

## Elements of Discord, Ch5: Roast Apples

By Somber

(All credit for My Little Pony: Friendship is magic to Lauren Faust. Thanks for reading this far.)

The defense of Apple Acres had taken the entire Apple clan to arrange in the cold and rainy hours before dawn. The plan had changed from 'run' to 'fight' and strange energy seemed to seize the colts and mares of the family as they'd roused to push through the night without hesitation or rest. Even Granny Smith leapt to the occasion, which was something of a marvel in and of itself with her hip. Applejack might not have known the first thing about the kind of fighting they'd have to do, but Braeburn and her cousins arranged the defense of Appleloosa against rampaging buffalo.

A similar defense had been arranged here and threw a few new ideas into the plan. Big Macintosh and the other colts took the snow ploughs out and carved a moat clear around the farm. The wet, muddy berm, now topped with every soaked crate and spare board they could put their hooves on, rose above the sludge filled ditch. Applejack doubted even a Nightmare's fires would burn covered in that muck. Other surprises were rigged as they readied to fight. Everypony who could find a blanket or quilt soaked it through before tying it on.

"We're as ready as we're gonna get!" Applejack said as she hopped on to the muddy berm and pointed south towards the line of gray smoke and steam. "This here is where we're gonna make our stand and show this critter that it might cook up the Everfree Forest, but Apple Acres is a whole other barrel of Apples! Everypony get in their places." She scanned the crowd. "Apple Fritter! Did you find Apple Bloom and her friends?"

The pale yellow pony shook her head once, chewing the end of her green mane nervously. Applejack stomped her hoof. "Tarnation! I swear I'm gonna hogtie that filly next chance I get!"

"Applejack!" Shouted Twilight Sparkle from the direction of Ponyville. She ran up quick, panting for breath. She stopped and stared at them in shock. "What are you doing? The Mayor needs everypony on the other side of the river now! There's reinforcements from Canterlot arriving soon and-"

"Nothing doing, Twilight Sparkle." Applejack cut in with a sharp sweep of her fetlock and then stamped firmly. "This is our land and our fight. No pony's gonna make us leave it without a tussel!" The entire Apple family gave a resounding cheer.

Twilight pointed a hoof towards Fluttershy's cottage roof to the west, "But... Applejack! You saw what she did to Fluttershy!"

"Darn right I did, thanks for reminding me." She snorted, looking at the distant black figure approaching. "I owe her a good couple o swift kicks for Fluttershy!"

"Ugh, why are you being so stubborn?" Twilight Sparkle asked with a groan. Applejack looked worried, even hurt, and slid down the berm to stand before her friend, gazing into her eyes. "This ain't about being stubborn, Twilight. This is about doing what's right. Running with our tails tucked to let all this burn? Ya know that ain't right." She put her hoof on the purple unicorn's shoulder. "Ya gotta understand, Twilight. Not a one of us could forgive ourselves if we didn't fight for all this. We gotta."

Twilight Sparkle grit her teeth to suppress a little scream. "They're just-" but the

rest of the sentence died in her throat as she saw the look in everypony's eye. *Just Trees*, she'd almost said. Just like Ponyville was just houses and Cloudsdale was just clouds. She could have kicked herself. Everypony looked ready to fight for the farm as devotedly as if they were fighting for each other. Maybe she couldn't understand it, but she could respect it. "Are you sure you want to stick to this?"

"Ya gotta ask?" Applejack replied with an easy grin, but worry was mirrored in both their faces. Another of her friends putting themselves in harm's way! Of course Applejack was right, and that made it even more aggravating.

"Fine. Fine! But I am going to fight alongside you!" Twilight said firmly.

"Nothing doing, Twilight." The purple unicorn's left eye started to twitch, feeling as though she verged on throttling her dear friend and saving Fury the trouble. Applejack looked towards the Crusader's tree house. "Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle are missing. Ya gotta find them. Make sure they get to Ponyville safe and sound."

For the longest moment Applejack was certain that Twilight Sparkle was going to argue. She seemed to be building fit to burst! Then she let out her breath in a huff. "Okay. But soon as I find them and they're safe, I'm coming back to help you! Do you hear me?" She said as she shook Applejack with far more vigor than a bookworm should have managed.

"There she is!" yelled Red Delicious, pointing out over the low ridge.

Applejack climbed back atop the berm and straighten Old Uncle Applecore's football helmet. Glaring out at Nightmare Fury she stomped her hoof firmly. "This here is Apple Acres and ya'll ain't welcome! You want ta get to Ponyville, you'll have to go through us!" The rest of the Apple family took up her words with cheers.

For the longest moment the Nightmare simple stood there with her head lowered. Then she spread her front hooves wide and seemed to bow to Applejack, "Gladly." Applejack stiffened as Fury rose, "But first, I need you to take something off my hooves." She stepped aside to reveal the three cutie mark crusaders.

Applejack staggered a moment like she'd just been applebucked, "Buh? Apple Bloom! Wha- why, how? Urrrrghhhh!" The bafflement gave way to exasperation, stamping her hooves before pointing at her sister. "Apple Bloom, you get away from her this second! You're grounded till yer Granny Smith's age, you hear me?"

Twilight Sparkle watched in amazement as Fury turned to say something to the girls. All three looked upset, but not scared. They were right next to the most dangerous monster in all of Equestria, weren't they? The girls nodded vigorously to whatever she said and trotted to the ditch. Big Macintosh bit a plank and easily swung it over as an impromptu bridge. All three carefully walked across it and slid down the berm.

Applejack was so frazzled that she thought she might lose it; and she couldn't do that. Not now. "Twilight Sparkle, get them outta here!"

"I wanna stay! Please sis!" Apple Bloom protested.

The little orange pegasus looked at her friend. "Apple Bloom, you promised!" The rose maned filly winced. Applejack would have given a bucket of sugarcubes to know what Scootaloo was talking about.

"I know but—"

Applejack looked at Fury. Why wasn't she charging? Flinging fire? It was

almost like she was waiting for something. Applejack looked down at her little sister and slid down next to her. "You listen here, little appleseed. You gotta go. You and your friends. Twilight will see you back to Ponyville." She brushed Applebloom's hair out of her eyes with a soft smile, "But I need to know you're safe, Apple Bloom. So you're going with Twilight Sparkle, even if I gotta hogtie ya. Ya hear?"

Apple Bloom looked miserable and bit her lip, "But... it's my home too!"

"Apple Bloom, we promised," Sweetie Belle said quietly, glancing towards the berm.

"It is. But we can't fight for it if we're afraid for you. Please Apple Bloom." Applejack said as she looked down at her sister, trying to send her all the love she could to convince her that she had to do this.

Apple Bloom started to cry, but gave a jerky nod. Applejack nuzzled her forehead. "That's a good filly." She looked at Twilight Sparkle, "Get em outta here!"

"Right. Come on, girls." Twilight Sparkle made sure that Apple Bloom went ahead of her. She wouldn't risk her running off. "Soon as they're safe I'm coming back. And I'm bringing help! I promise!"

Applejack just smiled, knowing how much it killed Apple Bloom and Twilight Sparkle to go. She never cared more for either of them more than at that moment. She nodded once. "Right. Let's do this." She scaled the berm and looked at Fury. All the certainty she'd felt earlier was jumbled up now and she didn't know how she was supposed to feel right now. Burning eyes looked up at her as the pony sat in a circle of smoldering grass. "I ain't gonna ask ya ta leave."

Fury nodded. "And I won't ask you to surrender."

Respect. That was the disturbing expression Applejack saw in Fury's eyes. Whatever she was, she didn't look at them as if they were nothing. No mocking or taunting. She treated Applejack as a worthy opponent. "Thank you. For taking care of Apple Bloom," she blurted. Why had she just said that? She didn't want to thank her; didn't want to owe her anything.

Fury nodded her head again. She clenched her eyes closed a moment, teeth gritted as if in pain. Suddenly there was a little explosion of fire searing a circular patch of grass. The ground around her combusted as Fury looked up at Applejack, "Ready?"

It was now or never. "Launch!" She shouted as she looked over her shoulder at two large see-saws they'd constructed in the night and erected as soon as Fury had been spotted. Two colts leapt from the tops of trees on to the raised platforms. There was a heavy, wooden 'whump' as the far arms swung up and launched a fusillade of freshly baked goods high into the air.

Nightmare Fury, the terror of Equestria, the bane of old Canterlot, stood there in amazed confusion and was painted from head to hoof in gooey apple pie. "Ha ha, take that!" Cackled Granny Smith in glee!

Then Fury's blazing eyes opened like doors on a stove. The pie filling and crust immediately smoked and blackened, falling off her in a dark shower. She shook once and grinned. "My turn!" The flaming tail whirled behind her and began to lob balls of flame along the parapet before her. The wood and dirt deflected most of the flame, but burning bits tumbled

down the far side. Ponies with buckets of moist dirt and water immediately doused them before they could spread.

Then she suddenly stopped and set her hooves. “Here she comes,” Applejack warned. Fury raced down a little ways and turned to charge the ditch. She cleared it, landing with her blazing hooves digging into the moist dirt. “Now, Big Macintosh! Now!”

Big Macintosh rose at the top of the berm directly above Nightmare Fury. He set his front hooves against a crate lid and began to push the top of the berm down on her in a growing cascade of wet dirt and mud. Fritter tossed a wooden bucket of water up at Applejack, and the orange pony caught it in her mouth, moving to where Big Macintosh relentlessly pushed Fury towards the water below.

Applejack let the water fly and it struck along her crackling red mane, extinguishing it in a huge ball of steam! Fury clenched her eyes closed, screaming in pain as her ebony coat hissed and sizzled. Her back hooves slipped into the muck, making it bubble furiously around her legs. Applejack tossed the bucket back to Apple Fritter and called to her brother, “One more good push!”

“Ayup,” was all he said as he braced himself to finish the job. Powerful legs churned forward as the berm slowly slid down towards the ditch. A foot or two more and-

Fury exploded. Yellow fire erupted all along her back and the wave of heat was so intense that Applejack felt it through her waterlogged work clothes. A pillar of steam rose as the plank Big Mac pressed immediately ignited. He grunted anyway, shoving against the crackling wood as Fury dug into the wet bank.

No, not wet, Applejack realized. The heat she put out was baking the embankment, turning it firm enough to push against. “Buckets! More Buckets!” AppleJack stood on one side, Braeburn the other, tossing water as fast as ponies below could toss it to her in a bucket brigade. Hang on, Big Macintosh! Push her back! But the strongest of the Apple family was forced to give way as the wood under his hooves blackened and tongues of fire licked at his legs.

Something had to give. The plank volunteered. It snapped around his hooves as a burning hot cascade of roasted earth and crackling wood tumbled down upon him. The soaked mattress they’d wrapped around him hissed as Fury cleared the berm and leapt off into the orchard. Within seconds the apple trees were smoking and licks of fire were spreading everywhere.

“Fire crews! Get working!” Applejack shouted as she charged Fury. Mares and colts with buckets and shovels braved the terrible heat pouring off Fury to toss dirt and water on anything aflame. Fury might have made it past their first line of defense, but it wasn’t their last! *Now if we can just avoid being cooked...*

\* \* \*

Twilight Sparkle trotted as fast as she could without leaving the Cutie Mark Crusaders behind. She contemplated teleporting straight to her library, but could she afford the fatigue and disorientation it caused? Taking one passenger was hard enough, but three? She could be out of commission for hours. Twilight glanced at the trio, “What were you three trying to do?”

"We were trying to stop her," Scootaloo said sullenly. Twilight Sparkle blinked in shock and then smiled. "So everypony would stop hating us for letting her out."

Sweetie Belle sighed, "But she's... weird."

"She's a monster, Sweetie Belle. A Nightmare." Twilight Sparkle said softly.

"No, she isn't." Said Apple Bloom sharply.

"What?"

Apple Bloom didn't look up from the dirt as she walked besides Twilight Sparkle. "She's not a monster. I mean she is, but she isn't."

"You're confused..." Twilight Sparkle began, but received a sullen look from the filly. "She's very dangerous..."

Scootaloo looked back over her shoulder at the scorched lines in the Everfree Forest that still smoked despite the rain, "Yeah, we kinda saw that."

"What we mean is that she's not like some monster running around destroying because she likes it. She doesn't." Sweetie Belle said as she looked up at Twilight Sparkle.

"What... what did she tell you back there? You mentioned a promise?" Twilight Sparkle asked, a little bit afraid of what the answer might be.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders glanced at each other, "She made us promise to get somewhere safe," Apple Bloom muttered softly. "She said she was sorry she had to burn Apple Acres and Ponyville, but that she didn't want to burn us too." Apple Bloom bit her lip, "She said... she said I wasn't chicken fer getting ta safety." The filly rubbed away her tears before they could get far. Twilight Sparkle slowed a little as her brain mulled over the possibilities. They'd simply assumed from the outset that Fury was maliciously out to burn Equestria.

"What if she has a reason for doing all this?" Twilight Sparkle asked herself more than the girls.

"She does. She told us why." Apple Bloom was so depressed she missed Twilight's shocked expression for a second.

"She... told you?"

The three nodded. Scootaloo glanced behind them. "She said that Princess Celestia did something real bad to somepony that was her friend a long time ago. Hurt her real bad. So Fury wants to fight the Princess."

"She's going to burn up all of Equestria till she does or she's stopped." Sweetie Belle finished solemnly.

"Fight the Princess?" Twilight Sparkle marveled at the audacity. Absurd... and yet it made a horrible kind of sense. Eventually the Princess would have to appear to stop her. "Did you learn anything else about her?"

They looked a little less unhappy now that they had something to contribute. Sweetie Belle cocked her head and looked up at Twilight Sparkle, "She gets hot when she gets mad."

"She's got fire coming out her mane and hooves, Sweetie Belle." Scootaloo said sullenly.

"No. I mean she gets hotter." She looked at her friends. "Remember when we tried to say how Princess Celestia is good? She went all fwoosh! She got so hot her hooves melted the rock she was standing on. I saw."

Her power increases with rage. Suddenly Twilight Sparkle didn't think the Princess fighting Fury was absurd any more. "If Fury blames the Princess and they fought..." If just talking about the Princess made her strong enough to melt stone... how hot could she become? "She really could burn all of Ponyville. All of Equestria." The lack of Princess Celestia's presence since this began suddenly made a lot more sense. Fury wasn't just a monster, she was a walking bomb. With the Princess as the trigger! If Fury thought Princess Celestia was at Ponyville instead of Canterlot, would she have spared Fluttershy and the girls?

"But she doesn't want to," Apple Bloom said immediately. "She's just... mad. And hurt. And upset." Apple Bloom hung her head again. "And I know just how she feels."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her and gave a little nudge and a smile. "Cheer up, Apple Bloom. If there's anypony that can handle herself in a fight, it's Applejack." Apple Bloom clearly wasn't convinced. Twilight Sparkle could use some convincing herself.

And if there's anypony with a chance of stopping Nightmare Fury, it's not the Princess. Not unless she wants all of Equestria to go up in a ball of smoke. If there was anypony who had a chance of taking Fury down it was her friends and Twilight Sparkle. When they reached the bridge to Ponyville, the Mayor was speaking with head pegasus Radiant and a pegasus captain of a dozen white flanked royal guards. Beneath the stone bridge, the Equestria river roared; its waters dark and nearly at its banks from last night's storm.

"Twilight Sparkle! You found the Cutie Mark Crusaders! Thank goodness." The mayor looked exhausted as she gestured to the pegasus besides her, "This is Captain Goodlight." Then the Mayor looked around, "Where is the Apple family? They're the last ones to be evacuated." The mayor looked over Twilight's shoulder as if expecting to see the fifty or so ponies trotting after her.

"They aren't coming. They're staying to fight for Apple Acres."

"Idiots." Snorted the pegasus guard captain. "They can't possibly mount a decent defense against a creature like that." Both the mayor and everypony in earshot looked shocked at the insult.

Twilight Sparkle's ears stood straight up. "Captain, they might be farmers but they're fighting for their home. Isn't that what we all should be doing?"

"Leave fighting to the fighters, ma'am." The guard captain said with a dismissive snort. "When the rest of our troops are formed up we'll show this Nightmare what a real fight looks like." He said in disdain as he walked back to where the pony soldiers stood at attention. They certainly looked impressive. Focused. Clean and confident in their polished armor. Maybe they could do it.

"Pffft. A bunch of puffed up ponies don't stand a chance against Fury," Scootaloo said, receiving looks from the rest. "What?"

"What about the rest of Ponyville? Are they going to help?" Twilight Sparkle asked as she looked around. There weren't many folks in sight, but the town hadn't been completely evacuated yet.

The Mayor looked at Goodlight and gave a little snort. "I know what you said about protecting our home, but Captain Goodlight overrode me. The Equestria Guard will fight the Nightmare, not us." She sighed, pushing her glasses up her muzzle. "There's several ponies still around. Your friends, the Cakes, Nurse Trueheart... not all of us have fled." There

was a note of pride in her voice at that.

Twilight looked at the guards in their shiny new armor and lowered her voice, “Mayor, how much fighting do the Equestria Guard actually do?” Until recently, Equestria really didn’t have many problems that weren’t resolved by her majesty.

The Mayor didn’t look confident at all as she shook her head. “I don’t know, Miss Sparkle, and that’s not a good sign.” She looked back as Captain Goodlight looked back towards them sharply and a half dozen pegasus and unicorns marched up to surround Twilight Sparkle.

“What... Captain! What do you think you are doing?” The mayor protested.

“Hey, let me go! I have to get back to Apple Acres! I need to help Applejack!” Twilight Sparkle cried as the unicorns horns glowed and summoned magic chains to bind her hooves.

“Hey! Let get go!” Apple Bloom charged Captain Goodlight and gave his leg a swift kick. His wings snapped once and knocked all three Cutie Mark Crusaders to the ground.

“You’re Twilight Sparkle?” He asked coldly as he stared into her eyes.

“Y...yes?”

“By the authority of the Princess of Equestria, you are under arrest.” He glared down at the three fillies. “The young as well for assaulting a member of the Equestrian Guard,” he added with a disdainful snort. One of the unicorns gave Twilight’s rump a sharp jab. When she tried a spell, the manacles gave her a zap that disrupted the magic! She could only look back at the smoke rising up over Apple Acres.

\* \* \*

*Could sure use Twilight Sparkle about now!* “Keep her moving! Don’t let her get set!” Applejack shouted as another tree began to crackle above the flaming pony. A sickly sweet smell rose above the smoke; roasted Apples. “Keep firing!” Red Delicious and Golden Delicious kicked a rapid fire barrage of apples against the black Nightmare. They burst in wet pops of steam and flaring apple juice, but each hit still hurt and prevented Fury from setting herself and tossing around fire. Granny Smith, Apple Tart, and Apple Fritter rained pies and pastries down in a steady avalanche of edible goods. No pony could aim well be pie in their eyes! “Braeburn! Haul her out of there!”

“You got it, cuzz! Yeee haw!” He cheered as he whirled a lasso overhead. “This here is a special trick straight from Appleloosa! Git along little pony!” He said as he expertly flicked the loop over Fury’s head. It would have been perfect if the rope hadn’t flashed to ash. Braeburn blinked stupidly at the end of his rope and grinned sheepishly, “Sorry, cuzz.”

“Forget that, you idjit! Look-“ But Braeburn paid attention to the wrong thing and Fury tagged him with a devastating rear kick that knocked him sliding across the dirt, struggling for breath. “-out...” Applejack finished. Braeburn would bounce back, but she wasn’t sure about Apple Acres. “Get on those fires, Apples!” Anypony not fighting Fury assaulted the licking flames with shovelfuls of dirt, buckets of water, or wet blankets. Applejack couldn’t see how much was on fire; she couldn’t bear to think of it now.

They needed some way to lead her. Every minute under the trees was simply an

opportunity for more fire. Braeburn's lasso was a fine idea; she just needed a stouter lasso! Running to a heap of supplies she grabbed what she needed, hooked it into a loop, and raced back to the fight with her teeth clenched. *Now this is a rope trick*, she thought furiously as she jerked her head around and let the loop of chain fly. It settled around Fury's neck and with a yank went tight. "Gotcha!"

Fury reared as the chain went taut and Applejack was nearly yanked right off her hooves! Big Macintosh found his own length of chain and tossed a second loop after the first. Getting to his hooves, Braeburn saw their plan and sent a third loop of chain flying. Digging in their hooves, the three started to drag her back towards the berm and the ditch. Sweat poured off Applejack, mixing with the hot water soaked into her clothes, as she struggled with the Nightmare. "Git! Off! Our! Farm!" She said through clenched teeth.

Fury faced away from them, hooves churning in the ground as she pulled opposite the three. Burning chunks of earth rained down on all three as the metal started to shimmer and glow red. She could feel the heat growing on her teeth.

"Applejack! Let go!" Shouted Red Delicious from the side.

Applejack could barely see with smoking clods raining down on the three of them. That's crazy giving up talk! She pulled hard, feeling Fury start to slide after them. They had this! Then, with a resounding 'ping', the chains snapped and red hot links shot out in all directions away from Fury. The whiplash carried the chain straight back and crashed against the football helmet she wore and knocked her muzzle into the dirt. *If I'd been wearing my hat, that would have taken off my head!*

Freed of the chains and with a good build up of momentum, Fury broke away from the engagement. A trail of flames marked her passage, licking at the green leaves and red apples as she raced between the trees towards Ponyville. Nothing could stop her now... and then the ground gave way as a canvas tarp stretched over a pit split at the first touch of her burning hooves. She could only jump and crash into the far lip of the hole. Cold water splashed beneath her, bringing a cry of pain as she fought clear of the hole. With a heave, Fury stood on the far back, looking back at the water.

"Yi yi yi yi!" A filly cried as Gala and Fuji swung down on a log stretched between two trees. Old Benedict had passed away years ago, but his sturdy trunk still served Apple Acres. The green and red twin mares riding the swinging log whooped as Fury stood right in the path of the trunk. This was it! The knockout blow!

Her teeth grit as Fury set herself. A flare erupted all around her as the trunk struck a glowing shoulder plate head on. The arc of flame touched the solid heartwood of the old apple tree and the massive log's middle combusted and crumpled. The ends not even slowing, they swung up and out wildly. Gala and Fuji cried out in alarm as they were flung from the ends of Benedict and flew up into the air. They plummeted into the pit with a cry and a splash.

"Nice try," Fury retorted, gasping for air as she looked back at the pit. "But fire beats wood."

She looked forward in time to receive a faceful of snow plough.

Big Macintosh dug in with his usual solemn tenacity, hooves chewing up the turf as the broad blade pushed her back towards the edge of the pit. Fury punched her rear hooves



into the ground, her front hooves blazing and snapping against the metal blade. It glowed softly around her hooves as Big Macintosh locked with Fury on the edge of the pit. Heat radiated in waves over the edge, but Big Macintosh simply lowered his head and kept up the pressure. Fury grit her teeth, eyes dripping fire as her tail snapped and lobbed fireballs that splashed ineffectively off the roof of the plough.

Fury lost one inch. Then two. Then three. Slowly and inevitably Big Macintosh drove her towards the water filled pit.

The metal slowly began to give way under her hooves as Fury stared into his eyes. "Push me in," Fury gasped, "and they'll boil."

Big Macintosh's verdant eyes went wide, his step faltered for just a moment.

With a roar, Fury shoved the snow plough to the left and leapt to the right, sending the glowing blade into a trunk. Setting her front hooves, her rear hooves came up in a thunderous kick that lift the side of the snow plough and flipped it over on to its roof, leaving Big Macintosh tangled in the harness.

"That should take care of you," Fury muttered, turning forward again towards her revenge.

Two leather boots filled her vision. The kick knocked her rolling away. "And that should take care of you!" Applejack panted, feeling her boots steaming around her feet. She stared at Fury thinking furiously, *please be taken care of!*

Fury then shook her shimmering helmet and glared back at Applejack. "Why is everypony trying to hit me when I'm not looking?" She rose to her hooves and gave a brisk shake.

"Ain't rules in fightin'!" Applejack retorted. "Just win!"

"Oh, so you agree with me." Fury said as she darted forward, drew short so Applejack's follow up kick went high, and leapt underneath Applejack. Her coveralls crackled and steamed as Fury gave a great heave and launched Applejack into the trunk of a tree. Apples cascaded down over the orange pony. One rolled to the Nightmare and she pressed her hoof against the top. "Anything to win," she said as the apple's skin blackened and split, issuing steam and boiling apple juice. "No matter whom you have to burn."

Applejack rose, smarting from the toss as she stared back at Fury. Was she just like Fury then, willing to do anything to defeat her enemy? "If that's what you think, why'd you save Gala and Fuji?"

Fury just shrugged, "Saving them was saving me. If the big pony believed in winning at any cost then I'd be beaten, and they'd be...." Her hoof came down on the apple, smashing it into a burning puddle.

Applejack swallowed hard.

"It's a fun idea... unrestrained combat. Isn't it?" Fury said as she scraped the smoking residue of her hoof, looking back at Applejack evenly. "Never fight to win at all costs. Not unless winning really matters." Fury said in her low, crackling voice, "Some prices you don't recover from."

Applejack shook her head hard, backing away as Fury stalked forward. "Why in tarnation are ya gabberin like this? Just fight!" Fury suddenly jerked, blue fire lancing from her body in all directions as she shook. The look on her face was agony. For a few seconds she

looked ready to die. Then she grit her teeth, breathing deep, till the flares disappeared. She panted and gasped for breath a moment before looking at her opponent.

"We *are* fighting, Applejack." She replied, and gave a quick foreleg kick. When Applejack jumped aside, the workhorse landed just in time to have her legs knocked out from under her by a sweeping maneuver. "Fighting is more than kicks and bites." As Applejack rose she tried another applebuck kick, but Fury dodged to the side and brought her burning fore hooves down on Applejack's flank with a crack. "Fighting is in the mind, body, and heart. You only have to beat one to win." She once more whirled, her burning tail flashing over the battered football helmet she wore. Old Uncle Applecore saved Applejack's face from being cooked off. "Nightmare Moon taught me that. I thought it fit to share that with you," She said in a parting tone as she turned and started to trot away.

"Nightmare Moon..." Applejack sputtered as she rose on shaky hooves, "Nightmare Moon was a bad apple that deserved getting kicked clear outta Equestria!" Fury froze in place, facing away from Applejack. "Princess Celestia was right ta banish her! Good riddance!"

"Nice attack," Fury replied softly. Then she whirled, rearing up, and brought her hooves slamming straight down. The ground beneath them exploded, but a line of explosions roared one after the other straight towards Applejack.

"Aw horseapples..." she groaned and turned, jumping aside at the last minute as the line of explosions roared past her and blew a tree to splinters. She looked back at Nightmare Fury, rearing once again. I can't buck something blowing up, but I can keep away if I can get her out in the open! She turned and fled down a line through the orchard. This time, Fury pursued.

\* \* \*

*The Everfree Forest? More like Everfree Graveyard.* Black, gray, and brown streaks cut around scattered patches of forest that withstood the fires as Nightmare Screamer flew overhead. Smoke rose from hundreds of hotspots. Fury sure knew how to make a mess. "Honestly, I can't remember why we bothered using her in the first place. She was always a loose cannon."

Nightmare Whisper laughed softly in her ear. "Force and passion are always useful. Particularly when coupled and stripped of sense. Now keep your eyes open. It should be somewhere beneath you."

Indeed, Screamer could see the trail cutting through the burned trees and mud. The glint of glass met her eye and she dove, pulled short, and stuck the landing. Of course there was nopony around to see; that certainly soured her mood. The tree had once been hollowed out into a home, but the top half had snapped off and fallen back, creating a blackened ring filled with pulpy ash. Colored glass streaked the sides and lay in oddly colorful plotches around the ruined home. Blackened masks leered out of the debris. "Creepy. How did you even know it's here?"

"The occupant was kind enough to tell me all about it in passing. It's amazing how much some ponies will talk when they're lonely. I'm sure you can relate." Nightmare

Screamer grit her teeth, wishing for the millionth time she could kick a voice. Hard. "You'd best hope you can find it. I'd hate to send you all the way to her homeland. That'd be quite a flight, even for you." Nightmare Whispers said.

"Maybe I could, but what makes you think I'd come back?!" Nightmare Screamer snapped.

That smug sureness didn't waver, "The same reason why you're there now. You *a/ways* come back, Screamer. Now do be a good girl and stop sulking. It'll be in a pouch or jar in the root cellar. She wouldn't keep it where something could happen to it." Nightmare Screamer kicked the debris aside as she searched, imagining each ugly lump to be Whisper's face. Underneath the overturned cauldron she discovered the trap door.

The root cellar reeked of smoke, but the piles of herbs and roots were intact. Dozens of jars lay in carefully ordered rows. "Now what? I can't tell one weed from another. This is a dirt pony thing."

"It won't be obvious. Look for something hidden."

"Right." Screamer didn't care for slow and subtle when she could get stuff done now. She smirked as she set herself and let the power flow through her. Her storm blue mane and tail crackled and snapped with yellow bolts. Lightning lanced out from her, pulverizing the shelves as lightning crackled and popped over every inch of the root cellar.

A crackling length of lightning touched the wall behind a shelf and popped a small hole. Screamer cut the light show, panting and aching. It hurt, oh pony did it hurt, but using her power was just so cool! "Voila." She said as she widened the hole with her hoof. Within were a few clay pots, a pouch, and a few carefully sealed rolls of parchment.

"Yes, Fury would be proud." Then there was a pause. "Yes. Yes! Oh I could kiss her filthy striped hide for this treasure." Screamer gave a shutter and shook her head as Nightmare Whispers grew excited. "There! That leather pouch. That's it! And that's not all," another soft laugh in her ears. "Why Zecora, what are you doing holding on to *these* herbs? Oh yes, quite delicious! Take that second jar to the left."

"Why, what is it?" Screamer stared at the strange purple leaves with little gemstone sparkles.

"A *very* special herb, cultivated by earth ponies centuries ago, to... heh... deal with magical pests." Whispers evidently found it quite amusing, "I thought it extinct long ago. I can only wonder where she found some."

"Who knows how dirt ponies find their weeds?" Screamer snorted, "Oh, well any grief I can give horn heads is something I can handle." She picked it up with her mouth and tucked it under a wing.

"Good. Destroy the rest. I have things to deal with here."

Screamer hesitated, never really sure when Whispers was 'gone'. "I think I'll just keep these for myself..." She commented, ears twitching. "Geeze, Nightmare Whispers is such an annoying, whiny, coward of a pony..." Another pause and she smirked, looking in the hidden space. "So these are valuable but you want me to destroy them? Then I guess it can't hurt to hold on to them. Just in case." She took the other three jars and tucked them under her wings as well. The she backed away and aimed a thunderous rear kick that pulverized the alcove. Once outside, she found some smoldering bits of wood and kicked them down into the cellar. It

wasn't long before the herbs began to crackle and burn quite nicely.

"Just you wait, Whispers. When I find everything that you're hiding, you'll be running errands for me." Screamer promised to herself as she transferred the jars and pouch to her tail and flew away into the unmonitored sky.

\* \* \*

"Granny Smith always warned me my yap would get me in trouble! Didn't think it'd be with a pony on fire!" Applejack shouted as she glanced behind her at Fury. The pursing pony trailed flames like blazing pegasus wings as she raced along a row parallel to Applejack's. Every second Fury pulled closer and closer, her eyes solid panes of yellow flame under red glowing armor. Applejack just clenched her eyes shut. *Faster! Faster! More speed! Imagine its Rainbow Dash at the Running of the Leaves.*

She peeked to her left and stared right into Fury's crackling eye as they raced neck and neck. Looks like she's picked how she's gonna try and beat me. Fury's tail lashed, lobbing flame that licked at Applejacks boots and tail.

Suddenly they reached the end of the row and the two ponies launched into the air side by side. The moment seemed to extend as they arched downwards into the vegetable garden in front of the barn. Hooves touched earth and Fury slammed sideways into Applejack. The contact was brief before Applejack staggered, but the orange pony felt the heat through her almost dry coveralls. Rolling through cabbages and carrots, Applejack came to rest in a heap and gave her head a vigorous shake.

Fury raced past, circling around for a charge. Applejack looked around frantically, and then spotted a full rain barrel besides the barn. If she made it through this, she'd kiss Rainbow Dash! She raced to the barrel and pulled it forward, drenching herself. As the water fanned out behind her, Fury leapt aside and launched another barrage of flame from her flaming tail. "Time ta get dirty!" Applejack shouted, lunging forward and ducking underneath Fury. She lifted with her back and then bucked Fury over her haunches and into the muddy puddle. "That's for the Everfree Forest!" And Applejack launched herself on Fury's back, rolling her in the muck in a terrific hiss of steam. "And that's for Fluttershy!"

A hoof covered in steaming mud shot up, nearly taking the helmet off her head, but Applejack found herself grinning. Now this was a fight she could get into! Wrestling, backyard style! Without her flames, Applejack had a chance to finish this once and for all! Applejack got her rolled over and went for the pin! Big Macintosh and the other Apples were coming out of trees with more buckets of water. If they could just keep her from getting away...

Then Fury kicked up with all four hooves at once, heaving Applejack off of her. Coated in muck, she reared up and brought her front hooves down on the helmet. There might not have been an explosion, but the force cracked the old helmet and sent the yard spinning around Applejack. She recovered in time to spot a second leap by fury and with a cry Applejack bucked Fury clear through the wall of the barn!

"Ha! Ain't so hot without your fire, are ya?" Applejack yelled into the hole. Then she frowned as she heard the growing sound of hooves. With a tremendous crash, Fury rammed the side of the barn and sent half of it collapsing on Applejack. The orange pony pulled

herself free with a groan, "That's the first time I've been hit by the side of a barn..." She mumbled as she staggered. Fury moved in, positioning herself for another kick.

But the Apple family had other plans. Yelling, whooping, and hollering they tackled Fury en masse. Some had the sense to try and soak her, but in a chaotic melee they simply mobbed her and each other in their eagerness to finish the fight once and for all. When Applejack pulled her head together she stared at the enormous heap of ponies in the middle of a mud puddle and busted out laughing. Her cousins followed suit.

Then Braeburn, at the base of the heap, suddenly yelped. "Ah... hot... hot hot hot hot... Tarnation! My apples are burnin!" The mass gave a great surge and ponies went tumbling away in all directions. Standing in the middle of the ring of equine was Fury. The mud baked into clay, cracked and crumbled and let sullen red light gleam out.

"Enough!" Fury shouted and reared. White fire blazed to life, and she slammed her hooves down with an enormous explosion that send Applejack's kin flying, along with a good part of the vegetable garden. Fire seemed to spray off her again in a dazzling flares and arcs as she slammed her hooves again and again in a complete rampage! One shockwave blasted away the remainder of the barn. Another sent the windmill aloft like a rocket towards Ponyville.

Applejack stared at the fire at the heart of the destruction and narrowed her eyes. "You said it." She raced over and yelled as loud as she could over the explosions, "Hey Hot Head! Me and my friends are personal friends o the Princess!"

Fury paused to fix Applejack with her baleful gaze and stomped, sending an even larger blastwave ripping along the ground. Applejack jumped aside at the last minute, letting the explosion blast out the supports holding up the Apple Acres water tower. With a great crack, the massive container tilted and crashed to earth, sweeping everything before it in a deluge of water.

When the flood abated, it had pushed Fury all the way to the entry gate of the farm. Applejack trotted through the muck towards the prone shape under the arch. The blazing mane was gone, and in its place was a mane of red, orange, and yellow. Coughing water, Fury looked at her with normal bright red pony eyes. "You and your friends... you know Princess Celestia? Personally?"

"That's what I said. Shoot, my friend Twilight Sparkle's the Princess' favorite magic student. Corresponds every night it seems." Applejack frowned as she saw Fury rise to her hooves. "Awww, can't ya figger out when yer beat?"

Fury just closed her eyes as she smiled, "I'm quite bad at that, I admit." She didn't look beat at all. In fact, she looked poised to do something.

"Well let me help you-" but as Applejack went for the finishing blow Fury darted to the side and spun, delivering her own applebuck upside the orange pony's head. Applejack staggered back, but Fury didn't relent. Kicks. Bites. Shoves and slams. Fury built one attack upon the next. Applejack tried to protect her head and received kicks to the gut. She covered her middle, and was hit from the side. Again and again she tried to lunge and wrestle Fury to the ground again, but the black nightmare refused to let her close.

And with each blow, the Nightmare grew warmer and warmer. Applejack tried to set herself up for a kick, but Fury swept her hooves out from under her. Finally Fury reared her back legs up and landed both hooves against Applejack's side. Something inside her resisted

and then snapped. Pain erupted all along her side and it was all she could do to keep from screaming.

Stepping away from a battered Applejack, Fury closed her eyes and with a soft fwoosh, relit herself. The water covering her hide dried almost immediately. "How'd you..." Applejack muttered as her body ached and threatened to give out. The pain in her side was so intense that she doubted she could so much as manage a nudge. "How'd you do that? You was beat..."

"I fight, Applejack. I fought for years. It's all that I'm good for." Fury replied as she looked down at Applejack, breathing hard as her body shimmered in the heat. "It'd take a lot more water than that to take me out."

"Fight ain't over." Applejack said as she drew in her breath. The spear of pain disagreed.

"Ours is," Fury replied simply. "And congratulations, you won."

"I... what?" Applejack shook her aching head again. "Don't mess with me!"

"Look." Fury pointed with her hoof, and Applejack hesitated before glancing behind her. The barn was a blazing heap of timber. Half the windows of the farm house were smashed and there were holes in the roof. The windmill and water tower were both gone and there was a muddy pond where the vegetable garden once stood. And the trees...

The trees stood. Row upon row of greenery decorated with their red, gold, and green bounty. Here and there she could see smoke and blackened limbs, but the apple trees of apple acres stood proudly around the family that had fought for it.

"That is what you were fighting for, wasn't it?" Fury asked softly as her flames crackled solemnly.

Applejack couldn't speak; she simply nodded. The sight so beautiful it brought tears to her emerald eyes.

"Nice job," Fury said as she turned towards Ponyville.

The wonderful feeling vanished like a popped balloon. "Wait!" She said as she limped after Fury. "I can't let you go to Ponyville."

Fury stopped and just looked at her with an annoyed expression before shook her head. "You're Apple Bloom's sister, aren't you?"

"Buh... huh?" Now Applejack was completely befuddled. "Yeah, I am. Applejack. Why'd you ask?"

"I see where she gets it. She kept trying to stop me too." Fury took a deep breath and then looked evenly at her, "I'll tell you the same thing I told her. I have a grudge to settle with the Princess. If I have to burn down Ponyville, so be it. So long as it draws out Princess Celestia." She looked evenly at Applejack, "But, if your friend... this Twilight Sparkle... wants to face me in her place then so be it. Maybe she can stop me once and for all." Her eyes suddenly blazed with flame as she stomped one hoof. "And maybe, if I kill another of the Princess' favorites, she'll face me."

Applejack's jaw dropped. "You... I..." But Fury suddenly hugged herself and her mouth went wide. Flames started to pour from the blue white flaming mushroom cloud that was her Cutie Mark.

"Otherwise I'll burn Ponyville to ash right here and now!" She suddenly

screamed, a swirling bonfire now completely engulfing Fury. "I am sick and tired of waiting! I am tired of holding back! I want to burn! Burn everyone and everything! I want my revenge and I want it now! Nightmare Moon deserves no less! The Princess deserves no less!" She reared in the flame, and for a moment Applejack had an image of those hooves dropping and an explosion a thousand times greater than any before burning her, Apple Acres, and Ponyville to ash.

The flaming corona died and Fury sat in a bubbling pool of molten rock, hugging herself, teeth gritted in agony. Fury seemed to be glowing with a terrible internal fire as her cutie mark blazed. She took a few shallow breaths as she shook. "This has to end." Fury gasped, eyes clenched tight. Shaking, she opened one eye to look at her in pain, "You have till noon. She faces me before the bridge."

"I'll... I'll tell her," Applejack said. What else could she say to a pony in obvious agony before her?

Applejack limped a few feet away. "Applejack," the nightmare called from behind her. She looked back at Fury. That same expression she'd worn at the start of their fight. "I enjoyed our battle. You're a heck of a fighter."

Applejack's legs ached, her eye was swollen, work duds a ruin, and her entire body felt as if it'd been drug clear to Appleloosa and back. Still she smiled and nodded, "Yeah. You too."

\* \* \*

"It's a mistake. That's what it is. A mistake," Twilight Sparkle said in a high strung voice as she paced back and forth with as much haste as the manacles allowed. "Princess Celestia probably told that idiotic Captain Notbright to protect me and somehow he thought she meant arrest me. That's it. Gotta be."

Spike just sat along with the Cutie Mark Crusaders in matching chains. Sweetie Belle seemed to be trying to conjure a light, let out an 'ow' with a wince, and repeated. Scootaloo did her best to try and chew through magic manacles. Apple Bloom just sulked. Spike breathed flame on one scroll and watched it burn normally before tossing it into the fireplace. No messages that way. "Unless you can magic a message to the Princess, it's no use Twilight. So could you sit down?" Spike asked.

"Sit down? Sit down! Spike, right this minute Apple Acres could-" Spike reached out and grabbed Twilight Sparkle by the muzzle. The purple dragon glared into her eyes a moment then looked over at Apple Bloom. The filly gave them one long look and sighed softly, looking away. Twilight's head drooped as Spike released her, "Right. Right. Sit down and wait. Good idea."

Just then the door to the library opened, admitting a stern aged unicorn. Her sides were a soft sky blue with a darker midnight blue mane, her eyes hard like sapphires. On her flank were two crossed wands trailing sparkles. She walked slowly into the library with a haughty look of contempt that included everything and everypony inside it. "I am Lady Dignity, Chancellor to Princess Celestia."

The unicorn oozed so much protocol that Twilight stood and cleared her throat.

“And I-“

“Yes, I know who you are: Princess Celestia’s most *faithful* student. Twilight Sparkle. The protégé. And an incalculable, shameful worry for your mentor!” she said in perfectly clipped tones. Twilight Sparkle felt as if her stomach had fallen out.

“Woah... ah... oof... AH!” came a cry from behind Dignity. The unicorn stared ahead with a suffering look as an earth pony staggered in with a stack of books on her back. Her body and mane were an odd milky white that had a strange translucency. Much of her body was covered in a white dress. Watery blue eyes blinked in confusion through thick glasses as she stared around in approval. “Oh very nice. You know, Dignity, the libraries of Canterlot really lack this level of charm.”

“Honesty, dear,” Dignity said primly, “I am administering a reprimand!”

“You had her arrested just to be lectured by *you*? I thought the Princess banned torture,” the odd white mare said as she shrugged the heavy books off. Scootaloo snorted, drawing both their gazes. Honesty took one look at the three and their chains and then arched a brow at Dignity. “Really? Chaining young, Dignity?”

The blue unicorn’s cheeks flushed, “That was not in my instructions.” As everypony looked on the unicorn gave a toss of her mane, “Fine. In the interests of expediency,” Dignity swung her horn and the chains on the girls and spike vanished in a flash. “Twilight Sparkle, the Princess asked you be detained so she could speak with you personally.”

Twilight Sparkle gasped, “No! If Fury learns she’s here she could explode!”

Dignity groaned softly, looking at her as if she were a dunce, “We are quite aware of that. Thank you. However, it is not Princess Celestia that wished to address you.”

Another pony stepped in the library. She looked a little older than Twilight recalled, with her dark purple flank and softly lighter blue mane. The moon rose on her flank like it did every night in the sky. Princess Luna shuffled back and forth on her hooves and gave a scared ghost of a smile, “Um... Hello Twilight Sparkle. I wanted to talk to you about helping my friend.”