Spelling it Out

by Short Skirts and Explosions

It was the night of the Grand Galloping Gala, a very eventful one at that. After a calamitous series of events at Canterlot Castle, Twilight Sparkle and her friends fled to the safe confines of a downtown doughtnut cafe that was open twenty-four-seven. After a brief, delightful, and unexpected visit from Princess Celestia, the six friends spent the wee hours of the night chatting, sharing the crazy events that they had all experienced. One by one, the young ponies left to retire at Twilight Sparkle's parents' house and prepare for the next day of touring the city. Halfway through the cafe exit, Twilight paused to glance back at the two ponies who were still stuck in conversation.

“Applejack? Rainbow Dash? Aren't you both tired? If you stay up all night, how will I get to show you around my home town?”

“Oh, we'll follow you in a jiffy, Twilight!” Rainbow Dash said, waving a limb with a mangled slipper. The tell-tale signs of a bizarre night hung off the threads of hers, Applejack's, and Twilight's tattered Gala gowns. “AJ here is just in the middle of telling me more about this Prince Bloodclot that Rarity had been hanging out with.”

“Don't you mean 'Blueblood'?” Twilight remarked, casting a cock-eyed glance. She shook her head and smirked beneath exhausted eyes. “Whatever. Just be quiet when you both trot through my folks' front door later. Saner ponies will likely be sleeping by the time you get back.”

“Yeah, sure thing, sugarcube.” Applejack dismissed Twilight with a nod. As Twilight exited, she turned and smirked at Rainbow Dash. “So, like I was sayin', that uptight bottle of silver spoons was doin' nothin' for Rarity all night: not even showin' her the tiniest bit of courtesy! I've seen a heap'o'spoiled brats in my day, but this feller could have filled Ponyville Town Hall with golden bits at the drop of a hat if he wanted to. Would it have killed him to have paid Rarity some respects—with his money pouch if not with his heart?”

“Yeesh!” Rainbow Dash made a face. She reached up and straightened the bent, golden crown resting atop her mane. “I know we all had some wild and crazy stories to tell, but I think Rarity had the worst of all!”

“You reckon so?”

“Think about it. Not only do we all totally trash the nifty dresses she made for us, but then she gets hauled around with Prince Blueballs and gets her whole night ruined!”

“Blue**blood**. And if ya ask me, Rainbow, I think the whole experience did Rarity some good.”

“Pfft—Hahaha! Oh really?”

“Dang straight!” Applejack smirked. “You heard her goin' on and on for months about meetin'

some 'Prince Charming' at the Gala. I feel like a bad friend for not takin' one of them many moments to tell her how much she was settin' herself up for a fall. It's one thang to have yer heart in the right place, so long as it doesn't get mixed up with your brain noodle."

"Hahaha... 'brain noodle'."

"What's so cotton-pickin' funny?"

"Nothing." Rainbow Dash nevertheless chuckled and leaned against the edge of the table with an exhausted smile. "It's just funny-sounding, is all."

"So maybe I was born to buck apples and not words," Applejack said with a shrug as she picked at a plate littered with doughnut crumbs. "That's why I couldn't tell Rarity to her face that she was never gonna meet the stallion of her dreams so easy-like."

"Why not? You're the Element of Honesty and stuff, right?"

"Rainbow, tellin' a pony the honest-to-goodness truth just isn't everythang, ya hear?" Applejack's green eyes lit up with the warm lantern-light hanging above the lengths of the doughnut cafe. "If there's anythang that the Gala has taught us all tonight, it's that we gotta live through the bumps in life to see that the world ain't always as smooth as we dream it to be."

"Heheheh..." Rainbow Dash grinned. "Just like Rarity's sweetheart wasn't as smooth as she dreamed him to be."

"I felt mighty sorry for her when she and the Prince trotted up to my apple stand," Applejack murmured, her freckled face glazed over in thought. She stared off into the distance and summoned a soft, sympathetic smile. "She'd been so generous to us with these here dresses and all. I felt the only right thing to do was give her and the Prince a treat on the house, no matter if it brought my profits straight down to zilch."

"Hehehehe... Ahem..." Rainbow Dash rubbed the creeping sleepiness out of her eyes and then squinted at Applejack with sudden curiosity. "What do you mean, 'zilch?'"

"Heh. Didn't you hear me earlier when I was ramblin' on to Her Majesty and the rest of y'all?" Applejack rolled her eyes and flicked a few candied-crumbs off the barren plate in front of her. "The only bits I made the whole dang night was from one of yer beloved Wonderbooms."

"Wonder**bolts**," Rainbow Dash corrected and leaned further over the table with blinking, ruby eyes. "You mean the only thing you sold was that one apple pie to Soarin'?"

"Was that the feller's name? Well, he must have been hungerin' for somethin' mighty fierce, because no sooner had I set up my apple cart when he was tossin' bits my way for a bite. I reckon everypony else had either eaten before the Gala or thought my stuff wasn't fancy enough—like Rarity's Blueblood. I never got to find out which was which, because as soon as I baked a fancy cake and rolled it into the dance hall, Pinkie Pie smashed it to bits in the middle of one her crazy dance numbers."

“Yeah... Uh... Pinkie will do that,” Rainbow Dash said dismissively, her gaze falling towards the floor. “I know for a fact that Soarin' enjoyed your pie, cuz I saved it from falling to the floor just minutes before I was allowed to hang out with the Wonderbolts.”

“Heh. So that's why they let you into the VIP area,” Applejack said with a smirk. “And here I was thinkin' it was just on account of you savin' all their hides months ago at the Best Young Fliers Competition.”

“Yeah, well...” Rainbow Dash fidgeted, her hooves toying with the edge of the table. Her smile had left her. “Spitfire remembered me, at least. The others... I-I'm not so sure. Really, though, the Wonderbolts were all too busy hanging out with other ponies or getting their pictures taken.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, Rainbow. I know how much you wanted to hang out with them folks.”

“That's... just the thing.” Rainbow Dash chuckled nervously. “I kind of sort of got that chance already. On the day I won the Best Young Fliers Competition, I spent an entire afternoon with the Wonderbolts. It was like a dream come true.” She smirked. “It was *better* than a dream come true; it was the best day ever! I... I used to think that the Gala would give me that, but things turned out differently. I guess tonight would only have been a repeat of something awesome that I was lucky enough to have gone through already.” She gulped and gave Applejack a sad glance. “But you? You got totally screwed out of something awesome, didn't you?”

“Land's sakes, girl! I thought we all decided that this night was the best night ever!” Applejack smirked. “Don't fret none, Rainbow Dash. Just like Rarity, I should have known better than to have expected too much from just one evening.”

“What, you were also looking for Prince Charming?”

“Tchh—You *really* have a hard time payin' attention, don't ya, sugarcube?” Applejack helplessly chuckled. “This was all about earnin' bits! This whole night was supposed to be my golden opportunity to drum up money for the family farm! What else have I been ramblin' on about for the last few months if not tryin' to turn the Gala into a business opportunity for Sweet Apple Acres?” She raised her hooves and removed her hat before dusting it off for the umpteenth time that night. “Still, I should have known better. The Gala is all about rich pony folk hangin' around and talkin' nonsense while Princess Celestia blesses them with her presence. There's not a single customer to be had in that whole lot. Why, I'd have an easier time countin' hay stalks than sellin' apples to lace-dressed wallflowers. Lesson learned, I guess.”

“You... You will find another way to earn bits, won't ya, AJ?”

“A mare's gotta do what a mare's gotta do,” Applejack stated. She planted the hat back atop her braided, golden mane and smirked at Rainbow Dash. “From now on, it's back to business as usual. I can't pretend to have the same entrepreneurial spirit that my mother took with her to the grave. I was born with more brawn than brain, sure—and I'll be the first spirit to admit that. So long as I keep pullin' the plow straight and buckin' the trees in time for the next harvest, I'll have all my apples in their baskets—heh—both literally and metaphoric-like.”

“But... tonight's craziness at the Gala and all...” Rainbow Dash shifted uncomfortably. “It's not a setback or anything for you, is it?”

“Life's full of setbacks. The key is not to fret over it none. Sure, I gambled a little more than I'm proud to admit on tonight, but it's nothing worse than I've had to deal with in the past. I warned Filthy Rich—our partner in marketing, you know the stallion—that the supply of apples will be a little bit short this month, on account of my packin' so much fruit to peddle at this here Gala. But t'ain't nothin' too terrible. I'm already plannin' to have Filthy sell the surplus apples at his shops here in Canterlot. Whatever little profit I make from that should tie the farm over until Cider Season. That's when the work around home always gets mighty tough. So long as the family's prepared for that, we can squeeze by another year.”

“Jeez, AJ. I had no idea things were always so... so...”

“Tight?” Applejack graced Rainbow Dash with a blank expression. “Them's the cards fate has dealt, Rainbow. If I didn't want to deal with it, I wouldn't be farmin'. But it's what I was born to do, and hard work makes a pony. At least I've always believed that. Still, I never wanted to burden you and the other girls with my family matters. T'ain't proper. Besides, I enjoy hangin' out with y'all because you're such fun to be around: a proper diversion, if you will. Pilin' on all of my farmin' business with useless talk just ruins the moment, ya hear?”

Applejack expected silence after that. Instead, Rainbow Dash was quick to reply with “I don't think it'd ruin anything, AJ.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “I beg yer pardon?”

Rainbow Dash was trying her best to give a sincere smile. Enough of her devil-may-care smirk was absent to show the farm-filly that she wasn't fooling. “You and I and the rest of our friends just survived the worst-best night ever. It's half-past dead, we're in a doughnut shop, and there's nothing left to lose. So... pile it on, Applejack. I'm all ears.”

“You, Rainbow?” Applejack squinted suspiciously. “*You're* all ears?”

“Yeah, why the hay not? I'd like to hear more about your crazy farm full of apples, AJ. Besides, I couldn't fall asleep now if I tried.”

Applejack was about to dismiss her friend when something in the pegasus' tranquil gaze told her that this moment was anything but a joke. She took a strong breath and tested the waters with a grumbling voice. “Yeah, well, talkin' farm business works up an appetite, and as if I didn't make myself clear, I ain't got the spare bits to be buyin' myself more doughnuts to munch on.”

“Heheheh... No problem.” Rainbow Dash winked and dropped a few golden coins onto the tabletop. “It so happens I've got some to spare.”

“Well, ain't you Miss Golden Goose all of the sudden?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Rainbow Dash waved her hoof towards the cleanly dressed stallion standing

behind the distant coffee counter. “Hey! Mister doughnut dude! Another plate! Pronto!”

Rainbow Dash was willing to listen, so Applejack was willing to talk. The farm filly started out simple, talking about the average number of apples she and her family sold in a given month. When Rainbow Dash asked for more details, Applejack no longer kept things simple, and before she knew it an hour had passed and she was talking about the steady decline in profit that Sweet Apple Acres had been enduring over the past five years. This led to rather gritty details concerning the horrible condition of the farm family's barn roof, as well as how badly their chief plow needed to be replaced. By the time the discussion had delineated to the subject of Granny Smith's much-needed hip operation, Applejack feared she had talked far too much.

However, Rainbow Dash—the chief weather flier of Ponyville—hadn't shown a moment's sign of disinterest. She sat still, her ears tuned to everything that Applejack had to say. It was because of the sheer fact that the pegasus was willing to stay in one place for so long that Applejack braved going even deeper, if only to see if she could give Rainbow Dash the ultimate test and bore her into submission. This backfired, and soon Applejack was divulging detailed memories of Apple family harvests of yesteryear and the various highs and lows that led to the farm's condition today. Applejack talked about Big Macintosh's soft-spoken demeanor, about Granny Smith's legacy in Ponyville, about Apple Bloom's future education, and even about Winona's scheduled veterinary visits with Fluttershy.

The passing time was measured in eaten doughnuts. The pile of pastry treats on the table between the two disappeared one by one like an imploding mountain. By the time the plate was once more reduced to a sea of scattered crumbs, a strange glow was forming just over the rooftops of Canterlot right outside the cafe. It was morning; Princess Celestia was raising the Sun. Applejack would have said something about it, if only she wasn't too busy laughing her freckles off...

“Heheheheh—And then 'lil Apple Bloom goes 'If yer name's Filthy, then how come you always smell like a perfume shop whenever you visit!'”

“Oh dear Celestia!” Rainbow Dash chuckled. “You're pulling my hoof!”

“Honest to goodness truth!” Applejack giggled and wiped a tearing eye. “From then on, whenever Mr. Rich visited the farm to talk with Granny, we made sure Apple Bloom stayed in her room. Such a sweet little darlin', but she's got a long way's to go before she can chat business like the rest of us.”

“Is that the only reason you don't let her talk to the dude?” Rainbow Dash asked. The world outside the windows was a dull, golden gray. Many unicorns had filled the once-vacant tables, engaging in morning meals as they started their busy day in the city. “Sounds like you're pretty protective of Apple Bloom. If she knew how much the farm was struggling to get by as you're telling me, then that'd give her something to worry about beside getting a cutie mark.”

“T'ain't strugglin', Rainbow.”

“AJ?!” Rainbow Dash made a face. “Didn't you just get finished telling me that you and Granny Smith almost planned to sell half the land four years ago?”

“That was long before you became in charge of local weather in Ponyville, sugarcube,” Applejack said with a consoling smile. “With climate as regular as it has been, we've been able to climb back up from such a pit, though it's been a steady grind.”

“Thanks, Applejack, but... I think we both know that what I do in town doesn't mean squat in this case.” Rainbow Dash frowned and toyed with an empty mug of coffee. An entire night of conversation had passed, but she looked awake enough to take on an army of Nightmare Moons. “I didn't realize it was just so freakin' hard to sell apples. No wonder you're *obsessed* with it. A pony *has* to be crazy to live off of farming in this day and age. I had no idea.”

“Now I only told you all this cuz you asked, Rainbow!” Applejack exclaimed. “Sure, it's tough at times. But that's just fine. I like a good challenge. Don't you?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Besides, if I don't have a good work ethic, then what do I have?” She smiled. “I'm happy to be carryin' the farm on my backside like I have been. Heh... I'm downright proud. I know that if my parents were still alive and kickin', they'd both be happy with what I've done for the family business, and I'm not makin' that up. I've spent all my days tryin' to do right by what Apple ponies before me have set in motion. Laborin' ain't much to sweat over so long as you're sweatin' for all the right reasons.”

“It's just... It just sounds like so much *work*, AJ. Don't you ever dream of doing more than kicking apple trees and having fruit fall on your head?”

“Heheheh...” Applejack adjusted her hat and leaned against the table, smirking. “Reckon it's only fittin' for a pegasus with 'Rainbow' in her name to put so much weight into dreamin'. As a matter of fact, I *do dream*, sugarcube. Ever since I was a young pony, I've had this one vision that someday I'd be... Aw shucks...”

“What?” Rainbow Dash perked up, blinking.

“You don't wanna hear any of that nonsense.”

“No! Please, tell me.”

“Well...” Applejack took a deep breath, smiling in a sudden warmth. Her orange cheeks flushed red underneath her freckles as she gazed off into space beyond the lengths of the busy cafe. “Believe it or not, underneath all these duds and muscles is a little filly just like what's inside the rest of y'all. And like any little filly, she dreams of startin' a family of her own someday and raisin' them proper.”

“Heh... Yeah, okay. Kind of sappy...”

“'Kind of?!'”

“Okay, *really* sappy!” Rainbow Dash stuck her tongue out. She giggled when Applejack did, then continued, “I'll buy that. Still, what's the big deal? What's wrong with—I dunno—living that dream?”

“T'ain't proper to count chickens before they've hatched. So maybe I have a dream; it's only somethin' worth dreamin' about if I can *earn it*, Rainbow.” Applejack gazed up across the table at her friend. “This farm I'm on won't balance itself out on its own. Equestria's full of magic, but when it comes to an earth pony and the land, work is all I have to count on. That's why I'm always laborin' so hard. Still...”

“Still what, Applejack?”

She smiled softly, murmuring into the last scant shadows of the expiring night. “I can't help but imagine the day when the dream comes true, only because I've finally *made it happen*. That's a day when I hope to finally relax and find myself a stallion—not some handsome and debonaire charmer like Rarity fancies—but a hardy, dependable pony with whom I can see eye to eye, somepony simple, somepony I can watch the sunset with and enjoy the world for what it brings us as much as we bring it. Maybe then I can settle down and have me some foals. I'd give them the sort of life that I was never able to afford, a childhood where their parents are alive and well enough to be with them every trot along the way towards discoverin' themselves. They wouldn't have to work their hooves to the bone or sweat their coats out all on their lonesome. The Apple family would carry on, stronger than ever, cuz I'd be there to support them with every ounce of strength I have to give. There have been times, Rainbow, when I've feared for the survival of this farm and the legacy it's had to hold. I reckon you've had your best day ever; the day I no longer have to worry about Sweet Apple Acres will be mine. It makes all the hard work worth it, so long as I have my eyes in the right place. Does that make any sense?”

Rainbow Dash took a deep breath. She spoke through a tranquil expression. “Yeah, AJ. It does. It didn't always, but it does now, I think.”

Applejack blinked awkwardly at the tone in Rainbow's voice. Suddenly, the weight of the entire night announced itself to her bones. She shuddered and expelled the sensation with a high-pitched exhale. “Whew! Listen to me, will ya? Gabbin' on and on about silly filly dreams and all. I've talked your ears off somethin' awful. And look where the night's gone!”

“Yeah...” Rainbow Dash smiled nervously, adjusting the folds of her tattered gown under the gaze of curious breakfast patrons in the background. “Twilight's gonna kill us by the time we get back.”

Applejack leaned in, playfully uttering in a hushed voice. “Perhaps we can steal two seats on a train and speed ourselves to Ponyville without her knowin'. You reckon she can be dumb enough for a single day to not notice?”

“That egghead?” Rainbow Dash made a retching expression. “No. I don't 'reckon!'”

“Snkkt-Hahahaha!”

“Heeheehee!”

Rainbow Dash and Applejack did not take a train, and Twilight Sparkle didn't kill them. The next day was an awkward affair for the two drowsy ponies, but they made do. Twilight eagerly showed her friends the sights and sounds of Canterlot. The other five ponies enjoyed the tour, especially Rarity. Aside from a complicated situation involving Pinkie Pie, her tongue, and a gumball dispenser in the Magic History Museum gift shop, the day went off without a hitch. By the next morning, the six close companions took a coach back to Ponyville. The weekend of the Grand Galloping Gala soon became a thing of the past, and life for the six companions returned to normal.

Nopony understood this more than Applejack. True to her words to Rainbow Dash, she drowned herself in the apple orchards of her farm. Days passed by, days of ache and hot, humid afternoons. Applejack was used to the strenuous routine, but something about that one week of apple bucking took even more out of her than usual. For some reason, she couldn't shake loose the fresh memory of talking to Rainbow Dash in the doughnut cafe. Applejack couldn't remember a different time when she had divulged so much of her farming concerns to another pony. On that note, never before had one of her friends expressed so much legitimate interest and curiosity, enough to be an avid listener to all of Applejack's words from evening to sunup. The strangest thing was that it was the brash and easily-bored Rainbow Dash—and not a more cerebral pony like Twilight or Rarity—who had expressed such interest. Trying to mentally sort it out only made Applejack dizzy.

Applejack focused on her work, and time flew by, dissolving all the stress into nothingness along with it. The crazy events of the Grand Galloping Gala joined the sweat-stained blur, until only the cheerful memories of her and her friends' night together remained at the surface. Happily, the farm filly cherished those thoughts, for she couldn't afford herself a visit with Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, or any of the others for several days. Preparation for a seasonal harvest was always like that. Hanging out with friends amounted to brief sabbaticals in the grand sea of work. Applejack wouldn't have it any other way, or at least she never believed that she could afford it.

She never thought—not even for a second—that any of this was capable of changing, until one day...

“Howdy, folks!” Filthy Rich trotted slowly up to the farm, a big grin on his face as he came within hearing distance of the squeaks of Granny Smith's rocking chair. “Working hard as always, I see.”

“You bet your fancy tie we is!” The elder member of the Apple family murmured from her seat in front of the farm's decrepit barn. A few spaces away from her, Applejack and Big Mac were loading empty baskets into a wagon for another afternoon's fill of fruit. Apple Bloom was seated beside Granny Smith, working on Cheerilee's latest homework assignment. “We wouldn't be called the 'Apple family' if we weren't pickin' or buckin' at... at... oh gosh darn it, sometimes they're red and sometimes they're green whatchamucallits—”

“**Apples**, Granny.” Applejack rolled her green eyes. “Goodness!” She smiled at the wealthy, visiting stallion. “Good mornin' to ya, Mister Rich. What brings you to these here parts? We weren't expectin' to see ya for a good month!” She blinked, and her face briefly washed over with concern. “Shucks, I didn't miss a week or two again, did I?”

“Heheh... Nothing of the sort, Miss Applejack.” Filthy smirked and leaned against a wooden post before the four. “Working on the next big harvest?”

“You betcha!” Applejack loaded another basket into the wagon alongside Big Mac. “We've had a tiny little setback, but t'ain't nothin' to be worried about. I promised y'all that we're gonna deliver to yer produce stands on time, and that's a fact! I never fall back on my promises, do I, Macky?”

“Nope.”

“Well, that's just the reason why I came over here to see you fine folks,” Filthy said, brushing his collar and tie off while smiling with a strange pride. “Not that I'm meaning to pry or anything, but just how far are you coming along with your picking?”

“Almost have two thirds of the barn full, Mr. Rich. Why don't you trot inside and have a look-see? She may not be pretty on the outside, but we fill her up with Sweet Apple Acres' finest.”

“I don't need to take a gander, Miss Applejack. If my business wasn't so sure of your family's quality, my Pa wouldn't have invested in you so long ago as he did.” Filthy's glinting teeth showed as he next said, “Actually, I was wondering if I might trouble you to lend me a third of the bounty early?”

“This soon?” Applejack raised a curious eyebrow. “So far ahead of the harvest? What for?”

“To resupply my shops in Canterlot. It turns out your latest stock has sold.”

“Oh yeah? How many of the apples?”

Filthy Rich cleared his throat, then said, “All of them.”

Applejack froze next to the wagon. Big Mac did a double-take. Apple Bloom looked up from her homework. Finally, Granny Smith leaned off the edge of her rocking chair, nearly falling into the dirt beneath her. “Would ya mind terribly if you repeated them words for an old mare to hear once more?”

“I said it and it's the truth, Granny,” Filthy exclaimed. “There's no more Sweet Apple Acres fruit on the shelves in Canterlot. Every single apple has sold within a week.”

“Within... W-Within a *week*?” Applejack dropped a basket. She and her brother turned to gawk at the family's business partner. “Filthy, if this is some kind of joke, I'm afraid it's goin' clear over our manes.” Her green eyes narrowed. “That's over *fifty bushels* of apples you're talkin' about. The family's never sold that much within a *month*, much less in such a snobby place as Canterlot.” She winced. “N-No offense to yer unicorn business partners or nothin'.”

“Heh... It's quite alright, Miss Applejack.” Filthy smiled. “It so happens that your product is a big hit in the royal city. Quite frankly, I was surprised when I saw the numbers rolling in. I didn't believe it at first, so I sent two of my closest associates on a special trip to the stores in Canterlot to check for themselves. Sure enough, the shelves are clean. On top of that, ponies everywhere in the city are asking for more. Overnight sensations like this are normally unheard of. That's why I came here to see you personally and make a gentlecoltly proposition.”

Applejack and Big Mac trotted closer. Apple Bloom and Granny Smith craned their necks over the two siblings' flanks while Applejack spoke, “Just what kind of a proposition? If we switch gears now, we risk comin' short of supply for the upcoming harvest.”

“I think you should put the normal harvest on the back-saddle, so to speak.”

“How do you mean?”

“Focus on the stock you've got now. Divy up the freshest of the bunch, and send them my way. We'll restock the shops in Canterlot by week's end—”

“So soon?!” Applejack exclaimed, her eyes wide. “But what about Ponyville or the Manehattan shipments?!”

“Miss Applejack, I know you're a hard-working pony, and just like your Pa you don't hold much stake in the business side of things.” Filthy smiled calmly at the four gathered earth ponies. “But please take my advice in this matter. I've been bred to spot opportunities like this, and I have the good sense to know when it's something worth leaping onto. Right now, Canterlot is a gold mine for our mutual interests, and if we let it pass by, we'll both be ruing this day for years to come. I know how much you ponies have been needing to gain momentum after so many years of—*oh, how should I put it?*—sub-par profits. This may be just the thing that Lady Opportunity has shipped your way. Now, what do you say?”

Applejack and Big Mac exchanged anxious glances. The two of them allowed Granny Smith into their circle of contemplation. She was just as speechless as the younger two.

“Oh, did I forget to mention?” Filthy spoke up with a happy smirk. “I'll be increasing your share by thirty-five percent if you let me restock Canterlot sooner than later. That's better pay for fewer apples. You can't possibly lose here.”

“I've been workin' with you for a long time, Filthy,” Granny Smith spoke up, her wrinkled face scrunched to deliver him a suspicious glare. “If you're fixin' to take advantage of our good nature—”

“Heheheh... Please, Ms. Smith,” Filthy adjusted his tie and winked. “My stores in Canterlot are rolling in bits as we speak, and still those shelves are empty. Now, I've already promised to increase your share by thirty-five percent. I couldn't possibly be closer to *begging for* your apples than I am right now. I'm more than willing to risk so much to gain even more. Is your family fixing to do the same?”

“Pssst!” Apple Bloom hopped up from her homework and joined the ever-increasing huddle. “Sellin' in Canterlot is good, right? I mean, we've never done it so well before. If we do it now, what's to stop us from sellin' apples just as well elsewhere?”

“Heheheh...” Granny Smith chuckled and patted the filly's red mane. “The little sprite's got a point there.” She gave her older granddaughter a firm glance. “AJ? I reckon we have somethin' here that can make us instead of break us. I know my memory's not the same bucket of Zapapple Jam that it used to be, but this is the first time somethin' has looked promisin' in as long as I can remember. Still, the decision's yours, darlin'.”

Applejack bit her lip. She took a good look at the farm, at the rows upon rows of emerald groves. Everything had always ever been the same, and it was enough for them squeeze by. Suddenly, “squeezing by” no longer felt like it should have been enough.

“Mister Rich?” Applejack turned to smirk at the business stallion. “It's a deal.”

“Splendid! Splendid!” Filthy exhaled with relief, smiling with a renewed strength. “Let's get started.”

“Agreed. How many bushels do you think it will take to fill them Canterlot shelves back up?”

“Let's start with eighty and work our way to kingdom come.”

“Yee-Ha! Well, alright!”

Applejack and her family delivered Filthy Rich his requested eighty bushels of apples. In the meantime, they busied themselves with the usual apple bucking as if the upcoming harvest was going to transpire as usual. Within a week, they were utterly flabbergasted to find Filthy Rich returning to Sweet Apple Acres, asking for another small shipment.

All eighty bushels' worth of apples had sold in under five days. Applejack was beside herself in shock and disbelief. This numbing sensation subsided, however, after a trip to the Ponyville Market with Filthy and Big Macintosh, when Applejack and her older sibling got a hold of the veritable fruits of their... fruit sales. It was more bits than Applejack had possessed at any single time in her life. It took a quiet evening under candle-light and the combined accounting skills of all four Apple family members, but they determined that they had earned nearly a third of a usual harvest's gain in less than three weeks, and all of it from this sudden surge in sales of their product at Canterlot.

If the earth ponies of Sweet Apple Acres were doing well, Applejack could only guess how much Filthy himself was profiting. He was chomping at the bit—quite literally—to have more product delivered to his stores. Ever a cautious mare, Applejack urged Granny Smith and the rest of her family to hold an emergency meeting. As much of a golden opportunity as they had in Canterlot, it would have been folly to ship their entire bounty of apples to the city. One day, in the middle of such deliberation, Rarity stopped by to pick Sweetie Belle up from a sleepover. The unicorn was thrilled to hear about the family's recent profit, and she suggested that the farm ponies change the nature of their product so that they could get more out of their deliveries with less output, while at the same time matching the refined taste of Canterlot's upper class elite.

Applejack brought the idea to Filthy Rich, and upon the next shipment, they supplied only sixty bushels of fruit, upon which Filthy hired chefs to provide the apples to city folk in the form of exquisite dessert treats. It was something of a risky gamble, but it paid off. “Sweet Apple Fritters” became a hit in the streets of Canterlot, leaping off the resounding success of the family's fruit the previous three weeks. The product became rarer and as a result more valuable. Though Filthy thought it was a great marketing ploy, he still had no proper explanation for what caused the surge in apple-mania in Canterlot to begin with.

The Apple family wasn't about to complain. With this new avenue for profit, they were able to pump out a steady but controlled supply of apples to Canterlot while still managing to gather enough fruit for the upcoming harvest to sell elsewhere. For the first time in as long as Applejack could remember, she was looking at a steady influx of bits from two sources at once, without having to rely on the short but sweet Cider Season or Zap Apple Harvest.

A fourth week passed, then a fifth, then a sixth. Over a month after the Great Galloping Gala, Applejack suddenly had more bits than she knew what to do with. Neither panicking nor rejoicing, she carefully opened a new account at the Ponyville bank just to store all the funds. It occurred to her that she was now dealing with something larger than what Sweet Apple Acres was used to.

“Do you know what this means, Granny?” Applejack said one evening, sitting across from her grandmother in the living room of their farmhouse. A warm fireplace crackled in front of them as she flipped through a pamphlet full of earnings that she had asked Twilight Sparkle to help her with the afternoon before. “For the first time in ages, we've got ourselves some disposable income!”

“T'ain't no such thing as disposable income!” Granny Smith barked. She grimaced, glanced at the slumbering figure of Apple Bloom in her lap, and resumed rocking in her chair, this time speaking in a lower voice, “I never retired to Dream Valley for a reason! I couldn't afford it none!”

“But at this rate, Granny, I'm willin' to bet you could. Heck, we all could!” Applejack said with a smile. “Sure, I ain't fixin' to run the race until I know all the hurtles ahead of us, but this is somethin' we just can't stand to leave lyin' around unwatered!”

“What are ya gettin' at, sweet pea?”

“I've always wanted to do somethin', Granny, somethin' that would keep this farm afloat for a good few months so we could focus all our effort on Cider Season later this year. If we take this opportunity to make this the biggest Cider Season ever, we could make this most recent boom in Canterlot look like foal's play! The last five years of strugglin' will seem like a bad dream! We could afford to get some nice stuff done around this here farm!”

“Out with it already, little filly! I'm not gettin' any younger, y'know!”

“Granny...” Applejack leaned in. She wore a very serious face when she said these next few words, “We should hire helpin' hooves to assist us through this Apple Buckin' Season.”

“What?! Bah!” Granny Smith practically spat. Apple Bloom briefly stirred in her lap as the elder mare coughed and frowned. “Preposterous! Why, of all the dag-blame'd, crazy ideas! Yer gettin' Filthy Rich's filthy... er... filth all filthyin' yer purdy 'lil head! What would yer Pa think with crazy ideas like that!”

“I think Pa would respect me for thinkin' outside of the box, Granny,” Applejack said. “I know t'ain't like me to suggest such a thang as hirin' ponies outside of the family. But the rest of our relatives are too busy on their own farms. If they all got the same kind of profit this early like we did, I wouldn't put it pass them to come up with this same idea. If we don't take advantage of the bits we have now, it'll all just go away over time, and we'll end up treadin' water like we have been these last few years. Ya reckon my Pa would like that any? I know Ma wouldn't, and she wouldn't stand to let this farm sink under hers or Pa's hooves if she could do somethin' about it when she had the chance!”

“Mmmm... Yer Ma was always wantin' to do stuff untraditional-like,” Granny Smith said, clenching her jaw. “At first, it used to me scare me somethin' awful. But I learned to respect her. After all, she loved this farm almost as much as she loved yer Pa.”

“I'm only sayin' we hire ponies through to the end of this here harvest, Granny. No further,” Applejack said with a hopeful smile. “I'm not tryin' to turn us into business mares and stallions like Filthy Rich. If this works out as I hope it will, we'll have just the right kind of boost to fix ourselves the

best Apple Cider Season ever, cuz we'll have so much of the labor out of the way for the harvest before, we'll be able to work hard and supply Ponyville with quantity of cider *as well* as quality, you reckon?"

"Mmmm... I reckon. Long ago, I knew it was best to trust this farm in your capable hooves, dearie," Granny said with a smile. "You may not always have my understandin', but you darn tootin' have my blessin'."

Applejack smiled wide. "I won't let you down, Granny." She crossed her heart, flapped her hooves, then stuck one against her eyelid. "Pinkie Pie swear!"

"Pinkie Pot What-Now?"

"Just you wait'n see."

When Applejack asked for Twilight Sparkle's help in advertising for Sweet Apple Acres employment, Twilight thought she was joking. It took Applejack two solid days of convincing the unicorn that she was the very same farm pony who resisted any help during one fateful Apple Buck Season a year ago, but soon the two were posting advertisements all over town. With Filthy Rich's help, a page was placed in the classifieds section of the *Equestria Daily* newspaper. The call to labor was answered from all over the Equestrian Valley. Very quickly, a group of no-less-than fifteen farmhooves were hired to assist in apple bucking around the farm at a very generous salary. Two weeks into the harvest preparation, and sales in Canterlot doubled as Filthy expanded his business into one of the city's restaurant chains. Applejack wasted no time being mesmerized by what was already a startling well of good fortune. She agreed to double her supply to Filthy, and then hired an additional ten laborers to join the current farmhooves for the last two weeks of Apple Buck Season.

The end result was something out of Applejack's wildest dreams. Not only did her family make ample profit beyond what they had paid their temporary work force, but their income that first half of the year was literally triple of the previous twelve months' worth of earned bits. The first Apple Buck Season was finished—and more successful than usual, despite the slightly lower yield of apples. On top of that, there was still the ever-alarming surge of profit from the "new market" in Canterlot. Applejack's plan had worked out: her family now had two and a half months to devote almost entirely toward planning the Cider Season. The implications of this were overwhelming. If that wasn't enough, when Twilight Sparkle and Applejack went through the numbers, they realized that the family *still* had disposable income.

Suddenly, getting a new roof for the barn, a new plow, and much-belated surgery for Granny Smith weren't just dreams; they were realities. Applejack could barely believe it. She awoke each misty morning in a numb state of mind, and found herself walking the apple groves leisurely. For the first time in her life, she actually had time to think, time to reflect, and time to smile. This smile was shared among her friends, whom she was more than glad to share her joy with. Twilight Sparkle was proud of

her. Rarity was complimentary as always. Fluttershy shared Applejack's speechlessness, and Pinkie Pie had only one idea and one idea alone:

“Party!” Pinkie Pie shouted, cartwheeling across the interior of Sugarcube Corner while confetti streamers exploded on either side of her. A record player was blaring country music across the happy, hopping interior while Applejack and her family stood blissfully within the circle of ecstatic friends.

“This really means a lot to me, y'all,” Applejack said, her smile bashful and her freckled cheeks flushed as she stood in a spotlight she wasn't used to. “I had no idea Apple Buck Season would turn out so well. So many of you have been really helpful—especially Rarity and Twilight. If it weren't for yer generosity and... and... book-smarts...” She paused to grin as several ponies around her giggled and chuckled. “...I don't think my family and I would have rightly taken advantage of our most recent success.”

“I'm just proud of you, Applejack,” Twilight said while Spike sat on her backside, munching into an apple fritter. “When opportunity came knocking, you didn't let it get to your head. You're still the same humble and thoughtful pony I first made friends with. I have faith that no matter how successful you may become, you'll still be our good 'ol AJ. Hmm-hmm-hmmm,” she chuckled.

“Oh, please, the darling is entitled to a little bit of self-indulgence, hmm?” Rarity leaned into the conversation, her eyelashes batting. “After all, she *has* earned it after all these years. A truer triumph over adversity has never been so richly deserved. Oooh! That reminds me! This calls for the Victory Scarf!” That said, Rarity reached into a saddlebag and produced a blue sash which she wrapped about her neck.

In the meantime, Fluttershy trotted up. “I really think it's wonderful that you're in such a good place, Applejack. I have no doubt that this will be your best Cider Season yet.”

“Heheh... Darn tootin'!” Applejack smirked while Pinkie Pie bounced around with a giggling Apple Bloom on her back. “And don't think for a minute that we're gonna be slackin' any in deliverin' the goods this year! I know how much y'all ponies hate it when we don't have enough cider barrels to go around each season. This time, things will be different! There'll be plenty'o'cider for everypony!”

There was a resounding roar of cheers from all the party-goers.

“Heheheh! I mean it!” Applejack winked and grinned some more. “We have enough time on our hooves now that we can deliver on both quantity and quality this year! Heck, I bet Rainbow Dash's already droolin' for joy to hear that bit of news!” Applejack glanced around. Her green eyes blinked. “Say, just where is Rainbow Dash anyway?”

“I don't know.” Twilight Sparkle looked every which way, her face scrunched in concern.

“Surely Pinkie invited her.”

The earth pony in question cartwheeled by. “Yupperooni! Sent an envelope to her cloud, her workplace, her napping cloud, the Wonderbolts' club, and her backup napping cloud!”

“Huh... I wonder what's keeping the little speed demon,” Rarity remarked. “She does so enjoy parties.”

“Uhm... If you'll excuse me.” Fluttershy suddenly bowed out of the group and headed for the punch table. “I think I'm thirsty.”

Applejack lifted her hat and scratched her blonde mane with a hoof. She stared after Fluttershy. For the briefest of moments, she thought she could see a flushed expression on the pegasus' yellow face. Shrugging it off, she nearly bumped into Granny Smith.

“Whoah there, Granny! Don't get too carried away with dancin'! Ya still got that bad hip to be mindful for.”

“I wasn't dancin', ya lil apple sprout!” Granny briefly frowned. “I was just thinkin' in circles.”

“Oh... well then...” Applejack plopped the hat back on her head and smiled. “Care to share some of that circle-thinkin'?”

“You sure do have a fine bunch of admirers in this here town.”

“Why, of course, Granny! These here our my friends! Heheh... We really are blessed, ya reckon?”

“Right, which is why I started askin' around while we're surrounded by such happy ponyfolk.”

“Uhm...” Applejack squinted suspiciously at her grandmother. “Askin' *what* around?”

“Applejack, darlin', I don't think we should bother replacin' the roof atop our barn.”

“What?!” Applejack did a double-take. “But that thing's gonna collapse at any second! The farm may be breakin' even for the first time in ages, but we can't let that get to our heads! There're plenty of things around the Acres that need fixin!”

Granny Smith only chuckled, planted a hoof on Applejack's side, and smiled. “You're always takin' after my sonny boy, AJ, and I've always liked that about ya. Still, if there's anythang this old bag of bones has learned from recent events, it's that you need to learn to think *big* while you still have the chance. You did so when you got all them hired hooves to help us out just now, didn't ya? Well, I reckon it's time to think big again.”

Applejack blinked. She smirked curiously at her elder. “Just what have ya got in mind?”

Two weeks later, the old barn had been completely demolished. Gathered in the center of Sweet Apple Acres were no less than fifty ponies from all walks of Ponyville life. They had come together for an old-fashioned barn-raising, and not a single soul wanted to be elsewhere. Tables were lined up with apple refreshments and treats, courtesy of the same lucky family that everypony was there to pitch a hoof in for.

Under Big Mac's directions, rows of stallions and mares erected the large wooden walls upon the foundation of the brand new barn. Several pegasi hovered and began hammering the cross-sections in place while unicorns magically provided support. Many familiar faces were knee-deep in the mutual labor, including Rarity and Fluttershy.

Applejack was beyond flattered. Halfway through the communal construction, she stepped back to wipe the sweat from her brow when she found a bottle of apple juice being telekinetically floated up towards her. She grasped the container and smiled Twilight's way.

“Much thanks, Twi. Y'all have been such kind and neighborly ponies to my family these past few weeks. I rightly don't know what to say.”

“Hehehe...” Twilight giggled. An afternoon of sweat and toil did little to ruin her lavender coat. “Your recent success has produced an infectious happiness, Applejack. If you ask me, everypony's glad to be here.”

Applejack took a sip from the bottle, swallowed, and stated, “Or perhaps they're all just plum happy that we've promised them an ample Cider Season this year.”

“Mmmmm... Yes. You're probably right,” Twilight uttered with a smirk. “It's all because of the cider.”

Applejack and Twilight Sparkle shared a mutual laugh. They took a break and watched as Big Mac directed the raising of the south side of the barn's wooden infrastructure. Pinkie Pie was bouncing through the crowd, offering glasses of water to several earth ponies who were waiting their turn to get their hooves dirty. Rarity stood in the thick of the group, pretending to be thoroughly invested in the labor, even going so far as to wear her yellow “Work Scarf.”

“Applejack,” Twilight Sparkle spoke after a space in time. She looked away from the barn-raising to smile at her friend. “I heard about your visit with Nurse Red Heart the other day. Is it true that Granny Smith is going to be spending time in the hospital next week?”

“Yup. Starting this Tuesday.”

“Is...” Twilight's ears briefly drooped as concern washed over her features. “Is everything okay?”

“More than, Twi.” Applejack said with a smirk, watching the group of ponies around the barn. “She's finally gettin' her hip replaced. If you ask me, it's been a long time comin'.”

“Oh, that's wonderful!” Twilight chuckled with relief. “She really deserves such good treatment.”

“That ain't the half of it. I don't know where to begin, Twilight,” Applejack murmured, her green eyes falling towards the rich soil of her and her family's land. “Did I mention we finally got rid of that old plow last week?”

“No, you didn't. Did you get a new one?”

“**Two** new ones,” Applejack said. “One for the north fields, and one for the south. We've also got a new pressing contraption for producin' cider for this upcoming season. On top of that, I had a long talk with Miss Cheerilee a few days ago about settin' up a college fund for Apple Bloom and... and...”

When Applejack fumbled for words, Twilight Sparkled leaned forward with a concerned expression. “Applejack...?”

The farm filly was smiling, but her green eyes were glossed over. She took a deep breath, at the crest of which tears were finally milked out of her. It was the first and only time Twilight had seen her close friend so emotional. Instinctually, she offered her a hug, which Applejack gladly accepted, murmuring joyfully over the unicorn's shoulder.

“It's just so amazin', Twi. I-I never thought we'd run into this much luck. Not ever. It's all so much, I plum don't know what to do with all the blessings sometimes. I'm scared I'm gonna mess it up somehow.”

“Not even close, Applejack.” Twilight smiled and nuzzled her companion. “You're doing what's best for your farm, your family, and your future. You're smarter than you give credit for, and you deserve this chance to shine.”

“I'm just so glad that all my friends are here,” Applejack said, sniffling. She glanced aside, wiped her cheek, then surrendered her smile to a concerned expression. “Well, almost all of my friends.”

“Hmmm?” Twilight blinked.

“I... I could have sworn I invited Rainbow Dash to come join the barn raisin',” Applejack remarked. She sniffled again, then managed a deep laugh as she rolled her eyes. “Of course, it's silly to expect that mare to come flyin' in and doin' any sort of volunteer labor, but I'd think she'd at least be attracted to the fun and refreshments in between.”

Twilight shrugged and smirked. “Who knows, Applejack. Maybe she had some important weather stuff to do above downtown Ponyville.”

“Yeah, but that's an awful lot of weather flyin', if I do say so,” Applejack remarked, adjusting the brim of her hat. “I swear, I've barely seen her in weeks. What's gotten her so busy all of the sudden?”

“Come to think of it, you're right,” Twilight said. “Being Ponyville's chief weather flier usually takes just a few hours out of Rainbow's day. Most of the times I've seen her in the skies, she's been practicing some stunt routine or another for impressing the Wonderbolts. Nowadays, I look up into the clouds, and she's rarely there.”

“Who's rarely there?” Fluttershy asked, walking up with Angel resting on her flank.

“Rainbow Dash, that's who,” Applejack said with a slight grunt. Her eyes had dried up, resembling a tired expression she once bore in a doughnut cafe. “This might come off as little strange, but somehow I'd expected her more than any other pony to show up for this here barn raisin'.”

“Oh... uhm... Well, that's quite strange indeed,” Fluttershy stammered, her cheeks red. “If you'll excuse me, I think I'll be calming some of the livestock you've got sequestered in the stables, Applejack. I fear this whole event has made them awfully skittish.”

“Fluttershy...?”

“I-I must be going!” Fluttershy scampered away with a nervous, flailing Angel grabbing onto her pink tail for dear life.

Applejack scratched her head before casting Twilight a glance. “Now what in the hay was that all about?”

“Beats me. You know Fluttershy: she's so feeble, she gets confounded by the smallest thing.”

“Yeah, but without rhyme or reason?” Applejack blinked. “I feel like I should have a talk with her or somethin'.”

“In due time, Applejack.” Twilight smiled. “Right now, I think you've got a barn to raise.”

Applejack was busy with many things. Between preparing for Cider Season, seeing Granny Smith through her hip replacement, and painting the freshly erected barn, she found her comfortable niche of hard work in spite of her family's recent success. On one afternoon, after having visited Granny in the hospital, she found herself enjoying free time for the first occasion in days. She thought this might be just the opportunity she needed to pay Fluttershy a visit, when something interrupted her trip—or more appropriately—somepony.

“What a cool landing, Dashie!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, bouncing jubilantly around a fresh crater in the center of Ponyville. “I give it a solid ten! But... uhm... aren't you supposed to use your hooves instead of your face?”

“Unnngh...” Rainbow Dash sat on her haunches, her eyes spinning dizzily inside her bruised skull. “Did... Did I seriously just—*Ugh!”* She tossed her hooves with a show of frustration and stomped up onto all four limbs, straightening a saddlebag harnessed to her blue body. “I'm freakin' losing it, I swear to Celestia.”

“Your bones seem to be in all the right places!” Pinkie Pie grinned innocently. “If you ask me, the only thing you've lost is altitude! Heeheehee!”

A ring of curious, concerned ponies had gathered around the scene, among which was Applejack. “Rainbow!” she exclaimed, her jaw dropping in shock as she gazed at the deep crater in disbelief. “Heavens to Betsy! That *had* to have been a nasty tumble! Are you okay, sugarcube?!”

“You all right, Dashie?” Pinkie Pie squinted at her friend. “Your eyes are lookin' all baggy and stuff.”

“I'm **fine**,” Rainbow Dash grumbled, shook her mane straight, and marched across the town square while flexing her muscles. “Everypony stop looking at me like I'm on fire or something. I hit the ground, so what?” She glanced at every mare and stallion within listening distance—all but one. Applejack could have sworn that Rainbow was going out of her way to *not* look at her. “Even the Wonderbolts have their off-days. Now if you'll excuse me...”

“Rainbow?” Applejack leaned in, raising a concerned hoof. “Just what in tarnation is goin' on here?”

“I gotta go,” Rainbow Dash said, speaking over Applejack as if the farm filly didn't exist. With a single flap of her blue wings, she took off into the air, soaring eastward.

“Hmmm...” Applejack tapped her chin with an orange hoof. “Did she just... fall asleep in mid-flight? Or is it just me?”

“Oooooooh...” Pinkie Pie blinked rapidly. “The world may never know.” She smirked wide. “Don't you wish you were so cool at what you do that you could fall asleep in the middle of it as well?”

“Uh... yeah, sure, Pinkie.”

“I'm going to go and fall asleep while baking cupcakes and see what kind of craters I can make!” Pinkie Pie ecstatically chirped, bouncing her way towards Sugarcube Corner.

Applejack was left behind, staring at the damaged ground where Rainbow Dash had landed. Something was dreadfully wrong, and Rainbow Dash didn't give Applejack the chance to learn anything.

So Applejack gave herself another chance the next week. Over the course of several days, she worked hard at prepping for Cider Season, so that on a Friday she might have an entire morning to spend staked out at Ponyville's post office. Just as she suspected, Rainbow Dash showed up to receive her weekly directions from the Cloudsdalian Climate Commission. When the pegasus stepped back out of the building, she couldn't escape coming face to face with a certain farm filly.

“Oh... Uh...” Rainbow Dash smiled nervously, tiredly. Her eyes were thin, and there were dark circles brimming the lids. She wore the same bulky saddlebag she had been sporting the week previous when Applejack witnessed her crash-landing into downtown Ponyville. “H-Hi, Applejack. What's up?”

“That's a darn good question, now ain't it?” Applejack raised an eyebrow as she approached her elusive friend. “Rainbow Dash, what in the hay is goin' on? Two months have passed, and I've barely seen you for more than two minutes at a time! It's as if one of my closest friends has disappeared off the face of Celestia's green earth!”

“Yeah... well... uhm...” Rainbow Dash shifted nervously, teetering. She looked on the verge of collapse, as if she was asleep on her hooves. “I-I've been kind of busy lately...”

“Busy?” Applejack blinked. “Rainbow, the busiest I've ever known you is when you're frantically searchin' the skies for a fresh cloud to nap on!”

“Yeah, well, I've been *busier* than that these days. Now... uhm...” Rainbow Dash stifled a yawn, shook her face, and frowned as she marched past Applejack. “If you'll excuse me, I've gotta jet.”

“You gotta what-now?”

“I can't hang around. I got stuff to do. Crazy schedule.”

“Oh no ya don't!” Applejack galloped over—frowning—and stood directly in front of the pegasus. “You ain't gettin' away that easy!”

“Uh...” Rainbow Dash blinked, teetered, and squinted. “Huh?”

“Why do I get the itchin' feeling that you've been purposefully avoidin' me?”

“Pfft—Please, Applejack.” Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes and smirked. “Since when did you become Ponyville's Queen of Attention!”

“T'ain't nothin' like that!” Applejack frowned. Her eyes then softened with concern. “I'm worried about ya, sugarcube. You're my friend, and me and the gals have hardly seen ya in weeks.” She gulped and trotted forward. “Is... Is there somethin' you need to tell us?”

“No! For Celestia's sake!—I'm **fine**!” Rainbow Dash brushed past Applejack and stretched her wings. “Like I said, I'm busy! Don't you have enough celebrating over your wickedly cool stroke of farm luck to distract yourself with?!”

“Well, excuse me for tryin' to be friendly-like!” Applejack returned with an angry glare. “And y'know, you could have shared in some of that celebration if you were kind enough to have shown up those many times when you were invited, Rainbow!” Applejack immediately winced at her own words. She feared that she might elicit an ugly response from Rainbow Dash.

Instead, she got, “I'm sorry, AJ.” The pegasus sighed, pausing before flying off. She glanced tiredly over her flank to look at the farm filly. “I'm glad for all of your success as of late. I really am. Someway, somehow, I will make it all up to you. I promise.” She smiled, teetered exhaustively, then snapped out of it in time to add, “I've just got... things to do.”

“Rainbow Dash, I...”

“See ya!” Rainbow Dash was gone.

Applejack sighed and sat on her haunches in front of the post office. She adjusted the brim of her hat and muttered dryly to the air, “Way to go, sunshine...”

“She just took off?” Twilight Sparkle remarked, blinking. She stood across the library from an anxiously pacing Applejack later that very afternoon. “Did Rainbow Dash mention at all just what was keeping her busy?”

“No, not a word,” Applejack murmured, trotting back and forth. “You should see her, Twi. She looks like she hadn't slept in a week. At this rate, she's likely to fall asleep in mid-flight and crash into something a second time.”

“A *second* time?!” Twilight gasped. “So it's true, then! When I heard about her crashing in downtown Ponyville last week, I thought it was just a rumor.”

“I wish that it were,” Applejack said. She paused in her tracks, sighed, and slumped against a bookcase. “I feel like somethin' awful, Twi.”

“Whatever for, Applejack?”

“I've been so swept up in my business with the farm and all, I'm ignorin' my own best friends around me.” Applejack gazed across the library with vulnerable green eyes. “If somethin' were eatin' at ya mighty fierce, you'd *tell* me, wouldn't you?”

“Oh Applejack...” Twilight smiled and trotted over to nuzzle her friend. “You're not ignoring any single one of us. And if there was something wrong, I'd be the first to come to you for help.” She reflected the concern in the farm filly's face. “As for Rainbow Dash: I couldn't begin to guess what's gotten into her as of late. It's not just a mystery to you, though I doubt that helps any.”

“If only she wasn't so heck-bent on shruggin' everything off like she was made of invincible stuff,” Applejack briefly grumbled. “I swear, that pegasus is as stubborn as a mule.”

Twilight giggled suddenly.

Applejack gave her a crooked glance. “What's so funny?”

“Remind you of anypony else you know?” Twilight winked.

Applejack merely glared at her. “Just what is that supposed to mean?”

At that moment, there was a knock on the front door.

“The library's always open this time of day! Just come in already!” Twilight droned. She glanced over just as the entrance opened and blushed. “Oh... Uhm, sorry, Fluttershy. I didn't mean to sound rude...”

“Oh, it's quite alright,” Fluttershy murmured, walking in with a basket of flowers balanced on her flank. “Has Rarity returned from her week's stay at Canterlot yet?”

“No, not yet,” Twilight said, shaking her head. “But Spike did get a letter from Moondancer just this morning. Rarity should be arriving by air-coach this hour or next.”

“I see,” Fluttershy nodded, gazing across the library. She smiled upon seeing Applejack. “Hello, Applejack. How is Granny Smith doing?”

“She'll be on her hooves in less than a week,” Applejack returned with a soft grin. “For the first time in years, she's fit as a fiddle. Thanks so much for askin', sugarcube.”

“Oh, I'm so happy to hear that,” Fluttershy breathily exclaimed. She sat down and examined the flowers in her baskets while speaking. “I think everypony deserves to be happy and secure in the twilight of their years. Erm... If you pardon the expression.”

Twilight chuckled. “We get it, Fluttershy. I'm sure Granny Smith would appreciate the sentiment.”

“I've heard all the stories of how important her legacy's been to the founding of Ponyville,” Fluttershy thought aloud with a pleasant smile as she stared at her flowers, inspecting them one after another. “I'm surprised nopony's offered to build a statue in her honor in town square.”

“I reckon it's all for the best,” Applejack was suddenly muttering. “Besides, Rainbow would only crash into it after falling asleep in midair again.”

“That's only because Rainbow Dash is working three jobs at the same time right now—” Fluttershy began saying. Suddenly, her blue eyes flew wide open at her own words. “Eeep!” She reddened immediately.

Both Twilight Sparkle and Applejack did double-takes.

“She's doing wh-what?!” Twilight exclaimed.

“Did ya just say *three jobs* at once?!” Applejack added.

“I... I-I...” Fluttershy trembled, gnawed on her bottom lip, then nervously flung her flowers upside down into her basket before bounding towards the door. “I-I've said too much! I need to go!”

The only exit to the library was suddenly flung shut under a violet glow of magic. Fluttershy skidded to a stop, squeaking pensively. Applejack marched up, followed by Twilight and her glowing horn.

“Fluttershy, hang on for just a cotton-pickin' moment.” Applejack stood in Fluttershy's face, squinting hard at her. “You've known somethin' about what's been eatin' Rainbow Dash all this time and now's the moment you finally let us in on it!”

“I... I-I can't!” Fluttershy trembled, scrunching up against the nearest wall and trembling. “She only told me so little, and even then—she never said I was allowed to tell another pony! Oh, I'm such a blabbermouth. Please, please forgive me, but I-I just can't!”

“Fluttershy, I know you and Rainbow Dash have known each other for a long time,” Twilight said, gazing sympathetically at the pegasus. She planted a hoof softly on Fluttershy's side and smiled reassuringly. “But we're her friends too. If something is wrong in Rainbow's life, we want to help her as much as you do.”

“We'd hate ourselves somethin' fierce if we let her tear herself to bits!” Applejack said, her expression as sincere as Twilight's. “Won't you let us help her by tellin' us what you know?”

“I... I don't think she wants our help,” Fluttershy exclaimed. She gulped. “You know how Rainbow Dash is. She can handle anything the world has to throw at her.”

“Or so she *thinks*, Fluttershy,” Twilight said. “Please, what's going on with her? What has she told you?”

Fluttershy took a deep breath. She sat on her haunches and hid half her face behind a lock of pink hair. After a few seconds, she rubbed her front hooves together and softly let loose, “She... she got demoted.”

“Demoted?!” Applejack exclaimed.

“She's...” Fluttershy bit her lip and stared towards the floor. “She's no longer Ponyville's chief

weather flier. She answers to Cloudkicker now."

Applejack and Twilight Sparkle exchanged shocked glances. When they looked back at Fluttershy, Applejack's eyes were wider. "Since when?"

"Erm... Over a month ago. She never told me why. As a matter of fact, Rainbow Dash hadn't told me anything at first. I found it out on my own." Fluttershy gulped and leaned forward as she spoke, "You see, every so often Rainbow Dash and I make separate trips to Cloudsdale to report to our superiors. The Weather Commission and Animal Services Commission share the same building, after all. It was during one of my trips that I found out that Cloudkicker had become the chief weather flier of Ponyville. So... uhm... I did something assertive: I asked Rainbow Dash about it. That's when she told me that she was demoted, and also that she's got a new, second job that's eating up her time in Canterlot."

"Canterlot?" Applejack made a face. "What the hay is Rainbow Dash doin' pullin' a second job in the royal city?"

"Also, didn't you say that Rainbow Dash has been trying to tackle *three jobs* at once?" Twilight added. "If she's working under Cloudkicker now *and* doing this second job in Canterlot, then what's the third thing taking up her time?"

"Uhm..." Fluttershy bit her lip as her cheeks reddened. "I-I guess I wasn't really accurate when I said 'three jobs.' It's more like 'two and a half jobs.'"

"You mind runnin' that by us again, sugarcube?"

"The third job is really just a volunteer thing... Well, maybe not *volunteering*." Fluttershy gulped something guilty down her throat. "It's... uhm... you see... Rainbow Dash has been asked by the city council to do community service in Canterlot."

"Community service?" Applejack blinked.

"But the only reason anypony is ever asked to do community service in my home town is if..." Twilight blinked at her own thoughts being spoken aloud. "If they did something to break the law!"

Applejack gawked at her. "Rainbow Dash?! Breaking the law?!" She glanced at Fluttershy. "Do you have any idea *what* she did?!"

"No! Not at all!" Fluttershy stood up and stared emphatically at her two friends. "Rainbow Dash has barely given me any details! And... And you both know I can't possibly pull much out of her, not that I would want to, of course..."

"Two jobs... *and mandatory* community service..." Twilight Sparkle began pacing.

"No wonder Rainbow's been so exhausted that she's turnin' into a slumberin' missile in midair!" Applejack exclaimed. "Years ago, I once tried to pull a second job in town *while also* runnin' the farm. It just about nearly killed me. I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I can understand what

Rainbow Dash is goin' through."

"She makes trips to Canterlot two or three times every *week*," Fluttershy exclaimed. "Just the idea of the *flight alone* makes me want to faint. I know that Rainbow Dash is capable of doing a lot of awesome things, but I've been starting to get worried sick about her." She gazed down at the floor as her eyes began to water. "Ohhh... I've been such a bad friend to let her go on like this. I just wanted to respect her secrets, but even I've failed at keeping those..."

"Fluttershy, don't be so hard on yourself." Twilight leaned into her gently. "I'm glad that you told us, because it means that we can possibly think up a way to help Rainbow."

"I still can't believe it, though..." Applejack removed her hat and ran a hoof over her blonde threads. "*Demoted?"* She gazed sadly at her close friends. "That's losin' somethin' special right there. And we all know how much Rainbow hates to lose. How could she let her position as Ponyville's chief weather flier slip away so easily?"

"I don't know," Fluttershy exclaimed, shaking her head softly. "I've been wondering about it myself. I-I think it might have something to do with why she's doing community service in Canterlot."

"For something that she did?" Twilight said.

"Yeah, but like what?" Applejack remarked. "None of this makes sense!"

Suddenly, there was a loud pounding on the library door. The three mares realized that someone had been knocking for the last minute while they were deeply engaged in conversation. "Will somepony please be courteous enough to let a patient lady inside already?! She comes bearing *giiiiifts!"*

"Oh... eh heh heh..." Twilight Sparkle released her telekinetic spell and opened the door. "Come right on in, Rarity. Sorry if we ignored you. We were busy talking about—"

"How lonesome you've all been without my captivating presence?" Rarity trotted gaily into the abode with a pair of shopping bags and a suitcase floating behind her. "Oh please, for dignity's sake, spare me the praise while I regale you on Canterlot's elite and Moondancer's boundless well of hospitality!"

"Uhm, Rarity?" Applejack groaned. "We're kinda in the middle of—"

"Twilight, how come you never told me that Moondancer's aunt owned a boutique in the upper district?" Rarity smiled lusciously as she took a seat beside the center table of the library. "I must have spent hours just talking fashion with the lovely lady! I almost missed my second appointment with Hoity Toity! Could you have imagined that?! My entire reason for visiting Canterlot, gone up in smoke! Still, I'm sure it would have been worth it, in some poetic sense. Here—I have just the thing you've been secretly begging me for with that glint in your violet eyes these past few months!" The white unicorn reached into her nearest shopping bag and produced a folded article glittering with gems. "A ruby-studded book cover! No longer will you have to expose the garish, dust-stained bindings of your tomes to the public while you're lounging about for a casual read in the park!"

“Awwww... Why thank you, Rarity! That's so, so very thoughtful for you.” Twilight smiled, though her face twitched slightly as she glanced up from the object to catch Applejack's and Fluttershy's anxious expressions.

“And for you, Fluttershy, a new diamond collar for Angel! Let's hope the sparkly shine hides the frown that's constantly brandished across the bunny's adorable little face!”

“Oh... Uhm... H-How nice.” Fluttershy smiled bashfully, but bit her lip in the end. “Uhm, Rarity. As much as we'd love to hear about all you've experienced in Canterlot, something's come up—”

“And that reminds me! I'm back in the company of friends!” Rarity gasped wide. “This calls for the 'Felicity Scarf!'” She reached into her suitcase and wrapped a red sash about her neck while Twilight face-hoofed.

“Rarity,” Applejack grumbled. “Would ya mind puttin' a halt to your fanciness for just a second and let us tell you what we've learned about Rainbow Dash—?”

“Oh, Applejack!” Rarity grinned ecstatically and spun to face her friend. “I must congratulate you on your savvy marketing decision in Canterlot! All this time, I thought that your good business as of late was a case of freakish circumstance! *Delightful* circumstances, mind you, but still a bit freakish. Ahem. Alas, even the fairest stand to be proven wrong. Heeheehee...” Rarity winked and pointed a hoof at Applejack from afar. “You sly devil, you.”

“Uhm...” Applejack squinted curiously at the fashionista. “Just what... uh... 'marketing decision' are you squabblin' about exactly?”

“Oh don't play so coy, Applejack! So you were ahead of Filthy Rich on his own game the whole time! I was wrong to think you were incapable of such an assertive business maneuver, but live and learn! Quite frankly, I'm surprised that the demand for your 'Sweet Apple Fritters' hasn't cleaned you entirely of your whole stock of fruit by now. It's all the rich elite of Canterlot care to talk about!”

“Rarity?” Twilight leaned forward. “You're... You're only confusing us even more—”

Applejack all but brushed Twilight away as she practically glared at Rarity. “Out with it, girl! What did I do to get Canterlot in such a tizzy?”

Rarity blinked awkwardly. “Why... The cloud advertising, of course!”

“The cloud-*what* now?”

“The **skywriting**, darling!” Rarity waved a hoof with a smile. “What an ingenious way to advertise Sweet Apple Acres! It really put your family business on the map! All I want to know is this: did you think up such a remarkable ploy *before* or *after* our fateful sojourn to the Grand Galloping Gala? Because it positively wreaks of brilliance!”

Applejack was speechless. She could do nothing but share a numb glance with Twilight. “Sky... writing...?”

“Ungh!” Rarity rolled her eyes. “Honestly! Does the modesty of farm ponies have any boundaries?” She smiled and glowed her horn as she reached magically into her bag of things. “Fine. Don't believe me? I happened to have anticipated your soft-spoken nature well in advance, so Moondancer and I took it upon ourselves to have a passing custodian take this amateur snapshot of the two of us in Starswirl Park while we were engaged in a delightful afternoon conversation.” She produced a framed photograph of her and a purple-maned unicorn standing side by side and smiling. As she floated the image Applejack's way, she giggled and said, “Don't be distracted by how wonderfully shiny my eyes are in that shot. I told the fellow to aim high so he could catch plenty of the sky above us, but he nearly missed the image of the clouds by focusing so much on me and your long-time friend, Twilight. I swear, stallions can be won over so easily these days.”

“I... I just don't believe it...” Applejack murmured as she sat on her haunches and grasped the picture frame in two hooves. “Will you look at that?” As she gawked, Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy trotted up and looked over her shoulder for a better perspective.

There, clearly visible above the manes of Rarity and Moondancer, was a series of clouds elaborately displayed to spell out in legible hoofwriting: *“Sweet Apple Acres. Finest Apples in Equestria.”*

“Rarity,” Twilight spoke up while Applejack was too numb to even move, much less talk. “You were staying at Moondancer's place in Canterlot for over a week.” She pointed at the picture. “How many times did you see this skywriting while you were there?”

“Uhm...” Rarity stroked a hoof through her mane as she thought aloud. “At least four times, maybe five. It happened twice on the days it did. Hehehe—But why are you all asking me this? Surely Applejack is the brains behind... such an... operation...” Her words dwindled as she blinked awkwardly at Applejack's expression.

“Four times in a week and a half...” Applejack gulped. She gazed aside at Fluttershy. “How often did ya say Rainbow Dash was headin' to Canterlot?”

“About two or three times a week,” Fluttershy replied. “But there's one thing I don't understand. Flying is a privilege in Canterlot, and a limited one at that. Every pegasus who visits the city knows that they're not allowed to soar above the rooftops, unless they're the Wonderbolts or members of the royal guard.”

“You mean to say that this here skywritin' ain't allowed?” Applejack remarked.

“Obviously, things have changed since I moved to Ponyville,” Twilight exclaimed. “Fluttershy's right. Flying high above Canterlot airspace is a recipe for trouble if the royal guard catches you doing it.”

“Like what kind of trouble?”

“Well, it depends. In the best case scenario, it's only a minor infraction, and a pegasus caught doing it would be forced to... do community service.” Twilight, Applejack, and Fluttershy shared a mutual glance of realization.

Rarity was unnerved by their speechlessness. “I'm terribly sorry. Have I missed some startling development here?”

“I reckon we all have, Rarity,” Applejack said with a shudder. “But it's time I did somethin' about it.” She gulped and looked at Twilight. “Twi? If ya don't mind me askin', just what are you up to this weekend?”

It was a long train ride, even longer for Applejack. The scenery passing by the windows to her car did little to solace her anxious thoughts. It took an entire day, but she and Twilight Sparkle finally arrived at the train depot in downtown Canterlot. It was a surreal experience returning to the royal city for the first time since the gala, but Applejack didn't waste any time drinking in her surroundings. The sun was setting by the time she and Twilight crossed the commercial district and arrived at the Canterlot Justice Department, only to find that the doors to the facility were closed for the evening.

Twilight suggested that they spend the night at her parents' home and inquire about Rainbow Dash the next morning. Applejack wasn't quite so swift to share Twilight's patience. Rashly, she marched out into the street and began asking the first startled unicorn she could find about the recent skywriting. To her and Twilight's surprise, Sweet Apple Acres wasn't the only thing being advertised lately. As a matter of fact, over the course of the last two months, several different types of messages had been displayed boldly over the rooftops of Canterlot, advertising one thing or another, though the delicious “Sweet Apple Fritters” was the hallmark of the skyward broadcasting.

Twilight Sparkle was utterly flabbergasted by this. She explained to Applejack that this sort of liberal use of Canterlot airspace was unheard of. Upon further investigation, the two ponies learned that indeed there had been a change: skywriting had become a reality only recently. When Applejack demanded details, every unicorn she questioned pointed her in the same direction: a tall building in the center of downtown labeled “Cash-In Advertising Incorporated.”

What was more, the place was open twenty-four-seven...

“Rainbow Dash?! Heck yeah, I know her!” The aptly-named Cash-In smirked. He was a

middle-aged unicorn with a gray mane and three golden bits for a cutie mark. He trotted briskly across a cramped office full of printing stations and ponies drawing brand prototypes across white canvases. Twilight Sparkle and Applejack struggled to keep up with him as he filed things away and rambled in the midst of work. Outside the windows, night had fallen, shrouding the rooftops of Canterlot in glistening starlight. “Our business has gone in new directions all because of that one pegasus! Was there any doubt?! Ha! Take one look at her mane, and there's a dang fine mascot in the making! Boy, I tell you what—”

“Mr. Cash-In, that's all nice, but would you mind answering our questions, please?” Twilight Sparkle spoke above the noise and heat of whirring printer machines. “Rainbow Dash is our friend, and we think she might have gotten herself in trouble! Tell us, how could you possibly let her get away with skywriting if you knew it would get her in trouble?”

Cash-In slapped a file drawer shut and spun to give the two mares a bizarre glance. “Heh... What kind of business do you little fillies think I'm running here?” He paced over to a desk and shuffled a cluster of papers with magical telekinesis. “Skywriting is the wave of the future. I wish I thought of it myself, but rightfully so—I didn't. Sending working pegasi into airspace high above Canterlot has been a no-no for as long as I've been alive.”

“What do ya reckon changed?” Applejack inquired.

“Ha! Your friend did, that's what! She revolutionized the whole marketing industry in this city, and thanks to her—Cash-In Advertising Incorporated is at the head of business!”

“You're talkin' about a pony who sleeps on clouds and spends every wakin' hour dreamin' of racin' lightning bolts!” Applejack said with a frown as she chased Cash-In around the busy office. “Rainbow Dash couldn't revolutionize an ant farm if she tried!”

“Well, she could have fooled me!” Cash-In levitated a pair of notebooks in front of him and flipped through several spreadsheets. “Two months ago, to be exact, I'm heading out for lunch—and what do I see in the sky? But an advertisement for some farm out in the boondocks. As you might have guessed, I was reasonably shocked. But then, within a week, all of my associates were telling me to try these delicious apples that were flying off the shelves in the local market. Most delicious stuff I ever bit into. Not only was the skywriting downright audacious, but it was spot-on with what it was selling! Speaking of which...” He smirked and levitated a plate full of familiar pastry treats towards the two ponies. “Want a fritter?”

Applejack made a face and politely dismissed the offering with a waving hoof. “Erm... No thanks. I've seen enough where I'm from.” She cleared her throat. “So what became of this whole skywritin' fiasco?”

“That's exactly what I wanted to know! If I could only have found a way to... well... heh heh... live up to my name in regards to this new potential for public marketing in Canterlot, then I could have taken my business to new heights! No pun intended. Anyways, I sent all of my agents to do research about this phantom cloud-speller. It turns out that a lone pegasus named Rainbow Dash was responsible for the message, and she got in trouble for it too. Every three days, she had to report on time to the Canterlot Justice Department and do menial tasks all around town. I didn't think it was all too fair.

Genius should be paid with more respect."

"But that still doesn't explain why there's been skywriting almost every week for the past two months!" Twilight exclaimed.

"Well..." Cash-In leaned against a desk and scratched his chin with a proud smirk. "I might happen to know a pony who knows another pony who's related to a pony who sits on the city council." He chuckled victoriously. "Long story short, after two committee meetings and a few dozen penstrokes, me and a couple of other business owners succeeded in convincing the city to allow licensed fliers to make a few rounds in the air per week. The result is rather obvious. Business is booming in Canterlot, and it's given something for Canterlot citizens to stare up in the sky for—as if their noses weren't hanging in the air enough already! HA!"

"How does Rainbow Dash still play in all this?" Twilight asked, then blinked as she knew the answer already. "You hired her, didn't you?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Cash-In smirked and trotted across the office to another set of filing cabinets. "She's the one pony who thought this whole enterprise up, in her own not-so-subtle way! Heheh. Besides, I feel bad about her being given such a bad rap, especially since local legislation got changed so soon after the city chose to slap her on the hoof. With all the community service she's forced to do, it's only a hop, skip, and a jump over to this place for her to get a paycheck. I figured it was easy for her. To be quite honest, I knew nothing about her other job far away in—Just where is she from again?"

"Ponyville!" Applejack frowned. "And between bein' a weather flier there, doin' dirty work here, and skywritin' for you, she's a terrible heap'o'battered nerves!"

"She's a trooper for sure, I'll give her that!" Cash-In exclaimed. "I do pay her handsomely, you know... Hmph..." He briefly grunted with a jaded look across his face. "For what it's worth."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'for what it's worth?.'"

"She'd be a lot richer and better off if she took what was given to her," Cash-In said. "Instead, when she took this offer, she had one stipulation. For every skywriting job I sent her on, she'd perform one of her own choosing. Before we started our little partnership, I told her that I now owned the rights to skywriting in Canterlot airspace, and if she had any message she personally wanted to deliver, it would come out of her salary in order to afford my business the opportunity to give either of us the slimly allotted skies over Canterlot to begin with!"

"What kind of messages are we talking about?" Twilight asked.

"Sweet Apple Acres..." Applejack murmured knowingly, staring into blank space beyond the noise and bedlam of the cramped office. "It all started two months ago, at the same time Filthy Rich came to my family about expandin' the business, and since then that crazy pegasus hasn't stopped for one second. That explains why Rarity was able to see the clouds just a week ago." She gulped hard and glanced at Twilight. "All this time, Twi, and Rainbow hasn't even said a single word..."

Twilight Sparkle had nothing to say to that, though from the way she fidgeted and gnawed at her lips, she was desperately attempting to find something enlightening.

Applejack didn't bother to give her the chance. She stood up straight in front of Cash-In. “Was there any of yer fancy skywritin' bein' done today?”

“Yup. Just this afternoon. It was an advertisement for Threadbare, a local boutique.”

“So that means Rainbow Dash is in town as we speak?”

“Heh—I'd say so. She usually knocks out some work for the city in the morning and heads back out to Celestia-knows-where by noon.”

Applejack squinted. “Just where can I expect to find her at this hour of the night?”

Rainbow Dash was slumped over the edge of a table in the middle of the doughnut cafe, her face pressed against the laminated surface. A saddlebag was folded beside her and her two front hooves limply clasped an empty mug stained with coffee residue. Her body slowly stirred, and her upper limbs twitched at the sound of a ringing bell above the nocturnal eatery's front door. A series of hoofsteps marched over to her, and then an orange limb slid the mug out from her grasp.

“Mmmrmmph... f-fill 'er up. Not so heavy on the s-sugar...” She muttered, neither awake nor asleep, but some zombified state in between.

“I reckon I'd give you lumps, just not the type you're expectin'.”

“Mmmmph... Heh heh... What's with the accent?” Rainbow Dash tilted her smirking face up and opened a pair of bloodshot eyes. “Have you been paying visits to—*Sweet Apple Acres!”* She gasped and nearly collapsed on her hind-quarters. Rainbow Dash's wings nervously shot up as she gulped and pointed a shaky hoof upwards. “What in the blue heck are you doing here?”

“Lookin' for you,” Applejack droned. Her face was straight and her expression was bland as she loomed above the jittery pegasus. “Figures you would be here. You always did love flyin' in circles. It's only right that you'd be thinkin' in circles too.”

“Applejack, I don't know what's crazier, that you'd make a trek all the way to Canterlot in the first place, or that you'd waste such a trip by chatting with me. Look, I told you that I was busy with stuff lately. What more did you need to know—?”

“I spoke with Cash-In.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. Her wings deflated instantly. “Oh.” She leaned defeatedly over the table and rubbed two hooves over her aching temples. “Well, *snap*.”

“'Snap' is right,” Applejack said with a nod. She bent down to occupy Rainbow's vision with a glare. “Rainbow Dash, what's gotten into you?!”

“Mmm... Not enough caffeine, that's for dang sure,” the pegasus painfully mumbled.

“I mean—Seriously, darlin'! Violatin' Canterlot airspace?! Allowin' yourself to get tossed down a rung on the ladder of Ponyville climate control?! Workin' yourself to the bone over two jobs *plus* community service?! For a pony who always likes to win in life, you've been shapin' yourself to be a real loser lately!”

“Heh...” Rainbow Dash smiled weakly, her bloodshot eyes nearly rolling back in her head. “Guess I'm a... a... a fill-in-the-blank for punishment. Just what's the phrase again?”

“Rainbow, I ain't Rarity and I sure ain't Twilight. This is Applejack you're talkin' to.”

“Jee, as if the freckles and the bedside manner weren't big enough clues.” Rainbow Dash momentarily closed her eyes while rubbing the sides of her head. “Would you mind speaking a little quieter? Just because there're bowling pins rattling against the walls of my skull doesn't mean you gotta sound off like an angry trumpet.”

“Rainbow, why are you doing this to yourself?!” Applejack's face grew long and sympathetic. “You've gotten us worried sick! Twilight may not look it, but she's beside herself with bein' all anxious-like! And poor Fluttershy! You've gotten her so jumbled and confused in the middle of all this, she's actually blamin' herself for wantin' to stop and help you—”

“How's the farm?”

Applejack went cross-eyed. She stopped in mid-speech to shake her head and spastically utter, “The farm's ***fine***! Better than fine, even! But that's not the point—!”

“Pinkie Pie said she threw a party for you and your family,” Rainbow Dash said with a tired but genuine smirk. Her bloodshot eyes gazed Applejack's way. “She said the ponies in town got together to raise you a barn, cuz you promised them that you'll make Cider Season bigger and better than ever this year.”

“Yes... Yes, that's all true.” Applejack nodded. “And I would have loved it if you were there to celebrate it with me and all my other friends.”

“I... I'm sorry, AJ,” Rainbow Dash exhaled into the empty space of her mug, fiddling her hooves along the cup's porcelain curves. “I was... preoccupied.”

“With what?” Applejack frowned. “Sweatin' yer tail off over punishment for a petty crime you never needed to commit in the first place? Or enslavin' yourself to some self-centered cheapskate in the middle of downtown Canterlot?”

“Wow, the way you say it makes it all sound so...” Rainbow Dash winced. “Not-awesome.”

“How is it awesome when it turns you into a complete mess!”

“Hey! I'm cool!” Rainbow Dash smiled, teetered, and smiled again. “And don't you worry about that ditzy Cloudkicker taking my spot in Ponyville. With all the awesome weather skills I've got to throw around, I'll be back on top before you can say 'Sassafras.' Heh. And who cares if I take a back-saddle for a little bit? Besides, I'm working! Hasn't that always been your thing, Applejack? Y'know? *Working?”* She dryly chuckled and flipped a part of her colorful mane back. “I mean, it's gotten you to where you are now with the farm, right? Dream come true and all that jazz? Settling down and taking it easy?”

“It... That...” Applejack clenched her eyes shut, shook her head, and practically spat, “I didn't get there all by myself and you *know it*, Rainbow!” Her face was wrenched between anger and confusion. “Why did you do all of this? Was it all for me?”

“AJ...” Rainbow Dash sighed.

Applejack didn't stop. “Why break the law? Why lose so much sleep and sanity? What would possess somepony like you to work herself to the bone, so that she nearly kills herself crashin' into the center of Ponyville?!”

“Look, Applejack.” Rainbow Dash's voice cracked. She avoided Applejack's gaze, as if she would catch on fire through sheer eye contact. And she *did* catch on fire, for a deep flush had formed beneath her cheeks as she clutched the empty mug between her hooves to the breaking point. “Seriously,” she gulped and muttered. “Do I really have to spell it out for you?”

Applejack stood still, gazing down at Rainbow Dash. For a brief moment, it was like gazing into a clear sky, and everything—much like her farm, her hopes, and her dreams—suddenly came into focus. Gently, a smile surfaced under her freckled face. “I reckon you already have, sugarcube,” she said.

Rainbow Dash exhaled, her nostrils flaring. She sat, flustered, beneath Applejack, with nowhere to go. She was the fastest pegasus in all of Equestria, or so she had always boasted. However, nothing could take her far enough, or fast enough, from that time and place. Applejack quietly intervened before the exhausted pegasus could even summon the strength to tempt the idea.

“Tell me, when's yer next shift at... wherever?”

“Uhm...” Rainbow Dash tiredly blinked and gazed up at the clock on the wall. “My vision's kind of blurry. What time is it anyways?”

“Three in the morning.”

“Yeesh.” Rainbow Dash winced and sighed. “Well, in about two and a half hours, I'm due for an appointment uptown with two duty officers. I'm about three weeks' away from gettin' this boring

community service over with."

"I reckon you'd like to sleep."

"Heh. I could if I would." Rainbow Dash smiled tiredly. "But you know me. I can't stop once I get started with something."

"No. No you can't," Applejack said. She gazed behind her at the bar. "How about another cup of coffee to get ya goin'?" She smiled back down at the pegasus. "We can spend the next two hours gabbin'. Heheh... We both know how much that makes time fly by."

"R-Really?" Rainbow Dash remarked in a curiously foalish voice. She cleared her throat, and the redness in her cheeks finally went away. She waved her mug while casting a nervous smile. "Uhm.. What I mean is—Really, I'd love to have another cup, but I-I'm kind of short on bits these days."

"No problem," Applejack said warmly, smiling. "It so happens I've got some to spare."

"Hehehehe—And then Soarin' says 'Buccaneer Blitz?! I can do the Buccaneer Blitz in my sleep!'" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, waving her hooves dramatically over a half-empty mug of coffee. All of the bloodshot miasma was gone from her eyes as she grinned wide and rambled on, "And I said 'Sure, why not! You were part of a Sonic Rainboom while unconscious! Show us what you got!' So the dude flies really high up—like—to the edge of the troposphere, see?"

"Uh huh..."

"And he comes barreling down—*Nyarrrrruuuuu*—While me, Spitfire, and the rest of the Wonderbolts are all watching. It's then that I realize that something's not right. Well, it turns out that just as Soarin' was about to take off, Rapidfire slipped in and tied a pair of goggles to his tail! Snkkkt—Hahahaha!"

"Aw shucks. What happened?"

"Hehehe—Well, the goggles threw off his balance, but he wasn't prepared for it at the time. So when he came at the crest of descent and spun to toss the sparklers from his belt buckle, he veered off course and went sailing straight into a pond beneath Cloudsdale—*SPLAT!* Hahahaha!"

"Yer kiddin' me?! Was he hurt?"

"Hah! He only wished that he was! The poor sap was spitting minnows out of his mouth all afternoon! Ha ha ha! Man, I hope that when I join the Wonderbolts someday, I'm not nearly as much of a lame-o! The kind of practical jokes they play on each other are absolutely epic! Spitfire told me about

this one time that she was first inducted and the team captain at the time—Wingblade—filled her entire locker with goat cheese and—Are you sure this isn't boring you, AJ?"

"Hmm? Oh no! Absolutely not." Applejack smiled gently from where she leaned against the table across from the suddenly awake and jubilant pegasus. "I'm all ears, sugarcube."

"Alright, well... Where was I? Oh! Right! Goat cheese! It wouldn't be so bad, only that Spitfire had this wicked allergy, and no matter how much she put her uniform through the rinse that whole week, she told me that she broke out in hives for the next five consecutive airshows! Ha! Could you imagine that?! Flying in formation with your cheeks exploding like a fat chipmunk's?! Hahaha!"

"Heheh... fat chipmunks," Applejack murmured, though she barely recognized her own words. She was drawn into the sound of Rainbow Dash's voice, the euphoria that emanated from her, like a little foal on the morning of Hearth's Warming. An hour had passed, and the sunrise was still far away. Still, Applejack couldn't shake the feeling that she was no longer waiting for it, or for anything else. As Rainbow Dash continued to share the story of her best day ever, Applejack briefly wondered if this was hers. It was a silly notion, like a young filly's fanciful dream. For the first time ever, Applejack stopped questioning it... and simply settled down.