stunt flying naturally, but she had to work and sweat and break herself for everything she had. It wasn’t much consolation to look back and see the thousands upon thousands of pegasi she had surpassed, because all she could ever see was always the five or six between her and her dreams.

As the battered mare lay on the ground, lost in thought, she heard the beat of running hooves approaching. She arched her neck up to look around and saw an earth pony colt racing up to her, with an excited grin on his face.

“Ohmygosh, are you okay?” he panted.

Rainbow tried to look nonchalant but winced slightly as she shrugged. “Eh, I’ll be fine. It’s not the worst crash I’ve had.”

“Oh, good. I’ve been watching you fly all morning, and I was hoping you’d land.”

She rolled over and sat up so she could look at him while upright. “Why’s that? Want an autograph?”

The tiny pony beamed at her. “Oh, would you pleaseohpleaseohplease—?” He coughed, composing himself. “I mean, I’d love one, but that’s not why I wanted to meet you.”

She looked him over. “Okay, so why *did* you want to meet me?”

“Well…” he hesitated, rubbing a hoof through his mane self-consciously. “I wanted to say that you inspire me.”

Rainbow jerked back slightly, caught off guard. “Okay,” she said slowly, “how did I do that?”

“You’re smaller than all the other Wonderbolts.”

The pegasus cocked her head. “Well, yeah, I guess I am, but I don’t follow ya.”

The colt scuffed the ground awkwardly with a hoof. “Well, I know that you’re not as strong as the other flyers, and you’ve had to work twice as hard as everypony else,” he said. “For the longest time, I’ve wanted to be a doctor, but I’m not that smart in school. Everypony else in my class gets better grades than me, and ponies have told me that I’m probably not going to get good enough marks to be a doctor. You’ve probably had ponies tell you stuff like that, too, huh?”

Rainbow nodded solemnly. “I don’t know how many times…”

He nodded. “Well, I know that I’m gonna have to work twice as hard as anypony else in my class, but I’m not giving up, because *you* don’t give up.”

Something in Rainbow’s mind nudged her, reminding her that this chance meeting would never have happened if not for the crash. The flyer felt herself getting slightly misty-eyed as she looked at the determined colt and then back down at her fractured goggles. She reached out and draped the broken goggles over his neck. “Here ya go. For you.”

“Oh, wow, thanks! Um… but why?”

The pegasus stood back up, groaning under her breath as she straightened her leg out. She looked down at the earth pony and smiled. “Because sometimes things don’t work,” she answered, looking back at the trench she had carved in the forest floor. “Sometimes, you screw up.  Or life just happens in a way you don’t expect it to.  When that happens, you just gotta work harder.”

He followed her line of sight and whistled under his breath. “Wow, I didn’t know you crashed quite so hard. What happened?”

“A lesson.” Rainbow Dash reached out and tapped the colt’s hoof with her own before leaping painfully into the air. “Keep dreaming,” she called back to the young pony who stood waving energetically to her as she rose.

The Wonderbolt Academy was just visible on the horizon. She would have to take a day or two off to rest up, but once she could find the time, Rainbow knew she’d be right back out over the hills, trying her new tricks once again. No matter how many wrecks or how much effort, she was *going* to make the Wonderbolts’ main roster.

Even if it was only so a young colt could become a doctor someday.