

The sun had just finished rising on another day in Equestria, a day that the creatures of the forest saw as just another day. The sounds of chirping birds in the trees, the sounds of rabbits rustling in the grass, the morning breeze moving through the branches of the trees - to anypony walking the path from Ponyville to Canterlot, life was just as it was the day before.

If, however, somepony decided to turn off the path, to a clearing in the forest that most ponies wouldn't be able to find (unless they knew where it was, of course), then they would happen upon something that most ponies would go their whole life without seeing. Something that most ponies would gladly pay a million bits not to see. A young filly called Starflower had done exactly this. She had come to the clearing as per her usual routine - usually, it was a place of beauty and serenity, a place that would make even the most stressful of ponies as calm as could be. A place to relax, to get away from the hustle and bustle of life within the capital city. And, on any other day, Starflower would have got this desired effect.

This wasn't any other day. This was the day that a young Canterlot filly named Starflower found two dead ponies, in an unnamed clearing, in an unnamed forest, located between the town of Ponyville and the city of Canterlot. It had been a sight that had scared her down to her very soul, a sight that had sent her galloping back to Canterlot, weeping in fear and dread. And it was certainly a sight that would plague her nightmares for years to come.

Royal Guard Captain Graphite knew all of these things about Starflower, because he had spent the last hour talking to her. He had all the sympathy in the world for the poor filly, but even so, talking to the initial discoverer of a dead body was the hardest job in the world. Getting any information from a filly as emotionally drained as her was tricky business - finding the important pieces of information he needed to find between the sobs and the tears and the "they only looked like they were asleep"s.

Dear Celestia, Graphite thought, surveying the scene that Starflower had happened upon. *It's probably a harder job to talk to the finder of the body than it is to talk to the families. Although, seeing this with my own eyes...I can probably forgive Starflower for being a bit hysterical.*

The grey-coated earth stallion had seen more dead bodies than anypony, but that still wasn't that many. With Equestria being the peaceful place it was, and with ponies being made of far sterner stuff than they looked, most deaths in the country were by old age, with just a few requiring actual investigation by the Royal Guard. But as Graphite looked at the situation, he could see why he had been called in. This was an odd sight, to say the least.

The two bodies were quite a distance apart. One lay almost right in the middle of the clearing, while the other was almost at the treeline, where the forest began proper. They were both young, or at least, young compared to Graphite. Old enough to have cutie marks on their flanks, young enough that most bartenders would probably give them a second glance if they tried to buy cider. It was an earth pony who lay in the center of the clearing, one with a light pink coat, and a darker pink mane, a mane that carried a slight wave, as though it had been recently tied back, or styled in such a way and not tended to for a while after. Contradicting what Graphite had heard from Starflower, there was very little blood staining her coat, but he could see quite a sizable bruise marking her stomach, and one of her back legs was clearly broken.

The second body was a blue-coated pegasus, also a filly. Her mane was multi-coloured, like a rainbow. A few years ago, this might've made her easier to identify, but the rainbow mane

style was becoming quite popular in Canterlot, for reasons that Graphite did not, nor cared to know. The rainbow mane, however, was not what drew Graphite's eye.

Compared to the body of the earth pony, this pegasus had clearly taken far more punishment. Graphite guessed that at least three of her legs were broken, and she was sporting far more bruises. It was her wings, however, that showed the true damage. Had the filly been alive, Graphite was certain that she would have never been able to use her wings again - they were twisted and mangled out of shape, the feathers stained with blood. Graphite did not own a pair of wings, but everypony knew that wing injuries were among the most serious and painful injuries anypony could suffer, second only to the loss of a unicorn's horn.

The bodies of the ponies were not the only thing in the clearing, however. It also housed the various bits and pieces of, as far as Graphite could reason, an improvised flying machine. He could see the remnants of a kind of chair, some sort of pedal device that looked more at home on a bicycle, and quite a sizable...well, Graphite wouldn't know what to call it, the closest he could guess was the blades of a windmill. Clearly, though, it had been a machine meant to fly, made of mostly wood, and, bizarrely, candy canes.

Graphite sighed. He knew it was a cliché, but he would be the first one to say that he was getting too old for this. It was nopony's express job to investigate the scenes of such accidents, but out of all of the Royal Guard, it would always be him that was called out. He didn't doubt that his seniority was the reason for that, partly of rank, but mostly of age. However, even with his years of experience, he had never seen something like this.

I'll never understand what these kids get up to these days, he thought, shaking his head. *But one thing I've learned today - my filly ever wants a flying machine, she can forget it.*

He'd got half a picture in his head as to what he thought had happened, but, as usual, he wanted to bounce his ideas off someone first.

"Klondike!" he yelled, his gravelly voice instantly catching the attention of his underling. "Front and center."

Eagerly, the young lieutenant cantered to the Captain's side. "What d'you need, sir?" he said, a wide smile on his face.

Calm down, son, Graphite thought, *there's such a thing as too excitable, especially given what we're here for.*

"You've had a look around, what d'you reckon?" Graphite said, not looking to the lieutenant.

"Well, sir, it's pretty nasty." Klondike replied.

"Well, of *course* it's pretty nasty, Lieutenant. There isn't really a proper word to describe just how nasty this is. To clarify, I was hoping for you to tell me what you think happened here, not what you're gonna go and write in your diary when this day is done."

"I don't actually keep a diary, sir."

Graphite didn't need to say anything to this, knowing that a sideways glare would get the young stallion to start talking sense.

"Er, well, erm...well, I'm not entirely sure, sir. I'd say they fell from quite a height, but seeing as one of them is without wings and one of them is Rainbow Dash, that theory kinda falls apart."

"Rainbow Dash? You know the pegasus' name?"

“Darn right, sir, she’s quite the famous one! You don’t know her? Even my parents know who Rainbow Dash is.”

“Klondike, I have knowledge of the things important to my job, and until this morning, knowledge of the Who’s Who of pegasi was not one of them. So, less about your folks, more about this filly.”

“Well sir,” Klondike said, his face changing to one of admiration for the pony he was about to talk about. “Most recently, she won the Best Young Flyer award up in Cloudsdale, people were touting her to be a new addition to the Wonderbolts. And darn right too, in my opinion. She was fast, she was agile, maybe lacking in grace but, hey, when have the Wonderbolts ever been about grace, right?”

“So, you’re saying there’s no way Rainbow Dash could’ve fallen from such a height because talented flyers like her would never fall?”

“Exactly, sir. No way in Equestria that would happen.”

“Well, Klondike, you’ve made my theory about what happened a bit more plausible.”

“And what theory would that be, sir?”

Graphite smiled. While the job he had was grim, he quite enjoyed presenting his thoughts to his underlings. Partly because they couldn’t disagree with them, but mostly because he enjoyed the admiration it would gain him.

“Well, this debris is clearly from some traditional flying machine, like those ones at the Museum? A few ponies own them, it’s quite a hobby for some. So, Pony A…”

He paused, motioning to the pink pony in the middle of the clearing, and started to pace around the clearing.

“Pony A is taking her’s for a spin, and took into the forest, so as not to bother anypony. Then, Pony B, this Rainbow Dash filly. I would assume, if she is as talented a flyer as you say, that she would need quite a few practice sessions to keep at peak performance. Again, she came out to the forest, so as not to bother anypony. It’d be as simple as five seconds of daydreaming from either of them to cause a collision in the sky. You say Dash was a quick flyer? She comes barrelling along, doesn’t see this…contraption, flies right into it. If she was going at speed she would’ve battered herself quite badly, which you can plainly see has happened. And she almost certainly would’ve taken that machine apart, they aint exactly sturdy. Unconscious pegasus, wingless pony, broken flying machine, all comes crashing down.”

He stopped pacing, glancing back to his lieutenant, gladly seeing the slight look of awe on his face.

“Well, sir, I suppose that could’ve happened. Although I probably would’ve said that’s a bit of a big coincidence, were I not seeing the results of exactly such a thing right in front me.”

Graphite nodded, taking a last look at the bodies before walking back to Klondike.

“I’m sure we can find someone who knows the earth pony,” he said. “This Rainbow Dash’s parents as famous as she is?”

Klondike shrugged. “I don’t know ‘em, better off asking in Cloudsdale for that, I reckon. But that’s not who I’d go to first.”

“Why’s that?”

“‘Cause she’s one of the six who took down Nightmare Moon a few years back. They became firm friends afterwards, I heard. They all live in Ponyville. She’d probably be closer to

them then her parents.”

Klondike’s expression suddenly turned into one of deep concentration.

“Now that I think on it, sir, I think one of those six was a pink earth pony, her name escapes me at the moment. Couldn’t say for certainty if it were her though...but if they were friends, maybe they came here together? Practicing their different types of flying? Certainly takes the “huge coincidence” problem out your theory, sir.”

“See, Klondike? There’s a reason I keep you around. Maybe if you spent a little less time being star-struck by a corpse, you’d get a little more thinking done.”

Graphite sighed again, knowing the situation just got whole lot messier, what with the cadavers belonging to semi-famous ponies.

“Well, either way, Ponyville is our next stop, it seems. The para-medics are on their way, we’ll leave as soon as they...”

Graphite’s sentence was cut short by a high pitched scream from behind him. He turned, and saw that, with the distraction of their conversation, they had failed to notice a butter-yellow pegasus walk into the clearing. He watched her screaming, her basket discarded on the ground in front of her, her eyes frozen in terror.

“Dammit, Klondike, I thought I told you to keep this place off-limits!” Graphite yelled, giving a stern look to the Lieutenant.

“I did, sir! I got all the civilians away an hour ago, she must’ve come out of the forest...”

Graphite’s angry sigh sounded more like a growl to the Lieutenant, who sheepishly looked at his hooves. The captain started towards the pegasus, expecting her to be running away, but instead, she suddenly exploded into a gallop towards the pink earth pony. As he got closer, he heard the weak voice of the pegasus, seeing the tears already staining her face.

“Pinkie.....Pie?”

Well, Graphite thought. That solves one mystery.

* * *

After ten minutes, Fluttershy had stopped crying. She was actually quite surprised at this. She had cried far longer for things far less serious. But now, all she did was sit in silence, in front of Pinkie Pie’s body. A Royal Guard pony had been talking at her for the last few minutes, and, while she was listening to his words, she wasn’t really understanding it. To her, it was incomprehensible.

It’s all a bad dream, she thought. It’s got to be. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash can’t be dead. It’s a mistake. Don’t worry, Fluttershy. You’ll wake up in a minute, and you’ll cry a lot, but that’s better than what’s happening here.

Suddenly, she became more aware of the soldier’s words as he said his next sentence.

“...a tragedy that no-one could’ve prevented, miss. We were just waiting for the medics before we headed to Ponyville to tell you and your other friends, so you can...”

“No.” Fluttershy said, her eyes not turning from Pinkie Pie’s body.

“Sorry, miss?”

“With....I....I mean no disrespect...Captain, is it? But...I think they’d rather hear this news from me...rather than a soldier they don’t know...so, you don’t need to go...that is, if that’s OK with you...” Even in such extreme circumstances, Fluttershy’s timidity was still her winning emotion.

“I completely understand, miss.” Fluttershy heard. “We’ll be waiting here until the medics arrive, you can wait here and...compose yourself until then, if you want...”

“Why...” Fluttershy said, her voice hoarse from her crying. “Why are the medics coming? They’re...they’re dead...aren’t they?”

“Well, it’s only the medics that are allowed to, ah, move the bodies, miss. They’ll be taken to Canterlot, prepared for funerals and things like that...”

“Pre...pared. Funeral...oh...kay...” Fluttershy finally looked up from Pinkie Pie, looking the officer in the eye. “This...isn’t a nightmare...is it. This...is happening...”

She was aware of the captain closing his eyes and somberly nodding his head.

“I’m afraid so, miss. Are you sure you’ll be okay on your own?”

“I’ll...be fine.” Fluttershy said, slowly getting to her hooves. “Thank you...for your help, Captain...”

Fluttershy vaguely sensed the soldier say something in response, before flapping her wings and slowly rising into the sky. She flew towards Ponyville, going neither too fast nor too slow, thinking of nothing in particular. She knew she wasn’t dreaming, but her dazed, numb, slow movements felt like something from a dream.

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Fluttershy wasn’t sure what the next step was, once she’d touched down in Ponyville. Who would she go to first? Would she wait until everyone was together? How exactly would she say it? Was there even a good way to do it?

All of these thoughts suddenly left her, as she looked at the townspies on the streets of Ponyville. She would guess that it was about noon-ish, and ponies filled the streets, hustling and bustling, looking for a place to get lunch, or just chatting amongst each other.

Everything is still going as normal, she thought, bewildered. No pony knows yet but... it’s weird how everything is still just...going. I figured the streets would be deserted, or that there would be a hushed atmosphere. Everything should stop, at least for a little bit.

She knew she had to make a move. Tell one of her friends. Tell *anyone*. But the relative normality of the day contrasted so violently with what she had seen, she had to take a few minutes to process it all. She stood in the street, starting into the middle distance, not focusing on anything.

“Fluttershy?”

She heard her name, but it took a few seconds to register it. Looking towards the sound, she saw the faces of Applebloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle.

“You alright, Fluttershy?” Applebloom asked, looking puzzled. “Why y’all jus’ standin’ in the middle of the street?”

"I'm just..." Fluttershy said, letting her mouth do the work instead of her brain. "I'm looking for...the others..."

Her brain then kicked in for a split second.

"Actually, Applebloom, you couldn't go and fetch Applejack for me, if that's okay? And Sweetie Belle, could you get Rarity? Can you tell them to head to Twilight's place? I need to speak to them." She tried to keep her voice strong, or, at least, as strong as her voice usually was.

"Sure thing, 'Shy. AJ's still at the farm, I reckon." Applebloom said, her wide smile adding to the list of things that Fluttershy didn't quite register.

"You want me to find Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy?" Scootaloo asked, excitedly.

Fluttershy felt a stab of something she had never felt before, and again, let her mouth resume the effort.

"No, Scootaloo, it's alright. I've already...seen her."

"What about Pinkie Pie?"

"I've...seen her as well. You just go with one of your friends, Scootaloo."

She watched Scootaloo's head move from the left to the right, as though the decision of who she would spend the next five minutes with was the most important decision of her life.

"Errrr...I'll go with Applebloom. Free apples from the farm, right?" she said, casting a toothy smile at the earth pony.

"Sorry, Scoot, Applejack said that if I did that again, it's comin' out of mah allowance."

"But Rarity always gives us candy!"

"Then go with Sweetie Belle then, we're meetin' at the clubhouse anyway!"

"But I'm in the mood for apples!"

Fluttershy finally found some feeling in her hooves, and found herself being carried towards Twilight's library. She found this odd, since she wasn't consciously trying to move them, or trying to escape from watch she found, at least at this time, a completely meaningless argument. When she realised she was moving in the direction of Twilight's library, her brain conceded that her hooves were doing the right thing.

It's like I'm being pulled on strings, like a puppet, she thought. That's good, I doubt I would've had the energy to move on my own.

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Twilight Sparkle was running out of things to do.

She'd cleaned the library, she'd tidied her desk, she'd straightened as many wonky books as she'd been able to find. Now, she was working through her "to-read" pile, a pile that always seemed to be three books taller than she last remembered. These were all things that she had planned to do tomorrow, but, as usual, she hadn't planned for Rainbow Dash's lack of punctuality, and felt that she had to fill the time with something at least semi-productive.

Well, with all the cleaning I've done, at least Spike will get a day off. Although, Twilight thought, hearing the dulled snores of the baby dragon from the floor above, I can't quite see

how that differs from his usual status these days.

Twilight was distracted from her thoughts by the sound of a slight tap on her door, and heard it swing open.

“Ah, Rainbow Dash, you’re finally here. Y’know, for one of the fastest ponies in Equestria, you sure do turn up late a lot...” She looked up from her book, and saw that the pegasus at her door wasn’t the pegasus she had first thought.

“Oh, hey Fluttershy. Sorry, I was expecting Dash at some point today. It seemed a bit odd for her to knock rather than crash through my window,” she said, smiling.

“Hi...Twilight. I’m not interrupting you, am I?” Fluttershy said, trying, and failing, to return the smile. Twilight didn’t notice.

“No, no, I’m just trying to fill this gap in my day with some reading. A gap that *should’ve* been filled with Rainbow Dash. Y’know she’s an hour late? Even for Dash, that’s pretty darn late. I’m supposed to be trying out this new spell on her - it’s one I’ve made from scratch, so it could go a bit wrong, but if it works it should make her flying speed even faster than it already is!”

“Twilight...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. We can’t use it for any tournaments or anything. There isn’t an actual official rule against magical help in competitions, but apparently it’s very unsporting. But I’m sure Dash would quite enjoy a boost in speed, just for herself. Well, at least I’d’ve thought she’d enjoy it, but she can’t care all that much if she’s gonna just leave me hanging here...”

“Twilight...”

“...I mean, *seriously*, an hour late! It’s thrown my whole schedule off. I’ve gotta go to Rarity’s to get my dress for Pinkie Pie’s party later, knowing her that’ll probably take the best part of an hour. Weird how Pinkie Pie, of all people, asked us to wear dresses to a party of her’s. Considering it usually ends up in a food fight, it doesn’t sound like the best pl--”

“TWILIGHT!!!!”

Fluttershy’s shrill yell brought Twilight’s rambling to a grinding halt. She looked at the pegasus, shocked that she had raised her voice beyond her usual near-whisper, and saw that Fluttershy herself looked just as shocked at her outburst.

“I’m...I’m sorry Twilight,” Fluttershy apologised, wearing an expression that Twilight couldn’t quite read. “I...shouldn’t have yelled...especially in a library...but you kept mentioning...”

“Fluttershy, is everything alright? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you yell...”

“No...everything is not alright, Twilight.” Fluttershy said, tears forming in her eyes for the second time that day. “But...don’t worry about your schedule...Rainbow Dash isn’t visiting you today...and I very much doubt there will be a party at Pinkie Pie’s tonight...”

“Okay, Shy, you’re freaking me out now, what’s going on?”

There was a pause. Twilight quite like the silence in her library, but this was one silence she wanted to end as soon as possible. She quickly regretted this wish with Fluttershy’s next statement.

“...they’re dead, Twilight. There was an accident in the forest and...they’re both dead.”

The words hung in the air. Somehow, the library had become quieter than silent.

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Applejack and Rarity had entered the library just seconds after Fluttershy had given Twilight the news, forcing her to repeat the horrible fact again. They had reacted as one might expect them to - both began with a disbelieving stare and a disbelieving statement, and while Applejack had managed to hold her tears back, Rarity had been less successful.

Twilight, however, hadn't moved one inch from the place she had first heard Fluttershy's words. She didn't move when she saw the two ponies enter her library. She didn't move when Rarity's tears began, or when Applejack had furiously stamped on the floor. She didn't flinch when Fluttershy re-told exactly what the Royal Guard Captain had told her, even when Fluttershy's wounded brain decided that imparting the grislier details of the two ponies' fates was a good idea. She just stood there, fixed to the spot in the middle of her library, trying to absorb and register all of the horrible things that she was hearing.

She suddenly became aware that the silence had restarted, and looked up to see her three friends looking at her, all wearing different expressions of grief.

I haven't said anything since Fluttershy told me...but what am I supposed to say? she thought, beginning to feel pressured by her friends' stares. *Am I supposed to pull out one sentence that makes everything better? Or just shrug and say "Oh, don't worry, I have a spell that can fix death, just give me a second." Nothing I say can change the fact that Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie are dead, so I think I'll say exactly that. Nothing.*

She stayed silent.

However, the other three ponies were not looking for words of reassurance - although, if they had heard them escape Twilight's mouth, it would have been better than nothing. They were looking for *anything*. The young unicorn had simply stood there for the last ten minutes, in complete silence, her face seemingly devoid of any emotion. Had they walked into her library and saw her like this at any other time, they probably would ask her what she was daydreaming about.

The reason for this distinct lack of emotion, or rather, this distinct lack of any indication that she had heard Fluttershy talk at all, was because her mind had yet to choose what emotion to portray. All the usual responses to bad news were jostling for priority in her brain. Sadness, denial, anger...but there was something else, in the back of Twilight's mind, a feeling she knew all too well, but a feeling which didn't belong in this situation.

It was suspicion.

She'd heard what Fluttershy had said, the whole horrible story of what had happened to her friends, or, at least, the story which the Royal Guard Captain believed to be true. Now that she had been given the time to turn the story over in her head, she couldn't bring herself to believe it. Not as a by-product of grief - she literally could not believe that the supposed series of events that she had been told could lead to the death of the two ponies in question.

If Rainbow Dash had been flying fast enough to mess up her wings as badly as Fluttershy just said, Twilight thought, forgetting the stares of her friends. *Then, even she would make sure she had clear skies. And even then, Pinkie's flying machine isn't exactly sturdy, flying into it would probably cause as much damage as flying through one of my windows, and*

Celestia knows she did that enough times without injury.

Twilight was confused. She knew this was not the way to be thinking in this situation. She knew that the first thought to enter her mind after hearing of the death of her friends shouldn't be of the questionable logistics of their unfortunate end. She knew that simply bursting into tears, falling to her knees, and breaking down right in the middle of the library was a more usual course of action, maybe even a healthier one. She felt the sadness, the crippling feeling of knowing that two of her closest friends were gone, but for some reason, her feelings of suspicion won out. In the battle between the scientific and emotional halves of her mind, the former had been victorious.

Something doesn't add up.

"Fluttershy," she said, her friends flinching at the sudden break in the silence. "Where did they crash?"

"A clearing...off the path between here and Canterlot..." Fluttershy said, confused. "Why does that matter, Twilight?"

"Can you take me there? I need to see this with my own eyes."

Applejack, Rarity, and Fluttershy all looked at Twilight, all with identical expressions - a mixture of sadness and confusion. Twilight had obviously heard what Fluttershy had said, but if she was sad, neither her voice nor face betrayed this emotion. If anything, it sounded like she was gearing up for another crazy adventure.

"I...I'd rather not...go back there..." Fluttershy said, her voice becoming softer with each passing word. "But...there were...guards on the road...so you should be able to find it...or ask them where..."

Twilight nodded, and cantered out the library without another word.

The three ponies left in Twilight's library were left speechless by her quick departure. Without as much as a backwards look, she had left her friends to deal with their own grief, and not shown one bit of guilt in doing so.

"Why would she want to go there?" Rarity said, blinking the last tears out of her eyes. "After what Fluttershy said, I'll probably have trouble walking the road to Canterlot ever again, let alone seeking out the place where...where they..."

"Everypony's got their ways of dealing with bad news, Rarity," Applejack interrupted, saving Rarity from the depressing end of her own sentence. "Some ponies cry, some ponies drink, some ponies don't care at all. But Twilight? She aint any o' them. She's an egghead, above all else, and she aint good at understandin' things she can't see with 'er own eyes."

"...you think we should follow her? She can't be in a good state."

"All ah know, Rarity, is that she heard what we heard, and her reaction was to get the hay out and be on her own. Reckon we should give her that, at least fer a little while. 'Til then...we'd better tell the Mayor wut's happened." She looked over to Fluttershy, seeing her harrowed expression and her blood-shot, tearful eyes.

"Shy, if you don' wanna tell that story again, I don't blame ya. I'll tell the Mayor. Rarity, y'all had better get back to Sweetie Belle, ah know what she's like when she's mindin' your shop."

"Applejack," Rarity said, "My shop could be a smoking crater for all I care, I'm pretty sure it still won't be the worst news I've heard today." She paused, and the slightest of grins crept onto her face, as she clopped her hoof twice on the floor. "Knock on wood."

All three ponies in the library knew that what Rarity said was not particularly funny, but they laughed anyway, knowing that, at moments like this, even the slightest giggle should be taken advantage of.

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Rarity had forgotten that Sweetie Belle had brought Scootaloo to help look after the shop. On any other day, she would just have been doubly worried for the safety of her shop, but now, an already daunting task had become all that much harder.

She had planned to close up shop, and tell Sweetie Belle what had happened. Obviously, she had not intended to go into as much detail as Fluttershy had, but she felt like it was her job as the big sister to tell Sweetie Belle herself, rather than have her hear from the Mayor, or from somepony on the street. She knew that Sweetie Belle hadn't spent all that much time with Pinkie Pie or Rainbow Dash, but she had heard her sister talk about how "Pinkie Pie is really funny" or "Rainbow Dash is really cool" enough to know that the news would almost certainly upset her.

Scootaloo, however, was a different matter entirely. Rainbow Dash was a goddess to her. You only had to spend minutes with her before she'd mention her, her words always filled with pride and admiration. If Sweetie Belle would be upset by the news, then they would probably have to invent a whole new word for what Scootaloo would feel.

I don't have to tell her, Rarity worriedly thought. It might be my job to tell my little sister but it's her parents' job to tell her. But...I can't just tell her to leave. And if I tell Sweetie Belle then she'll hear about it soon enough, and I'd rather she heard it from one of Dash's friends than just by word of mouth.

Her rational reasoning didn't help her worry. Despite the fact that she had walked very slowly to her shop - partly because her legs were still working on autopilot, and partly to prolong what she had to do now - she had reached the entrance of Carousel Boutique. She could hear the girls in there now, talking and laughing. To her despair, she could hear the voices of three - Applebloom had also joined them in looking after the shop.

Oh, now that's not fair. She's got her OWN big sister, it's DEFINITELY not my job to tell her!

She sighed, knowing it would make no difference. Rarity knew that they would almost certainly notice that she'd been crying. They'd ask about it. And she wasn't about to lie to them.

Taking a deep breath, her horn glowed, and she opened the door.

* * *

Applejack sighed. She had told the Mayor the news. While she didn't think that the

Mayor would go as far as to summoning the whole town round a stage and telling them that two of their citizens were dead, she had expected more than just being told to “start telling everypony else”. Applejack had expected a bit more a fuss, especially considering the mini-celebrities they’d become in the last year.

While Applejack had been given this task by the Mayor, she didn’t really want it. But, such was the reputation of pony who’s reliability was, literally, award-winning - people would start relying on you for everything.

After she had left the Town Hall, however, she had decided that, for once, she would be unreliable. She decided that she would give herself a few hours to deal with her own problems, thinking that the loss of two of her closest friends was as good as an excuse as any to get some alone time. She had stopped the first pony she saw on the street, said to them the news, and hoped that it would spread of its own accord.

Ah flaked on the Mayor’s job, and ah’m gonna spend the next few hours on my own. That’s kinda selfish, I spose. But I need to sort mah own problems before I go lookin’ to solve everypony else’s. And the one thing I wanna do now is go home and cry for a bit.

And that’s exactly what Applejack did. She had walked back to Sweet Apple Acres, entered the farmhouse, ascended the stairs to her room, shut the door, laid down on her bed, and instantly burst into tears.

She had been very precise with her “few hours of selfishness”. Almost down to the second, she had spent the last three hours either crying, or attempting to talk through her sobs to Applebloom, Big Mac, and Granny Smith, all who had come up to her room at various points, having heard the news. They’d all tried to help in different ways - Applebloom had simply joined Applejack in bursting into tears, Big Mac had talked about how unfair it was that such a horrible accident had taken their lives, and Granny Smith would keep saying about how they “had gone to a better place.”

This hadn’t helped Applejack. She didn’t want them to go to a better place. She wanted them here, in this place, in this town, planning another party or expedition, or adventure. She wanted to hear Dash mouthing off about how she would handle the death of a friend so much better than her. She wanted Pinkie Pie to burst in, singing a random song to make it all better. She didn’t want her friends to be “in a better place” because, to her, compared to any place where all six of them were together, there was no better place.

So, for almost exactly three hours, Applejack was “selfish”. She wept for her friends, for the jokes and songs she would never hear, for the aerial acrobatics she would never see, and for the near-perfect life she had once had, which she knew she would never have again.

* * *

Of course, after being “selfish”, Applejack’s mind turned back to her friends once again. Despite the fact that Fluttershy had seen the bodies of her friends with her own eyes, and despite the fact that Rarity had had the job of telling three fillies not even old enough to know

what death really means, it was Twilight Sparkle that Applejack worried about most.

She aint even shown one hint of sadness, Applejack thought, as she walked down the street towards Twilight's library. An' that means she either truly doesn't care, or she's bottlin' everythin' up. I don' believe the first thing fer one second, and the other thing aint no good either. It's been a few hours, maybe it's finally hit her? Maybe I'll walk in the library and she'll be upstairs, crying, jus' like I was. She sighed.

I wish nuthin' bad on her, but that's the best thing she could be doin' right now, I reckon.

She reached the door to the library and knocked twice, hearing a voice from behind the door as she did.

"It's open."

She pushed the door open with her head, and looked up to see Spike sitting at Twilight's desk. Applejack instantly knew that Spike had heard the news, partly from the look on Spike's face, and his slumped posture, but mostly from the fact that the ground floor of Twilight's library had a telltale sign of trouble and woe - the smell.

"Spike...is that brandy?" Applejack said, not bothering to hide the surprise in her voice.

"Hi, Applejack." Spike replied, not looking up from the desk. "And yeah, it is. Tried it at one of Pinkie's parties once, figured today would be as good a day as any to have some more, yeah?"

"Spike, surely y'all aint old enough for that stuff, you're a *baby* dragon!"

"Dragon years work slightly differently...oh, wait, you won't fall for that excuse. Well, let's just say, if you're good enough to find Twilight's secret, magically-hidden bottle of brandy, then you're probably old enough to drink it. Want some? Pretty sure she swiped it from Celestia, although she'd never admit that..."

"Ah, no thanks, Spike, brandy...brandy aint really my drink."

"Cider, right? Wait, wait, let me tell you how I guessed that..."

"Because I work on an apple farm and have the word "apple" in mah name?"

"...hmm, well that's a better reason than what I had..."

Applejack sighed. Whether dragon years were different or not, she could clearly see that Spike was quite drunk. She played with the idea of taking the bottle from him, but decided against it.

"Well...go easy on that stuff, Spike. I dunno how dragon years work, but I do know that y'all are about an inch shorter than that bottle, so that kinda tells me how much drink you can take."

Spike laughed. "Ah, don't worry 'bout me, AJ. Dragon years might not work differently, but dragon livers sure do. I guess you're here looking for Twilight?"

"Yeah, she upstairs?"

"Nope. Haven't seen her all day, I only woke up an hour ago."

"Seriously? Then, who told you...?"

"Spits did, of all people. Let's just say, he wasn't exactly gentle with the news."

"Ah, Spike, ah'm so sorry, the Mayor told me to tell everypony, but I got a bit...distracted..."

"Don't worry about it. Bad news is bad news, it doesn't matter who you hear it from. How long's Twilight been gone?"

“Three, maybe four hours? She was talking about...”

“Let me guess,” Spike interrupted, finally looking up from the desk at Applejack. “She barely reacted, stayed silent for a bit, made up an excuse and ran out the door as soon as she could?”

“...that’s exactly wut happened. How did you...?”

Spike sighed. “It’s how she deals with big things like this. You know her. Science mind. She takes a couple of hours to...*study* the news in her mind, I suppose. By herself. Yeah, I know, it’s weird,” he said, noticing Applejack’s puzzled expression. “But it works for her. I’d bet good money that she’ll be the first one out of everyone to get over this. Like with her mother. Only took her two days and then it was like nothing had happened...”

“...her mother? Her mother is dead?”

Spike’s eyes widened, and he quickly threw his hands over his mouth, before realising that the words had already escaped. Jumping from his chair, ran over to the pony, and fell to his knees, clasping his hands together. Applejack would’ve thought that he was doing this for mock dramatic effect, had he not seen the tremendous amount of worry in his eyes.

“Applejack, you *cannot* tell her I told you that. She swore me to secrecy, she said she didn’t want any of you worrying about her...”

“When...when?” Applejack asked.

“...about a month ago. Please, Applejack, promise me you won’t say anything about it. I know I said she got over it in two days, but trust me, you don’t wanna ask about those two days.”

“Is that what you were doing when you and her went to Canterlot? She wasn’t jus’ goin’ to see the Princess like she said?”

“Applejack, *promise me*.”

Applejack looked at Spike’s face. She had never seen the dragon look so worried - until today, she probably would’ve questioned whether the usually fun-loving dragon was even capable of worry at all, but the look on his face was bordering on fear. Clearly, he had messed up to an extent that Applejack couldn’t explain.

“I promise, Spike. You were drunk, you weren’t thinkin’ right. This conversation never happened.” Applejack said, her worry for Twilight only growing.

Spike breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Applejack. I’m sorry we lied...but I’m sure Twilight had her reasons, even if I didn’t quite understand them all.”

Applejack shrugged. “It’s none o’ mah business, Spike. She don’t wanna talk about her family problems, I aint gonna force her.” She sighed. “I’m gonna go find her, I know where she’s gone. Family matter may be none of mah business, but when two of her friends...when two of *our* friends have died? Then it sure as hay is mah business.”

Spike nodded. “I’d come with, but...ah...Twilight would probably be a bit mad if she saw me drunk. I’ll make sure to sober up before you get back.”

“Spike, ah’m pretty sure that’ll be the least of her problems.”

* * *

“Er...Miss Sparkle, are you sure you’re feeling alright? You’ve been looking at the debris for hours now...”

“For the third time, Mr Klondike, I appreciate your concern.” Twilight said, not looking at the young lieutenant. “And again, for the third time, don’t worry, I’m perfectly alright. I’m just thinking.”

“...okay, well, I’ll be...over there...if you need anything.”

Twilight would always say that she had better than average manners, but given the circumstance of the day, she didn’t feel too bad about her overly sharp response to Klondike’s concerns. She had figured that, given the obvious look of awe on the lieutenant’s face when she introduced herself as Twilight Sparkle, it would be easy to get him to grant access to what was, now, just a clearing full of wreckage. Getting him to leave Twilight alone for more than an hour, however, wasn’t quite as easy.

Admittedly, it must look weird to him, Twilight thought, looking around the clearing for what must’ve been the hundredth time. All he sees is me standing here and looking. But I’m doing more than that. I’m thinking. And you can pretty much do that anywhere.

The bodies of her friends had long been moved, Klondike had told her, and at first she was annoyed, as though the clearing without the bodies would be like a jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece, but she realised it was probably better this way, at least for her - seeing the bodies of her friends would almost certainly distract her, would almost certainly remind her of the gravity of the situation she found herself in. Klondike had told her where the bodies lay, which was the next best thing, but this had just served to make Twilight even more suspicious of the supposed story of their death. In fact, she’d thought of quite a few things that didn’t quite hold up.

Her problem lay in the fact that there was no-one to bounce her ideas off. She couldn’t talk to Klondike or any of the other guards - she had already heard the high regard that their Captain, Graphite, held with his subordinates, and knew that the guards wouldn’t accept any story that conflicted with his. And she wasn’t sure if her friends would want to hear anything about it, especially not this soon after the “accident”.

Everything I’m thinking sounds right to me...but considering two of my friends have died, I’ve no idea if my ideas are solid or just grief-stricken paranoia. I need to ask somepony else...

“Er, Miss Sparkle? Your friend Applejack is here, she says she’s looking for you?”

Twilight turned to Klondike’s voice, and saw Applejack standing next to him. She smiled at her, beckoning her over.

“Thanks, Klondike, don’t worry, I’ll fill her in, you go back to your post.”

“Sure thing, Miss,” Klondike replied, turning and trotting back to his spot in the clearing.

There was a second of silence before either pony spoke.

“It’s good you’re here, Applejack. I needed to talk to somepony about this.” Twilight said, not looking away from the wreckage.

“Sure thing, Twilight, but...there aint nothin’ much to talk about here. Why did y’all rush off before? And why come here?”

Twilight sighed. “I needed to see.” she said, still not looking at Applejack. “When

Fluttershy was telling the story that Graphite had given her, I just couldn't believe it."

"Well, ah couldn't believe it either, Twi'. You hear a story like that, an' the last thing you wanna do is believe it..."

"No, I don't mean it like that." Twilight said, turning to face her friend. "I *literally* could not believe it. I was listening to the story, and so many things didn't add up."

"Didn't add up? Like what?"

"Well, they were found just after sunrise," Twilight said, starting to walk slowly around the debris. "Which probably means that they...fell...sometime in the night, or in the early hours of the morning, before the sun was even up. Does that not seem odd? Rainbow Dash might be...might've been a risk-taking pony, but there's no way she'd be out flying at night. And even then, she was darn lazy a lot of the time, so it'd be weird of her to be out here at night when she could've been sleeping. Pinkie Pie too, why would she take her flying machine out for a spin in the dead of night?"

Applejack opened her mouth, wanting to reply, but she could see that Twilight had more to say.

"Then there's the fact that, well, Rainbow Dash isn't one to just fall out of the sky. Nor is she one to let Pinkie fall without saving her."

"Didn't Fluttershy say that she crashed into the flying machine? And she messed 'er wings up or sumthin'?"

"Yeah...but that doesn't really make sense either. Pegasus wings are made of strong stuff, and Pinkie's machine wasn't very sturdy. If she'd've been flying fast enough to wreck her wings as bad as Fluttershy said it had, she would've just gone straight through it, knowing her, she probably wouldn't have even noticed it! Plus, it's just so unlikely. Even if we had flat out asked her to go at full speed into Pinkie's machine, it'd probably take her a few tries. That flying machine in the whole of the skies? It'd be like trying to hit a fly on a barn door!"

"I reckon that's exactly what a *freak accident* is, Twi'. And even if you're right about the wings, maybe Dash hit her head when she crashed, knocked herself out cold or sumthin..."

"I thought that too, but didn't Fluttershy say something about Dash's legs being broken? If her wings didn't break on impact with the machine, then how were both her legs *and* her wings broken by the time she reached the ground? She can't've landed on her hooves *and* her back at the same time!"

Applejack had thought, at first, that Twilight's ramblings were just a means to an end, that she was just inventing a mystery to distract herself from her grief, but the more she listened, the more she started to see Twilight's way - a lot of things about this were weird, but none of it was exactly compelling evidence.

She sighed. "Well, Twi', let's say you're right." she said, deciding to humour Twilight, at least for now. "Let's say there's no way Rainbow crashed into Pinkie, and even if she did, let's say that she wouldn't've injured herself badly enough to not be able to save herself at least. What are you trying to get at?"

Twilight stayed silent for a few second before answering.

"I think the only way Rainbow Dash could fall out of the sky...is if somepony broke her wings beforehand."

"*What?* Why would anypony want to do that?"

"I don't know, Applejack. My theory is that Dash was hurt, Pinkie Pie picked her up with her machine, and the machine crashed in some other way. Why Dash was hurt, why Pinkie Pie was there at all, how the machine crashed, why either them were out in the dead of night at all, I don't know. But I honestly believe that it wasn't how Graphite said."

"Wait, Twi', why did you say that somepony broke her wings? That aint a sure thing. It could still be an accident. Two accidents, even. Rainbow Dash accidentally crashed and messed up her wings, Pinkie Pie accidentally crashed her machine trying to take her to get help..."

"That makes sense, Applejack, and that's what I was thinking as well. But...I think they were running from someone."

"How's that?"

"Well, Klondike told me that Pinkie's body was right with the wreckage, but that Dash's body was over there..." She turned, nodding towards the forest. "Almost at the trees. If it happened how I think it did, then they would've just dropped straight down, so why are they so far apart?" Twilight paused again, bracing herself for her next sentence, since it was one she didn't like thinking about.

"I think...I think Dash survived the fall. I think she survived, and tried to get into the forest before she...well, you know. And the only reason I can think of for trying to move with two broken wings and three broken legs is that you're trying to get away from something that's chasing you."

Twilight turned to her friend, seeing the worried expression on her face.

"Don't be worried, AJ, if something was chasing them, it's long gone now. These guards have been here longer than I have."

"It's not that, Twi'." Applejack said, breaking away from Twilight's gaze. "It jus' that...you're talking about where are friends bodies were...and Dash dragging her mangled body away from sumthin' chasin' her...you're talking about it like it's nuthin'...."

Twilight frowned, realising that the things that she had been saying can't have been nice to hear. "I'm sorry, Applejack," she said, trying to regain her eye contact with her friend. "I've been playing with these ideas for the last few hours, so I'm used to it now but...it's not nothing to me. I don't find it pleasant to talk about our friends like this, but if - and I know, it is a big if - if this wasn't an accident, if something else is responsible for this...then it's something I need to push past. If I'm going to figure this out, that is."

Applejack sighed, and decided to say what she'd been thinking this entire time.

"But Twilight...maybe there aint nuthin' to figure out. Maybe...you jus' want sumthin' to distract yourself from what's happened here."

"...I thought that too, Applejack. And you're right, maybe there isn't anything to figure out. Maybe it's just as Graphite said, just an accident. But until I turn that "maybe" into a "definitely", I'm not gonna be able to get it out of my head." She turned back to the wreckage, and sighed.

"And there's only one way I can think of to do that." she said.

"What?" Applejack asked.

"...I need to see the bodies."

