

## Applejack

The storm drummed down like it was beating to get through and wash the stain away. One pony with two extra holes, and a gleaming metal testament to corruption in a sticky pool of rebellion. Applejack pulled her hat further down her head and walked into the downpour. The evidence was meaningless. The shooter was just the extension of the gun, and she knew who really pulled the trigger. Rain wouldn't be the only thing to fall tonight.

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A nightclub, brightly lit sign screaming a warning in tongues to all the deaf souls lined up outside, cowering under an awning. The real answers were around back, through a nondescript doorway declaring "Do Not Enter." Applejack took the invitation.

"Hello, Rarity."

The unicorn in petticoat and silk black stockings before her looked up from applying maquillage, meeting her eyes through the mirror. A small smile tripped across her lips, and she turned slowly about in her seat. Dames.

"Applejack," she cooed, voice full of smoke and honey. "Here for business, or..."

"Business." She didn't let her eyes travel down, down, down as she spoke. "Union boss bought it in the manufacturing district."

The showgirl dropped her ploy like a penniless John, returning to her preparations with a sigh. "Yeah? And what does that have to do with me?"

"Well, I figure I like your man for it."

A gunshot of laughter. "You're all wet, AJ. Caramel may be dumb, but he's nobody's fool. He wouldn't be the one to pull the trigger."

"Then I suppose it would be in his best interest if you told me where I could find him."

Rarity tossed her head like she wasn't a glorified stripper for a few seconds, and Applejack bit her tongue. "Fine. He'll be at The Horse Shoe. It's a dive across town. Though I'm sure *you* already knew that."

The earth pony ignored the jab, which cut closer than she'd care to admit, and removed a little of the edge from her voice. "Thanks Rare. Break a leg."

She just snorted as Applejack started to leave.

"AJ, wait." When she glanced back, the showgirl had left, and something that had been gone for a long time stared at her from behind too much rouge. "Do you... ever think we could've been different?"

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The Horse Shoe, a holdover from the age of speakeasies. A short dive and a long, choking drown. It made her thirsty. Her throat felt empty, aching for the burn. She walked in and instantly spotted Caramel in the back.

He swore as she sat down across the booth, apple cider in hoof. "Whassa matter, Caramel? Y'ain't happy ta see me?"

"Drop it, Applejack. That was a long time ago." He sniffed, and scratched his cheek idly. "So, you been to see Rarity?"

"I'm supposed to be askin' the questions here."

"It wasn't a question."

Like vinegar in her mouth. She washed the feeling down with a draught of cider and regret. Pleasantries were over, then. Routines and motions, now.

"Did you do it?"

Caramel gave a wry chuckle. "Do what? You know my memory was never quite up to snuff."

"Dammit, Caramel, Blues used to be your friend. Now he's dead in a warehouse."

"Come on, AJ. We both know who it really was. Why are you here?"

She set the empty bottle down, tracing the logo on the label. "I came to warn ya, Caramel." Her eyes cut through him, skewering him in place. "Get outta town. I'm goin' ta the top o' the list. It's gonna get bad with Snips an' Snails outta the picture, an' I don't want ya caught in the

middle.”

For several long moments his gaze was focused on a knot in the wooden table. “Do you remember-”

“No, Caramel.” She stood. “That was a long time ago.”

After Applejack had walked out the door, Caramel looked down at the cider bottle she had been nursing. The top of the logo proudly proclaimed, in rustic lettering, *Sweet Apple Acres*.

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Applejack watched the small house from her car, waiting. She had already sent away the filly who had showed up. Apparently, Snips liked them young, and he wouldn't want anyone else to know that, so Snails would probably be his only guard. The tempest continued to rage like it was trying to drown the city, but Applejack just waited for the trap to spring. The heft of the holster around her shoulders felt comforting, an anchor to fidelity. Rain wouldn't be the only thing to fall tonight.

## Pinkie Pie

“I want it done right, ya hear? I don’t want anyone else to know. That cheating bitch is going to get what’s coming to her.”

“Okie dokie.”

There was a click on the end of the line as the caller hung up. Pinkie Pie sat back in her chair and rolled the lollipop in her mouth a few times. She always hated these jobs. The cheating wife, the jealous husband. No one ever wanted her to track down the tastiest cupcakes, or find the best party in town. It was always a stolen this or a cheating that.

At least it was straightforward. Watch the address, wait for the husband to go to work, then follow the mare of the household to wherever she drove off to when he was gone. Pinkie wouldn’t even need one of her impeccable disguises. She grabbed her hat from the chair by the door and swept out of her office, pulling her coat tight around her in the late morning rain.

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It was a posh house, Pinkie had to admit. But then, Snails was in a lucrative business. She frowned at the thought of what he had become. A familiar rainbow blur sped off from the back of the house, distracting her. So, she was still a fighter. She made a note to check up on her again, as she did with all of her old friends on occasion.

She recognized Snails as he strode out, older now, no longer the boy she remembered. She had half a mind to tail him instead, and see exactly how he earned his keep, but that wasn’t the job. She was supposed to follow the wife. And there she was n-

Pinkie Pie’s jaw dropped. *Fluttershy*. By the time she had recovered, she had almost lost the Pegasus pony’s car around the corner.

It didn’t make sense. Why was Fluttershy with Snails? When had this happened? How had she not known? Had it really been so long? And was she really cheating? The questions chased her as she chased the car from a careful distance.

She was surprised as she was led out of town, to a highway. Shortly after they escaped the city limits, the storm petered out and eventually ended, becoming a murky curtain miles behind them. Familiar landmarks soon started to show themselves, and an hour after they left, Ponyville became visible in the distance.

As Fluttershy turned onto a dirt road, Pinkie started to wish she had brought her disguises. Although, she doubted anyone in Ponyville would be fooled. Or maybe they would. Maybe she wouldn't even need a disguise. Maybe she really had changed that much.

She could worry about that later: she couldn't follow Fluttershy any further in her car, or the pony would definitely get suspicious. She pulled off the road and parked, deciding to hoof it the last several miles to town. In the distance, she could just make out the other vehicle. Instead of continuing into town like Pinkie had expected, she took another turn onto an even smaller dirt road, lined with apple trees.

## Rainbow Dash

*Damn.*

She flew through the drenching rain, unfazed by the bitter gales, immune to the numbing cold.

*Damn damn damn. All you had to do was take a couple of half-hearted punches. I was this close to letting you win you stupid glass-jawed coltcuddler.*

Rainbow Dash had fled the arena as soon as she saw her opponent's unconscious form hit the ground. She had won. Again.

Snips would lose a lot of money on that. But it wasn't her fault the other boxer couldn't take a swing to save his life. Or hers. If he had put up at least a semblance of a fight, Rainbow would have felt better about taking the dive.

*Damn damn dammit!*

It had been years since they had all moved from Ponyville, hoping to realize their biggest dreams in the big city. The big city, however, had had other ideas. The element of loyalty had taken the group's drift poorly. She hit the bottle harder than she hit her opponents in the ring, and that was saying something. If she had ever been a great flier, she was an even greater fighter. She let that small glow of pride combat the icy bite of wind and old memories.

She was thankful for the dark, and the rain. She stuck mostly to the rooftops as she flew, but the weather provided good cover when she had to make a break into the open. There was no telling who might be one of Snips' boys, and his pegasi could be anywhere.

Her apartment was probably already being watched. Everything she owned, lost. Stupid stupid stupid. All for her dumb pride. What a cliché.

She couldn't stay here, in this city, or they would eventually find her. She needed bits, just a little to get her out of town, get her started again. There was nothing left for her here, anyway. There hadn't been anything here for years. Maybe somewhere else, where she started over, she could find a replacement, another reason to continue.

She skirted the edges of town, where she was less likely to be spotted. There was a sudden flurry of gunshots - at least four of them, from multiple guns - and for a second she thought the bullets were directed at her. She started to fly higher, further out of range and into the clouds, before she

realized the shots had come from a small house below her. She knew this part of the city. Occurrences like that were all too common, and anyone else within hearing distance would know better than to call the police.

There was nothing to be done. She sped onward, the torrent whipping at her face. She needed supplies, and she knew exactly who she could count on to get her on her way.

## Spike

The purple dragon flicked his lighter several times before the warm orange glow of a flame took the wick, and brought it to the tip of his cigarette. He remembered when he had been able to light them with his own fire, but the smoking had long since sapped that magic from him. He pulled long and slow, reveling in the feel of the hot acrid smoke hitting the back of his throat, almost as good as a jet of flame. He let the chemicals work their way to his skull, getting that tingling focus throughout his body, then exhaled slowly.

He stared out into the late night from behind the wheel of his off-hours cab, the sheets of rain covering everything in murky obscurity. It had been a slow night, and he was beginning to regret wasting his time. He could be out at a club, staring at some pretty little pony dancing on the stage, or drunkenly chatting up some tittering young mare who just wanted to see the glamor of the big city, and was excited by the exotic appeal of a dragon. Smoke poured from his mouth in a sigh, deflecting off the windshield in front of him.

A lone mare stepped out from under an awning in front of an office building, waving him down, and he slowed to a stop, flicking his cigarette out the crack in his window. There was a click and a slam as the pony entered and shook her head slightly to rid herself of some of the rainwater in her mane. It was almost too dark to make out any features. Almost.

“High rises on the East Side, please. I’ll tell you where when we get there.”

Spike pulled his cap lower on his head and avoided catching the pony’s eyes in the mirror. “Yes, ma’am.” He hoped the cigarettes had changed his voice enough.

He drove in silence for several minutes, black rubber pulling the car through intersections and small pools of light cast by street lamps and the sparse oncoming traffic. Curiosity ate away at him until he couldn’t contain his questions.

“So, what do you do?” It’s not like she would answer anyway. Fares typically preferred not to talk to cabbies, and usually just stared out the window until he gave up on small talk.

“I’m vice-President of an accounting firm,” she surprised him.

“Oh, yeah? Sounds swank.” She was always good at organization.

“It pays the bills.” Spike waited for more, but it didn’t seem like he was going to get anything. There were too many questions that he couldn’t ask, so he just tried to focus on the streets.



“It’s this one up on the right.”

His eyes traveled up, taking in the impressive architecture of the building.

“Nice place you got.” He thought of his own cramped one-room hovel, and of another home much further back.

“I guess so.”

He stopped in front of the entrance, swallowing, wanting another cigarette.

“That’s twelve bits.” He waited for her to get out. He couldn’t stand to stay like this much longer, but the seconds dragged on in empty silence.

There was a hoof on his shoulder, and a soft rustle of paper being set on the seat beside him. He clenched his hands around the wheel, ground his jaw tight.

“You know... I’m always looking for a number one assistant.”

## Fluttershy

The yellow pegasus carefully stepped from her car and inhaled the scent of loam and apples, a drastic change from the smoke and exhaust of the city. The smell reminded her of her old hut, but her animals had probably forgotten her by now, after she had let her friends talk her into moving away. The thought always made her quiver, but the appearance of a familiar red form eased her mind.

Big Macintosh slowly walked toward her, standing in the sun. She lowered her eyes, but he just lowered his head and gently nuzzled into her neck, making her squeak softly.

"Wha' don'cha come inside?"

She was like this every week, no matter how often she came to see him. Sometimes she would get better, and they would spend a few passionate hours. Sometimes all she could do was quietly sob while he was helpless to do anything but hold her.

Today, it seemed, was one of those times, as she broke down as soon as they had crossed the threshold to the farm house. The large earth pony didn't care. He just pulled her close and slowly sank down onto his haunches with her.

After several minutes of this she forced herself to look up, and brought her lips to his in a slow, deep kiss. When it broke, the shy pony met his eyes meekly, and gave a small nod. He carefully helped her to her hooves and started to lead her to the bedroom, when they were suddenly interrupted by a soft knock at the door.

Big Mac snorted. "Ah'm sorry, ah told Applebloom to go inta town fer a few hours. Ah guess she decided ta come back."

"Oh, no... it's okay. You can let her in."

Big Mac opened the door, then stared in slow confusion at the pony on the porch.

"P-pinkie Pie?"

"Hi Fluttershy." The private eye looked embarrassed to be there. "We, um, need to talk."

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“Snails... hired you?” Fluttershy had turned an even paler yellow, and was trembling so badly she had to sit down.

“I’m sorry, Fluttershy. I didn’t know it was you.”

“Well, I... I... I wish it wasn’t!” She suddenly exploded, then burst into tears. “He was s-so kind and charming, and th-then he just ch-ch-changed! I never should’ve left Ponyville!” Big Mac did his best, but the small pegasus was completely inconsolable by now, body wracked with sobs.

Pinkie Pie couldn’t bear to look any more. None of them should have left.

“I love Macintosh. I always did, but Snails made me forget it. He’d never agree to a divorce. And now he’s going to be worse than ever!”

When Pinkie hazarded another glance up, she could see old bruises, barely visible under fur and make up. Losing a friend’s trust was the fastest way to lose a friend, but Snails was no friend.

“He doesn’t have to know.”

Fluttershy sniffed, wiping her eyes dry enough to get a bleary glimpse of the pink pony.

“I’ll just tell him you came to see some old friends in Ponyville. I can’t promise he won’t hire anyone else to follow you, but if you call me before you come back out here, I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

“You’d r-really do that, Pinkie?”

Pinkie Pie looked between the two sets of hopeful eyes watching her, and for a minute she felt like her old self. “Cross my heart and hope to fly.”

## Twilight Sparkle

Twilight stepped out of the cab and stood in the rain as she watched it disappear into the night, then turned to enter the building. She hoped he would call. She hoped he would call more than anything in the world. The elderly doorstallion bowed lightly as he held the door open for her, and she thanked him quietly.

A gaudy, ancient Pelloponysian style lobby greeted her, and her stomach turned, as always. She just wanted to get to her room, with its austere furnishings and mounds of disorganized books. She just wanted to research magic and write a report to her mentor. She just wanted a simpler time of friendship and adventure and *Dear Princess Celestia*. Before she could reach the elevator, one of the ponies behind the front desk called out to her.

“Miss Sparkle! You’ve got a caller. Somepony named Rainbow said to meet her in the bar. I could call security if you like.”

Twilight Sparkle was dumbfounded for the second time in an hour. “No no, don’t do that. I’ll go meet her. Did she say anything else?”

“Just that she would be done in ten seconds flat.”

A small grin crept to her face. “Thank you.”

Twilight walked around the corner to the bar. She hardly ever went there, except when she was meeting business partners. Still, she knew it well enough to find her way around the tables and booths until she spotted a familiar colorful pegasus.

“Hiya Rainbow.”

“Twilight. Pull up a seat. I put the drinks on your tab. Hope you don’t mind.”

She was a little taken aback by her old friend’s appearance. She was soaking wet, fur ruffled and dirty, and she seemed to have a black eye hidden under her blue coat. She was surrounded by empty bottles and still going strong. Twilight sat down, concerned.

“I’ve run into a bit of trouble.” She took a drink, but said no more, as if she had explained everything.

“What kind of trouble?” the unicorn asked warily.

“The kind that leaves me in a ditch somewhere if I don’t get away fast. Snips wanted me to take a dive. I wanted Snips to go to hell.”

Twilight was utterly lost. “What are you talking about? You mean ‘Snips and Snails’ Snips? Why are you running from him?”

Rainbow gingerly rubbed at her eye. “Let’s just say he and Snails fell in with the wrong crowd a while back, and then he got a little ambitious.”

Fear only entered her mind as an afterthought. The only thing she could think was how to help her friend. “Well... What can I do to help? You know I’m always here for you. We could-”

“Save it. This isn’t Ponyville. I’m just calling in a few favors. I can’t go back to my place. I just need a little cash to get me going, and then I’m gone for good.”

The speedster pony would not be dissuaded. Rather than argue, Twilight nodded. “Come up to my room with me. I’ll get you started. And then you can leave.”

Rainbow just nodded, draining her bottle and standing to follow.

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“There, that should be enough to get you started wherever you go.”

Rainbow Dash looked up from the envelope in her hooves, mouth agape.

“Twilight, this is too much, I c-”

“No. It’s nothing, Rainbow. Just money. I don’t need it. What I need is to help you. I loved you, Rainbow. I loved all of you. And I just let it slip away.” Guilt began to force her throat shut.

“You five were all I had. I never wanted to lose that, and then...”

“But Twi-”

“Take it.” Eyes stung, and she sniffed sharply to stave off the onslaught. “Please.”

Wordlessly, the pegasus tucked the envelope away and walked toward a window, starting to open it.

“Rainbow Dash, hold on.” She turned back as Twilight chewed her lip, needing to say so much, but she eventually had to settle. “Will you write to me? When you get where you’re going?”

Heavy swallow and a hasty exit left Twilight Sparkle alone in her room, rain pouring in through the window, silently pleading with the long-gone pony to stay.

## Rarity

A knock at the door roused Rarity from her thoughts. That was probably Caramel, now. Why was he so late? He was usually over much earlier than this. She checked the eyehole out of habit and froze. Then, tying her bath robe shut, she threw open the door and began her tirade.

“Applejack! What do you think you’re doing? I thought I told you to never come to my- Oh, my goodness, Applejack!”

“Howdy, Sugarcube.”

“Applejack, why, you’re bleeding!”

The drenched earth pony grimaced. “Snips was a mite faster on the draw than I expected.”

“You’ve been shot?! Applejack, no, don’t come in, we’ve got to get you to the hospital, what are-”

“Hush, now. It’s nothin’ serious, just nicked my shoulder. ‘Sides, I don’ like doctors and you’re handier with a needle than anyone.”

Rarity bit her lip as Applejack hobbled through her doorway on three legs, clutching one hoof to her shoulder and trailing water with every step. She was behaving strangely, her usually covered accent coming out unbridled.

“But I’ve never... fine. Into the bathroom.” She dug through a drawer for her sewing kit. “You remember where it- oh.” Applejack was already nosing through the door. Rarity levitated a bottle of vodka from a shelf and followed the earth pony with the makeshift disinfectant and first aid kit.

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Rarity looked over her handiwork, feeling oddly pleased with herself despite her rather grotesque materials. The wound hadn’t actually been as serious as she had feared, and now Applejack was lying in her tub, shoulder stitched and passed out next to a fifth of whiskey.

She hiccupped, then shifted in her porcelain bed. Perhaps not completely passed out. She spoke like she had spent a fair amount of time too far gone to speak.

“Say, ya remember tha’ time in the ol’ barn?”

“I remember having to teach you a thing or two.”

One small laugh. The voice came from another time, and Rarity followed the trail back. “We stole a few bottles o’ cider-”

“And more than a few kisses.”

“-spent all night flyin’ high-”

“I seem to recall being much closer to the floor.”

“Made out like bandits, we did.”

“Or rabbits.”

A breathy, wonderfully thick, country chuckle. “Tha’ too, I reckon. We mighta been mighty drunk, but you always were the most beautiful pony. Even with all tha’ ... hoity toity nonsense.”

Rarity smiled in spite of herself. “You know, you never answered my question before.” Eyebrows perked lazily above drooping eyes. “Do you ever wonder if things could have gone differently? I mean, really wonder?”

The orange pony rolled to her side, drifting off again. “I suppose it don’t matter too much now, does it?”

“No. No, I suppose not. Still, that doesn’t mean things can’t go different from here, right?” she asked, smiling down at the sleeping form before her. “Doesn’t mean it’s too late to go home.”

The constant deluge continued to fall out over the city, beating on the windows, scouring the dirt and grime and washing it into the sewers.