

## Chapter 4

*Lights will guide you home,  
And ignite your bones,  
And I will try to fix you,*

*Tears stream down on your face,  
When you lose something you cannot replace,  
Tears stream down on your face,  
And I...*

“NNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

The scream woke Applejack and brought Nurse Redheart running towards the room.

Thrust up from sleeping by the sudden noise, the orange earth pony mare rubbed her eyes as she tried to make sense of the scene before her. As the blurriness of sleep faded from her vision, she shook her head to fully activate her awareness. Her gaze fell upon the bed in front of her, and what she saw caused her to jerk her head up, senses aroused by the sight before her. She sat up in the chair that she had fallen asleep upon the night before. The cyan pegasus who she had watched drift off to sleep herself only a few hours ago was now awake and thrashing around in the hospital bed. Frozen in place and not quite understanding the situation she was now confronted with, for several moments Applejack could only stare at the blue pony before her.

“She’s dead, she’s dead!” Rainbow Dash suddenly cried, jerking up in bed and flinging her sheets to the floor, “She’s dead and I killed her! I killed her. I killed her! Oh Celestia I killed her!” Finished with her outburst, Rainbow’s head dropped into her hooves and she began sobbing uncontrollably.

“Sugarcube?” Applejack asked as she jumped up from the chair, immediately rushing to the side of the bed, “Rainbow? RAINBOW!” She cried, reaching her hooves out to grasp the head of the pegasus before her. “Rainbow, wake up!” She started to shake the inconsolable pegasus, trying to get a response from her.

Rainbow Dash looked up, tears brimming in her eyes as she stared up into the face of the pony above her. “Applejack, I... I... I killed her Applejack. I killed Fluttershy. It’s all my fault. She’s dead because of me, because she tried to save my life! That should be me, Applejack. She should never have tried to save me. I should have died instead of her; she didn’t deserve this.”

“Oh, Rainbow.” Applejack said, embracing the blue pegasus by the neck, “Don’t talk like that; ya don’t deserve to die. And how could ya possibly know about Fluttershy?”

“I... I saw her... I watched her die, Applejack. I watched her heart stop!”

“Watched who die?” Nurse Redheart, just trotting through the doorway, asked, “Just what is wrong in here?”

“I... I woke up in the middle of the night. I walked down the hallway because I wanted to see Fluttershy. Then I saw her... and I talked to her...” Rainbow began to speak, tears forming in her eyes even as she did so, “Then... then her... her heartbeat stopped... I... I killed her... It’s my fault.”

“But, Sugarcube, that’s impossible. You’ve been in this room all night. Ah slept here right next to ya, so ya couldn’t have left without me knowin’ it.” Applejack said, pulling her face away from that of her friend’s, but still keeping her hooves wrapped around Rainbow’s neck.

“Besides, Fluttershy isn’t dead.” Nurse Redheart said, still standing back by the door. “I can assure you that Doctors have been with her all night. They told me that even though she is still in a coma, she is going to live. She won’t die, Miss Dash.” She paused for a moment to let this information sink in, “Now, I have other patients to attend to, so unless you are hurt in any way, I think I’m done here.”

Rainbow Dash shook her head and Nurse Redheart left the room. Without saying another word, she pulled Applejack in for another hug. She buried her face into the Blonde mane before her. Applejack had taken the bands out of her hair when she went to sleep, and her mane now fell loose about her shoulders. Rainbow breathed in the scent of apples from her mane as she began to cry again. This new information was almost too much for her to take, but for the moment, she had her face buried in the mane of the mare she loved. Even if she couldn’t admit her love to her, just having her in her arms was enough.

“It’s OK, Sugarcube.” Applejack whispered comfortingly into her ear, “It was just a dream. Fluttershy’s gonna be alright. Ya only had a nightmare.”

“But... but it felt so real!” Rainbow Dash said, still unsure.

“How could it have been real? Ya haven’t been awake outside of this room, ya wouldn’t even know how to find Fluttershy’s room, let alone get in without anypony seeing you. Doctors have been in there all night, and they sure wouldn’t have even let ya in her room if you had managed to find it – let alone even allow you to leave your own room in the middle of the night.”

“But there were no doctors, I didn’t see anypony else... not even you.” Rainbow said.

“Exactly, Sugarcube.” Applejack told her, stroking her hexachromatic mane as she spoke, “If it had been real, ya would have seen me when ya woke up. Ya would have seen doctors in Fluttershy’s room. You’re alone only in your dreams.”

“But... but why... why, Applejack... why does my mind want to torture me?” Rainbow sobbed into the sweet golden straw that had become her pillow.

“Oh, Rainbow. Maybe it’s just because you’re feelin’ guilty.” Applejack told her, “Ah know you must feel terrible right now, but believe me, Rainbow Dash. Everything is going to get

better. You're still alive, Fluttershy is still alive, you'll both be healed soon enough, and then everything can go back to normal. You'll see."

"No, Applejack." Rainbow said, resting her chin on the orange mare's shoulder, "Nothing is ever going to be the same again. I made a huge mistake, Applejack. I almost killed myself. I almost killed Fluttershy. My life will never be the same again."

"Ah know it feels bad Sugarcube," Applejack continued to console her, "But everypony makes mistakes. Even if this was a big mistake, ya can't live your whole life feelin' bad about it. Ah don't want ta see ya do that to yerself, and Ah know Fluttershy wouldn't want ya to do that either. She cared enough about ya to risk her life ta save yers. She wouldn't want ya ta beat yerself up over it." Applejack paused to reflect on something before speaking again, "Ah certainly didn't carry ya all the way here to watch you hate yerself."

"You... you carried me here?" Rainbow asked, perplexed now.

"Yep." Applejack responded, a hint of pride missed in with her solemn voice, "Ah was headin' into town when Pinkie found me and told me what happened. At first Ah was worried that you and Fluttershy were dead, but I leaned down and listened for yer heartbeat, and when Ah heard it Ah knew that Ah had ta save ya. So Ah put ya on mah back and carried ya all the way into town. Pinkie carried Fluttershy right behind me."

"But Applejack... what about the other girls? Where are they now, even?"

"Well... Rarity kinda left in a huff yesterday. But Rainbow, she doesn't hate you. Rarity is just stressed right now, and you know how badly she handles stress. Twilight leaves every night because she's takin' care of Fluttershy's animals for her. She stopped in to talk with me last night while you were asleep. She told me the instant that they got back to the waiting room Pinkie Pie crashed on a couch and fell asleep..." Applejack started chuckling involuntarily at this.

"What's so funny?" Rainbow Dash sat back down in the bed, confused.

"Oh, it's just that Ah think Pinkie's endless energy has finally run out." Applejack said, obviously trying to lighten the mood, then she continued to speak in a more sober voice, "Ya know, she watched you and Fluttershy fall to the ground. Ah think that out of all of us, she was the worst affected for the past two days. She never got a wink of sleep. She would just stay up all day and all night, pacin' the floor and whisperin' ta herself." Applejack paused, her tone suddenly much more serious, "We tried ta get her ta snap out of it but she wouldn't. You know how she is when her hair falls flat... Then, when Nurse Redheart told us you were awake, she took off running here without us. Ah'm just glad she finally found time to sleep, at least, according to Twilight. Ah can only imagine she's still curled up on a couch. Twilight left to put Spike to bed and tend to Fluttershy's critters after she stopped in to see us. Ah think Ah fell asleep a few minutes after that."

“You... you... you slept here all night?”

“Of course Ah did, Sugarcube. What are friends for, anyway? Ya asked me ta stay with ya, and Ah did.” Applejack gave her a smile, and Rainbow could swear she saw a sparkle come to her tired green eyes for but a fleeting instant.

“You’re a much better element of loyalty than I am.” Rainbow said, hanging her head, suddenly feeling dejected.

“If ya keep thinkin’ like that, you’ll never feel better about yourself, Rainbow. Ya need to be strong. Ah can’t stand ta see ya treatin’ yerself like this.” Applejack told her, lifting Rainbow’s chin with her hoof to look directly into those sad, magenta eyes.

“I know, AJ.” Rainbow responded, “It’s just so hard not to... I feel like... I mean, it feels like... it feels like... like...”

“Like the whole world is just against you, and you’ll never be able to feel happy again?”

“Y-yeah.” Rainbow managed to say, “AJ? How... how did you... know?”

“It’s a long story.” Applejack sighed, “Let’s just say that Ah... Ah understand your situation a little better than most ponies.”

“Applejack?” Rainbow Dash propped herself up, suddenly curious and slightly concerned, “Did you... where you ever... well, you know... are you saying that... that... you were like me once?”

“Well... not exactly,” Applejack paused for a moment, appearing deep in thought. Finally, she spoke, “Ah guess Ah could tell ya the story.” Without warning, Applejack climbing up into the bed and lay down next to Rainbow. She smiled as she lay her head on the pillows. Rainbow Dash, perplexed for only a brief instant, lay down to face Applejack. She stared into the green eyes across from her as she reveled in the chance to be closer to Applejack. She smiled at the mare she loved, willing her to begin as she received a kind smile back. “Do ya remember a couple weeks ago when Applebloom had her birthday party, but Ah wasn’t there for the first half?”

“Yeah, I remember thinking that was strange.” Rainbow answered, “And when you got there, you looked like you had been crying, but I didn’t want to say anything because I thought it was too personal...”

“Well... that’s because Ah was cryin’, Rainbow.” Applejack paused before continuing again, “Ah was cryin’ because that day... the day when Applebloom was born, was one of the worst days of mah life.” A silence descended on th two ponies, Applejack caught in a flood of memories, and Rainbow trying to think what to say to the pony before her.

“A-AJ? You... you don’t have to tell me this if it feels too bad...”

“No.” Applejack said, breaking her reverie instantly, “Ah want ta tell ya, Sugarcube. Ah think it will help ya.” With that said, she began her story again. “Many years ago, on the day Applebloom was born, Ah was just a filly. Ah didn’t even have mah cutie mark yet. Ah lived with Ma, Pa, Granny Smith, and Big Macintosh back then. Ma had grown up on the farm, and when she married Pa they took over operations from Granny Smith and Grandad. They were getting’ old, so when Grandad passed away we were all still sad, but it wasn’t really a surprise. Then, we all got some happy news. Ma gathered the whole family in the kitchen one day and told us that she was going to have another foal. Granny Smith explained to me that Ah was going to get a new little brother or sister, and Ah was so excited! As the months wore on, Ah watched mah mother get bigger an’ bigger, and eventually the day came for her to leave for the hospital. Ah don’t even remember why now, but Granny Smith made me an’ Macintosh stay back at the house while Ma and Pa went away. Then, that day came - the day when they were supposed to come back and the day Ah was goin’ to meet mah new baby sister. That day, Pa came in carryin’ the cutest little baby filly Ah ever did see in his hooves. I ran up to him and Ah asked where Ma was, ‘cause Ah didn’t see her anywhere. Then he started cryin’. Ah’d never seen my Pa cry before, so Ah knew somethin’ must have been terribly wrong. Pa wouldn’t talk to us. Granny Smith had to explain to Macintosh and me how Ma had died of foalbirth, and she wasn’t comin’ home no more.”

“AJ?” Rainbow spoke up, “AJ... I had no idea. I’m so sorry AJ...”

“Ah know Sugarcube. Thanks.” Applejack leaned over to give Rainbow Dash, who had fresh tears in her eyes, another hug before continuing. “Ah was upset. For the longest time Ah just couldn’t understand why Ah could never see mah Ma again. Ah started blamin’ everypony for what happened. Ah blamed Pa for not savin’ her. I blamed Applebloom for killin’ her when she came into the world. But most of all, Ah blamed mahself... ah blamed mahself for not bein’ able to do anythin’ for her. Ah took to lockin’ mahself in mah room for hours on end. Ah was takin’ it pretty bad, but Ah think Pa took it even worse. Most days he would leave in the afternoon and not come back until evening. He would stumble into the house and collapse on the bed. Then, one day, he left in the afternoon and didn’t show up that night. He didn’t come home the next day either. We went searchin’ for him, but we never found him, dead or alive. To this day, Ah still don’t know what happened to him. He just got up and walked out of our lives, and we haven’t heard from him since.” A hush fell over the two ponies, and for several moments after this, Applejack was silent.

“But... but how could he do that?” Rainbow asked, “How could he just leave? How... how could I just leave? Oh Celestia, I almost did the same thing! I almost abandoned you just like he did... Applejack? I’m sorry. I’m so sorry... so, so sorry...”

“It’s OK, Sugarcube.” Applejack said, “Ya know what? Even though he did what he did, Ah forgive him now. Ah forgive him, and Ah forgive you. Ya know why? Because Ah almost did the same thing. When Ah lost both Ma and Pa, it was almost too much for me. It was terrible. Mah whole family was split wide open. It felt like the whole world was just against me, and Ah

felt like Ah would never be happy again. That was when I started thinkin' about just endin' it all. I thought about doin' the same thing you just did, only Ah couldn't fly up and let mahself drop. Ah decided that a rope would do it for me. Ah got as far as tyin' one of mah favorite lassos, but Ah could never do it. Ah could never do it because every day –every mornin'– Ah would wake up and see the sunrise. And every day the sunrise seemed to say to me: 'Hold on. Hold on for one more day.' So Ah did. Ah lived one day at a time for a long time, until Ah finally decided ta just leave. Ah didn't want ta spend the rest of mah life on a muddy ol' apple farm... but there was more to it than that. There were too many memories on the farm. There were too many happy memories and too many sad memories – Memories of mah Ma and mah Pa – memories that made me sad. Ah didn't want ta think about them anymore, because thinking about them was just too painful. So Ah left for Manehattan."

"And that's when your cutie mark story starts?" Rainbow asked, recognizing the path Applejack's story had taken.

"Yeah. And Ah know ya'll've heard that story before, but Ah have one more thing ta say." Applejack took a deep breath, suddenly and inexplicably looking very nervous as she began to speak again, "When Ah felt homesick in Manehattan, and Ah had no idea what ta do, a rainbow showed me the way home. Ah ran all the way back home ta be with mah family, because Ah realized in that moment that family is the most important thing, and that Ah needed ta be with them. Ah came home, and Ah've been happy ever since. Ah have mah family again, and Ah've raised Applebloom like she was mah own, because everypony deserves ta have a lovin' family." Applejack breathed deeply again. Rainbow Dash was confused. As they both lay on the hospital bed, she continued to look into Applejack's eyes, but Applejack was starting to look nervous, and Rainbow Dash couldn't fathom why.

"Are you OK, AJ?" She asked, confused and suddenly concerned for her friend.

"Sugarcube..." Applejack began to speak again, "That rainbow Ah saw, that was you. Ya'll were the one who led me back home. Ya were the one who showed me what was important in life. Ya saved me from making a huge mistake, even though ya hadn't met me yet. And when Ah did meet ya, ya know how fast we became friends. Well... Ah've... Ah've always felt like we were more than friends... more than best friends, even... That's why Ah ran into town with you on mah back, Rainbow Dash. Ah couldn't stand the thought of losin' ya. Ah couldn't bear to lose ya because... because... because Ah love you too much, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash lay in stunned silence for a while. Could this be? Could Applejack have really just told her that she loved her – loved her back? Desperate for answers, Rainbow Dash broke the silence. "You... You love me?" Was all she could stammer.

"Yeah, Sugarcube, Ah guess Ah do." Applejack paused, unsure whether to continue, "Ah know it seems weird, us both bein' mares an' all, but Ah love you. Ah have for a while. If... if you... if you want me ta leave... Ah can..." She said finally, propping herself back up in the bed.

"NO!" Rainbow Dash suddenly cried, startling the orange earth pony, "Don't leave.

Please. AJ... I... I..." Rainbow stopped, unsure what to say now, "Why didn't you tell me sooner? If I had known... if I had known then I might... I might not have... I might not have tried to..." She couldn't bring herself to say it. She couldn't even mention how she had thought of Applejack when falling. She couldn't begin to say that this information might have prevented her from falling in the first place. She couldn't make Applejack feel guilty about not telling her sooner, but she could say one thing. "I love you too, Applejack. I love you and I was never able to tell you before – I was always too afraid. I've been such a stupid foal lately. I almost abandoned you without telling you – without knowing how you felt. I'm so sorry."

"Do ya... do ya really mean that, Sugarcube?" Applejack whispered, lying back down.

"Yes." Rainbow Dash said, voice full of a newfound confidence, "I do. Oh, Applejack. Please don't leave, please don't leave me here." She reached over and grasped the orange mare lying next to her, burying her face in the loose golden strands of apple-scented hair once again. "I... I don't want to be alone again." She said solemnly.

"Ah won't, Sugarcube." Applejack whispered into the blue ear of the pegasus, clutching Rainbow Dash in her own hooves as well. She reveled in the sensation of the pony she held sobbing gently into her mane. She had told Rainbow her secret, and she could not have hoped for a better result. "Almost losin' you... well, it made me think how fragile life was, and Ah knew Ah had to tell ya how Ah felt. Ah'm so happy ya feel the same, Rainbow Dash. Ah can't stand the thought of life without ya."

"I thought... I thought when I had that dream... that nopony wanted me anymore. I thought that I was just going to leave everypony behind... and I almost did." Rainbow said, still unwilling to let go.

"The dream where you saw Fluttershy die?" Applejack asked, wondering what Rainbow meant.

"No... I... I had another dream." Rainbow said slowly, "I wasn't going to tell anyone about it... but... here goes." She swallowed as she repositioned herself on the bed, staring deep into Applejack's eyes, ready to tell about the dream, visions of which had haunted her ever since she woke from it. "I was in this forest." She began, "It seemed peaceful at first, but there was this noise. I was curious, so I followed the noise until I got out of the woods. Then, I was standing on this beach. Behind me was Equestria, but in front of me was an endless sea of water, perfectly calm except for small waves that washed onto the sand every few seconds." She paused. It was strange, normally she couldn't recall the details of dreams so well, especially so long after she had experienced them, but this one seemed engrained into her memory, as if it had been real. Rainbow Dash still wasn't entirely sure that it hadn't been so.

"Then I heard this voice. I was startled but I looked down. There was a head poking up out of the water. I realized that it was me, only grey. We spoke for a while. Whatever it was basically told me that I should have died. It said that I was in between life and death, and that I had to follow it to finish what I had started. I guess that meant I was supposed to wade into the

water and take myself away from my life for good. I don't know why, but I got really angry. It was like this thing embodied everything I hated about myself, and I was afraid of it. As I felt myself getting angrier, the wind started and the sea got furious, it was like the whole world was following my emotions. Then, my parents came out of the water. I haven't seen my parents for years, and they were suddenly right in front of me. I wanted to be near them, even though they were grey. I felt like... like if I left my life behind, I could be with them again. So I started to walk to the water, only when I touched the water, it hurt. It hurt a lot." Rainbow Dash winced involuntarily, remembering the searing pain that had shot through her head. The pain she remembered felt all too real.

"When I opened my eyes, the water was turning red and the storm was breaking all around me. Everything was going crazy. The trees were moving as if they were alive, the water seemed to be turning into blood, it smelled like... it smelled like my house did when I watched it burn down. Then, my grey parents and grey self rose up out of the water and I saw... I saw that they each had a hole right through their chest. I was scared, so I ran, but I could get through the trees. So I just jumped up and flew. I flew upwards, right through the storm, and they chased me. I had to outrun them, but I started to get tired. Then a hole opened up in the clouds and there was this light shining down. So I flew through it and escaped. Then I... then I woke up here, with the lights in my eyes. I haven't forgotten any of that dream, but I wish I could." She finished.

Applejack leaned over to embrace Rainbow again. It felt good, to have her eyes mopped by a soft golden mane and to have her fears taken away by the strength and warmth of the pony she loved. Rainbow Dash smiled as she breathed in the sweet scent of Apples again. Even if she harbored so many bad memories, she knew that she could still be at peace here, with the mare whose strength was enough to bring a tortured soul in from the cold and out of the dark. "What do ya think it means, Sugarcube?" Applejack whispered.

"It means... it means I was close to death, I was on the brink, but I chose not to. I chose not to go into the sea; I chose to stay out of the great unknown. I chose to stay her with you. I chose life." Rainbow said, slowly catching on to the significance of her strange nightmare.

"Well," Applejack said, "Ah think ya'll made the right choice, Rainbow. Do ya know why?"

"Why?" Rainbow asked.

"Because you belong with me; not swallowed in the sea."