

A tapping at her closed window brought Applejack out of her thoughts. *What in tarnation?* She hadn't been home more than five minutes when she heard the sound. She had fled the library where her friends were, scared and ashamed.

*Horseapples, if that's Rainbow Dash I'm in for some yellin'...*

She slowly walked over to the window and pulled back the curtains. Fluttershy was standing on the roof just outside of the window, smiling at Applejack. The farmer opens the window, raising an eyebrow in the process. "Fluttershy? What are you doin' here?"

"I just thought we could meet up and talk a bit on our way back to Sugar Cube Corner. If you don't mind that is." She hadn't stopped smiling, but now seemed more hopeful, anticipating a certain response.

Applejack knew there couldn't be any anger between them. Fluttershy was too kind, too nice. Even if she disagreed, or was angry, there was no way she'd say anything or act like it. She wouldn't judge another pony based on just a few of their thoughts. Applejack hesitantly answered "That would be just fine Fluttershy. Just wait down by the door and ah'll be there in a minute, all right sugarcube?" Fluttershy nodded, flying down from the roof and landing on the ground softly, walking around towards the door. Applejack took a deep breath. *You don't know why you feel this way, AJ, but Fluttershy ain't mad. You should talk it over with her. Just talk, slowly and cautiously... and keep it to the truth.*

She met the pegasus at the entrance a minute later, having taken time to grab an apple to eat. Applejack was greeted, once again, by her warm smile, and it seemed infectious as the farmer let the corners of her mouth curl upwards a bit too. They both left the property on hoof, walking slowly down the path towards Ponyville.

Neither one spoke for a few minutes. Applejack decided that she needed to say something. She shouldn't be silent around her friends with everything that had happened. "Fluttershy, ah need yer help."

"What would you like help with?" Asked Fluttershy, casually.

"Ah wanna talk about what Rainbow said. And how... she's right."

Fluttershy's eyes seemed to glow with surprise, but only slightly. "You... so she was right?"

"Ah think she was, but that don't mean ah should feel this way. Ah should trust her, she should be mah closest friend and ah should know that she wouldn't ever, ever do that to anypony, no matter how much she loved them, no matter how much it hurt her to not have that feelin' returned to her. Ah... ah feel awful about this Fluttershy."

"W-well I'm sure there's some reason you think this way Applejack, but I'm still confused." Fluttershy obviously hadn't prepared for this conversation well, but it seemed to Applejack she was

prepared to try and steer it somewhere else. There's no way the shy pegasus in front of her would just come up and ask to talk without a big reason. "Why... why do you feel that way towards Rainbow Dash? Haven't you known she's a lesbian for a while?" Applejack noticed the conversation had taken a turn and went back to her, but she decided to go along with it.

"Ah have. She told me with that same story about Sky Swallower that she told you, and how she realized she was a fillyfooler that day, and how she... lost a dear friend, but this was a long while ago. Ah never held it against her, and I never mentioned it unless she wanted me to. She's always been a little concerned with how other ponies might see her if they found out."

"She... told you about that?" Fluttershy seemed very surprised.

"Just cause... well that's how she told me she was a, ya know, lesbian and all."

"Hmm." Fluttershy seemed to be thinking deeply on some issue, and then she started again. "So why do you feel somewhat angry or scared of Rainbow Dash?"

Applejack stared at the ground in shame as she started her next answer. "Ah don't know why ah'm scared of her. Mah parents always said that it was okay if ah... wanted to see another mare, or even if Big Mac wanted to see stallions. They meant it too. Ah know they did. They said that what we wanted always came first, and the farm always came second..."

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. "But you love the farm Applejack. That's how you got your cutie mark."

Applejack nodded. "Ah love that farm as much as ah love all of mah friends Fluttershy. Ah may have loved it more than them, more than mah brother. Ah've dedicated mah life to makin' this farm be one of the best orchards in the whole country. Ah'm mighty proud of it too." She smiled despite herself. "Ah can't think about what would happen if ah lost this farm one day. If it all just vanished. Ah'd... well, it'd break me."

"Thanks Applejack." Said Fluttershy, smiling too. "I get it now."

"Get what now?" Applejack looked at her, completely confused now. She quickly glanced ahead and saw that Ponyville was still a few minutes down the trail.

"I know why you're so scared of Rainbow Dash being a lesbian, Applejack."

"How could ya know about that!?" Applejack let her anger get the better of her. "Even if ya did, that don't mean that ah should feel this way. It ain't fair to Rainbow! She's mah best friend!"

"Applejack, don't worry. I know that... you're hurt. Just... next time you see Rainbow Dash, apologize to her, okay? She's still pretty hurt too... from yelling at you."

“She’s what?”

“When she got angry in the library... we think that wasn’t her being normal either.”

Applejack suddenly looked apprehensive. “Oh no, ya don’t think that pony was messin’ with her now too?”

Fluttershy nodded. “We... we’re pretty sure. Rainbow Dash doesn’t remember what she said to you Applejack, and she’s been desperate to apologize.”

Applejack thought for a few seconds, letting the implications sink in. *If we are ever talkin’ to somepony, no matter where we are, we might start actin’ frantic and scared. We wouldn’t know it, and the other pony might not know either.* Applejack couldn’t stop herself as a scared look crept on to her face. “So... how do we fight this Fluttershy? We can’t even talk to each other without knowing it could turn into somepony getting’ hurt.”

“I don’t know either Applejack, but Twilight’s trying to come up with a plan. She’s looking into making a potion for us too, to maybe help us not be so easily affected by this. I don’t think she’s coming to the party later.”

Applejack nodded. She understood the situation on some level, but she was scared all the same. Anypony she might talk to could snap in an instant. She shivered. It was like no matter what they did, they couldn’t keep some pony out of their minds. It was like an invasion of privacy that she couldn’t stop. “Ah want to talk with Rainbow before the party. Ah want to... ah need to set this straight.”

“She’s still at the library. Let’s go see her now.”

They turned off the main path leading to the center of Ponyville and headed towards the Library, arriving quickly enough. Inside was Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle. Twilight was looking over some books on a book stand, almost frantically flipping the pages with magic. The table next to her had various flasks full of liquids and equipment for handling chemicals and such. It was all sitting on the table idly, as Twilight hadn’t started any work yet.

Rainbow Dash looked up the second they entered, breaking her thoughtful face that had been staring at the ground. “Hey guys... uhm... let’s go talk in Twilight’s room, so we don’t bother her here...” Fluttershy and Applejack nodded, walking by Twilight and heading up the stairs to Twilight’s room at the opposite end of the library from the entrance. The indigo unicorn took no notice of them.

Now at her room, they closed the door. Inside of it were three beds, Twilight’s bed, a guest bed and spike’s small bed, a book shelf, and a table with a chair. It was a large room, and only seemed larger with such few items. Applejack, finished gazing idly about the room, finally looked to Rainbow Dash. She was looking at the ground in shame, facing the large window that seemed to make up almost half of

the wall of the bedroom.

Fluttershy closed the door behind the two quietly. Applejack looked at the door briefly, then to Rainbow Dash again. Neither one spoke. Their gazes always averted, staring at the ground, the wall, the ceiling. The minutes felt excruciating to Applejack. She finally looked to Rainbow Dash, who, after several seconds of avoiding her, finally met her gaze as well. They both gave each other a warm, heartfelt smile.

-1 “I... I don’t actually know what came over me, Applejack, but if it was anything as bad as what you said to me, it was pretty bad. And even if I didn’t actually mean it, it’s still... it’s still real. So I’m sorry.”

“Heh, and here all ah wanted to apologize for was what ah said to you yesterday.” She nodded, as if to herself. “Apology accepted Dash, and ah’m sorry about what ah said to you. You don’t deserve that-“

“Applejack, that’s another thing I wanted to talk about.” Rainbow Dash interrupted the farmer promptly, almost expecting what she had said. “There’s... there’s a reason I hit you for that.”

Even Applejack wasn’t that dense. “You... you...”

Rainbow Dash could only nod. “I still love Fluttershy. I really do. And you were completely right that it does... hurt. To see her this often. Sometimes... sometimes I feel like I could...” She wiped at her eyes with a hoof. “Something about her just makes me... feel terrible and awful at the same time even though I love her and I can’t think about it because it’s that bad and-“

Applejack walked forward, stopping the quick words from the pegasi’s mouth. “Hush now. Yer the most loyal pony ah know. Don’t let stupid thoughts yer gettin’ in yer head make you think you’d ever do somethin’ to hurt any of us Dash, okay? That ain’t you, and you ain’t gonna do it. You love her, that’s it. You wish she would love you too. But she doesn’t. So you need to tell her that you can’t see her all the time, that she can’t always be with you all the time, because it *does* hurt you. She wouldn’t want to be hurtin’ you, Dash.” She hugged her friend tightly as she finished, catching the cyan mare by surprise yet again.

“But... AJ...”

“Ah don’t care that you kicked me or anythin’ like that, so you don’t have to apologize for yesterday. Yer still my best friend, no matter what.”

“Right... right, okay. Thanks Aj.” The two separated, and Rainbow Dash seemed to have her usual confidence back. “I just have to... tell her to leave me alone tonight, no problem. She’s a big, grown mare anyway, she can deal with a few nightmares, right?”

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“Well I’m glad *that’s* all done with. I was really worried about you guys might keep fighting or something!” Said Pinkie Pie, as she walked next to Applejack, though her walking was more like bouncing.

“Heh, you didn’t need to be too worried in the first place Pinkie Pie. We get into arguments all the time, and we always solve’em pretty quickly,” Applejack said, reassuring her pink companion.

“Still that must be awkward and stuff, everypony being all weird and angry and mad all the time! I couldn’t imagine being angry! Gosh, it would be like the opposite of being happy or something!” She started laughing, but stopped suddenly. “Oh, I wonder what the opposite of laughing is. Is it shuddering? Maybe it’s scoffing? Or guffawing? How about-“

“Pinkie Pie, ah don’t think there’s an opposite of ‘laughing’ really. Now we got 20 minutes before this party, so let’s get to setting it up okay?” Applejack finished as they reached Sugar Cube Corner. She had accidentally found Pinkie Pie after leaving the library, and had taken to talking with her on the way back to where the party was to take place. She had hoped to see why Pinkie was so disconcerted earlier, but it seemed she was back to her regular self now. *Ah just hope that she wasn’t bein’ manipulated bah that darned pony too... why ah don’t know what ah’d do if they made Pinkie cry on us...*

Inside, the main lobby and dining area where ponies would eat whatever they purchased, was already cleared of tables which had been moved to the back. All that was left was the counter, which had drapes over it and no food on display, and Rarity and Fluttershy, who were talking in one corner of the room, seemingly about clothing ideas for somepony. The two earth ponies moved past them, heading to the kitchen, which was a makeshift back-stage area for the guest that evening.

*A magician huh... that seems like a bit of a coincidence... ah’ll have to keep my eye on her...* Applejack thought it was odd. All of their issues had started only in the last week. Fluttershy’s dreams, her own anger... it all started so recently. And then this pony, some kind of famous magician, had spent a week at the inn before asking Pinkie Pie to throw this big party... show... thing? Applejack had her own suspicions, but she knew that without any idea about magic, and no proof, that she couldn’t very well say anything.

As soon as Pinkie Pie and Applejack entered the kitchen, they saw the Magician. Pinkie Pie had seen her probably several times by now, and was going across the kitchen in her usual bounds to talk to her.

Applejack, however, hadn’t seen her before. The farmer thought she was one of the most stunning ponies she had ever seen. The magician was a unicorn with dark purple fur, and a long black mane with two different stripes of a somewhat brighter, navy-blue. Her eyes were a bright, light-blue that weren’t unlike pinkie pie’s eyes, and she wore a long, dark-blue cape. Her cutie mark wasn’t visible

under her clothes, but that didn't matter to Applejack. The dark colors of the pony before her seemed so... powerful, regal. The black and purple seeming to draw light away from the surrounding kitchen, she stood out with a kind of grace that Applejack could only equate with Luna whenever she had been to Ponyville.

Having finished speaking to Pinkie Pie, the magician turned to see the farmer looking on at her with unblinking eyes. She laughed. "You are Applejack, the pony who runs Sweet Apple Acres branch here in Ponyville, correct?"

"Y-yes ma'am." Applejack shook herself, as if freeing herself from invisible binds, and walked forward to the magician, presenting a hoof in greeting. "Sorry 'bout that, but you're--"

"I am quite different from most ponies, yes." She shook the hoof gingerly, her grip soft but still leading the shake. "Many in Ponyville seem to have brightly colored coats, and maybe a dark mane or an equally bright mane to match, yes?" Her voice had some tinge of accent that Applejack couldn't place. She was still easy to understand so Applejack listened intently. "In some places in Equestria, it's quite normal to be born with quite the opposite. I imagine I look quite exotic around these parts--"

"Gosh, ah don't mean anything by starin', ma'am. Ya just... at a glance I coulda mistaken ya for Princess Luna."

She snickered a little. "You should have seen what your unicorn friend – what is her name, Rarity? – was like when she first saw me. She was so entranced with my color scheme that she immediately started taking measurements for a gown of some sort."

Applejack chuckled as well. "That's Rarity for ya. But she does have a good eye. You should let her make somethin', it would be amazin'."

"I'll think about it. Now if you don't mind, I need to prepare. I think some things still need to be set up outside, so I'd be grateful if you were to help out that... very energetic pink earth pony out there, would you?"

Applejack nodded. "Sure thing, ma'am."

"Call me Aile. I can't stand all that formal 'ma'am' stuff, I won't have any of it."

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Most of Ponyville had come out to see the show, and Applejack knew why as soon as it had started. Her show consisted of telling well known stories and myths with a visual display, a huge illusion for the entire crowd. Yet for each individual, it was like they were there, watching it play out before them as their point of vision flew into the sky, trailed behind the characters, as if they were a bird or a ghost. It was an experience she had never felt before, being so entangled in the situation even if she was just an

onlooker, not taking action and simply watching as a ghost. The first story was how the six of them had defeated Nightmare Moon; Applejack wondered how she had heard the story, but it was exactly correct, from Nightmare Moon appearing in Celestia's place, down to the speech Twilight Sparkle gave describing everypony's place as an element of harmony. The second story she recognized as well; It was the novel she had read at home the previous day.

The show itself only lasted about an hour and a half, with the two different stories, yet the party lasted into the evening. Being held mostly outside, ponies eventually started wandering in after it had started, and this kept it going for much longer than planned. Pinkie and Applejack had no problem keeping up with food, having retreated to the kitchen once to start up more confections for the party. The cakes had taken to serving and making sure everypony was satisfied, and everypony kept themselves happy, even without the show. Aile seemed more than happy to be the center of attention, answer questions and directing onlookers as if it was a practiced skill. Idle chatter was shared between the both Pinkie Pie and Applejack whenever they went back to the kitchen, and it was more fun than Applejack had had in a while. It seemed nopony was acting strange that night either.

It was finally over around six o'clock that night, when everypony had finally left except for Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and both Mr. and Mrs. Cake. They all decided they'd clean up, even if it was only Pinkie's responsibility; they had helped prepare, so there was no reason not to help clean up. It didn't take them long to make significant headway with the help of Rarity's magic and Rainbow Dash speedily moving anything else.

Pinkie Pie was still her happy usual self, even after such a long celebration. Her grin fell when she heard Applejack say she had to leave. "Don't go just yet Applejack!" Almost everypony had gone home already; both Rarity and Rainbow Dash had already left, and the cakes had nothing left to do outside. "I, uhm... we need to... you know, clean up the kitchen a little!"

Applejack looked past the pink earth pony to the kitchen. Indeed, it was very messy, with some bowls, pans, spots on the floor, the occasional pile of flour; it was just a wreck. She sighed. "Okay but ah'm not washin' anythin', ah'm just gonna pick up."

The clean up took ten minutes.

"Ah've gotta be off now, okay Pinkie Pie? Ah'll see you later." Applejack was just walking out the front entrance when Pinkie Pie grabbed her tail. Applejack spun around and gave Pinkie a stern look, but the pink pony recoiled immediately, already cowering on the ground.

"P-please don't go Applejack... please..." she was begging. Applejack had never heard Pinkie Pie beg before.

"What in Equestria is wrong with you Pinkie Pie?" She filled her voice with as much concern as she could muster.

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” She yelled, which made Applejack take a few steps back. “I mean, I’m normal... I’m just... just... a little... tense.” She looked away, almost ashamed to meet the farmer’s gaze. “I’ve just... I really wanted to spend some time with you today, but we didn’t get to...”

Applejack smiled reassuringly, and moved her head to catch Pinkie Pie’s far-off gaze. “Why don’t we meet up tomorrow, and we can hang out all day. Ah’d like it if ya told me what has been botherin’ you so much, okay Pinkie Pie?” Pinkie started to smile again, and Applejack continued. “Ah’m pretty tired after that party, and all our bakin’ that we were doin’ in here, so ah need to go home and rest up a bit, okay?” It wasn’t really a lie; she was somewhat tired, and she figured hanging out with Pinkie Pie again after dinner would leave her much more drained than she wanted.

Pinkie Pie grinned instantly and hugged Applejack. “No problem AJ! I know all kinds of things we can do tomorrow! I even have the day off again!” Applejack was already expecting a torrent of words, the list of things they might do the next day, but instead felt Pinkie Pie release her and stand back a few feet away, warmly smiling at her. *Is she already expectin’ me to leave?* Pinkie Pie was acting so drastically different that it appeared to visually upset the Applejack without her even realizing it; Pinkie Pie frowned, almost like she was responding to the farmer’s thoughts

Applejack corrected her stance before saying goodbye. “Ah’ll see ya tomorrow, Sugarcube.” She quickly exited the store, waving with one hoof as she walked on towards her home. Pinkie Pie waved from the door, and then turned around and slowly entered the store with what Applejack thought was a solemn face.

The town was somewhat darker than she realized. It was close to half-past six, and being late in the summer meant the sun would be setting sooner. It was a gradual change every year, but it always took her a long time to notice when the sun would start setting so much later. The sky was set ablaze, as if a fire had been lit. Streaks of purple were a haze, Luna’s moon seeming to want to inch its way into the sky and replace the now setting sun. Everything in Ponyville seemed steeped in the thick, yellow-and-orange light, everything looking monochrome. She pulled her hat down more over her eyes so she could see past the glaring light-

She stopped herself just short of colliding with a pony that was walking by her. Applejack’s gaze had been wandering so much that she hadn’t noticed a pony crossing the main path out of town, and had almost collided with her side. Applejack tilted her head. “Sorry ‘bout that. Guess mah head was in the clouds.”

She noticed it was the magician again. She had just emerged from the inn, still wearing the same clothes she had earlier. She tilted her head slightly so that she could see Applejack past the hood. “Just be a little more careful.” Her tone was utterly indifferent, most of her face still hidden by the sunlight and the hood.

Applejack looked at her puzzled, and hesitated before asking, “Everything all right there? You seem a might out of it.”



“It is as I said. Be a little more careful.” Applejack thought she could make out a smirk on Aile’s face when she started again, saying quietly, almost a whisper, “You will be the first to fall.” The sunlight made her whole body seem like a giant shadow as she continued walking, turning sharply and walking past Applejack down the main path.

Applejack brought a hoof across her sweat-covered forehead, as if wiping off solidified tension that had clung to her face. Her first encounter with Aile had been... refreshing, and comfortable. She felt on edge now, as if her very presence had been subtly poking at Applejack physically. *It was probably just some magic after effect, after all, she musta been worn out after that show. But what was that last thing she said? What the hay was that about?*

She thought about her suspicions from earlier as she walked home. *If Aile is this pony that’s messin’ with our heads, why would she come out like she just did and say something so... odd? Surely she wants to hide herself, so she can be near us? Applejack shook her head. She must have some kind of plan... she otherwise she would just never show up, she wouldn’t draw any attention to herself... so does she want me thinkin’ about this? Applejack took one hoof and rubbed her temple with it as she walked, feeling more confused than before, and coming to the same conclusion she did every time: Twilight can figure this out, she knows about magic and potions and all that stuff. Ah should just stop worryin’ about it.*

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“Applebloom, why don’t you believe yer big sister?” Applejack asked, frustrated. Just before her bedtime, Applebloom had walked into Applejack’s room to ask her how she was doing. Five minutes into the conversation, Applebloom started talking about Rainbow Dash. “We apologized; we made up! Ah don’t see why you don’t believe me!”

“Cause I saw her after the party, sis!” Applejack gave her an inquisitive look. “Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo were there too you know... but that’s not the point. After the party, Rainbow Dash... she asked me somethin’ about you...”

“What did she ask ya?”

“She... asked if you had dated anypony before. She looked really concerned and sad and stuff too.” Applebloom looked sad as she answered the question.

*That... darn Rainbow...* Applejack’s face hardened, but kept her voice calm. “What did you tell her?”

“The truth. I don’t know if you’ve dated anypony before.”

“That stupid pegasus... she shouldn’t be goin’ behind my back like this.” Applejack gave a

frustrated sigh. “Ah’ll ask her what this is all about tomorrow. Ah’m hopin’ this ain’t about a date or somethin’, cause she’s gonna be disappointed...”

“What do you mean?” Applebloom asked, genuinely curious.

“Cause ah... you know, don’t like mares like she does. Ah prefer... colts...” Applejack failed to mince her own words, but Applebloom seemed to fully understand anyway.

“So your barn door don’t swing that way?” She asked, almost giggling.

“Don’t talk about it like that Applebloom.” Applejack said sternly. “But yeah... that’s... that’s why...” her thoughts caught her off guard as Applebloom walked away, sensing a kind of finality to the discussion.

*Rainbow Dash... it was all she could do to get herself to her bed and lie down on it. Ah hope ah’m gettin’ this wrong, because ah don’t want you to be so hurt in such a short time. Yer strong, but you’ve been through so much...* She looked to her clock, noting it was just past 10 PM. She decided she’d get to bed early, and wake up just as early the next morning. After all, she had a day scheduled to hang out with Pinkie Pie, and there was no telling what plans they would have for the oncoming day.

And so she slept a peaceful dreamless sleep; so made sure the pink-and-yellow pegasus, lying vigilantly on a cloud above the Apple household. Seeing the farmer fall asleep, she too nodded off, falling asleep atop her cloud soon after.