

# Clipped

by nohbrows

When they arrived at Canterlot General Hospital late that afternoon, the frenzied crowd accompanying the peak hours of open visitation had already dissipated. The lobby was sparsely populated with the odd patient and indifferent visitor -- the kind that showed up out of duty.

The two of them walked towards the Welcome Desk, hoofsteps echoing around the lobby as they made their way over the marble flooring. It made a sharp click that disturbed the very quietness around them, out of place. Just like the two of them. She was wearing nothing but a broadbrimmed hat; he was wearing a yoke.

The receptionist barely gave them a glance.

“Just take a seat in the lobby,” the receptionist said with a tired sigh, putting down her fretlock trimmers. “I’ll go get you two when they’re ready for you.”

The mare took the pencil in her mouth and signed her name anyways. “Applejack,” she wrote in a large, scraggly scrawl. She dropped the pencil down, picked up the basket of apples that she had set down on the counter, and sat down at a window-side couch.

“Hey Big Mac, you think they ever let her eat the apples?” Applejack asked.

The red, yoked stallion shrugged as he took a seat next to her.

“She always liked them though. Especially the first ones of the season. She really did. It’s really nice of Applebloom to send these to us every year,” Applejack said. Big Mac kept chewing a piece of straw. Applejack fell silent. “Now I wonder what’s keeping them. It’s almost suppertime.”

When receptionist finally called them up, the sun had gone down. The overhead lights flickered on, replacing the soft orange of dusk with a harsh, fluorescent light. Evening seemed to rejuvenate the lobby. Ponies shuffled in, many bearing balloons, flowers, the occasional plush toy. A pair of paramedics burst through a side door, wheeling a stretcher with a hysterical pegasus on it. A filly cried, screaming that she didn’t want to get shots as her mother dragged her towards the Welcome Desk. An elderly couple was being escorted out of the hospital by a pair of orderlies -- the wife confined to a wheelchair, the husband limping along on three legs. The filly started running towards the exit, colliding into the wheelchair and toppling the orderlies. Angry shouts broke the still air of the lobby. The filly cried harder.

The receptionist handed them their visitor passes. “Same place as usual,” she said, indifferent to the chaos occurring at the lobby front. “You might have to wait again though. Patient escaped into the pediatric ward. Made a huge mess.”

“I can wait,” Applejack said.

“Yeah. Just make sure no worms get into your apples.” The receptionist waved them past.

“Psychiatry and Psychotherapy,” the sign over the ward’s entrance said in big, red letters. The nurse on duty told them that their visitation would be delayed by a little bit, as all doctors on duty were busy subduing a particularly difficult patient. Applejack said it was fine, and the brother-sister pair stood around in the corridor. Big mac said he had to go use the restroom and left the ward. Applejack began reading the little informational pamphlets they had in a small, plastic stand next to the head doctor’s office. “Depression”, one said. “Schizophrenia: Nothing to fear,” read another. A brightly colored poster, a picture of a pretty, young mare smiling against a garden backdrop, hung over the pamphlet stand, asking, “Alzheimer’s Disease can begin early. Do you know the warning signs?” Applejack found the constant, smiling portrait unnerving.

“Miss Applejack?” A nurse poked her head out of one of the doors in the corridor. “She’s ready to see you.” Applejack took her basket of apples and followed her to a nondescript, metal door at the end of the hall. The nurse flashed her ID card to the guard sitting in the windowed booth left of the door.

“Sorry about the delay,” the nurse said as the security guard buzzed them into the visitor’s room. “One of the patients escaped from psychotherapy this morning. Ran off while the doctor wasn’t looking. We found him in the long-term filly-care wing, trying to juggle the dinner trays.”

“He must have gave the fillies quite a scare,” Applejack said.

“No, not really. He’s terrified of the little things. Take a seat. She’ll be right out.”

Applejack set the basket down on a plain, metal table. The room was sparsely furnished. The linoleum flooring was stained green with age. The only light was flickering. She was alone in the room. Visitation had been over for hours. Moonlight streamed in from the barred windows.

The door squeaked open.

A blue pegasus shuffled into the room. Her rainbow colored mane was unkempt, stray strands sticking out at odd angles. Grease and sweat discolored the shades dull. She stared straight down at the ground as she and the nurse walked over to Applejack. Her eyes sagged, dark circles underneath them.

The nurse left, saying they had thirty minutes.

“Hi Rainbow,” Applejack said with a smile. “How are you doing?”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. She stood there, in front of Applejack, head turned away and staring unfocused at the windows and the moonlight. Appledash picked up the basket of apples and held them up to Rainbow Dash.

“I brought apples! First picks of the season. You always loved the first ones, especially the Fujis and Reds!” said Appledash in a muffled voice. She put the apples back down and continued. “So how are

things with you?"

"Fine," Rainbow Dash said in a thin, cracked voice. She was still staring out at the moon.

They didn't say anything for a long time. The two of them stood side by side, looking out at the moon as it hung low over Canterlot Castle. Applejack leaned her head against Rainbow Dash's shoulder. The pegasus stood there, stiff, unaware or indifferent to the orange earthpony. Applejack closed her eyes.

She must have dozed, for the next thing she knew, someone was lightly tapping her on the shoulder.

"Miss Applejack?" It was the nurse. "I am sorry, but time is up. I need to take Rainbow Dash back now."

"I'll see you next time, Rainbow," Applejack said, giving her a hug.

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Applejack was told to come back some other time when she made her weekly visit to Psychiatry and Psychotherapy.

"I am sorry," the doctor had said. "We are going to need to keep her under observation."

A nurse had walked into Rainbow Dash's cell room during the nightly medication rounds right as the pegasus was repeatedly throwing herself against the windows. It had taken several orderlies to finally stop her, said the doctor in a tired voice.

"Broke one of the orderly's ribs. First a loose patient, now this."

Applejack and Big Mac exited the hospital, hopped into the carriage, and told the guards to take them back to their castle suite. The carriage got to a lurching start, rattling down the cobblestone streets. Applejack closed the carriage's window curtains, plunging the inside into a darkness, the only light coming from the tiny gaps at the edges of the windows.

*Simple.* That was what the doctors had said after the accident. But as time went on, medical treatment seemed to prove ineffective. The best scientists, mages and doctors in all of Equestria puzzled over the case. Magic couldn't save her -- it would destroy her personality. Therapy proved pointless. Surgery -- fatal. Papers after papers had been published, debating what exactly was causing the mental illness they were now calling "Traumatic Catatonia." The papers agreed on the basic facts though.

The root cause was excessive head trauma. She had been training with the Wonderbolts right before the Grand Galloping Gala. It had been a particularly dangerous formation they had come up with for that year's Gala. The stunt had been in its final loop when Rainbow Dash was caught in the wake turbulence of the pointpony. She had spun out. First responders remarked she had been lucky to survive the crash, given that it was done headfirst.

She didn't lapse into a complete catatonic state immediately. Rainbow Dash had insisted that

she'd be able to fly once she had left the hospital. But the fall had ruined her sense of balance. The team was forced to let her go.

"I *will* learn how to fly again," Rainbow Dash had vowed to Applejack after the earth pony arrived in Canterlot to help take care of her. "No matter what it takes, I will become a Wonderbolt again. Just you watch." So Applejack had watched. Day after day, Applejack watched the blue pegasus go to the Royal Racing Grounds. Day after day, Applejack watched her struggle to stay airborne. And day after day, Applejack watched her friend slip deeper and deeper into this obsession of flying again. One night, following a particularly spectacular crash, Applejack had argued with Rainbow Dash to stop trying to fly again before she hurt herself for good. Rainbow Dash stormed out. Come morning, she was found sitting still on the racetrack lawn, mumbling to herself, "I will fly." It was the last sentence Applejack heard her say. The pegasus slipped into a semi-catatonic state. Unresponsive in all sense of the word.

She was admitted to Psychiatry and Psychotherapy to be placed under study and treatment. While largely unaware of the world, there had been bursts of flight-attempts from time to time. Once, she had jumped out an open window.

Fearing for her safety, the hospital clipped her wings.

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The carriage dropped them off in front of one of the tower suites inside the Canterlot Castle walls.

"I don't want to eat with the princess tonight, Big Mac," Applejack said. "You go on without me. I'll just get something brought up from the kitchens." Her older brother contemplated this for a while, then nodded in agreement. He started a slow, leisurely pace towards the main castle hall. Applejack went up the stairs.

She walked inside the small suite at the top of tower. She hung her hat next to the door, dusted off her hooves, walked to the phone and dialed the castle kitchens. Something simple, she told the chef.

On her way to the bathroom, Applejack paused in front of a large showcase with an electric blue uniform hung up inside. It was a full body suit with a hood, goggles, hoof protectors and mask. Lighting bolts ran down the sides and in tiny letters on the front it said "Wonderbolts," and beneath that, "Lt. R. Dash." The hood was scuffed and stained a faint green, the goggles cracked. The doorbell rang, breaking the silent vigil in front of the uniform. Dinner had arrived.

When she finished the salad and drank the soup bowl clean, she went to the dresser and pulled out from the top drawer a pack of playing cards and a photo album. She pulled open the card table, shuffled the cards, and started laying out a game of solitaire -- a nightly ritual that seemed to have started almost out of whim.

Applejack opened up the photo album following her third play through. She flipped through the pages with an almost deliberate slowness. The edges were worn, the photos starting to lift up off the page as the glue deteriorated with time. She examined each one as if it was the first time she was seeing these photos. There they were, together, the six of them, on a lawn somewhere on the outer edges of Ponyville.

All of them smiling, happy, the last time the six will meet all at once. Rainbow Dash standing in front of some old mansion, in full dress uniform, holding a bouquet of flowers. Applejack started flipping through the pages more quickly. A grand stand at one of the Wonderbolts' tour stops. Los Pegasus, Manehattan, Canterlot, Baltimore, Canterlot again, an apartment building with two ponies -- one orange, the other blue -- on the porch. Here, Rainbow Dash and herself touring the Weather Factory. A shaky photo of the two ice skating. Another showed the two sitting by a campfire in a woods somewhere -- the next showed the tripod. Then it went onto a page of portraits that the two had taken together after Rainbow Dash had been commissioned into the Wonderbolts' main flying squad. One with Rainbow Dash in full dress uniform, another in flight suit, yet another with the two of them sitting side by side, eyes twinkling even in the faded black and white photo, bright smiles threatening to white out the page.

She had arrived at a page full of the two running together in the Running of the Leaves when Big Mac returned. Applejack quickly closed the album.

"Hi Big Mac. How was dinner?" Applejack asked.

"Good," he replied in usual curt fashion.

"That's swell. Hope the princess wasn't offended."

"Nope."

"Alright, well I'm going to catch some shuteye." Applejack put away the cards and the album. "G'night." Applejack walked into her room and shut the door behind her.

Moments later the door burst open. There was a flurry of paper as Big Mac dropped the newspaper he had been reading.

"I can't sleep!" Applejack said.

"Why can't you sleep?" Big Mac asked.

"I can't sleep because I can't live like this anymore. I can't go on living knowing that Rainbow Dash is in the hospital and I can't do anything about it. I can't just visit her once a week and pretend that everything is alright. I can't just leave her and come back the next week assuming that she will be there to for me to visit the next week!" Applejack paused to collect her breath. "I can't stand it no longer."

Applejack started to pace the room. Big Mac followed her with his eyes.

"I know what we'll do!" Applejack said, abruptly stopping her pacing. "We'll have her move into the palace! I've got it all figured out. First--"

The phone rang. It was past midnight, an hour that no one usually called. Applejack picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" Applejack asked. She wondered if it was the hospital.

“Hello?” said a timid, tinny voice on the other end of the line. “I’m looking for Rosemary.”

“I am sorry, but you have the wrong number sweetheart.” Applejack hung up.

“Where was I?” Applejack paused for a moment. “Oh yes. First, we will have to move to a room somewhere downstairs so Rainbow can have an easier time going back and forth. We can take turns watching over her during the night. And then maybe the princesses could spare some of their staff to help us out. I mean, we won’t be a burden, but it would be better than just having Rainbow Dash all alone in there--oh for crying out loud!”

The phone rang. Same timid, tinny voice, looking for the same Rosemary.

“Look. Sugarcube. Let me be real clear with this. You have got the wrong number. Let me tell you what you are doing wrong. You are mistaking Canterlot Vistas for Canterlot Palace. Make sure you have the operator get it straight,” said Applejack.

Applejack eyes were alight with excitement. She continued on with her plans, explaining with great pains the finer details. Big Mac just sat there and listened, nodding attentively.

“I am going to get some coffee. All this talk has made me thirsty,” said Applejack. She went into the kitchen. She came back with a tray of two cups of Ponyville roast. She handed one to Big Mac. The two sat in silence, sipping at the hot coffee. She pulled out the album and started going through the pictures again. She had gotten to Rainbow Dash’s inaugural flight when the phone rang again.