

She had a feeling that things were going to change. She didn't know what, exactly, but she could see herself trotting down that path, day after day. Something was coming up on the road she had been traveling, but what it was, exactly, she couldn't tell. It scared her. And she was never scared.

Things were going to change.

-Prelude-

"Ah still don't understand why ya have to take me into the Everfree Forest!" The orange cowpony complained to her pink companion, who was hopping up and down as they walked through the thick trees.

"I told you already, you silly silly filly," the pink one said. "We have to get to Zecora's so we can get some of the super fun stuff she created for the party we're throwing in Ponyville tonight!" The orange one sighed.

'Does everything have to be parties with Pinkie Pie?' she thought. "Alright, but ah still don't see what any of this has to do with bringin' me along."

"It's a lot of stuff!" Pinkie said proudly, a grin plastered on her face. "We need more than just two ponies to bring all of it into town! So, I thought to myself, 'Pinkie, who better to help you out than your super strong friend Applejack?!' And then I said to myself, 'Pinkie, you are so right! I'll just go over to Sweet Apple Acres and-'"

"Ah told y'all earlier today that ah had to do work around the farm since it was Big Macintosh's day off," Applejack scolded. "Why didn't ya ask somepony else, like Rainbow Dash?"

"Rainbow's busy clearing the clouds today," Pinkie said, not losing her exuberant energy one bit. "Besides, she's not *nearly* as strong as you are! And we need all the strength we can get from one pony!" Applejack merely groaned as they continued to trot. She stopped, however, once Pinkie turned an unexpected turn into a darker patch of trees; one that Applejack had never been through.

"Pinkie, where do ya think you're goin'?" Pinkie turned around. "Zecora's house is along this path here. We just need to keep goin' straight, avoid the poison joke, and-"

"Iiii found a shortcuuuuut~!" Pinkie proclaimed in a sing-song voice, interrupting Applejack's statement. "Seriously; this way takes tons less time than that old, boring path! Plus, it's a lot more funnerific!" Applejack glanced from her friend to the well-worn path; then back to Pinkie, and then to the trail again.

"Well, ah-" But Pinkie had already started walking, singing a song about trees as she did so. Nervously, Applejack followed her into the darkness.

--

"Did AJ ever say where she was goin'?" The red stallion asked. He had been plowing for the majority of the day, not minding the extra work that had been thrust upon him due to his sister's sudden absence, and was now resting underneath a large apple tree. The filly he had addressed was studying a book that her class was assigned to read under a tree next to him. The cover was a simple blue, and the story was a simple tale of two ponies that would simply fall in love and had to overcome all sorts of not so simple obstacles in order to simply end up together. And then they would die.

"Ah still don't understand why we have ta read this stuff..." She mumbled, flipping the page of the book she was so bored with.

"Apple Bloom, did ya hear me?"

"Ah think she said somethin' about goin' to Zecora's. Don't understand why she couldn't take me along with her."

Big Mac grunted unhappily as he stood up on his sturdy hooves. "It's prob'ly important work. She wouldn't have left the farm today if it wasn't important. Don't matter. Besides, you have work of your own to be doin', little filly." He began to trot off and resume his day of work "...And ah don't like that Everfree Forest," he added in a quiet mumble.

--

"Hm. Well, I don't remember that from before."

She knew this would happen. Applejack banged her head against a tree in frustration. She just knew that they'd get lost.

"Ooh, it's that tree!" Applejack looked up to see Pinkie staring at one of the many trees surrounding them.

"Pinkie, it looks just like all the other trees," she said, using every fiber of her being to keep herself calm. "There's nothin' special about it."

"Huh... nope! I'm sure of it; this is the tree I passed the first time I went this way! Now, was it ten trots, or twenty trots west... or east? Which way is which? Hm." Applejack had had just about enough of it. She began to trot away when she heard something in the distance. The sound was

hard to make out, but she couldn't place what it reminded her of...

"Oh right, silly me; we have to keep going this way!" Pinkie rushed ahead of Applejack as she bounced off. Applejack followed quickly. At long last, they had reached a clearing, and the source of the sound Applejack had heard earlier.

The stream ran wide and fast. It also appeared to be very deep; the two ponies noted that it wasn't the same river as the one occupied by the sea serpent several miles off. Maybe an estuary of that one, perhaps, but not the same exact one. "Huh. Don't remember this being here," Pinkie said as she began to walk off, looking for the way to Zecora's; something to trigger a memory.

Applejack, on the other hand, remained still. Not noticing Pinkie leave, she whispered aloud. "Ah... ah remember this place..." She put a hoof into the water, then another. The water was cool and steady. "Ah... ah don't remember ever comin' here, but..." Suddenly, the quick pace of the steady stream of water died down. The liquid was still. Nervously, she walked further into the river, looking around, trying to understand all the feelings going through her. She heard another sound; something different than that of the water...

She saw him standing several hundred feet away, farther down the water. He was small; maybe a year or two older than Apple Bloom. His body was tinted a bright and lively shade of green; not a bit of him looked sickly or pale. He was built much like Big Macintosh, Applejack noted. The pony was taking a drink from the still stream. He looked up and saw the mare staring at him. She wanted to look away, embarrassed, but she couldn't. Something kept her gaze fixated on the colt. He smiled at her.

"I found it!" Applejack looked back to find Pinkie Pie running back to the edge of the stream. "Applejack, what are you doing all the way out there in the water? Ooh, is this a new game?" The cowpony looked away from Pinkie and back to the- where was he?

The pony from before was gone. She slowly made her way back to the ground, shaking the water off of her. "...Anyway, I found the way to Zecora's! Come on!" Pinkie bolted away, with Applejack trotting slowly behind her. Applejack looked back one final time at the river before disappearing into the trees again.

She could still hear that sound... that song...

Something was wrong. Something had been changed.

It scared her.



apples and acres

Chapters 1-3

[Chapters 4-6](#)

---2---

Sometime later...

Applejack woke up very early that morning with a smile on her face. She wouldn't let her lack of sleep that past night dampen her exuberance. The sun hadn't begun to peak over the hills yet. She walked through the large abode in which she lived happily, looking at the pictures hanging on the wall of her entire family with joy; however, she focused on the photos that captured her immediate relatives. Her parents had died several years ago, and Granny Smith had passed on a month or two ago due to old age, but with Big Mac being the man of the house, they never had anything to fear. She knew that the four of them had lived on Sweet Apple Acres for years without a problem, with extended family visits never unexpected and always welcome. Though, they hadn't had a reunion in quite some time.

'Maybe we should have one soon...' she thought, smiling at the pictures. 'But then again, who needs the rest of them? We're the perfect loving family, so adoring. And I love them every day of every week. So, my little brother raises hell, my older one is boring, and my sister, though a genius, is a freak.' She sighed. *'Still, I help them love each other. Colts and fillies; sisters, brothers, cheek to cheek.'* She was broken from her reverie when she heard a noise from the kitchen. Nervous, she walked inside, seeing Apple Bloom sitting at the table, a large textbook sitting on top of it. Her eyes scanned the content of the pages tiredly. "Sugarcube, is everything alright?" Applejack asked gently. Apple Bloom looked over at her older sister, startled by the noise. "It ain't even time to get ready for school yet." The yellow filly yawned loudly.

"Everythin's fine, AJ," she said, rubbing her eyes. "But it is mah last year studyin' at school here; ah need to work real hard if ah wanna get to go to Canterlot." Applejack remembered; Apple Bloom had been going on about it for several months now. There was a special, selective two week program at Canterlot for young ponies who had just finished their primary school studies and wanted to pursue learning. And Apple Bloom, who - along with her two friends, Scootaloo

and Sweetie Belle - still had not gained her cutie mark, wanted to get in so that she could find out what it was that she was meant to do. Applejack smiled.

"Alright, just don't work yourself *too* hard," she said. "Take some time for yourself... you're growin' up so fast. Ya only live once, remember that." Apple Bloom muttered something, acknowledging what her sister had just said, as Applejack left the room.

She soon found herself walking into her older brother's room up on the second floor. The red stallion was sleeping in his bed soundly, his snores filling the dark room. Trotting over to his bedside, she nudged his shoulder, eliciting a grunt from the older pony. "Time to get up," she said in a kind whisper. He grunted once more, removing himself from the confines of his bed. "Ah'll go get yer coffee started."

"Much obliged, li'l sis," Big Mac said, stretching his legs as he yawned. Applejack smirked at her brother, planted a small kiss on his cheek, then left for the kitchen once more.

When she returned, she found Apple Bloom sleeping, drool leaking onto the open pages of the book she had been studying moments before. Applejack wiped up some of the liquid with a nearby towel, letting the filly get at least a little bit of sleep in before she had to go to school. She moved over to the coffee pot and began to get a cup of joe ready for her older brother.

"Hey, sis!" She turned around and saw the green colt trot in, a smile on his face. Smirking back, she gave him a peck on the cheek like she had done to Big Mac before.

"What're you doin' up so early?" She asked the pony. He groaned in response.

"I couldn't sleep that well," he said.

Applejack shook her head. "Well, if it's any consolation, ah couldn't sleep well either."

"And your reason is?"

Her smile disappeared as she grew somber. "It's the seventh night this week ah've lied in bed 'til mornin' imaginin' the ways ya might have died."

"Ah, yes, and today's winner is?" An apple from the counter made its way into her younger brother's mouth.

She inhaled deeply. "In a freak September ice storm with no warnin'."

"Because that happens," he sarcastically commented, biting into the apple expertly.

She continued. "There's a gang war. There's a riot. Trains collide."

"This is about the trouble in Stalliongrad, isn't it? What did I say about watching the news?"

"Ah waited fer ya all night; sneakin' in while ah slept fer an hour? Now yer actin' sweet an' surly, but ya swore ya'd come home early. An' ya lied."

He bit into the core of the apple, finishing it off, as he began to walk away. "You've gotta let go, sis. I'm almost eight!"

"Growin' colts still need their sleep."

Rolling his eyes, he spun around. "How can I sleep, when I have to be babied for my whole life? Come on; I'm a whole year older than Apple Bloom!" He pointed at the sleeping filly to make a point. "Why do I always have to be treated like I'm the little one?" He asked, huffing. Applejack chuckled softly.

"All ya need to remember," she said, patting the slightly smaller pony on the head, "is that we all love ya very much. So, what have ya got to be upset about when ya have fam'ly?" Her eyes were met with her brother's smiling face. "An' a great body to boot! Whah, ah think ya could be as built as Big Macintosh in, well, two months!"

His eyes glowed. "Really?"

"Would ah lie ta you?" She asked, hugging him closely. "But only if ya work hard out on the farm. Now git!" Applejack gave him a pat on the back as he chuckled and started toward the kitchen door. The slow trotting of hooves on the stairs above them caused him to stop. "Hurry up," she continued.

"Why does he hate me?" He asked, looking up. Applejack raised a hoof to her chin in mock thought. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Because you're a little mule."

The other one smirked. "You can't call me a mule," he said. Apple Bloom mumbled in her sleep, opening her eyes for a brief second before closing them again. "Morning, sunshine." With that, he left, heading outside toward the trees as Big Macintosh trundled into the kitchen.

As if on cue, the pot of coffee began to boil.

Just the four of them.

Just another day.

She had forgotten to take the pills that day.

She found herself in the bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror. The mirror, which was above the sink. The sink, which was next to the toilet. The toilet, which was next to the doorway. The closed doorway. She examined the bags under her eyes. The cowpony hat on top of her neatly brushed mane. The completely average - if not slightly toned - physique. Everything was normal. Nothing had changed.

Or so she had hoped. She recalled what had happened over the last month.

It had started with a conversation.

--

"AJ, are ya alright?" The pony tossed the bale of hay into the barn and looked over her shoulder to see Big Mac standing behind her. She flashed a phony smile as she began to walk past him.

"Ah'm fine, of course ah'm fine," she said, trotting away. "Why wouldn't it be fine?"

"It's just," Big Mac started. Applejack looked at him once more. She was confused; Big Mac wasn't very outspoken. He'd only talk when he felt he needed to. Obviously, something was up. "Apple Bloom's noticed it too."

"Noticed what?"

"You're not the same, AJ," Big Mac said. Applejack was taken aback. "Ya seem stressed an' tired. An'... there's no reason for that. It's not even Applebuck Season; ya shouldn't be this worn out." Applejack looked at him with wide eyes. He sighed and nuzzled her head in a protective manner. "AJ, ah know you're a hard worker." She looked away from him. "But I think ya need some rest. After all, we have a lot of big plans for next month; 'specially with Apple Bloom graduatin' an' all." Applejack nodded reluctantly in agreement. "She's been workin' really hard. An' she really wants to go to Canterlot."

"Ah know," Applejack said with a small smirk, pulling herself away from her older brother for a moment, "so she's the one ya'll should be worryin' about. Not me."

"But yer our glue," Big Mac said, putting a comforting hoof on her shoulder. "Yer what holds this family together."

And that's when it hit her.

--

"So you're graduating in a few months, right?" The purple baby dragon asked Apple Bloom as they sat down in front of the tree that acted as the library of the town.

"Next month, as a matter ah fact, Spike," Apple Bloom replied. Spike whistled.

"Wow," he said. "Time really flies by here in Ponyville."

"For you, maybe," she said. "Ah've been workin' mah tail off tryin' to keep mah grades up."

"What do you plan to do after school here?"

"Well, since ah still don't have mah cutie mark," she said, looking at her blank flank, "ah want to go to Canterlot. Ah think goin' ta such a big place could open up a buncha possibilities for me."

"Wow, Canterlot U, huh?" Spike asked. "But don't you need to be, like, a genius to get in there?"

"That's why ah've been tryin' so hard," Apple Bloom said. "Ah really want this, so ah've been studyin' all day an' night for all mah extra classes." She yawned, as if to emphasize the point. "It's really hurtin'."

"I think you need to take some time to relax," Spike said.

"Ah can't do that; not until the end of the year."

"Come on! Work isn't everything! You need to live a little!"

"So, Spike," Apple Bloom started, wanting to change the conversation, "how're things goin' with ya an' Rarity?" The mentioning of the pony of his dreams caused him to chuckle slightly.

"Eh, I've abandoned all hope," he said, waving his hand through the air. "She'll never see me the same way I see her." Apple Bloom playfully hugged Spike.

"Well, ah wouldn't worry 'bout it. Ah'm sure there's someone out there in Equestria for everypony."

"Everypony, maybe," he said, chuckling. "But what about everydragon?"

The two laughed in unison as they enjoyed each other's company.

--

“...And that’s all that happened.” The purple unicorn listened intently as she stared at the pony opposite her. Applejack had come over to the library to talk with one of her best friends, Twilight Sparkle. Applejack had been feeling unwell, and, not wanting to go to the hospital and having to deal with those pesky, annoying nurse ponies, opted to talk with her magical friend. Twilight had asked her about the last few months, wanting to know if this sort of thing had happened before. She recounted her journey with Pinkie into the Everfree Forest.

“Anything else you remember out of the ordinary from that trip?” Twilight asked. Applejack shook her head.

“It’s just like ah told ya, Twilight,” she said. “Ah reached that river, felt kinda strange, then walked away. But after that... ah felt like somethin’ changed in me.” She buried her head in her hooves. “Ah don’t know what it is!”

“I’m sure it isn’t that bad, Applejack,” Twilight lied. The pony before her had noticeably lost weight over the past few weeks, and her lack of energy only made her worry even more. But she didn’t want to have Applejack worry too much. “All you need is rest!” Applejack scoffed at the comment.

“You and ah both know that ah need much more than rest,” she said. “Which is part of the reason why ah came to you.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Yer magic! You can use one of yer hokey-pokey spells to get me out of this... whatever the hay it is.”

“Applejack, you’ve never been fond of me using my magic before to help you. Remember? ‘That’s not how we do things ’round here in Ponyville’?” Twilight put on a southern accent in a poor attempt to imitate the other.

“Psh. Ah know, Twilight. And ah’m sorry ’bout that. But this is different!”

“How is it different?” Twilight asked, raising her voice a touch.

“Because this is somethin’ much more than just... gatherin’ apples or... plantin’ seeds,” Applejack said.

“More than tradition?”

“Much more. This is family.” Applejack looked down, trying to avoid Twilight’s gaze. “Ah’m... the glue. Ah could lose them. And ah don’t want to lose what ah have.” She looked out the window of the library, and could see Apple Bloom talking with Spike. The two of them laughed, and

began to run off out of sight. "She needs me. They need me. An' now ah see her feel the fire. Now ah know she needs me there to help." She chuckled hollowly. "Ah'm nowhere." Applejack turned back to Twilight. "You understand, don't ya?" Twilight sighed.

"...Zecora gave me a few different medicines," she said after a long pause. Applejack perked up with hope. "New ones. She made them from pre-existing formulas and recent studies at Canterlot University. They're only samples, primarily for research and testing purposes. Allegedly, they can help with... calming a pony down. Easing pain. Keeping them from being... depressed."

"But...?" Twilight looked at her friend with sad eyes.

"I wouldn't feel right giving them to you without having them properly and fully tested."

"Ah can be a test subject!"

"I can't let my best friend do that!" Twilight said, backing up in frustration. "There's no telling what side effects there could be to these things! I don't know; Zecora doesn't know!" Applejack looked deep into her friend's eyes and could see that she was holding something back.

"How long have ya been researching these medicines?"

"A few weeks," Twilight mumbled. Applejack inched closer.

"Ah beg yer pardon? Ah didn't quite catch that."

"The whole month," Twilight confessed. "And no; nothing bad has happened yet in the research to show that they're deadly or poisonous or... whatever." Twilight could see that Applejack was beginning to grin at her. "But Applejack, nothing has come up that's shown that they work either!"

"No harm, no foul, am ah right?" Applejack asked. "And if ah feel odd or funny, ah'll be sure ta tell ya!"

"Applejack..."

"Please, Twilight," she pleaded. "Ah can't let mahself go crazy. Big Mac... Sweet Apple Acres... they mean all of Equestria to me." Twilight groaned in defeat.

"Alright, but promise that you'll be careful," she said, walking up to her bedroom. The unicorn returned moments later with two bottles with different labels on them. "Take the white pills once every night with a glass of water, take the yellow ones twice a day with food, but be sure to place at least three hours of time between the yellow ones and white ones to allow for..."

--

"Come on, Apple Bloom," Applejack said, emerging from Twilight's house and library while putting the bottles into her saddlebags. "Say goodbye to Spike, it's time to go home."

"Can't we just hang out for a few more minutes?"

"Don't ya need to study for them tests comin' up?" The little one scoffed.

"Now ya care."

"Apple Bloom..."

"Ah hear ya, ah hear ya... see ya later Spike."

--

Three days.

The effects were already becoming evident. Applejack was much more calm and subdued. She'd go about to do her daily work, as would Big Mac, and would help prepare dinner for the family when they were both done.

But she felt like something was missing.

--

One week.

"Well, ah had to come on over ta' thank ya fer this, Twilight Sparkle," Big Mac said upon arriving at the library. "Applejack is years better. Eeeyup."

"Just make sure she sticks to the instructions I laid out for her," Twilight said, happy that it was working but still worried. "I don't want her to get hurt because of this."

"Don't you worry," he said as he prepared to leave. "Everything is under control."

--

Two weeks.

"How are you feeling?"

"Well, Twilight... ah don't feel terrible. Ah don't feel dizzy. Or tired. Or overworked."

"Good!"

Ah don't feel anything.

--

Three weeks.

She was standing in front of the mirror. The half empty containers of pills were in the open medicine cabinet.

"Applejack?" Turning, she saw her younger brother in the doorway. "It's half past midnight; is something wrong?" She felt as if she hadn't seen him in weeks. He yawned while waiting for a response.

"Sorry, sugarcube," she said. "Ah'll be back to bed... in a few minutes. Don't ya worry none." Unconvinced, her younger brother walked in and looked at the pills in the cabinet.

"You know, I think these are doing something to you," he said, closing the cabinet. "You don't need them," he whispered before leaving the room.

"Sugarcube?" Applejack called. She could see the green coat of her brother return to the doorway out of the corner of her misty eyes. "Ah... miss the mountains," she admitted. "Ah miss the dizzy heights. All the manic magic days an' the dark depressin' nights. Ah miss the highs and lows. All the climbin', all the fallin'..."

She thought of the days of her youth wistfully, closing her eyes and remembering a time when she would run around with her only care being tending the farm. And to her family. "An' all the while the wild wind blows, stainin' you with snow, an' soakin' you with rain. Ah miss the pain." Opening her sad eyes, she gazed at her reflection once more. A hollow chuckle escaped her mouth before she continued talking to her brother.

"Mountains make ya crazy! Here it's calm, and mah hooves are on the ground. Everythin' is balanced here and on an even keel. Everythin' is perfect!... Nothin's real!" With that statement, she forcefully re-opened the medicine cabinet and removed the two bottles with her mouth, setting them on the sink. She opened up the toilet seat cover. "Nothing's *real*!" Applejack reached up with her hooves and, in a flash, took her hat off her head and threw it aside. She didn't bother to look over at the doorway to see that her younger brother was no longer standing there; didn't bother to notice that she was speaking to herself. Her hooves and head had begun to shake erratically, trembling at random. It was as if a shock of electricity was coursing through

her body.

“And I miss the mountains!” With a glare and a quick hoof, she knocked one of the bottles on its side. The pills inside of it fell into the toilet. “Oh, ah miss the lonely climb!” She undid her elastic hairbands, tossing her mane around while mussing it up with her hooves. “Wand’rin’ through the wilderness, and spending all mah time where the air is clear an’ *cuts* you like a knife!”

Suddenly, she stopped. Her breathing was heavy, and she was gasping for air. The reflection in the mirror stared back at her. Hair was strewn everywhere. Her once beautiful mane was now messy and unkempt. “Ah miss... mah life.”

With lucid eyes, she looked at the final bottle of white pills. Trembling, she picked it up with her mouth, and dumped its contents into the toilet as well. With a shaking hoof, she flushed them down the drain, watching them disappear.

She waited to feel again.

“I miss... my... life.”

[\(Continue: Chapters 4-6\)](#)