

Elements of Discord Interlude: The Poison Apple Tree
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“Well, ain’t nuthin’ fer it but ta dew it. It’s a shameful thing and it’s gonna break a lotta hearts. But it’s only right. The boy shoulda knowed better than ta dew sumthin’ like that.” Granny Smith, the iron-hoofed ruler of the giant Apple clan, mildly tottered around the Apple family homestead, carrying a photograph of Braeburn against her pastern and chest.

“Gotta dew wut, Granny?” Applejack looked on curiously. Granny Smith never moved that fast normally. Nor did she really speak that often without very good reason.

“Ah’ve just gotten word from way out in Appleloosa. Yer cousin Braeburn is off dewin’... Well, t’aint right. It’s wrong. He’s breakin’ all kinds of rules with his disgustin’ ways. He might spread his own evil through our family and that ain’t right.” Granny Smith reached a large, almost-blank wall. The only thing on it was the image of a smiling caramel-colored pony with slicked-back black hair dressed in a nice suit, with a ruffled shirt and lace at his throat. Beside that picture was hung the image of Braeburn. “So, he’s on our wall of shame. Let none in the family speak of him again. Now, ah gotta inform everypony.”

Granny Smith scooted, slowly, away towards her writing desk. It was the starting point for any Apple family message. A simple letter to each of her children, that she spoke to, would be filtered out to all their children and related persons through marriage.

While Granny Smith was distracted, Applejack looked at the wall. It seemed almost ridiculous. So much space, all dedicated to two pictures. Her uncle Bad Apple, and now her cousin Braeburn. At least uncle Bad Apple wasn’t alone anymore. Not that it was a good thing. And, she reflected, Braeburn would never know. No one would be allowed to talk to him anymore and tell him why he wasn’t allowed in the Apple family anymore. It wasn’t right.

Applejack dashed off to her apple cellar, where she did a lot of her private things. She had a little writing desk, salvaged from the trash and cleaned up, with some stationery and a pencil well-chewed near the end. She wasn’t a very good, flashy writer, but she could do it.

She sat down before her desk, took the pencil in her teeth and began to slowly write out a letter. “Dear Mister Bradley X. Higgsbotham, Esq., It’s me again. Applejack. I got sum news for Braeburn. Think you can run to Appleloosa? ...”

Observation Day Three, Seven AM: Rainbow Dash seen sleeping in her cloud. Scheming. No doubt she’s preparing for another day of deception.

Eight AM: Still sleeping.

Nine AM: Still sleeping. Lazy liar.

Nine-forty-seven AM: Rainbow Dash woke up and began eating a plate of apple fritters, most likely gained through deception.

Ten-oh-one AM: Rainbow Dash seen talking to Pinkie Pie. Seemed very close, tried to touch her. Maybe. The motion was inconclusive as Pinkie Pie was moving at the time.

Observation Day Six, Five-seventeen PM: Rainbow Dash seen with Applejack. Much conversation, mostly of inconsequential things, including talk of the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Not informative.

Observation Day Seven, Noon: During a necessary lunch break to shake suspicion from Spike, Rarity came to visit. Fluttershy was with her. No sign of Rainbow Dash despite normal proximity as some times. Rarity was attempting to size me for some dress or another that she was making. Politely refused. Rarity persisted. Fluttershy assisted. Refused. Subjected to pleading eyes. Refused with strained smile. Rarity backed down, walking out while Fluttershy spoke quietly to her.

Observation Day Twelve, Three AM: Rainbow Dash seen asleep. Allegedly. Observing to check for covert dalliances during the night. Must get more caffeine.

Observation Day Twelve, Ten-Twenty AM: Woke from an unrealized slumber to Rarity touching flank, with a ruler. Making comments to Fluttershy about ride and sizing. She had some kind of bluish-black monstrosity of a dress that was well-made but clearly over-the-top. Said so. Rarity retreated in tears. THE STARE received from Fluttershy on leaving. Must get more espressos.

Observation Day Thirteen: Rainbow Dash passed near Pinkie Pie. Intentionally.

Observation Day Sixteen: Rainbow Dash spent more time with Applejack.

Observation Day Eighteen: Rainbow Dash talked to Fluttershy and nudged her. Deception!

Observation Day twenty: Rainbow Dash hovered close to someone. The particulars are inconsequential. Contact was nearly attained. Even more deception!

Observation day Twenty-One

Observation Day Twenty-Seven

Observation

Observation

Observation...

The time had finally come. No more observations. No more torture with images of Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, being friendly. Action was necessary. Twilight Sparkle had to act. So, she wrapped herself in a black cloak and galloped off into the Everfree Forest, losing herself in the shadows of nature unleashed.

She trotted along the overgrown ways, following a narrow path carved through the choking growth by regular travel. It was a thin road through, but it was remarkably clear, even in the near-moonless night. She could make out the small hoof prints that had been worn in the dirt, going and coming over and over again, carving down the road with the regularity of their passing.

Nothing disturbed her on the journey. None of the normal hazards of the Everfree Forest interrupted her trek, which would have seemed unusual had she not been away of the lingering scent of herbs along the trail. A particular mixture that was faintly repellant to the monsters of the forest. It waded for easy passage from beginning to end.

At last, her destination came into view. The darkened home of Zecora. It was not as brightly lit as normal, but smoke still poured from the chimney which told of the zebra's presence. That was what Twilight desired. She was certain Zecora was just the one to help her with her problem. She had all kinds of skills. She was certain to know of many herbal techniques for doing what was necessary.

The low fire and fresh herbal scent, however, made Twilight Sparkle slowly move towards the house, stealthily peeking into the window to ascertain what was happening within.

She saw Zecora before the fire; it got chilly in the Everfree forest, even in the summer. Her back was mostly to Twilight Sparkle and she was slightly curled around a second figure. It was Applebloom, similarly curled, but in a fully flat posture. She appeared to be asleep as an effect of the warmth of the fire.

Zecora leaned her head down to gently brush her snout across Applebloom's cheek, causing the small filly to smile and lightly move. A smile drifted across Zecora's features, then fell into a melancholy aspect. "Though love is sweet it is our fate/ To make no move; all things must wait." Zecora bent down again and placed a soft kiss on Applebloom's cheek.

There was no indication of anything, yet Zecora's head came up, and looked around slowly. She never looked at the window with Twilight Sparkle in it, but she spoke out, loud enough to be heard, but too soft to awaken Applebloom. "Soak in revenge, of blood drink your fill!" Her head went down again, to kiss Applebloom once more and then rise again, head turned to glare hotly at Twilight Sparkle. "But it will not be I who helps you kill."

The steely gaze and direct words were enough. Twilight Sparkle galloped off into the night, back to Ponyville, to her books. She had important research to do.

"Twilight! The Cutie Mark Crusaders are here! Twilight?" Days later, long after the trip to Zecora's, and after the end of the observations. Spike gazed into the depths of the library. Though it was an open space there were still a few blind areas. And Twilight Sparkle had a habit of hiding in odd places when she wanted to study. "Come on, let's go find her."

The search was short, but enlightening. Around one of the small, blind turns that followed the curve of the tree, they found what looked like a fortress made of books piled up high, along with pages of notes spotted with ink from a too-rapid use of a quill pen. Visible within the pile of books was Twilight Sparkle. She looked thinner than she had been before, and far more pale. She twitched her head rapidly between multiple books as she flipped through pages and scratched jittery notes onto a piece of paper. "It's here, it's here, it's here... It has to be here. Where did it go?"

"Uh... Twilight... I hate to interrupt your nervous breakdown, but the Cutie Mark Crusaders are here to get that talk you promised them." Spike was rather surprised by Twilight's appearance. True, it had been more than a week since he last saw her. She had been engaged in something for a while, and had simply dropped out of their regular meals together a week or so before.

“Yea, yea, Cutie Mark Crusaders...” Twilight Sparkle never even looked up, she simply flipped through the hefty tomes, focused on the words within them while the notes were scribbled more furiously.

“Uh, Twilight? Ah’m missin’ an herbalism lesson from Zecora bein’ here. An’ we all respect ya. So we’re here fer the wisdom yew promised us. An’ maybe after yew can tell Sweetie Belle to give me a better part in her play. She made me the annoyin’ friend! Ah am not annoyin’!” Applebloom stomped her hooves and scowled at Sweetie Belle.

“Hey! You leave Sweetie alone! She did the best she could, but it was written as a two-star play! The only thing left is the villain, and that’s a colt role.” Scootaloo immediately stepped protectively in front of Sweetie Belle, staring down Applebloom with all of her fire, almost touching heads with her.

“Scootaloo... Come on, don’t yell. She’s right. It’s not perfect. But it’s the best I can do. There’s no room for a third star. It’s hard enough with two. Scootaloo is really the star; I’m just an afterthought for the plot.”

“Still, ah don’t like bein’ the annoyin’ one. Ah ain’t annoyin’, am ah Twilight? Twilight?” Applebloom looked pleadingly to the unicorn, eyes big and watery.

Throughout the entire exchange, Twilight Sparkle had grown more and more annoyed, teeth grinding and eyes slowly going closed. At the culmination of it all she turned on the group and screamed, mane leaping into illusory flames. “I’m trying to concentrate! This is important research and I need to focus! Can’t you see that?”

There was a moment of extreme shock, Spike planting his hands over his mouth, Sweetie Belle tucking her head fearfully under Scootaloo’s head, Applebloom taking a trembling step backwards. After that, Spike dropped his hands, trembling slightly. “T-twilight? What’s going on? Why did you just..?”

Twilight Sparkle’s bloodshot eyes softened suddenly, her mouth opening slightly with her breath panting out. Her face moved into one of realization, a clear appreciation of what she had done. “I... I don’t know... I don’t know what came over me. Oh my little ponies... I’m so sorry. I’ve just been... I’m so busy lately. I don’t even... Oh... I’m sorry.”

The Cutie Mark Crusaders remained stunned and shaken, though Scootaloo made an effort to look protective and strong while Sweetie Belle had her head tucked under her chin. They said nothing as they walked out, slowly, Scootaloo pressed against Sweetie Belle, Applebloom looking back at Twilight Sparkle a few times. Spike shook his head at Twilight Sparkle and looked askance at her. “Geez, Twilight. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh Spike... I don’t... I don’t know...” Twilight Sparkle looked down at her books with some sense of clarity. The insanity of her lack of sleep faded somewhat under her sense of shame. Her horn glowed as she tremblingly took up the quill again, scribbling out a quick note. “Please, send this to the princess. I need to visit one of my old professor and she’d know if he’s still at the Canterlot Academy of Advanced Studies.”

Spike took the piece of paper and breathed his signature green flames onto it, sending it away in a puff of smoke. “So, which one is it? Is in that really dry one that always smelled like ointment?”

“Ugh, no, not Professor Windy. I think he retired years ago anyhow. There was some kind of big celebration, and he got upset that they were sending him off with a band and party hats. It was so Pinkie Pie. Pinkie... No, I mean my Honors Advanced Magical Effects and Outcomes teacher. You know, the one that was always reading poetry and liked to give impromptu speeches about poets.”

“Oh yea! That guy. He was great, he always kept cheap diamonds in his desk drawer for me. It’s been a while, do you think he...” Spike’s speech was interrupted by a loud belch, which produced, in a flourish of green flame, a tightly-rolled scroll. “Oh, here you go.”

Twilight Sparkle unrolled the scroll with a flash of her horn, scanning the contents. Her eyes suddenly grew wide. It was no ordinary letter. Princess Celestia had much to say. And it all connected to what she had been reading. The sleep-deprived madness returned, preying on her rational mind. It was there, always there, the mania and paranoia born of sleepless nights and obsessed observation. This was what brought it fully forward. The triumph of the green-eyed monster. With another flash, she took up the quill to write another letter. “This needs to go out, immediately. I need dispensation for a little trip.”

“Dispensation? That’s a little serious. I thought dispensation was the kind of thing you needed if you wanted to get into, like, Paddock 51, or Silo 13.”

“Spike, Paddock 51 and Silo 13 don’t really exist. They’re just fantasies by those crazy ponies that wear foil on their heads. Well, Paddock 51 is kind of a real place but it’s a training ground for the elite

Pegasus guards and Unicorn guards. Anyway, it's just an expression. I was, after all, told to remain in Ponyville, and only travel with my new friends to learn all about the magic of friendship. This would be moving away from that, for a while. I want to make certain the Princess knows what's going on and gives me her ok." Twilight Sparkle smiled brightly at her friend, reddened eyes shining as she handed over the note.

"I'm telling you, they exist!" Spike dutifully breathed fire onto the note and then turned his attention fully to Twilight Sparkle. "They're where they hide all the weird and unexplained things from all over Equestria. They've got, like, robots and lightning statues and space chariots! And in Paddock 51 they have these weird things that don't look anything like anything in Equestria, and all the stuff they brought with them."

"Come on, Spike, you've got to stop reading the weird magazines that they sell on the sides of the stands. They'll rot your brain. There's no mysterious artifacts, and no weird creatures from outside of Equestria. Princess Celestia would have told me, I know it. Sadly, Spike, the world is less interesting than you might think. Just focus on things like manticores and hydras."

"Come on, you have to admit there are strange things happening out there. Those weird patterns that pop up in fields with lights in the sky, and the stories of mares lifted up from their beds at night and getting probed by..."

"Woah! You REALLY shouldn't be reading THOSE kinds of magazines."

"Twilight, I'm in my early 30's. Dragons can buy anything that ponies can buy. In Pony cities. Man, dragons don't let you buy ANYTHING until you're about a hundred." As Spike pouted he gave a loud belch, far larger than the usual kind. What resulted was a large and fancy scroll, capped in gold, with silver-colored paper and sealed with wax containing the royal signet. Before Spike could grab it, Twilight Sparkle snagged it with her power. "Woah! Fancy! Are you sure you're not going to Silo 13?"

"I told you, Spike, there's no such thing as Silo 13. This is just a little travel document showing the Princess knows where I'll be. Nothing special." Bloodshot eyes sparkled as they regarded the document.

"Ahhh, yes. Visitation. The one boon in the life of a retired stallion. And such a visitor. My best student, which I say without reservation. You were truly exemplary. I was unsurprised Celestia took you as her personal student. My only shock was that it took so long." A unicorn stallion rose from a low couch and approached Twilight Sparkle with a smile. He was an older stallion, but not very, no real, clear signs worn into his face. His air was matured, however, experienced. His whole body was black, a pure and deep black, while his long and flowing mane was purest white, the hair so long it reached to his equally white tail. On his flank, a thin crescent moon, barely more than a tiny shine in the field of black. On his face was a pince-nez, with bifocal lenses.

"Professor Crescent Sliver... It was such a surprise to hear you had retired by your own choice. I had assumed you would work as long as you were capable. You seemed to truly love to teach. And Princess Celestia always relied on you to identify students with the greatest potential." Twilight Sparkle looked around her old teacher's sitting room. The low couch was matched by another set a short distance away; a small table with seating for two was nearby; a bookshelf filled with heavy tomes rested near the back of the space; and all around there were potted plants that looked well tended.

"I have moved on to a new phase, to the proper activity of puttering and watering potted plants, as every old educator does at some point in their life. It was my fate, my former student. Inevitable. But, I suspect, that was not your reason for coming to this place. I rather suspect your motives. But I wish to hear it from your own mouth."

Twilight Sparkle fell rather heavily onto the second couch, attempting to maintain her dignity against the effect of her sleep deprivation and general weakness. She shook her head firmly and looked to her former professor with tired eyes. "I have been making a study. Of ancient myths and legends..."

"One of your specialties, I note. Even then. And it served you well, as I understand. News filters to me but slowly; however, I learned of your actions." The professor cut in on Twilight Sparkle with a smile.

"Yes, Professor. And in this study... I learned about a power. A great power. One of the rarest magics in all of Equestria. So strong and so secret that it is scarcely mentioned for fear of what it could do. Greater than Nightmare Moon because it is a branch of magic that has terrible consequences..." Twilight Sparkle leaned forward, eyes shifting side-to-side. "The power of destruction. Not merely second-order destruction. Not casting objects to destroy or making other objects do one's bidding and destroying. Direct, hard, unrelenting destruction of a living being. According to legend, the masters of the technique could do

most anything. Spontaneous combustion from the inside out, reversal of the body from in to out, detonation, even small-portal banishment into utter vacuum.”

“Yes. Yes. The terrible branch of magic that exists to maintain the parity of all the goodness in our world. Not merely an expression of natural evil which none may perfectly control, but the working of genuine malfeasance.”

Twilight Sparkle hesitated, her rational mind considering what she was doing. Then she thought of Pinkie Pie. “There was no indication of how it was learned, or even what the techniques may be. Not even a clue, clearly to protect others from it. Yet, it is magic. It can never truly die. When I wrote the Princess about you, asking if you were still at the Canterlot Academy of Advanced Studies, she told me... Among other things, you had this secret now. It was one of the reasons you retired. I still don’t understand. But... I wanted to seek you out for advice. And now, I can get more wonderful advice than I ever imagined. I beg of you... Please let me know the secret. Even the tiniest crumb of the knowledge. Surely your respect for me, and my position, as well as my knowledge makes you feel willing to give this to me, doesn’t it?”

The Professor hanged his head, a soft sigh passing his lips. “You are not the first pony, unicorn or otherwise if you can believe it, nor will you be the last, I suspect, who has come to me with this very request. With all your supplication and humility, though without your history. This power... What it allows me to see. The things ponies ask. I can make many an assumption. You need not answer. But I suspect, at the barest, that you are in love...”

“Yes.” Twilight Sparkle made a quick reply, snapping her head up and focusing intently on the stallion.

“I do not want the details. I don’t require them nor would they make a difference. What is it in the nature of love that turns it to this so much of the time? So many tales through all time, telling of this. Well... Your mare is a lucky one, I think. Seeing you here... Please do not grow too upset when I say it distresses me. Saddens me greatly. I always assumed that the one pony, the only one, I could rely on to never pass my door would be you. You were the one. The incorruptible one... But no matter. I’m afraid I must send you away unfulfilled.”

“Wh-what? Professor... I can promise you any number of things, and will fulfill them with the utmost fidelity. I can promise I will not develop whatever tiny piece of knowledge you grant to me. It will be used only once and then put from my mind, never to be used again. I won’t tell the Princess. So please... Please teach me. You know me. You can trust me.”

“I know. That trust, that history, tugs on my soul; my weak and sentimental soul. You, my dear visitor, my student... I am tempted to give it. I could trust you with anything. Even knowing the awful consequences of the tiniest morsel of this power, knowing with almost absolute certainty what you intend... Were it within my power I might still give it.”

“What do you mean, Professor? Can’t you teach me anything? You were one of the greatest instructors at the greatest academy of magic in all of Equestria.”

“There is one thing the ancient legends never tell, for the best, I think. This magic is special. As I said, there is a certain degree of parity in Equestria. Because of this, this power exists. But, it is not like other magic, which may be taught. It arises from a force, a power in and of itself, which passes from unicorn to unicorn. Not in a line, but almost at random. The end of one carrier brings forth a new carrier. It is like a curse, moving body to body. No goodness or evilness will draw it. It just... Comes. And it came to me, when the last holder expired. That is why I did what I did. Why I am here. And why you will leave here, with nothing.”

Twilight Sparkle’s face fell. Her last hope for resolution had withered and blown away. “A power that resides in you? Which came without you calling? Oh... If I didn’t know you, I’d suspect you were lying. But you don’t lie. But even so, when you discovered it, why didn’t you hide it and stay where you were? No one would ever have known.”

“Oh, I would know. But that is not the real concern. We are all, as you well know, good at heart by and large. But consider this. Bad days happen. Negativity comes to us all. Frustrations, accidents, the varied encounters of life. Imagine a bad day, with the power of annihilation. One accidental rage, and there is chaos and destruction. A single misplaced emotion or furious thought and everything burns around you. But think beyond even that. Think of cooled anger, or simple ambition. Think of what could be accomplished being able to be rid of any pony. All those in your way, gone. Accident, or by will... It was not worth the risk. Temptation is the worst thing in the world to give to any pony. So it was that things

happened as they did.”

“But it was such an extreme action. Why didn’t you simply tell Princess Celestia and then go about your life?”

“I did tell Celestia. As soon as I was certain I told her, and outlined my plans. She was like you. She advised me to keep my normal life. I told her what I told you. She was not pleased with my choice. But she understood it well enough. How could I ever trust that I would not be corrupted? It would be arrogant to assume I am immune. And so all precautions are prudent. As it was by my request, I could end it at any instant. But I choose to remain. It is not so bad here. It is, if you can believe, peaceful.” The professor clopped his hoof loudly several times, a burly Pegasus appearing in the barred doorway. “Please tell Saveur I’ll be having the apple and turnip stew tonight with cinnamon tarts afterwards. Be sure the others get some too.” The huge stallion nodded with a smile and trotted off.

“No matter how comfortable, or how much it was your will, it’s still a prison. And this place... What it does to magic.”

“That is the advantage of it. The natural warping and damping of magic makes any manifesting of magic spectacularly weak. And other precautions reduce any chance to nothing. I am... I am sorry, in a certain sense, for not being able to help you. But then again... Is there no other way?”

Twilight Sparkle slowly rose from the couch, looking down at the floor. “No, Professor. There is no other way...” She turned and began to slowly, dejectedly, clop out of the room, the door opened by the same Pegasus guard that had been there before.

Crescent Sliver gave it a thought and then began to quote. “*I was angry with my friend:/ I told my wrath, my wrath did end./ I was angry with my foe:/ I told it not, my wrath did grow./ And I watered it in fears,/ Night & morning with my tears;/ And I sunnd it with smiles,/ And with soft deceitful wiles./ And it grew both day and night,/ Till it bore an apple bright./ And my foe beheld it shine,/ And he knew that it was mine./ And into my garden stole,/ When the night had veiled the pole;/ In the morning glad I see/ My foe outstretched beneath the tree.*” The professor watched as Twilight Sparkle halted for a brief moment and went on out of the door.

As she passed down the twisting corridors of the deeply-cut mountain dungeon, Twilight Sparkle talked to the guard with her. “How is he? Really? I’m so worried now that I see him...”

“Oh we all like him. He’s given us a lot of good life advice. I was having some trouble in my marriage and I told the professor about it. A few good talks and now we’re happier than ever. We all try to make it as comfortable as we can. It’s not easy, but he seems happy just being here.” As the two walked along, they passed a deeply recessed chamber containing unicorns. There were more than a dozen, some engaged in a concentrated application of magic, the rest resting and eating. Their magic was clearly felt to be a dampening of magical effects, the precaution Crescent Sliver had mentioned.

Back in the cell, Crescent Sliver was back on his couch, contemplating. “*A different object do these eyes require;/ My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;/ And in my breast the imperfect joys expire...*” But he stopped, shaking his head, leaping immediately to the line he was destined to reach. “*And weep the more because I weep in vain.*”

“Thomas Gray never suited you, Crescent...” All of a sudden, Princess Celestia was at the entrance, smiling. “No poetry born of Sensibility did. Don’t you have something else for me?”

Crescent Sliver smiled, bright and cheerful, recovered from his existential state. “*While here I stand, not only with the sense Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts That in this moment there is life and food For future years.*” He got to his hooves and slowly approached. “Is that more to your taste, Celestia? I assure you, it is sincere.”

“Everything is music from you, Crescent.” Celestia settled herself carefully down on the second couch, more aware than usual of her size. “I gather from your lamenting Twilight has been here. And made you think of who you would prefer to see.”

“You must recall, for many a year I was used to seeing you each day. Raising the sun from your chamber and raising the moon before you left the academy. And as dear as Twilight Sparkle was to my old educator’s heart, she is no substitute for you.”

Princess Celestia smiled a bit, then sighed. “Did she... Did she ask what I thought she might?”

“As every other visitor who has heard a whisper. Love makes ponies do strange things. It was distressing. But, at the least, she will leave unsatisfied and be forced to find a new solution to her troubles. Perhaps her mare will give her some indication of a more peaceful resolution.”

“I wish I could help her. But she must learn on her own. Her lessons on magic are, for all intents and purposes, complete. Her lessons on life are up to her. She has been doing well. But now... I haven't seen a letter from her in over a month. And when I finally receive a letter, it asks about you. I almost wish I hadn't told her.”

“She would have grown even more eager had you said nothing. At least now she knows. And who knows? She may visit again. That would be lovely.”

Princess Celestia nodded her head slowly, still looking concerned. Then she looked up at Crescent Sliver with a smile. “And I am here. As you said, you looked forward to my visit most of all. There is much to say, very much.”

Twilight Sparkle never saw Princess Celestia. She left the mountain by a different route. When she arrived at the exit, she showed her travel dispensation to the guard that had seen her enter. It was a formality, but the entire dance was necessary to emphasize the secure nature of the place. She pulled on her black cloak, which she had left at the entrance and pulled the hood up. She looked down at the winding and rocky road that led back down the mountain. Everything was a hassle. But that was just sensible. One did not simply trot into the Mountains of Madness.

Applejack shook her head as she observed the mess in the orchard. High winds, ordered as a rush job, had swept through and made a mess out of the loose branches and leaves. It was another day of good times at Sweet Apple Acres. But she chose that life. It was better that tiny food and chortling city folk in Manehattan.

The first few twigs were scarcely gathered together before she felt a familiar chill in her back. It was like she had her own version of Pinkie Sense. She could just feel that nasty griffon in her bones before the words were out of her mouth. “Hey there, Applejerk. Oh wow. Somebody made a real mess out here. I guess breaking branches and flying through canopies before a big windstorm is bad. Oops.”

A few weeks ago, Applejack would have made every effort to snap back at Gilda. She could have yelled, kicked, snapped, something. But after all that time and all the grinding comments that had been wearing on her, she could only sigh and get back to work. “Jes wut dew yew want this tahm, critter?” She knew perfectly well what was coming. It was her routine.

Gilda frowned, for a brief moment. The lack of anger made the whole thing cheap. If she wasn't wringing agonized emotion out of her victim it was almost not worth doing. But she had to keep doing it. As much as it disappointed her, it was a step. It meant she was succeeding in her quest. She was wearing Applejack down to a broken nub. “Nothing much. I just noticed... Rainbow Dash isn't here. Hasn't been here for a few days. Something wrong?”

Applejack quivered. That still stung. It was still raw enough to make an emotion surge. But even that inclination was put down with a sigh, more twigs gathered together. “Ah ain't been feelin' rahght lately. Been keepin' tew mahself an' everypony knows it. So... Rainbow Dash ain't been comin' 'round here.”

Gilda grinned, feeling a bit of schadenfreude from that revelation. She had never thought to ask about Dash's comings before. She simply assumed she always came. It was even better than she imagined. Licking her beak, Gilda came closer to Applejack, mirroring her steps and just a short space behind. “Isn't that interesting? If you were worth something, she'd be out here anyway. But, here you are, all alone. I think you can see two truths here.”

“An' jes wut truths would they be?” Applejack was almost done. It was almost not worth responding.

Gilda quivered in the anticipation of victory. She was so close to feeding her bitterness the sweetest food in existence. “First off, Applesmack, you're not worth attention. And secondly, and most importantly, Rainbow Dash is incapable of affection. She doesn't love you, because she can't.” With a screech of sadistic delight, Gilda rocketed up into the air, twirling grandly as she retreated.

While Applejack was hanging her head sadly, Ditzzy Doo came up to her with a gigantic package in tow. But on examining the address for confirmation, her lazy eye popped out of place. “Oops, my mistake. I forgot to read this carefully. I guess I should focus more and check all the details. Derp.”