

Sweet Apple Acres was as noisy as ever. The animals cried out for food, Winona barked at a passing butterfly, and a sharp thud sounded amongst the apple trees, a sure sign that one of the Apple family members was hard at work.

Wiping her brow, Applejack glanced at the sky as she moved towards the next tree. A patch of grey was visible in the swath of blue, and the farmer squinted as she focused on the speck. She grinned as it came into focus, revealing itself as none other than Derpy, the local mailmare.

Applejack inspected her surroundings, and huffed as she noticed the lack of any other Apple family pony, forcing her to interrupt her work to get the mail herself. She quickly trotted up to the pegasus, grinning amicably; it wasn't Derpy's fault that neither Big Mac nor Granny Smith were anywhere to be seen. "Whatcha got for me, Derpy?"

Derpy just smiled, before completely shoving her head into her bag. After a short bout of rummaging, she pulled a letter out and offered it to Applejack, whose eyebrows lifted as she read the address. She hadn't heard from her family in Stalliongrad in years, and now here was a letter from them. She tore it open and started to read, slowly smiling as she reached the end. "Well, Ah'll be..."

She shifted her eyes from the words as she finished the letter, remembering that she wasn't alone. "Thanks, Derpy, I..." The words trailed off as she glanced around. Apparently she was alone after all.

Applejack frowned as she took stock of the farm, counting off the remaining unbuckled trees. She was loath to leave a job unfinished, but that simply meant she'd have to work harder when she got back home. She shrugged to herself and hurried inside, grabbing the first saddlebag she found, and placed the letter within.

A few minutes and a short trot later she found herself in front of Fluttershy's cottage, and lifted a hoof to knock. Applejack's eyes widened as the door opened, not seeing her friend's usual elegance, but instead a disheveled and tired Fluttershy.

The yellow pegasus smiled, glad to see a friendly face. "Oh, hello Applejack. How are you?"

Applejack blinked, realizing she had been staring. "Howdy, Fluttershy. Ah'm good, but Ah figure Ah should be the one askin' you that. You okay?"

Fluttershy nodded, glancing back to the interior of her home. "Oh yes. I just have a sick fox keeping me up. I can't leave him alone until he gets better!" Her eyes focused once more on Applejack. "Um. What brings you here? If you don't mind my asking..."

"Well, some cousins from Stalliongrad are coming to Canterlot in a few days to organize a charity and get the princesses' blessings. Ah thought Ah'd give them a visit since Ah haven't

seen them in ages.” She pointed a hoof at Fluttershy. “Ah was wondering if you wanted to tag along?”

The pegasus shook her head, her eyes wide. “I’m so sorry! I’d love to, but that fox needs my attention. I can’t leave him here. I hope you understand...”

Applejack’s smile dipped. “And you can’t get somepony else to look after him?” Fluttershy’s shaking head and pleading eyes were answer enough. “Shucks.”

“Maybe the other girls want to go?” Fluttershy suggested.

“Yeah, Ah’m gonna ask them too.” She turned around to head to town, but paused and gave her friend another glance. “You sure you don’t want to come?”

Fluttershy shook her head. “I’m sure. But thank you for asking.”

This, unfortunately, set the tone of Applejack’s visits. She’d headed to Carousel Boutique next, while keeping an eye on the sky for a certain blue pegasus, but she had not seen Rainbow Dash anywhere. Upon her arrival at the unicorn’s home, she’d discovered Rarity frantically working away, cloth flung in all corners of the shop. She hadn’t even turned away from her craft to face Applejack as she politely declined the invitation, unable to tear herself away from her work for at least the next few days.

Pinkie Pie was no better off, having been drafted by the Cakes into assisting their numerous catering orders, including a massive order of muffins for one birthday party. Once she’d finished listing off every single course of every order, she’d shaken her head and dived back into the kitchen, leaving Applejack with one more stop: the town library.

Applejack lifted a hoof to the door, knocking slightly harder than common courtesy allowed for. As Twilight’s magic surrounded the door, she wiped the frown off her face. No sense in taking her frustration out on the unicorn. It wasn’t her fault the others had refused. Applejack silently hoped she’d have more luck here. She spotted the librarian at her reading table, her attention drawn to her visitor. “Howdy Twilight!”

Twilight beamed, happy to see one of her friends. “Hey Applejack, what’s up?”

“Got a letter from cousins in Stalliongrad,” she drawled out, tiring of repeating this a fourth time. “Coming to Canterlot next week to organize a charity. They want to get the princesses’ blessing. Ah thought Ah’d give them a visit. Want to come along?”

“Sure thing! I’ve never met Stalliongradites before. I can visit the princess too!”

Applejack sighed in relief. "Good! Ah was worried Ah'd have to go alone."

Twilight tilted her head in confusion. "Alone? What do you mean? I'm sure the rest of the girls would want to come."

The orange pony shook her head, briefly recounting the three refusals she'd received so far. "--and that leaves you and Rainbow Dash." Her ears drooped as she continued. "Ah didn't want to be alone with all those highfalutin' ponies from Canterlot," she grumbled, before glancing at her friend. "No offense, Twi."

"None taken." Twilight grinned. "I know how bad some of them can be." She paused as she processed part of what Applejack had said. "But I don't know if Rainbow would be interested in any of that."

Applejack grinned. "Well hold on there. Mah cousins tell me they're fixing to ask the Wonderbolts to perform for the charity. That aughta spark her inter--"

A crash interrupted the conversation, as both swung around to look at the source of the noise. There, hanging on the ledge of the now open window she had burst through, was Rainbow Dash. "Did you say the Wonderbolts are performing?!"

Twilight stared at the weather pony. "Rainbow Dash, why are you here? How did you know what we were talking about?" For a moment, Twilight wondered if Rainbow Dash had copied Pinkie's ability to pop out of nowhere. The very thought terrified her.

Rainbow shrugged. "I was napping! Your tree is pretty comfortable, you know?" She waved a hoof in dismissal as she jumped off the ledge to join her friends. "So I thought I heard something about the Wonderbolts..."

Applejack spoke up as Twilight relaxed. "You sure did, R.D.. They might be doing a special performance in a few days in Canterlot. Interested?"

"Absolutely!" she gushed, flipping in the air with enthusiasm. "This will be awesome."

"Oh!" Twilight exclaimed, drawing the attention of the other two. "Maybe I can use that new teleportation spell I learned! We'll get there in a flash."

"That settles it, then," Applejack said, nodding. "Ah'll write them back and let them know."

"Twilight! Wake up already!"

The purple unicorn groaned as her friend and assistant's voice pierced through the fog of sleep. The realization that Spike—who was still just a baby dragon and needed his sleep—had actually woken up before her dispelled those last remnants of the sleepy haze. However, she still felt tired.

Spike eyed her as he took stock of her frazzled mane and runny nose. "Twilight? Are you okay? You don't look so good."

"I don't feel so good either," she answered, punctuating the remark with a wet snuffle. "I think I've caught a cold."

Spike glanced past Twilight's bed. "You left the window open, and it rained last night. You probably got showered on."

"You sleep right next to my bed! Why aren't you cold and wet?" Twilight asked, as she dragged herself out of bed and headed towards her mirror. Her mane felt as frazzled as it had during the poison joke disaster, but her horn was thankfully all right, as proven by the perfectly levitated brush.

"Er, hello? Baby dragon? Emphasis on dragon? Fire in my belly?" Spike said, rolling his eyes. "Keeps me nice and toasty." He winced as Twilight sniffed loudly in an attempt to control her running nose. "Maybe you should postpone your trip?"

"Trip? What trip?"

Spike smacked his forehead. "Your trip to Canterlot, remember? You, Applejack and Rainbow Dash were going today?"

"Oh! Right! No! I don't visit Canterlot enough, and this is too good a chance to visit the princess and my family!" The brush moved to the other side of her head, tugging out the knots in her mane. "And I can't let Applejack and Rainbow down, they've been looking forward to this. I can't let a little co-oh-oh-**achoo!**" The sneeze interrupted her train of thought, sending the brush flying. "Sorry. What was I saying?"

"You were talking about Applejack and Rainbow Da—"

"Oh yes! Applejack's visiting family, and Rainbow—"

"Twilight."

"—wants to go see the Wonderbolts Charity performance—"

“Twilight!”

“—so of course she wants to go! I just wish Pinkie, Fluttershy and Rarity weren’t so busy, it’s not as fun without—”

“**Twilight!**”

“Wh-what?” she stammered, Spike’s yell having finally gotten through.

“You’ve already told me all of this. And you’ve only got thirty minutes before Applejack and Rainbow Dash arrive.”

“Thirty minutes?” cried Twilight. “**Why did you let me sleep so late?!**” Her mane forgotten, she ran down the stairs to quickly prepare her breakfast, completely ignoring her assistant’s response.

“I’ve been trying to wake you for the past half hour... oh forget it,” Spike grumbled, as the mare disappeared down the stairs. Sighing, he started making the bed Twilight had left in disarray. On the bright side, Twilight was leaving him in charge of the Library during her visit, which could only mean one thing for Spike: more sleep!

“So where are your folks visiting from again?” Rainbow Dash asked the farm pony walking next to her. The two had met on the road from Sweet Apple Acres and were now trotting to the library.

“From Stalliongrad,” Applejack replied. “They own the biggest apple farm there.”

“Neat! You must be looking forward to seeing them.”

“Ah sure am, but probably not as much as you are to seeing the Wonderbolts, am Ah right?”

The pegasus grinned, a bounce appearing in her gait. She looked ready to fly off then and there. “Are you kidding? They’re gonna put on a special performance! This is gonna be awesome. Maybe I can show them some moves afterwards!”

“Whoa there, Nelly. It’s a charity thing, remember? Not tryouts!” Applejack chided.

Rainbow Dash’s demeanor deflated, her ears lying flat on her head. “I know, I know. Still, I can hope, can’t I?”

Applejack grinned, and nudged the pegasus. “Of course you can, Sugarcube. Tell ya what,” she

said, pausing in her stride, "Ah'll join ya at the event. We'll see if the two of us can herd them towards ya after the show." She emphasized her statement by rearing up and waving her front hooves in the air.

"That I'd like to see!" said Rainbow Dash, and both laughed at the mental image. The hilarity was abruptly interrupted by their arrival at the library. Or rather, the crashing sound that came from inside.

"What in tarnation...?" Applejack asked, before charging into the Library, Rainbow Dash hot on her heels. As the door flew open, the pair took stock of the situation.

Twilight was wiping her nose, clearly still under the weather. Surrounding her at various distances were broken plates.

Rainbow flew up to the unicorn, a look of worry painted on her face. "What's happening? Are you okay Twilight?"

Twilight nodded, levitating the cloth away from her nose. "Just a cold. I'm fine."

"What's with these plates?" Applejack eyed the debris.

"Oh, um... sneezing and levitation don't mix?" Twilight grinned sheepishly, before sneezing once more. Rainbow's vaunted reflexes kicked into gear, dodging the soiled hoofkerchief.

"Maybe you should stay here Twilight. You don't look so good." Rainbow fluttered back to the unicorn, putting a hoof on Twilight's back. Applejack nodded in agreement.

"Nonsense! I feel fine!"

"But--"

"But nothing." Twilight shook her head vehemently. "I'm not making you miss this trip because of a little cold!"

Applejack and Rainbow Dash shared a look, a slight frown on their faces. The farm pony then refocused on Twilight. "If you say so, Sugarcube."

The trio stood outside of the library, finally ready for their trip. As the new teleportation spell tended to take the ground beneath their hooves along with it's pony targets, Twilight had insisted on taking her casting outside. "Are you girls ready?" she asked the mares standing on either side of her. When they both nodded, she lifted her head up. "Then let's get going!"

Twilight closed her eyes as she concentrated, gathering a large amount of magical power at the tip of her horn. The tip glowed, growing in brightness as the power increased. A bubble started to form, slowly descending from the tip of her raised horn to surround the three ponies. Applejack and Rainbow Dash eyed the edges warily, careful not to touch them or even move.

The bubble finally inched towards the ground, the spell having gone smoothly. A testament to Twilight's skill, she had controlled the arcane powers perfectly. Suddenly, a sneeze blew out of her, as the bubble hit the ground.

"Bless—" Applejack started reflexively, an instant before the teleportation effect took hold. After what felt like minutes, but was only seconds, the trio reappeared. "—you!" A fine coating of dirt hissed as it settled at their hooves, having been transported with them from outside the library.

"Thanks," Twilight sniffed, and opened her eyes. Her expression mirrored her friends' as she looked around. They were in a small clearing surrounded by trees, none of which looked anything like the types found in Canterlot. "Uh-oh... where are we?"

Applejack answered immediately. "This looks like... the Everfree Forest? But Ah don't recognize what part... where did you bring us, Twilight?"

"I don't know," Rainbow Dash answered before the unicorn opened her mouth, "but let's find out!"

Applejack felt Dash bunch up for a leap into the sky beside her—then winced as she heard the pegasus crash immediately into the ground. Rather than embarrass her friend by looking, she continued staring ahead at the trees around them. "You okay there, Dash? My back hurts just listening to that."

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash replied, "I'm fi—" Applejack frowned and glanced over as the pegasus's voice died. The cyan mare was staring at her in shock, her expression quickly matched by Twilight as the purple unicorn followed Rainbow Dash's gaze.

"Er, Applejack?" Twilight whispered hoarsely. "I don't think that's why your back hurts."

"What?" the earth pony asked, before turning and gazing behind her. A splash of color on her haunches caught her eye, and she focused her gaze on herself.

That's where she discovered the pair of blue wings adorning her sides, and the rainbow-hued tail on her rear.

Applejack stared in shock, turning back to her friends as Rainbow Dash's body cleared the tall

grass she had landed in, a body whose smooth sides distinctly lacked a pair of wings, and whose rump had gained a very familiar blond tail. This second shock gave Applejack's brain a pause, providing the orange pony with only one thing to say.

"Oh, horseapples."

The silence was broken by the sound of Rainbow Dash scrambling to Applejack's side, her rising panic clear in her eyes. "What in the hay is going on?" she yelled, poking and prodding Applejack's flank, causing the farm pony to wince in pain.

Twilight could only continue to stare in shock, but her analytical mind still managed to notice the connection. "Wait... Applejack, you can actually feel those sensations in the wings?"

"Yup," Applejack replied, trying to inch away from the ever more frantic prodding by Rainbow Dash. "It—ow—sure feels weird with these—stop it R.D.!—things..."

This caused Twilight's eyes to widen in surprise. "So there's even a nerve connection? Amazing! I've never heard of something like this happen—" Her voice faltered as the pegasus's efforts reached a peak. Rainbow Dash was now practically wrestling with a wing, almost knocking Applejack down in an effort to make sense of the situation and ignoring her protests.

Suddenly, the wing in her hooves gave a strong twitch, as she hit the area where the blue feathers connected with the orange shoulder. It flared up in a swift motion, knocking the pegasus away, and sending Applejack to her knees.

"What was that for?!" Rainbow Dash demanded hotly, glaring at the orange pony as they both picked themselves off the ground.

"Ah didn't do that on purpose!" Applejack answered, motioning to the still flared wing with her head. "Ya hit something and it jus' moved!" She paused, gazing at the appendage. "It really feels weird with these things!"

"Hey! My wings aren't weird!"

"Ah wasn't saying that! Ah jus' can't control these!"

"Then give them back!" the rainbow-maned pegasus yelled, jumping back towards Applejack. Her movement was suddenly interrupted as she was surrounded by a purple glow, stopping her in her tracks.

"Rainbow, stop it!" Twilight cried, as she held her friend with her magic. "We can't rush into things like this! We've got to think it through!"

Rainbow Dash's glare turned towards the unicorn. "Fine! Just let me go!" she said, struggling in the magic's hold. "I don't want you to send me crashing into some tree!"

Twilight blinked at this response, releasing her hold. "What? What are you talking about?"

"Sugarcube..." Applejack interjected softly, trying to ease the tone of the conversation. "You're still sick. You broke those plates, and Ah reckon this," she said, nodding towards the wings on her back, "is because of that too. Maybe you should hold off on magic until you're better..."

Oh Celestia, she's right. Applejack's words hit her like a hoof to the gut. Twilight turned to face Rainbow Dash, her expression twisted by guilt. "Dash, I'll fix this," she promised, before unleashing the worst string of sneezes she had ever experienced. Each one was punctuated by a bolt of magic flying from her horn, toppling trees and sending the two other ponies diving for cover.

As the fit passed, the pegasus peeked out from her shelter, looking worried instead of angry and panicked. "Is it over?" Rainbow asked, as Twilight sniffed, then nodded. "Sorry for snapping like that, Twilight. I... guess I panicked. I know you'll fix this."

Twilight smiled gratefully at her friend's understanding, still feeling a knot in the pit of her stomach. Applejack's answer to her question had given her a vague idea of the scale of what she was dealing with, and it scared her.

By then, Applejack herself had popped out from where she had taken cover. "Then we should get back to Ponyville, lickety-split. You might find somethin' ta help in your library, no?" She glared at the still open wing, then glanced back at Twilight. "It's jus'... Ah hope you don't mind if we walk behind ya?" Twilight hung her head, aware of the logic of her friend's statement and unable to refute it, even if it hurt.

Rainbow Dash nodded frantically in agreement while approaching the orange mare, and paused beside her. "A.J., relax. You're gonna strain it like that," she said, motioning towards the wing. "Let me help."

She reached towards it, and gently pushed it down to a relaxed state, taking care not to hurt the wing—**her** wing—in any way. The earth pony gave a small sigh of relief, and nodded in thanks. "That feels better... Thanks." She looked off in the distance, squinting as she noticed something that caught her eye. "There's a big hill that way; we should get our bearings from there."

The three ponies made their way through the forest in silence, each lost in thought. Twilight led the group, making sure to keep her horn straight ahead. She did not want to cause any more problems than she already had. Applejack followed her, keeping an eye on her friend and their surroundings, occasionally glancing to the pegasus that brought up the rear. Thus she noticed how Rainbow Dash's gaze seemed fixed on one spot... her own rump.

“... Rainbow?” she asked, startling her friend. “Can ya... stop staring at my rump?”

The question earned a slight blush from both ponies. “I-I wasn’t!” Rainbow stammered. “I was—I was keeping an eye on my tail!” This was a slight twisting of the truth, as she had indeed been staring at her own tail adorning Applejack’s flank, wondering how the rainbow-hued hair would look with Applejack’s customary hairband.

“Yeah, well don’t get used to it. Twilight will get this fixed in no time!” the farm pony said, her statement punctuated by a sneeze from the unicorn. “Once she gets better, that is...”

The group eventually reached the top of the hill, giving them an unimpeded view of their surroundings. Rainbow Dash was the first to find a landmark, her sharp pegasus eyes taking in the landscape around them. “Look!” she said, pointing. “There’s the castle where we fought Nightmare Moon! We’re just a few hours from Ponyville.”

Twilight and Applejack squinted in the direction she was looking. “Are you sure, R.D.? Ah can’t see a darned thing.”

“It’s there! Come on, let’s go!” Rainbow said as she sped down the hill, the gravity of their situation forgotten. The other two quickly followed suit, chasing the now-yellow-tailed pony down the hill.

Night had fallen by the time they emerged from the forest to the welcome sight of their homes. “Ah’m telling you Rainbow, taking it slow was better! Twilight’s still sick, she couldn’t have run all the way home!”

“She did beat us during the race, remember?”

“By taking it slow!”

The subject of discussion shook her head in bemusement. “I’m still exhausted. I’m no iron pony like you two.” She paused, her mouth opening in a massive yawn. “I’ll just head back to the library and start to figure out how to fix thi—”

“Oh no you don’t!” Applejack interrupted. “You jus’ said you’re tired! Sleep; you can start tomorrow.”

“But...”

“No buts. Don’t make me tie you to the bed,” the farm pony said, frowning at Twilight. Rainbow

Dash nodded in agreement. "In fact, we should all head to bed."

Twilight relented under the gaze of her two friends. "Okay! I'll sleep. I'll see what I can find out tomorrow if you want to drop by."

With that, the three ponies each went their way, heading home. As Rainbow Dash trotted towards her home, she stopped in her tracks at a sudden realization, staring into the distance at her cloud-home, floating in the sky.

"Wait... where am I supposed to sleep?!"