



# Those Blue Wings

By Tchernobog

# Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	15
Chapter 3	27
Chapter 4	39
Chapter 5	48
Chapter 6	58
Chapter 7	69

# Chapter 1

Applejack glanced at the sky, pausing her applebucking as she noticed a gray coated mare with a blond mane glide down from the sky. Even if she hadn't recognized the pony herself, the mailbag slung around Derpy's shoulder would have tipped her off. Noting the lack of any other Apple family pony present on the farm, Applejack trotted up to the mailmare. "Whatcha got for me, Derpy?"

The gray pegasus just smiled, pulling a letter out of her bag for Applejack to see. The farm pony's eyebrows lifted as she read the address, her surprise growing as she opened the letter and read its contents. "Well, ah'll be..."

Focused as she was on the letter, she did not notice Derpy take off, heading towards Sugarcube Corner. The mailmare had plans, and many muffins had to be ordered...

-----

"Hey, Twilight!"

The librarian pony turned away from her reading, her attention drawn away by her friend. "Hey Applejack, what's up?"

"Ah jus' got a letter from some cousins in Stalliongrad. They're coming to Canterlot next week to organize a charity. They're coming to get the Princess' blessing. Ah thought ah'd give them a visit. Want to come along?"

"Sure thing! I've never met Stalliongradites before. Maybe 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. "Rarity's busy with her dresses, she just got a big order. Fluttershy can't, she has a sick fox to take care of. And Pinkie's gotta help the Cakes. Apparently Derpy ordered a few hundred muffins for the same day as the visit. That leaves you and Rainbow Dash." Her ears drooped as she continued. "Ah didn't want to be alone with all those highfalutin' people from Canterlot," she grumbled, before glancing at her friend. "No offense, Twi."

"None taken." Twilight answered. "I know how bad some of those could be." she paused as she processed part of what Applejack had said. "I don't know if Rainbow would be interested in any of that."

Applejack grinned. "Well hold on there. Mah cousins tell me that the Princess is making the Wonderbolts perform for the charity. That oughta spark her inter-"

A crash interrupted the conversation, as they glanced up towards the source of the noise. There was Rainbow Dash, hanging on the ledge of the now open window she had burst through. "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 worried that Rainbow Dash had become like Pinkie Pie. The very thought terrified her.

"I was napping! Your tree is pretty comfortable, you know? I thought I heard something through the window about the Wonderbolts..."

Applejack spoke up as Twilight relaxed. "You sure did, RD. They're performing next week in Canterlot. Interested?"

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

"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 sniffle. "I think I've caught a cold."

"It *is* pretty chilly out there... and your window is open! No wonder you got sick."

"You sleep right next to my bed! Why are you so healthy?" Twilight asked, as she dragged herself out of bed and headed towards her mirror. Her mane felt as frazzled as the morning after they had run through the poison joke. Thankfully, her horn was all right, proved by the brush she was levitating perfectly.

"Er, hello? Baby dragon? Emphasis on dragon? Fire in my belly?" Spike asked, rolling his eyes. Twilight must really be out of it if she couldn't remember that. "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! This is one of the few chances I have to visit the Princess, and I wouldn't miss it for the world! And I can't do that to Applejack and Rainbow Dash, they've been looking forward to this for a while! I'm not going to let a little co-oh-ohACHOO!" 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!” said Twilight, interrupting Spike. “Applejack’s visiting family, as for Rainbow Dash-“

“Twilight.”

“I think the Wonderbolts are scheduling some type of display for charity-“

“Twilight!”

“So of course Rainbow will be there! 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 interrupted her train of thought.

“You’ve already told me all of this. Plus, you only have 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 relatives visiting from again?” Rainbow Dash asked the orange farm pony walking next to her. The two had met at the 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 putting 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 still hope, can’t I?”

Applejack grinned, and nudged the pegasus. “Of course you can, Sugarcube. Tell ya what.” She said, pausing in her stride. “I’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, causing both to laugh 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.

“What’s happening? Are you okay Twilight?” Rainbow Dash demanded, flying up to the unicorn.

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

"What's with these plates?" the orange pony asked, eyeing the debris.

"Oh, um... sneezing and levitation don't mix?" She said, before sneezing once more. True to her speed loving nature, Rainbow Dash dodged the already soiled handkerchief before it hit her.

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

"Nonsense! I feel fine!"

"But-"

"But nothing. " Twilight said, vehemently shaking her head. "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 the large amount of magical power at the tip of her horn. The tip glowed, glowing 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 bubble warily, careful not to touch the edges, 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, an instant before the teleportation effect took hold. What felt like minutes, but was only seconds later, 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, before opening her eyes. Her expression mirrored her friends’ as she looked around. They were surrounded by trees, in a small clearing. None of which looked anything like the types found in Canterlot. “Oh no... where are we?”

Applejack answered immediately. “This looks like... the Everfree Forest! But ah I don’t recognize what part... where have you brought us, Twilight?”

“I don’t know,” Rainbow Dash answered before the Unicorn opened her mouth. “But let’s find out!” The pegasus flexed her legs, and leaped into the sky, ready to scout their surroundings from above.

Only to land flat on her face a second later, right into some tall grass. Applejack winced at the spectacle, as she and Twilight walked up to their friend. “Are you okay, RD? Mah back hurts jus’ from having watched that!”

“Yeah,” Rainbow Dash replied, popping out of the grass. “I’m fi-“ Applejack frowned as the pegasus’ 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 flank caught her eye, focusing her gaze on herself.

Specifically, the pair of blue wings adorning her sides, and the rainbow-hued tail on her rear.

Applejack stared in shock, turning back to her friend as Rainbow Dash’s body cleared the tall grass. A body whose smooth flank distinctly lacked a

pair of wings, and instead had gained a very familiar blond tail. This second shock gave her brain a pause, letting it provide the orange pony with only one thing to say.

“Oh, horseapples.”

The silence was broken by the sound of hooves speeding across the ground, as Rainbow Dash rushed to Applejack’s side, covering the ground as fast as if she were using the very wings that were now causing a mounting panic within her.

“What in the hay is going on?” she yelled, as she poked and prodded 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 RD! – 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 happ-” she faltered, as the pegasus’ efforts reached a peak. Rainbow Dash was now practically wrestling with a wing, almost knocking down Applejack 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, bouncing 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...”

Twilight’s gut gave a twist as she realized the implication of Applejack’s words, and turned to face Rainbow Dash. “Oh Celestia...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, hitting the surrounding trees and sending the two other ponies diving for cover.

As the fit passed, the cyan pegasus peeked out from her shelter, her expression now one of worry instead of anger and panic. “Is it over?” Rainbow Dash 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 asked, glaring at the still open wing, then glancing back at Twilight. "It's jus'... ah hope you don't mind if we walk behind ya?" Twilight hung her head, aware of her friend's logic in the statement yet unable to refute it, even if it hurt.

Rainbow Dash nodded frantically in agreement while approaching the orange mare, and paused beside her. "AJ, 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 flank.

"...Rainbow?" she asked, startling her friend. "Can ya... stop staring at my flank?"

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 RD? 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 as 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 in the distance at her cloud home, floating in the sky.

“Wait... where am I supposed to sleep?!”

# Chapter 2

“Hey, AJ! Wait up!”

Applejack stopped as she heard the voice, turning to see Rainbow Dash galloping down the path she had been following. “Rainbow? What’re you doing here? Ah thought you were going home!”

The pegasus trotted the last few feet to her friend, lightly out of breath. “I was, but I don’t think I can get home.”

“Why not?” the orange pony asked, tilting her head in confusion, before the realization hit, swiftly followed by her own hoof on her face. “Oh. Right.”

“It does make it kinda hard to get up there.” Rainbow said, pointing to her home floating in the distance. “Could I maybe sleep at your place?”

“Sure thing, RD! You can use the guest room. Ah’m sure nopony will mind!”

“Great!” Rainbow Dash replied, a grin on her face. “You’re a lifesaver.” she said, trotting after Applejack as they started towards the farm. The grin faded as her thoughts turned to events earlier in the day. “Listen, Applejack... I’m sorry I went crazy back there. I could have hurt you...”

Applejack turned her head to eye her friend, then shook it. “Don’t you worry about it, Sugarcube. Ah’d have probably done similar in your position.” She motioned towards the blue appendages on her back. “I mean, you not having these things is like me not having... um.” Applejack frowned, failing to come up with a good example.

“Your hat?” Rainbow suggested, a slight grin on her face.

The farm pony chuckled, shaking her head. “Ah do love this thing, but this is a bit more important than that!”

The cyan pegasus thought for a moment. “Your bucking?”

This made Applejack shudder. "Ah don't know what ah'd do if I couldn't buck them trees...Ah'd feel completely useless." She said, before realizing who she was talking to. "Oh horseapples, ah'm sorry Rainbow. I didn't mean-"

Rainbow shook her head, putting a hoof to Applejack's mouth. "Don't worry about it, it's not your fault. Heck," she said, lifting her head high. "It's not even the first time, remember? Even Discord couldn't keep these babies away from me!"

Applejack could hear the strain in her friend's voice, trying to hide just how scared she was. "Don't you worry, Twilight will fix this lickety split! Ah reckon you'll be back in the skies by tomorrow," she said, as they arrived at the farm. The lack of lights showed the family to be asleep, and the pair silently made their way to their individual rooms for the night.

---

*Rainbow Dash looked around, standing on one of Cloudsdale Stadium's highest platforms. The stadium was filled to the brim, every pegasus staring with rapt attention where she stood, and with good reason: Every pony on the platform wore the famous blue outfit with, complete with goggles and a lightning bolt on their flank.*

*And right in their midst, one of these Wonderbolts had a distinct rainbow mane. She stood with her heroes... no, now her companions, ready to show all of Equestria what she was made of. As if that thought was a signal heard by the whole team, they all took off in a blaze of speed, the rainbow contrail surrounded by multiple thunderclouds.*

*As they flew through their routine, one of the fliers turned her head towards Rainbow Dash, her yellow and orange mane flowing in the wind. "What the hay are you doing, Rainbow?" she yelled, sounding angry.*

*"W-what? Did I do something wrong?" the cyan pegasus replied, confused. On her other side, Soarin' turned to her as well.*

*"You shouldn't fly without wings!" he yelled, "it's dangerous!"*



*This only confused Rainbow Dash even further. What were they talking about? Her wings were fine. She glanced back, and stared in shock at her smooth back. Not a feather to be seen anywhere. She looked around, her forward motion suddenly gone, and now floated alone in the sky, the Wonderbolts having left her behind. She glanced downwards, immediately knowing this to be a mistake, and yelled as she plummeted through the air...*

And fell headfirst onto a wooden floor. She stayed there, upside down, legs still on the bed. *Oh, yeah*, she thought. *I'm at AJ's...* She remained in that position, blearily trying to clear cobwebs and the dream from her sleep deprived mind until Applejack opened the door and poked her head in a few seconds later. The earth pony's eyebrows shot up as she saw her friend on the floor.

Rainbow Dash glanced in Applejack's direction, noting the bags under her eyes, surely matching those under her own. "Itching all night?" she asked, pointing at the wings on her friends back.

"Eeyup." Applejack replied, eliciting a laugh from the upside-down pegasus. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing, you just... sound like your brother there!"

"Wha-hay! Ah do not!"

"Do too!"

Applejack shook her head. "If you ever decide to stand straight, breakfast is ready." she said, eliciting an immediate reaction. Rainbow Dash slipped off the bed in a jumble of legs, quickly rising up to follow Applejack to the kitchen. As they walked, she noticed the empty rooms.

"What time is it?" Rainbow asked. "Everypony's awake already?"

"Still jus' morning. We get up early down on the farm!" Applejack replied, as they entered the kitchen. "Well, most of us do."

Apple Bloom's intended retort died on her lips as she saw the two older mares. Her sister had explained the situation to her a few minutes ago, but

seeing the wingless rainbow maned pegasus really drove the point home, not to mention seeing her sister's tail on another pony's flank. "Now that's jus' plain weird."

"Apple Bloom! Don't be impolite!"

"But it is! Those wings! Your tails! You can't tell me that ain't weird!"

"That don't mean you can mouth off about it! Now finish eating and get to school!"

The filly grumbled as she shoveled the last of her meal into her mouth, then left the room, still grumbling. Applejack sighed as she turned to Rainbow Dash. "Ah'm sorry you had to see that."

"Don't sweat it. I'd probably react the same way in her place."

"At least Big Macintosh and Granny Smith didn't make a fuss." The orange pony sighed, munching on her meal. She continued as she noticed Rainbow's raised eyebrows. "Ah explained it to them, and they just shrugged! Like they expect weird stuff to happen to us."

"It does kinda follow in our hoofsteps..."

"Yeah, well, we'd better eat quick. Ah still have some chores to do this morning, then we can visit Twilight. Ah bet she'll have this fixed by now..."

---

As it so happened, Twilight Sparkle did not. In fact, she was in no condition to do any sort of research. Spending several hours in the Everfree Forest had not helped her cold, nor did a night of rest improve her condition.

Spike had opened the door, his grateful expression at seeing Twilight's friends at the door turning into confusion as he took stock of the changes to their bodies. "Huh. That's a new one."

Rainbow Dash and Applejack sighed, as the dragon's reaction was one they had seen in varying degrees on every pony's face on their way to the library. "Where's Twilight?" the pegasus asked, glancing around the library.

“Still in bed,” the baby dragon replied, only to be interrupted by a series of coughs from the staircase.

“Spike!” Twilight called out, searching for her assistant. “Was someone at the door? Oh! Hi girls...” she said, holding a hoof to her head. Seeing this, the two ponies at the door trotted over to their friend.

“Are you all right, Sugarcube? You look like something the cat dragged in.”

“I’m fi-” Twilight started, coughing some more. Before she could react, Rainbow Dash had put a hoof to her forehead.

“You’re burning up!” the pegasus exclaimed, eyes wide with concern. “We’ve got to get you to the clinic.”

“But I-”

“But nothing!” Applejack barked. “You look ready to fall down on the spot! I’ll drag you there if I have to.”

“Okay! Okay! You don’t need to do that, I can walk.” Getting her bearings, she turned to Spike. “While I’m gone, can you find any books we have on teleportation? Especially the one I was reading last week.”

The baby dragon saluted, closing the door as the ponies exited the library, and set himself on the task.

---

What should have been a fairly quick trip instead proved to be a lengthier journey, as the trio slowly made its way to the clinic. Twilight’s pace was sluggish at best, clearly showing her lack of energy that morning. The greater delay came from Ponyville itself, as most of its residents couldn’t help but stare as the group walked by. Some of the more inquisitive souls even accosted them, asking what had happened and offering help. Applejack spoke for the three, politely refusing any aid, explaining that it was all just “A little magical mishap.” and that everything was well under control. The trio continued on, passing by Sugarcube Corner until the door swung open with a crash.

Out came Pinkie Pie, tail first, her entire body shuddering as it once had in Froggy Bottom Bog. She had little control of which direction she was heading, bouncing past Rainbow Dash and her friends. As the party pony caught sight of them, the shuddering grew more intense, her body defying many laws of physics as it repeatedly changed shape in the blink of an eye, finally settling down with Pinkie staring at the three dumbstruck ponies. "Oh that's what that was! I felt another one of those doozies coming along but I couldn't see anything or hear anything at all and I couldn't see Twilight anywhere so it couldn't be her! And then I saw you guys and it all makes perfect sense now!" Pinkie paused for breath, then bounced towards Applejack and Rainbow Dash. "So what do we call you now? Appledash?" she said to the orange earth pony, then bounced towards the pegasus. "Rainbow Jack?"

The pair shook their heads in confusion. "Pinkie, you're so random..." Rainbow stated, relearning that fact once again.

"Sorry we can't stay, Pinkie, but Twilight's sick." Applejack interjected before Pinkie could start another of her endless tirades. Unfortunately, this didn't have the intended effect, as the pink pony gasped, zooming to twilight's face.

"Oh I know what will help! One of my super cupcakes!" she said, then vanished into Sugarcube Corner, leaving some confused ponies behind. She returned almost immediately, holding a cupcake on her hoof and offered it to the sick unicorn.

Twilight eyed the cupcake and its maker, unsure what to expect. She then shrugged, and ate the proffered treat as she had not had anything to eat that morning. To her surprise, she felt mildly better. "Wow, Pinkie!" She exclaimed. "Did you put any medicine in that thing?"

The pink pony giggled, shaking her head. "No, silly. It's just tasty! And tasty always makes you feel better!"

The four shared a laugh, only to be drowned out by a loud gasp. Turning to the source, they spotted a white unicorn with an impeccable purple mane trotting towards them.

“My dears!” Rarity exclaimed, her gaze whipping back and forth between Applejack and Rainbow Dash. “Whatever has happened to you?”

Twilight opened her mouth to respond, but the only noise that came out was a hacking cough, which left the purple unicorn shivering as it subsided. Rainbow Dash simply pointed at Twilight.. “That happened, really.” She leaned closer to Rarity, dropping her voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “Don’t let a sick Twilight do magic. Ever. It’s not pretty.” “I can see that,” Rarity replied. “Just look at your tails! These colors clash with your manes, it’s dreadful! And those wings! Blue and orange simply don’t go together!”

“Hey!”

“Don’t mind her, RD.” Applejack said, shaking her head. “It’s jus’ her silly fashion sense talking!”

“My fashion sense is perfectly fine, thank you very- Twilight!” Rarity exclaimed as she finally had a good look at the fellow unicorn. “Darling, are you all right? You poor thing, you’re shivering!”

“Er, I did mention she was sick...” Rainbow interjected, which fell on deaf ears.

Rarity dug through her saddlebags, quickly producing one of her finer coats. A quick flash of magic had it snugly around the sick pony. “There you are! That will keep you warm.”

Twilight shook her head as she looked at the numerous gems on the coat. “I can’t accept this, Rarity!” she croaked with her sore throat. “It’s too nice!”

Rarity stomped a hoof to the ground. “Tut-tut. I won’t take no for an answer! Now hurry along to the clinic.”

“You’re not coming?” Applejack asked.

“I cannot, I simply have too much to do at the boutique. But I demand you keep me up to date!”

“Will do, partner. Pinkie, you coming?” Applejack asked the party pony as Rarity trotted away.

“Of COURSE I’m coming! What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t?”

“The kind to forget something in the oven?” Rainbow suggested, pointing at a stream of black smoke coming out of Sugarcube Corner’s kitchen.

Pinkie gasped, eyes widening in surprise. “Oh no!” she cried, rushing back into the shop, before momentarily poking her head back out. “Don’t wait for me!” Pinkie said, disappearing into the kitchen. Shaking their heads in mutual bemusement, the trio continued on to the clinic.

---

Fluttershy nodded as she listened to Nurse Tenderheart. The medical pony had often given the yellow pegasus advice on the care of living things, be they ponies or animals, and today was no different. A badger had recently broken a leg, which Fluttershy had put in a splint, but she wanted to be sure she was doing everything she could for it, and ended up consulting the clinic’s more professional knowledge than her own self-taught skills. As the front door opened, nurse Tenderheart glanced towards it, abruptly ending her monologue as she caught sight of the group entering the establishment. Curious, Fluttershy turned to face the newcomers, a smile lighting her face as she recognized her friends. She walked over to them, stopping after a few steps as she noticed the changes. “Rainbow Dash?” she asked, her voice as quiet as ever. “What happened to your wings?”

The cyan pegasus simply shrugged, pointing to Applejack. “Right there.”

“Oh my...” Fluttershy whispered, eyes wide. She certainly hadn’t expected something like this when she woke up that morning. Hearing movement behind her, she moved to let Nurse Tenderheart approach the group.

“Are you two okay?” She asked, concern mixing with confusion on her face. “We must examine you immediately! When did this happen?”

“Er, yesterday?” Applejack replied, momentarily confused. Twilight was the sick one, not herself. Her reply was met with an exasperated huff.

“Why didn’t you come by immediately? This could be a very serious condition!”

“We were stuck in the Everfree forest all day! We fell in bed when we got back!” Applejack said, frowning at the nurse. “Begging your pardon, but ah think Twilight needs the most attention here.”

Nurse Tenderheart blinked, having entirely focused on the more distinctive changes that Applejack and Rainbow Dash had undergone. She examined Twilight with a critical eye, and turned back to the other ponies. “That may be, but you’re not getting out of an examination. Fluttershy,” she said, addressing the yellow pegasus. “I’m sorry, but we’ll have to continue later.”

“Of course,” Fluttershy replied. “I’ll...wait here.”

The next hour seemed to pass in an instant, with the three friends being subjected to a veritable barrage of tests. Even nurse Redheart was drafted into helping, the medical ponies splitting the workload more efficiently. Temperatures, heart rates and blood pressures were checked, blood tests were performed, xrays were taken, just to name a few. A reflex hammer ended up embedded in a wall, as the wing it had tested had knocked it out of Nurse Tenderheart’s grip, proving without a doubt that the appendage had responded normally, if a bit forcefully, to the examination.

Eventually, they ran out of tests to perform, and were simply waiting on results. Twilight, who was clearly the sickest pony present, had been assigned a bed to rest in during the examinations. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were sitting next to her, preferring to hear the results together, and even Fluttershy had joined them, wanting to be with friends rather than waiting alone in the lobby. She listened as her friends took turns explaining the events of the previous day.

“The worst part about all this,” Applejack was saying, “is that ah haven’t even been able to tell mah cousins why ah wasn’t there yesterday! They must be worried sick.”

“I can ask the Princess about that, Applejack.” Twilight suggested. She had been given some cough medicine which had helped her throat, but she still felt utterly spent, and was grateful to be in a bed, surrounded by friends. “I’ll have Spike write a letter when I get home.”

Rainbow Dash remained silent, lost in her own thoughts. She, like the others, had missed out on their planned trip with all it pertained, and she was disappointed that she had missed seeing the Wonderbolts. However, her wings remained foremost in her mind. The numerous tests the nurses had performed did not help to alleviate the concerns. Without her wings, the Wonderbolts were a rather moot point.

Her musing was interrupted by the arrival of Nurse Redheart, carrying a chart in her mouth. She then held it against her hoof, facing the purple unicorn. "Miss Sparkle, you have a mild case of pneumonia. It's not serious enough to keep you here, but I'm giving you a prescription and will see you back here in a week. Until then, bed rest, and no magic." She spoke over Twilight, who had opened her mouth to argue. "Considering what all three of you have told me about your magic while you've been... under the weather, be glad I'm not adding a magical inhibitor to the prescription!"

Twilight shrunk back under the covers of the bed, thoughts of a week without magic already haunting her. Applejack and Rainbow Dash's ears flicked backwards, betraying their nervousness as the medical pony turned towards them. "As for you two," Nurse Redheart began. "You've got clean bills of health. As much as I want to keep you here for more examinations, I can't think of what else we could do. You're free to go home."

The two ponies stared in shock and confusion. "Wait, what?" Rainbow asked, voicing the shared thought.

"Physically, I cannot find anything wrong with either of you. Bones, muscles, ligaments, tissue, nerves, blood vessels... everything is where it should be. Every feather is in place, from the primaries to down."

"Except that they're on the wrong pony!" Rainbow cried out, not believing what she was hearing.

"I realize this, Miss Dash. But medically, that is not something we can cure. Magic is likely to be the best solution. Which, I repeat," she said, glaring at Twilight. "Should not be performed during convalescence. Now, let me give you some medicine and your prescription, and you'll be free to go."



Despite some more arguing from the rainbow maned mare, the four ponies found themselves standing outside of the clinic, ready to go home. Before they could set off, a buzzing sound made itself heard from a nearby street. It soon materialized into an orange filly with a purple mane, speeding on a scooter. As Scootaloo spied Rainbow Dash amongst the group, she skid to an abrupt halt, tore off her helmet, and galloped up to her idol. "Hey, Rainbow Da-" The words faded as the young pegasus took in what she saw. Scootaloo stared at Rainbow's smooth back, the distinctive blue wings were just...gone. The shock spread to the rest of her body, locking it up in a rigid embrace, causing her to tip over. Nearby, a goat bleated.

The older ponies just stared in confusion, the whole scene having happened too quickly to react. Surprisingly, Fluttershy came to her wits first, and approached the filly. Gazing at the catatonic form on the ground, she sighed and faced her friends. "I'll bring her inside the clinic.. she might need help." She said, lifting Scootaloo onto her back. "You should head home...get Twilight in her bed."

Unable to see a flaw in that logic, the ponies bid the timid yellow pegasus goodbye, and headed back to the library.

---

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Today I learned that one should pay attention to the suggestions of your friends when it comes to matters of health, even if it means they will miss something important. Their concern for your well-being outweighs your concern for their disappointment. The fact that they're currently staring at me while I have this written has absolutely no bearing on that statement. At all.*

*I've also learned to take responsibility for mistakes I've made, related to the previous lesson. My being sick and not heeding my friends suggestion of recuperating resulted in a...terrible magical mixup. Thankfully, nopony was hurt, but two of my friends are nonetheless significantly affected. I'm sending a copy of the Ponyville Clinic's medical chart with details of the condition, with their permission, in hopes that you may know of a solution. Also Applejack would to make sure her cousins know she's all right.*

*Your Faithful Student,  
Twilight Sparkle*

Spike looked at the three mares around him, waiting for a nod from Twilight who sat ensconced in her bed. She gave her okay, causing the baby dragon to incinerate the letter with his magical fire. It vanished through an open window in a cloud of green smoke.

Only a few minutes passed until Spike's cheeks bulged, the ensuing belch forming the Princess' letter in mid air. He grabbed it and rolled it open, clearing his throat as he prepared to read its contents.

*My most faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.*

*I am so glad to hear you have learned one of the greatest lessons in anypony's life. To show how proud I am, I think you should be the one to fix this situation with your friends. I have full confidence that this task is within your capabilities and that they are in good hooves.*

*Your mentor,  
Princess Celestia.*

# Chapter 3

“Earn my keep? What the hay is that supposed to mean?”

Applejack winced at Rainbow Dash’s raised voice. She had certainly expected it, but that didn’t change the volume. Any louder and her ears would have been ringing. “Ah’m just saying, Sugarcube... you can’t exactly do your weatherpony duties right now, and the farm could always use another helping hoof. Think of it as a trade for food and shelter!” she said, a strained grin on her face.

Big Macintosh chose that moment to walk past, offering a piece of his wisdom. “She does eat an awful lot for such a small pony...”

The pegasus glared at the stallion, remaining unconvinced. “It’s not my fault I can’t do my job! I don’t see why that should change anything!” she grumbled, sitting on her haunches and crossing her forelegs.

The farm pony frowned, unwilling to let the matter drop. Rainbow Dash was one of her best friends, and she truly didn’t mind letting her stay at the farm, but Dash’s behavior had started to fray at her nerves. Not so much anything she had said or done over the past few days, but... the lack thereof. True to form, she was often found napping in some part of the farm. More often than not, the guestroom bed remained unused, as Applejack had found her friend in the barn, lying on a pile of hay, and had even once found her on a tree branch, marvelling at how that was even possible without wings.

“Ah figure those legs of yours would do a fine job at applebuckin’. And it’s good exercise for them! Think of how fast you could take off if they were stronger.” Applejack paused, observing Rainbow Dash’s expression. Noticing how it had wavered at the exercise comment, she decided to press her luck. “Well, ah guess the Iron Pony can’t do **real** hard work.” she shrugged, and started to turn around.

“Wh-Now wait just a second!” Rainbow Dash sputtered, “I can do just as much work as you!”

It took all of Applejack's self control to keep the grin off her face. This was too easy. "Then ah hope you don't mind proving it!"

Hours later, Applejack had to admit that her words had made an impact. Rainbow Dash was certainly not in the league of an Apple Clan applebucker, but she had the strength to back up her statements. It had taken a number of trees and several apple bushels falling on her head to get the hang of things, but she was now dropping apples like she had been born to it. Spurred on by her display, Big Macintosh and Applejack redoubled their efforts, resulting in one of the best applebucking sessions they had ever seen in a single day.

Applejack was thankful for this, as it had taken her longer than she cared to admit to get adjusted to her own applebucking rhythm. The wings on her back, what she still thought of as a bunch of feathers, had made a much more significant impact on her body than she had initially thought. Her balance was completely shot, and it had taken her most of the day after their return to reestablish her habitual rhythm. She was thankful nopony had been around to see the first stumbling steps, which more often than not had left her with her face in the dirt, or even flat on her back, having somehow managed to miss the trees entirely and flipped herself completely over. On one occasion, she had even crashed headfirst into the tree trunk.

For her part, Rainbow Dash had to admit that this applebucking business did have some perks. Applejack had been right, it was fantastic exercise for her legs, but the greatest benefit was that after a day of such effort, she actually felt tired enough to sleep. The naps she had snuck in these past few days had been sorely needed, her nights being filled with phantom itches and pains of her missing wings. She still felt something there, and it drove her crazy. Sleep only happened in two or three hour spurts, inevitably waking in the middle of the night.

But tonight? Tonight, she was going to sleep like a **rock**.

---

Applejack sighed as she stared at the ceiling in her room, then glanced outside. It was bright and sunny, the day having started several hours ago,

yet she still found herself in bed. After all, she had promised Dash she'd try to get some rest.

*"Applejack, you're barely even standing straight!" Her friend had stated, several days after she had started helping in earnest. She had not been napping nearly as often as before, for which the farm pony was thankful. Applejack, on the other hoof, used to the rigors of applebucking, had not dealt with her own lack of sleep quite as well. The wings seemed to constantly twitch, and lately even spasmed briefly, both of which worked to wake her in the middle of the night.*

*"Consarn it, Rainbow! Ah'm fine! And work needs to be done!" she had retorted, shaking her head, mainly to clear the near constant cobwebs that clouded her mind. This however didn't escape the pegasus' attention.*

*"And remember how that went last time? Or do I need to drag you to Twilight's to remind you?"*

She **had** forgotten that particular episode, much to her chagrin. But the reminder had allowed Rainbow to convince her to take a day off. And since Rainbow would be working on the farm, she wasn't leaving Big Macintosh to shoulder the entire workload.

However, after so many years of waking up early, Applejack couldn't fall asleep once sunlight was visible. Eventually, the pointless attempts to sleep and the recurring aches combined to make her get out of bed. She'd at least try to ease the pain in the wings, having just remembered the liniment Granny Smith used for her rheumatism. Normally, she'd just shrug the pain off, but it was now preventing her from sleeping, which was preventing her from working. And that would not do.

Unfortunately, it seemed Granny Smith had forgot to restock on liniment, as the only jar Applejack found was completely empty. She sat down and thought about where to get some more. Zecora was the first to come to mind, as the zebra could mix up just about anything, but she dismissed the idea, as the brewer simply lived too far away. Instead, she thought, she could head to the Ponyville Spa. She'd only been there once herself, during the poison joke incident, where the sisters who ran the establishment had helped Zecora mix the cure. She also remembered Rarity mentioning that the sisters mixed their own ointments themselves.

It seemed Applejack was about to pay the Spa another visit.

---

“Applejack! Wait up!”

The pony in question slowed from her trot, having opted for a quicker pace through town. The other ponies’ reactions weren’t as pronounced as they had been on that first day after the trip, but she still felt and saw glances and looks in her direction. All that attention had made her uncomfortable, unconsciously making her increase her speed as she hit the town. Turning to the voice, she saw the diminutive form of twilight’s assistant.

“Howdy Spike! How ya doing?”

“Eh, you know,” the dragon shrugged. “Taking care of some errands for Twilight while she’s in bed.”

“How is she?”

“We went for the weekly checkup yesterday, she was better but still needs rest. And,” he added, “still no magic. Sorry.”

Applejack shook her head. “Don’tcha worry about it. Getting Twilight back on her hooves is more important.”

“Doesn’t stop her from reading though. Should have seen her a few days ago... practically yelled at me!” He said, then cleared his throat. “ ‘I can at least **read**, right?!’ ” he said, attempting to mimic the librarian, then burst into laughter.

Applejack grinned, chuckling with Spike. “Ah don’t think anything could prevent her from reading.” Her laughter died off as she became increasingly aware of the looks she was attracting. “Say, Spike, I gotta get going. Tell Twilight I’ll stop by in a while?”

The baby dragon nodded, saluting. “Sure thing! See you then!” he said, and scurried away. As he turned around a corner, he glanced in Applejack’s

direction, pausing as he noticed her entering the Spa. He briefly pondered the rare occurrence, then shrugged, resuming his duties.

Applejack glanced around as she entered the building, momentarily confused. It seemed distinctly smaller than she remembered... she shrugged and moved up to the counter, where one of the sisters was standing.

“Hello! How may I help you?”

“Ah’m looking for some liniment, do you have any?”

“Of course!” the blue maned pony replied, vanishing into a side room to fetch the item. As she sat waiting, Applejack heard a familiar voice from one of the Spa’s rooms, which eventually materialized itself into a familiar white unicorn.

“Thank you again, Lotus, for a wonderful ti-Applejack!” Rarity exclaimed, lifting a hoof to her chest. “Whatever are you doing here?”.

The farm pony frowned, having picked up on Rarity’s tone of surprise. “What, can’t ah come to the Spa once in a while?” she snapped, somewhat more forcefully than she had intended. Rarity often unintentionally said things that got under her skin, even after they had made up during the sleepover at Twilight’s.

Rarity seemed taken aback at the response. “Well no, I mean...” she said, looking for words. “This is simply not a place I would expect to find you....”

Applejack’s temper simmered down at her friend’s expression. “Well, that’s true. Ah’m just picking up some liniment.” She said as Aloe returned with a jar. “For the wings.” she added, seeing Rarity’s raised eyebrow.

The unicorn smiled, a gleam in her eye. “Since you’re here, Applejack.. you really should let me do something with those wings. And that tail!”

“Ah’ve told you Rarity, I don’t like that frou-frou stuff!”

“I’m not trying to put you in a dress, dear! I’ll even... pay for the liniment for you!”

Applejack paused, tempted. Savings were always good for the farm.  
“Hmmm. Nah.”

“Well then, at least let me do something about the color, so everypony will quit **staring!**” Rarity said, pointing at the wings.

Applejack winced inwardly, knowing that Rarity had a point on that one. The staring was getting to her. “...fine. But nothing fancy, you hear!” she said, her voice falling on deaf ears. Rarity was already behind her, forcing her forwards into the depths of the Spa, prattling along about how much fun they would have, all the things they could try out...Applejack gulped, suddenly worried about what she had gotten herself into, and eventually found herself surrounded by Rarity and the twins.

“My dear, I haven’t seen you in a few days.” Rarity stated, as she sorted through a selection of makeup colors. “How has living with Rainbow Dash been?”

“Well,” the farm pony started, wincing ever so slightly as Lotus extended one of the wings, letting Rarity begin her work. Aloe took hold of the Applejack’s tail, braiding the multicolored strands. “Since she’s stopped napping all over, she’s been a great help to the farm! Ah don’t think we’ve ever had such a good applebucking season.”

Rarity paused as she moved on to the next set of feathers. “She has? That’s... unexpected. Hasn’t she gotten bored of it?”

“Nope.” She said, shaking her head. “Ah’m as surprised as you. She even took over for me today.” Applejack added, once more causing Rarity to stop, then put a hoof on Applejack’s head.

“Are you all right?” She asked, her eyebrows as high as they could go. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this from you! Miss I-can-do-it-all-myself?”

Applejack glared at the teasing, her ears drooping. “Ah know, ah know. Rainbow brought that up too, or I’d be on the farm right now.”



Rarity smiled as she returned her attention to the wings. "Well, it's good to get away. After all," she teased, holding back a smile. "You two have been so close for a while now!"

"Beg your pardon?" the orange pony asked, tilting her head in confusion.

"You're practically attached at the hip!" Rarity added, her grin only widening.

"What, like you and Fluttershy?" Applejack retorted, leaving Rarity flustered. "You two are here every week!"

This momentarily left Rarity at a loss for words, but she quickly recovered, firing another salvo. "Well yes, but... It's not every day you see somepony pinning a tail on that special pony..." she suggested, gently stroking at the multicolored strands with a hoof. "It's all so intimate!"

This left Applejack more confused than ever, a blush spreading on her cheeks. *Was she implying...?* "Wh-n-no!" she sputtered. "It ain't at all like that!"

Rarity simply laughed as she continued her work on the other wing. "Like what, my dear? I mean Rainbow Dash's wings!" She paused, an impish grin on her face. "Why, what did you think I was talking about?"

Applejack's hoof met her forehead, the blush matching her cutie mark's coloring in intensity. She'd walked right into that. *Open mouth, insert hoof...* "Rarity.. you know full well that stuff was just magic." She said, crossing her forelegs. "Nothing more!"

The unicorn sensed she had gone too far, but decided on one last jab before lapsing into silence. "Oh yes," she mumbled, smiling. "Definitely magical..."

She lapsed into silence as she continued working, but eventually broke the quiet. "Applejack...can I ask you a question?"

"What, you haven't been already?" Applejack answered, eyebrows raised. Rarity chuckled guiltily.

“I deserved that. No, I mean something a bit different.”

“Sure, what’s on your mind?”

“How...” Rarity started, but hesitated. “How does it feel to have wings?”

“What do you mean? Didn’t you get some from Twilight?”

The white pony shook her head. “I mean real wings. What I had was made out of...morning dew, was it?”

“Oh.” Applejack replied, at a loss for words. How **did** it feel, really? “It’s... itchy.”

“Itchy?” Rarity repeated in confusion. That had not been what she had expected.

“Eeyup. Keeps me up at night, too.”

“I...see. So no flying, then?”

“What? No! 'Cept maybe the itchin', ah suppose... Ah haven’t really done anything with them...too busy applebucking. Plus ah don’t really know how to move them. See?” Applejack said, straining a bit. The wings barely moved in response. “So ah just let em rest.”

“Ah.” Rarity replied, unable to think of what else to say, and eventually finished the makeover. While she wished she could have done a more comprehensive job for her friend, she was nonetheless satisfied with her work. Eager to be on her way, Applejack bid Rarity farewell, and left the building. The latter smiled as she watched her friend leave. She’d noticed a hint of the blush still remaining on her friend’s face.

-----

On the way to the library, Applejack reflected on her conversation with Rarity. She truly hadn’t even thought of the wings as being... real, to use Rarity’s exact wording. To her, all the wings represented were a source of discomfort and, lately, some pain. Flying was the last thing that was on her mind. As her mind wandered through the conversation, the blush returned

with full force when she turned her thoughts to what her friend had been implying. *Intimate...? Dangit Rarity, why'd you have to talk about... that... kind of stuff?* Shaking her head to dispel images she'd rather ignore, Applejack almost missed the turn leading to the library.

Once at the foot of the tree, she knocked on the front door, waiting for Spike to usher her inside. The baby dragon didn't disappoint, and she soon found herself trotting up to Twilight's room. As she crested the top of the stairs, she stopped and stared. Even bedridden, Twilight seemed to have the power to create a veritable carpet of books. Some formed stacks, but many were strewn haphazardly, a few even appearing to have been discarded with some force. Currently the bedridden unicorn seemed surrounded by small towers of books, creating a fort around herself. She naturally had her nose in a large tome, and had not noticed Applejack's arrival until the latter cleared her throat.

"Wha-" she cried, startled, then beamed at her friend before devolving into a series of coughs. "Oh! Applejack! What brings you here?" she asked after catching her breath, placing a bookmark in the tome seated before her before noticing the change in Applejack's appearance. "Er. What happened to your.. I mean, Rainbow's wings?"

"Rarity." Applejack deadpanned, as if that explained everything. "Wouldn't really let me hear the end of it until she got her hooves on me. And ah'm jus' checkin in on ya. I hear you had a checkup yesterday? You still don't look so hot."

Twilight nodded. "Yes. They still say I need to rest... and I still can't do magic. It's... frustrating."

"Ah can imagine. Being your special talent and all, it's like... Pinkie without parties." Applejack said, suppressing a slight shudder at the thought. She eyed the tomes surrounding her friend. "Are you sure you're okay? This seems like a mighty big load of work for a sick pony like you."

At these words, Twilight's left eye gave a slight twitch. "Applejack," she started, her voice strained. "I'm cooped up in bed all day and night, I can't do anything without Spike's help, and I can't even use my magic... For Celestia's sake let me at least STUDY?!"

Applejack took a step backwards as her friend's voice rose. She was reminded of Spike describing a nearly identical situation... "Sure, ah didn't say you couldn't! Just... take it easy, ya hear?"

"Oh. Right." the unicorn mumbled, her eyes drooping to her reading material, then snapping back up. "But if I hadn't, I wouldn't have found out so much about teleportation! You see," she started, her voice shifting to a preaching tone. "Teleportation moves the object within folds of time and space. Magic simply drills a hole into these folds and allows you to pass through instantly."

Applejack's ears flattened, recognizing the start of Twilight's lengthy discourses on magic. This usually sailed right over Applejack's head, being an Earth Pony rather than a Unicorn, magic wasn't her forte. "That's mighty interesting Twi, but-"

"It's easy to transport inanimate material through this stuff, and somewhat trickier with living material. It seems the holes are tiny small, far too small to allow anything bigger than, say, a parasprite through. Obviously, this means ponies won't fit-"

"Twilight-"

"-so the spell has to change the size and shape larger objects to pass through these holes. If I'm right, my sneeze happened at the critical reconstruction junction after passing through the folds-"

"Consarn it-"

"-and did not restore the objects.. or rather, us, in the correct way. This is harder since it's not just one object, but a three body problem. So the issue now is to figure out how to recreate this error, and control it-"

"Don't make me get an apple!"

"-which is infinitely harder to do... wait, what? An apple?" Twilight tilted her head, her train of thought finally interrupted. Applejack smiled guiltily. She had indeed been tempted to shove an apple in Twilight's mouth.

"Ah-heh. Sorry sugarcube. I've just gotta head back to the farm."

“Oh. Right. Say hello to Rainbow Dash for me, will you?” she asked as the farm pony turned to the stairs.

“Sure thing! As long as you take it easy!” Applejack said, ducking as a book sailed past her head, the sound of sneezing following her down the stairs.

---

As she made her way to the farm, Applejack examined the near innumerable rows of trees dotting the Sweet Apple Acres. A much larger share than was custom for the time of year were denuded of their fruit, a testament to how much work Big Macintosh, Rainbow and herself had put in lately. She'd have to do something special for her pegasus friend, as on her own, Rainbow had helped more than most farmhooves she'd hired in the past few years. She thought that they might even be able to take a few days off of bucking, the current ripe crop being nearly completely gathered. Several more still had some weeks to go until they were ready, and it wouldn't do to have an over-eager Rainbow Dash gather them all.

Hearing the distinct sound of hooves striking a trunk, Applejack angled towards it. She recognized it as Dash's, as she had grown up with the sound of her brother's applebucking. This sound had a lighter touch, a quick and sharp hit rather than the resounding thump of Big Macintosh's much stronger legs. Applejack herself had a method similar to her brother's, but she couldn't argue with Dash's results either.

Tracking down the sound, she eventually spied her friend at the foot of a tree, getting ready to give it a good whack. Grinning mischievously, Applejack stood behind another tree, waited until the right moment, and gave out a yell.

“HEY RAINBOW!” she hollered, and laughed as the pegasus jumped in fright, her rear legs having completely missed the tree. She however managed to stay steady on her forelegs, moving a few paces before her body leaned forward. She flexed, jumping up and performed a forwards flip, landing safely on all four hooves. Rainbow Dash grinned at Applejack, sticking out her tongue in defiance.

The farmer pony shook her head in amazement. She always knew Rainbow was a fantastic athlete, but that had still been pretty impressive. "Is that a new practice move?" she asked the grinning pony.

"Nah. Should be though!" She trotted up to Applejack, eager to chat. "What's up? You been resting all riAAAAGH!"

Applejack started at her friend's shriek, looking around for the source of Rainbow's panic. "What?! What is it?!"

"What did you do to MY WINGS?!" she yelled, staring at the now orange appendages. The gears in her mind spun, and clicked. "Let me guess," she said, her voice significantly lower. "Rarity?"

"Eeeexactly." Applejack replied, trying to keep a jovial tone to mask her feeling of guilt. She had not expected Rainbow Dash to react like this. The pegasus growled in frustration, and smacked a hoof to her forehead.

"That... argh, I'll deal with her later." She sighed, then started pushing Applejack towards the barnhouse.

"Wha-Hay!" Applejack protested. "Where are you taking me?"

"Back home. We're getting that stuff off of my wings!"

"Huh?"

"You're taking a bath!"

# Chapter 4

Granny Smith, Applebloom and Big Macintosh busied themselves around the kitchen, having just set up lunch. Two seats were conspicuously empty, as neither of the young mares had arrived yet. This was odd, as Applejack tended to be pretty punctual when it came to farm schedules, and you could practically set a watch to Rainbow Dash's stomach. Soon, however, voices could be heard from outside, steadily increasing in volume as the owners approached the farmhouse. The door crashed opened, displaying the ongoing argument for everypony to hear.

"Dangit Rainbow, ah know where the bath is! Stop pushing me!" Applejack said, her hooves nonetheless attempting to dig into the floor to stop the relentless forward motion. Noticing the other family members' presence, she tried switching the topic in hopes it would distract the pony pushing her forward. "Hey, lunch is ready! Ya gotta be hungry after all that bucking!"

Unfortunately for her, Rainbow Dash was determined to keep the Applejack moving. "Lunch can wait! This is an emergency!"

Her last hope dashed as she stared in shock at Rainbow's statement, Applejack put a hoof on the door frame to stop herself, twisting her head to look at her family. "Start without us!" she cried, her tone tinged with what sounded like fear. Losing her hold on the door frame, she was dragged into the corridor's depth in much the same way prey found itself pulled into the cavernous maw of a predator.

Three sets of eyes blinked as the last orange hoof disappeared behind the corner, then glanced at each other in mild bewilderment. All shrugging in perfect synchronization, they sat down to begin their meal.

---

"Listen, Rainbow," Applejack began as the pair found itself in the bathroom. The pegasus had already opened the tap, letting the hot water start filling up the bath. "Ah'm sorry. Ah should have asked you first. But you know how Rarity just can't take no for an answer." she finished, omitting the

details of her own desire to escape scrutiny. She didn't feel like admitting that just yet.

Rainbow Dash shook her head as she glanced along the selection of mane care products, dismissing the alarmingly numerous bottles of Apple Spice coat wash before settling on the basic Head and Withers brand. If that didn't work, there was a surprisingly large amount of different products in the bathroom, making her wonder just who was using them all... "I'm not angry about that!" she answered, hesitating. "Well, not entirely about that. But you just don't put all that... stuff on wings! They're delicate!" Rainbow stated, turning back to face Applejack, who was staring at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Sugarcube, those things survived a **rock** landing on them and all you did was wrap it with a bandage."

"That's different!" the pegasus retorted, trying to think of how to best explain it. "It's just... they're not like bat wings, there's a lot more smaller stuff going on. Each feather has tons of little... hairs, I guess, that are close but split from each other..." she paused, searching for words a non-pegasus would understand. "All together, this helps with air control and all that." Rainbow then pointed at the wings. "And that... stuff... on there messes up those hairs! It's gooey and sticky! And I'm not leaving it on my wings a second longer!"

"That reminds me," Applejack interrupted before Rainbow Dash could continue. "Twilight's still not casting magic. Does it matter if this stuff stays a while?" She asked. While it had served to reduce some of the stares, the wings did not feel comfortable covered in all the various products Rarity had used. She had not minded at first, but now she was acutely aware of the powder on the wings, proving them to be far more sensitive than she had thought.

However, considering she was about to be forced to take a bath by Rainbow Dash, she thought that dealing with that discomfort might be the better option. Unfortunately, her friend was emphatically shaking her head. "No! Who knows what this oily stuff will do to my feathers if it stays?" she said, then leaned over and stopped the still gushing flow of water. Pointing a hoof at the tub, she stared at Applejack. Seeing the farm pony hesitate, her face took on a determined look. "Am I going to have to throw you in?"



Throwing her hooves in the air, Applejack gave in. "Fine! Fine!" she said, taking off her beloved hat and removing the hairband from her mane. Giving one last withering glance at Rainbow Dash, she stepped into the piping hot water, settling in until it rose to her neck. Unable to hold it in, she let out a contented sigh. Rainbow had gotten the water at the perfect temperature, and she already felt it working wonders on her sore muscles.

That calm did not last, as she heard Rainbow Dash give a satisfied grunt. "Oh good." she said, her words muffled by the sponge she held in her mouth. "Some of that stuff is washing away on its own." She stood beside the large copper bathtub, her forelegs leaning on the edge as she watched Applejack, unaware of the latter's slight blush. For a split second, Applejack had forgotten the other pony was there, far too submerged in blissful relaxation. That notion was now dispelled, and the reality of there being someone else in the bathroom struck her with full force. She had not experienced this since she was a little filly, having long ago stopped bathing with her brother as youngsters. Mind you, she was no stranger to a dip with friends; that one session at the Spa during the Poison Joke incident came to mind. But this... this was in the comfort of her own home, her own bathroom, her own **bathtub**. And there was someone else here. Somehow, she still couldn't quite wrap her head around that, though hearing Rainbow move about, and feeling her stare on her back served as a constant reminder.

"AJ, can you sit up?" The pegasus asked. "I'm gonna start cleaning this stuff off." Grumbling, Applejack sat up, facing one side towards Rainbow, who started wiping off what had now become a gooey mess with the sponge. Applejack shifted slightly as her friend's hoof applied more pressure, giving some sections of the wing a more vigorous rub. The coloring started to bleed away, staining the water with a cloud of orange as the substances were removed from the wings. Feeling the scrubbing stop, Applejack glanced at Rainbow Dash as the latter spoke up once again. "Can you extend the wing? I need to reach the underside."

The farm pony shook her head. "No can do."

"Oh come on," Rainbow groaned. "Don't make this difficult!"

Applejack frowned at that. "It's not because ah don't **want** to, you goof. Ah just can't." she said, straining herself in vain attempting to move the wings.

"You...can't?" Rainbow Dash repeated, disbelief etched on her face. "Whaddya mean, you can't? Did you hurt them?" she asked with mounting panic.

"No, ah just wasn't born a pegasus if you hadn't noticed." Applejack stated, unable to hold back on the sarcasm. "Ah've never used those muscles before, ah don't know how!"

"Oh." Rainbow Dash said, sagging in relief before tensing once again in realisation. "Wait, does that mean you haven't used them at **all** since... then?"

"Nope." Applejack replied, flicking some water every which way as she shook her head. "Farm's been taking up all mah time." She paused as she saw her friend's expression. "Why, is that bad?"

Rainbow remained silent for a second, then shook herself as she noticed the worry on Applejack's face. "It's not **bad**, but it isn't great either. The wings are probably twitching and aching, aren't they?"

"Yeah, they are." Applejack exclaimed, surprised. "Is that why? Lack of use?"

Rainbow nodded. "It's like the rest of your body. If you don't use it, it complains. Wings are no different. No wonder you aren't sleeping." she eyed Applejack, who was laughing to herself. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing.." She answered, still giggling. "You just sounded like Twilight there with all your fancy pegasus knowledge."

"Hey, it happens!" she said, grinning until a splash of water hit her face. Sputtering, she wiped the water out of her eyes. "What was that for?"

"Jus' cooling your head down before it gets too big." Applejack replied, sticking her tongue out.

Rainbow simply bent over the edge of the bath, splashing back at her friend. "You're going down!"

Soon, more water found itself on the floor than in the tub, ending up as a major disadvantage for Rainbow Dash. In an attempt to dodge one of Applejack's splashes, Rainbow slipped, tipping over the edge of the bathtub to land headfirst into the water. Sputtering, she lifted her face out and sat down within the tub itself. "Ah think ah won." Applejack grinned, earning a mock glare from the other pony.

"Only due to sabotage! The floor betrayed me!" Rainbow Dash said, shaking a hoof at the floor. After a little searching around, she picked up the sponge and turned back to Applejack, who was watching with raised eyebrows. "What?" Rainbow asked, and pointed at the wings. "We're not done cleaning yet."

Sighing, Applejack turned and faced a wing towards Rainbow, who gently used a hoof to extend it. Despite that effort, Applejack still winced at the twinge that ran through the appendage, a reaction that didn't escape Rainbow's notice. "I can try teaching you how to move them later, if you want." She said, washing the underside of the wing. "That'll keep the aches away. Heck, give me a few days and I'll have you flying!" she exclaimed, grinning. The idea of Applejack flying amused her far more than it should, an emotion not shared by the earth pony.

"Whoa there Dash, are you sure that's a good idea?" Applejack asked. "Ah mean, ah understand giving the wings a workout, but flying sounds a mite dangerous..."

"It'll be fine! Don't worry, you'll have the best teacher ever!" Rainbow grinned, a hoof on her chest.

"Who, Fluttershy?" Applejack asked, sending a sly glance in Rainbow's direction.

"Exac- huh? No! Me!" Rainbow said, glaring. That was the second time Applejack had gotten the best of her. Staring at the wings in her hooves, an idea started to form, and a wide smile split her face.

This worried Applejack, as the pegasus' hooves moved to where the wings connected to her withers. In one swift motion, they moved under the wings, brushing the skin under the coat...and nearly causing Applejack to leap out of the bath. Her jolt of surprise was significant enough to send water everywhere, the splashes continuing as Rainbow Dash relentlessly continued to tickle her friend. Peals of laughter could be heard from both, with the occasional plea for mercy from Applejack, eventually subsiding as Rainbow Dash eased off.

"Revenge is mine!!" she laughed as Applejack regained her breath.

"Revenge for what?" she gasped. "And ah've never been ticklish there before..."

"For the water fight sabotage!" Rainbow answered. "And you're not, I am. I had to see if that got switched too!" Her joviality faltered as she noticed Applejack wince again. "Are they still aching?" she asked, concerned.

"Yup." the farm pony replied, wiping her blond locks out of her eyes. She raised a questioning eyebrow as Rainbow Dash momentarily remained silent. Her expression wavered between uncertainty and concern, eventually settling on a determined look.

"Turn around and lay down on your stomach." She ordered, smiling apologetically as Applejack looked askance. "I think I can help with that."

Still wary, Applejack followed the instructions, laying herself down flat in the tub, her legs curled up beneath her. With all their playing around, the water didn't even reach her shoulders anymore. Staring forwards, she felt Rainbow extend the wings, then gently move her hooves until they reached Applejack's back, where they started to apply a bit of pressure. Having not expected that, Applejack shifted, turning her head to the other mare. "Hay, what are you doing?"

Rainbow's cheeks took on a faint scarlet shade as she blushed. "It's a massage, okay?" She said sheepishly. "Best thing to do right now." The blush deepened as Applejack seemed to remain skeptical. "What? It's the best way to get kinks out of your muscles, and you can't really do it on your own!"

"Really now," Applejack asked as Rainbow shrugged. It didn't seem like her friend was lying, and she did feel mighty tense... *Might as well let her do it*, she thought.

"Yeah. First time I've done it though other than with a practice partner."

"Practice partner?"

"Yeah, they taught this in flight school. I was teamed up with Fluttershy but I've never really had the chance to use it since then. She was always much better."

"You ain't doing too bad, Sugarcube. This does feel pretty good." Applejack sighed as she relaxed. The pair lapsed into silence as Rainbow continued her ministrations, her touch becoming almost excessively gentle when they moved over the wings. These were, after all, her own wings, and she couldn't be too careful with them. Applejack wasn't wrong in thinking that the wings were pretty solid. They really could take impressive beatings, but injuries were not uncommon. Feathers could still be broken or torn off, and missing primaries could easily throw off the aerodynamics of flight, not to mention how uncool one would look with bald patches.

Concentrating on her task, Rainbow moved along the wing, applying pressure to the muscles and tendons as she went along. She'd pause whenever she found a knot, spending more time on it to ease it out. She switched from one wing to the other, working down and eventually reaching Applejack's back. As she pressed down on one particular spot, Rainbow heard a sound she had never thought to hear from the farmer.

A squeak.

She blinked, and pressed the spot again, not noticing the wings flare open with a quiet *pomf* as Applejack made another squeak. As Rainbow opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, Applejack interrupted her. "...Y-yes, right there. I-I've been sore there all day." she said, keeping her face away from the pegasus.

"Yeah? You're not helping by holding them so s... stiff. Uh. ...huh." Rainbow's hooves stopped moving, as she realized just why the wings were as stiff as they were. A blush bright enough to rival the red strand in

her hair appeared on her cheeks, and unbeknownst to her, it was matched by the one on Applejack's. While the earth pony usually didn't have wings, and thus had no reference point as to why the wings acted like they did, she did understand what she was feeling right now. Maybe not **why**, but certainly **what**.

And it confused the heck out of her.

Her wits similarly addled, and with lack of any comment from Applejack, Rainbow did the only thing she could think of, and continued with the massage. She kept her focus on her friend's back, avoiding that particular spot, but could not do so forever. The muscles there felt the stiffest and had the most knots, and loosening those would bring great comfort to Applejack. Swallowing to dispel the nervousness that had formed in her throat, Rainbow Dash returned her focus to that one area.

Applejack had kept her eyes scrunched closed the entire time, hoping that her friend couldn't see her face right now. She gave a slight sigh of relief as Rainbow avoided the traitorous area on her back, only to hold her breath as she felt the hooves reach it once more. She lifted a hoof to her mouth and bit on it, hoping it would help her keep quiet. While it did cause her to do a slight jump, she thankfully remained silent as Rainbow worked. She could feel it loosening up, the tension slowly easing away under all the attention being lavished upon it.

Feeling more relaxed than she had in days, Applejack didn't even register the fact that Rainbow had stopped, and was just sitting in the bath herself, glancing at the earth pony. She barely even heard what the pegasus was saying. "Whassat?"

"I said, I think I'm finished. How do you feel?"

"...Much better, actually. Thanks." Applejack answered, as her stomach made itself heard. She hadn't eaten since leaving that morning, and the smell of lunch was wafting through the house. "We should get out. Food's probably cold by now."

Grabbing a pair of towels, the pair dried themselves off, and used them to soak up the majority of the water that had splashed around the bathroom, both unconsciously seeking to put as much distance between each other

as they could while moving around the room. With the cleaning done, Applejack opened the door and headed to the kitchen, studiously staring straight ahead. Rainbow followed in her wake with a matching expression, staring at a seemingly far off point in the distance.

The general mealtime noise faded as they entered the kitchen, as three sets of eyes turned towards them. Blinking, the pair almost glanced at each other, but simultaneously turned their heads away, a blush reappearing on their cheeks. They each took a spot at a table, unable to meet each others eyes.

One of the observers, with the innocence of youth, could not help but see the wrong thing. "Did you two have a fight?" Applebloom asked, a look of worry painted on her face. She ducked as Rainbow Dash spit out the water she had started to sip.

"N-no!" Applejack stammered, forcing a smile on her face. "Everything's fine! Just dandy!" she said, laughing nervously. Rainbow remained silent, wiping away her mess.

Meanwhile, the second observer watched in silence, hiding a smile as his sister's nervousness grew. "So." Big Macintosh began, facing Applejack.

"Y-yeah?"

"Nice bath, huh?"

".....Shut up."

The third observer simply laughed as she served food to the two latecomers.

# Chapter 5

“Ah can’t believe ah’m saying this, Big Macintosh, but we’re actually ahead of schedule. Way ahead!”

The big stallion nodded in agreement to his sister’s statement. For the first time in longer than he could remember, the apple groves had been bucked in a fraction of their usual time. While a goodly portion of the trees still carried their fruits, those particular ones would not be ripe for another couple weeks, leaving the family with only the most routine chores left to do. Most of which only took an hour or two at most to complete.

“Ah guess we’ve earned ourselves some well deserved time off.” Applejack mused, breaking Big Macintosh out of his reverie. He nodded his agreement, deferring to his younger sibling. He may be the eldest, but Applejack usually made most of the decisions concerning the farm’s well being. Before he could add any comment, another voice interrupted him.

“Awesome!” Rainbow Dash cried, her face split into a wide grin. After the past few weeks of applebucking, a respite from the work was more than welcome. “And I know exactly what we’re gonna do!”

Applejack flinched at the words, looking up from her breakfast-filled plate. She frowned at Rainbow, who was staring at her. “Ah dunno, ah still think it’s too risky...” she said, but her argument was waved away by the pegasus.

“Since when did you turn into such a worry-wart? You’ll be fine! It’s not like I’m gonna start by throwing you off a mountain.”

“Ah sure hope not,” a worried Applejack replied. Meanwhile, Big Macintosh just stared at the two mares, totally lost.

“What’re you two talking about?” he asked, eyeing the pair. Applejack seemed to wilt, her ears drooping.



“She wants to teach me to use these things!” came the glum reply, pointing to the blue wings adorning her side.

Big Macintosh’s mouth gave a small upward quirk “She wants to teach ya how to fly?”

“I sure as hay do!” Rainbow interjected. “If I can’t put those babies to good use, somepony else has to!”

Applejack’s glare switched to her brother as he simply pat her on the back. “Ah’m sure it’ll be fine,” he said, straight faced, then proceeded to hide his face by digging into his plate.

Applejack eyed the other two ponies one more time, her gaze lingering on the big stallion. She just **knew** he was laughing behind that plate. Sighing, she put her face in her hooves. This was going to be a long day.

-----

“The first element of flight is wing movement!” Rainbow Dash stated, pointing a hoof at Applejack as the pair stood on a small hill. Dash had chosen the spot as the small incline would be perfect for the most basic type of flight: a glide. Plus, it was out of the way, so nopony would be around to disturb them, which suited Rainbow just fine. This day was going to be **awesome**.

Since she had realized that Applejack wasn’t keeping her wings active, Rainbow had insisted on spending time every day just moving them, and at the same time get Applejack used to the feeling of the muscles being used, and the appendages’ movement. Determined on helping Applejack fly, Rainbow had helped with the movement herself, showing by example the way things would go. This meant she had handled the wings in her hooves once again. Every free moment she could scrape up found her at Applejack’s side.

Thankfully, the awkwardness of that first massage had faded after a few days. She doubted her face could have kept blushing that long if it hadn’t, and she was glad she was finally able to look her friend in the eye once more... though she had caught herself lingering in that gaze a lot more

often nowadays... Feeling the heat rise to her cheeks once more, Rainbow Dash pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind, and focused on the task at hoof.

“I spent the last week and a half helping you move those things.” She said, a training cap on her head and a whistle dangling from her neck. “Now let’s see you move them yourself! Show me what you’ve got!”

Applejack sighed, knowing she had no choice. She’d attempted to make many excuses while on the farm, fabricating tasks she knew didn’t need doing. Unfortunately, Rainbow Dash was very much like herself in one respect: stubbornness. The pegasus had been relentless, even helping out in the tasks that Applejack had made up, until she had simply run out of ideas. At this point, it was probably easiest to just go along with the demands.

Closing her eyes, Applejack tried to identify the wings on her body. The time Rainbow Dash had spent moving them had certainly increased her awareness of them, rather than just being a presence she felt, but was unfamiliar with. Straining, she felt the wings give a twitch, then slowly start to move. They unfolded, the wingtip reaching out as far as it could, the wings stretched out to their limit. Opening her eyes, she stared in surprise. *They actually moved!*

“Good!” Rainbow Dash grinned. “Now try moving them down.” she ordered, stifling a laugh as she watched the orange pony close her eyes, scrunching her face in concentration with her tongue sticking out. It looked so adorably silly that she was almost distracted from Applejack’s efforts, but Rainbow Dash’s grin widened into a real smile as Applejack managed to lower the wings. “Okay! That was your first wing flap. In ultra slow motion maybe, but still a wing flap! Now keep going!”

Applejack frowned, choosing to ignore the backhanded comment. She continued to move the wings, feeling them tingle as she flexed them in ways she had not even considered before. Each flap required a large effort, burning up more energy than she had thought possible. Grimacing with effort and with sweat beading on her head, she redoubled her efforts to increase the speed. If those lightweight pegasi could make it look so effortless, she could do it too!

Suddenly, the shrill sound of a whistle interrupted her concentration, leaving the wings to drop down at her sides, still unfurled. Rainbow Dash was staring at her, a concerned look on her face.

“You okay there AJ?”

“Yeah,” the farm pony gasped, panting for breath. She realized she was more winded than she’d thought.

“Are you sure?” Rainbow asked, stepping closer to her exhausted friend. “You didn’t hear me when I told you to stop,” she explained, lifting up the whistle. “Had to use this to snap you out of it.”

Applejack simply nodded, sitting down on her haunches. “Ah think... Ah just...got too into it...” she panted, trying to slow down her breathing.

Rainbow chuckled. “Good, at least you’re not worrying anymore! But don’t overwork yourself,” she said, putting a hoof on Applejack’s shoulder. “You’re doing great though. Just gotta get used to the motions!” She eyed her friend’s face, beads of sweat clearly visible on her coat, and used her... well, Applejack’s tail to wipe it off. “You wanna stop for today? You look pretty beat-”

“No!” Applejack interrupted, vehemently shaking her head. “Just gimme a few minutes. If you pegasi can do this, so can ah!”

Rainbow could only grin as she watched. She hadn’t expected Applejack to get so absorbed in this, especially after her initial complaints, and now the fruits of her labor were showing. Spending the time to exercise the wings by hoof was paying off.

Things were going awesomely.

-----

Things were **not** going awesomely.

What had started out as a great rate of progression had tapered off on the following days, reducing the sessions to a mere crawl. Applejack had spent the time repeating the first day’s exercises, strengthening her

understanding and control of the blue appendages. They had even attempted a short glide, but it failed when Applejack couldn't focus on being in the air, or feeling the wind, or controlling where her hooves were pointing. Trying to keep the wings straight with all that had just been flat out impossible.

And Rainbow Dash didn't know what to do.

She had never been in that situation, having grown up with the wings, every last inch of it was familiar, every little sensation and feeling was known and identified, if not at a conscious level, definitely at a subconscious one. She just **knew** the limits of her body, and kept striving to overcome them.

But Applejack... she couldn't even begin to imagine what she was going through. The wings were fully grown, and strong. She just couldn't control them well enough for real flight. It reminded Rainbow Dash of something else...

*No...of **somepony** else*, she thought, her gaze shifting in the direction of a familiar cottage near the Everfree Forest. She frowned, the idea forming in her head not being one she really wanted to consider. But... as much as she didn't want to admit it, she was at the end of her rope.

Mastering the sky, performing tricks, she could do all of that. But actually getting into the air? That was...more than second nature. It was like breathing. She never even thought of it. She never even considered that there was any thought to it. It just happened.

Applejack halted her wings, noticing how quiet Rainbow Dash had gotten. More than just the quiet, she had noticed the pegasus' mood over the last couple days. Rainbow was growing increasingly frustrated, and Applejack was quite sure she knew what was the cause. She trotted over to her friend, and sat down next to her. "You okay there sugarcube? You've gotten pretty quiet..."

"Huh?" Rainbow blinked, turning her head to end up face to face with Applejack. Their eyes locked, the gaze holding for what seemed like an eternity. In them, Rainbow could almost see what the earth pony was feeling. Strength, determination, but also worry and concern. Concern for

her. "Yeah," she replied, breaking the gaze and facing away. "I'm just thinking..."

"Ah'm not doing too well, am ah?" Applejack asked quietly.

"What? No, you aren't! I mean, you are!" She stopped, trying to sort out her thoughts. "I mean, you're doing great... it's just..." she said, faltering.

"Yes?"

"I just don't think I... I can teach you right." She finished, her ears drooping.

Applejack sat quietly, watching Rainbow. She had never imagined the brash, loud and cocksure pegasus would admit something like this... not without her friends' prompting. "Ah'm sorry..." she mumbled, sure that her lack of progress was to blame. To her surprise, Rainbow shook her head vehemently.

"It's not your fault. I'm just missing a step here. I'll get you flying yet!" Rainbow said angrily, determination returning to her attitude. She stood up, facing the forest. "And I think I know who can help."

Applejack smiled, glad that Rainbow's spirits seemed to have returned, and followed her towards their destination.

-----

The cottage was alive with the sound of fauna, the various creatures and critters filling every nook and cranny of the home. Not a one was sleeping, as it was the most important time of the day: feeding time.

Fluttershy smiled as she drifted through her living room, dishing out seeds to the various birds nesting within. With that done, she fluttered back to the kitchen, seeking a bag of carrots. With the birds fed, the bunnies were next. Focused on her daily ritual, she did not catch a glimpse through the window of the two mares approaching along the path.

Rainbow Dash gulped as she and Applejack trotted up to the door, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't scared, never scared. She didn't think Fluttershy could even **do** anything to scare her, come to think of

it. She simply found the idea of needing help hard to swallow. She was certainly not above asking for help, or as the case may have been in Ghastly Gorge, shouting for it. But those circumstances had been extreme. This... somehow felt harder to do. She stared at the door, almost willing it to open on its own, then gathered her courage and knocked.

Fluttershy squeaked at the unexpected noise, dropping the carrots she had been carrying. Gathering herself, she trotted over to the door, flinching as whoever was outside started knocking again. Cracking the door open a mere inch, she sighed in relief to see Applejack and Rainbow Dash on the other side, and opened the door wide. "Hey girls. What's up?" she smiled.

"Hey Fluttershy, we uh..." Rainbow started before hesitating. Fluttershy's smile wavered as she looked at the fellow pegasus, sensing that she seemed troubled. Rainbow closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "We need your help."

Fluttershy's eyes widened in fear. "D-Did something happen? Are the girls all right? Are the crusaders okay?" She gasped as a thought struck her. "Is Discord back?!" she squeaked, covering her head with her hooves as she started trembling.

The other two ponies blinked at the spectacle, used to it after knowing Fluttershy for so long. Rainbow Dash sighed, putting a hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder. "No, silly. I'm trying to teach Applejack to fly but..." Rainbow paused once again, struggling with the words. As much as she was loath to admit it, she was out of options. "I don't think I can do it on my own. I need your help."

Fluttershy stared at her friend, dropping her hooves from her head. She glanced at Applejack, who was staring at Rainbow Dash with an unreadable expression, then back at the cyan pegasus. "H-how could I help?" she asked, confused. "You're the best flier in Equestria!" she exclaimed, immediately regretting the statement. "Oh... I'm sorry..." she whispered, her eyes wandering to Rainbow's conspicuously wingless sides.

Rainbow Dash frowned momentarily, then shook her head. "It's okay. I just remembered you having... trouble... flying during our summer flight camp. You're fine now, so I figured you might have some ideas...?"

“Oh!” Fluttershy exclaimed. “I’d be glad to help! If... that’s okay with you, I mean...”

“Don’t ya worry, sugarcube.” Applejack said, speaking for the first time since their arrival. “Ah’m sure your gentle touch will help!”

“Okay... if you’re really sure...” Fluttershy said, to which Applejack nodded. “Let me just finish feeding the animals.”

A few minutes later, the trio left the cottage and made their way back to the practice hill, where the pair of pegasi sat, observing the winged earth pony. Applejack demonstrated how she flapped the wings, earning a quiet cheer of approval from Fluttershy, and silence from Rainbow Dash.

Lining up at the top of the hill, Applejack took off in a short gallop, and leapt into the sky. She flapped her wings, the feathers catching air, and held them steady. For a merest second, she was once more airborne. That second seemed to stretch forever, the sensation of defying gravity robbing her breath away. But all too soon, her eyes tracked downwards, and her legs locked up. Her wings refused to make the minute corrections that would keep her aloft, dropping her hooves to the ground. Thankfully, she had not crashed into it again, ending like the first few attempts. But she could not prevent feeling some disappointment in herself at her inability to do better.

“That was amazing!” a voice exclaimed softly, causing Applejack to turn towards the source. Fluttershy was trotting towards her, a look of wonder in her eyes.

Applejack glanced past her, noticing the frown on Rainbow Dash’s face. Their gazes met, but soon broke as the rainbow maned flier turned her head away. *What’s wrong with that pony?* she thought, confused at Rainbow’s attitude. Focusing once more on Fluttershy, she gave the timid pegasus a wry grin. “Honey, I flew for maybe one second. That there’s not really flying.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “But it is! You’ve only been trying for a few days, haven’t you? That’s great!”

“Ah still need to do better though.” Applejack replied, glancing once more at their silent companion.

Fluttershy noticed the glance, and turned her head to follow Applejack’s gaze. Rainbow Dash was still facing away, seemingly lost in thought. Fluttershy smiled as she turned back to the earth pony. “I did notice some things you can change... if you want to hear them.”

Applejack blinked, then nodded emphatically. “Spit it out, sugarcube!”

Fluttershy nodded, and took a deep breath. “Well your wing strength seems strong enough, you don’t need a running start for it, just try to jump as high as possible instead. Also, your legs are splayed out, they need to be tucked in a bit for better aerodynamics. You keep your wings too stiff when trying to glide, you can flap them a little to keep airborne without trying to get lift. Oh, and try not to look down, look straight, or even up.” Fluttershy blinked, shrinking back into herself as she saw Applejack staring at her in shock. “I mean... you don’t need to follow my advice if you don’t want to...”

Applejack’s mouth hung agape, her mind still catching up to everything Fluttershy had said. Once she did, her open mouth changed into a wide smile. “Well now, you sure ain’t pullin’ no punches. And here ah thought this was gonna be easy! Ah’ll give it a try!” She turned back to the top of the hill, but paused before taking another step. Looking back at Fluttershy, she grinned sheepishly. “Um... can you list all that again?”

Giggling, the yellow pegasus stepped in next to Applejack as they trotted to the top of the hill, explaining each point in further detail.

-----

True to Fluttershy’s gentle nature, progress advanced at a slow, but steady pace. That first day, she spent her time coaching Applejack on her wing control, helping her to notice how the wings caught and interacted with the air around them. Contrary to Rainbow’s more instinctual and subconscious understanding of flight, Fluttershy’s early troubles with it had given her a more practical knowledge of the mechanics behind it, allowing her to see the root of Applejack’s problems, and address them. Before exhaustion eventually caught up to her, Applejack’s flight time had gradually increased by a few seconds. It seemed like a tiny amount, but to a normally



earthbound earth pony, those few seconds of controlled flight let her glimpse at a world she had never considered outside of daydreams.

More importantly, Fluttershy had one advantage that made a world of difference. She could actually show what she meant by providing an example, fluttering around Applejack and demonstrating techniques and tricks she had learned. Over the next several days, Dash found herself giving less and less input, mostly content to watch Applejack's efforts.

Mostly. She was certainly happy to see Applejack going to such lengths and showing such enthusiasm for flying. But at the same time, she felt something nagging at the back of her mind. She had clammed up, becoming almost surly when she did speak, something that had been noticed around the Apple family table. She herself was aware of it, but couldn't dispel the emotion. Even after she'd found Applebloom's handiwork on the guest room's door, a little apple shaped sign saying "Rainbow Dash's Room" in brilliant colors. While it had brought a smile, it had not lasted long enough.

Back on the hill, her emotions continued to clash. Every time she watched Applejack take off, that feeling of discontent surged, robbing her of the enjoyment she should have felt seeing her friend glide. Even watching Fluttershy in the air tore at her.

*Dangit, I need to fly!*

Realization froze her mind and body as the thought jumped into her mind. Jealous. She was **jealous**. Of Fluttershy, and of Applejack. Of what Rainbow Dash herself had been born with but was now missing.

She needed to fly. It wasn't so much a desire as a need, a craving, a hole that had to be filled somehow. Now that she knew what the feeling was, it stayed with her, an itch that couldn't be scratched. Living on the farm and spending her time applebucking had been a welcome distraction, but she was a pegasus. It was in her flesh, her bones, her very soul to fly. And she couldn't.

*But I know somepony who can help,* she thought, her mind wandering towards Ponyville.

# Chapter 6

"I just need to take care of something in Ponyville," Rainbow Dash said the following morning. "I'll be back later."

"You sure you don't want some company?" Applejack asked, wary at the suddenness of this errand's arrival. She remembered how Rainbow Dash's mood seemed to dip in the past few days. She had gone from an enthusiastic ball of energy to glum and glowering, which confused Applejack all the more since the flying practice was what the pegasus herself had suggested.

From all the time and effort spent trying to convince Applejack to go along with the idea, Rainbow Dash had made it sound like it would have been the best thing ever, short of getting the wings back herself. Seeing her like this made Applejack worry to no end. She had put her all into this training, hoping that Rainbow Dash would see and appreciate the effort. She'd even gotten some of Rainbow's favorite food for dinner, which seemed to work, but its effect did not last past the dinner itself. She couldn't think of what else to do, and the worry gnawed at her.

"Nah," Rainbow Dash answered, putting a grin on her face. "I'm a grown mare, I can handle it on my own. Plus Fluttershy will be waiting if you don't head out yourself."

Applejack frowned. Even she could see that the grin was forced, yet her friend had made a good point. Fluttershy was likely already waiting on the hill, ready to help out with further flight coaching. She couldn't just leave her standing.

And so Rainbow Dash found herself staring at the Library door. For the merest moment, a sense of unfamiliarity presented itself to her, thinking that she rarely seemed to use the door, and would normally use the windows instead. But that was currently impossible, so she simply raised a hoof and knocked. Moments later the door opened, revealing the shape of a baby dragon.

“Hey Dash!” Spike grinned. “What’s up?”

“Heya Spike,” she answered, giving him a friendly noogie. Unlike most, he actually enjoyed them, as it scratched the occasional itch between his scales. “Is Twilight in?” she asked as she let him go.

“Yup, she’s busy reading.” He rolled his eyes. “Not that that’s new.”

Dash laughed, for what felt like the first time in days. She walked into the Library, aiming towards the stairs to Twilight’s room, but paused as she caught a glimpse of purple out of the corner of her eye. There stood Twilight, nose buried in a book, in the middle of the library proper. She hadn’t noticed that a guest had arrived, still intent on her reading.

“Hey, Twilight!” Dash said, but got no reaction. She cleared her throat, and tried again. “HEY, TWILIGHT!” She yelled, causing the unicorn to cry out in surprise.

“What in the hay- oh, Dash!” Twilight relaxed at the sight of her grinning friend. “You almost scared my horn off.”

Rainbow Dash stared at Twilight in utter confusion. “Scared your... is that even possible?”

“No!” Twilight paused a moment, thinking. “Well.. no, at least I’ve never read about it! It’s just an expression. Don’t you pegasi have something like that?”

“Uh...” Rainbow wracked her brains. “Oh! Yeah, scaring the feathers off your wings,” she said, flaring her wings for emphasis. Or she would have, had she not momentarily forgotten her situation.

Twilight’s ears drooped, noticing the shift in her friend’s attitude. “Um. Sorry... anyway! What are you doing here?” she asked, tilting her head. “You’re always at Sweet Apple Acres lately. I haven’t seen you in days!”

“Well...” Rainbow started, her hoof rubbing the back of her head. ***I am spending all my time there, aren’t I?*** She then caught herself. “Wait. Back up, why aren’t you in bed?!”

Twilight glared at Rainbow, sighing loudly. "Oh please. I've been in there almost three weeks now. I'm fine." she said, holding a hoof up to stop Rainbow's interruption. "I've **been** fine for a few days now. Even went to the clinic yesterday. I've recovered. Clean bill of health!" She stared at the pegasus, as if daring to be contradicted.

Rainbow Dash perked up at this. "So this means you can do magic again?" she asked, a hopeful tone creeping into her voice.

Twilight remained silent, and instead simply let her horn do the talking. Rainbow yelled in surprise as she was lifted off the ground and spun upside down. She looked around, finally noticing the purple glow around her hooves, which disappeared as she was spun upright again and gently set on the floor. "Does that answer your question?"

Rainbow Dash nodded emphatically. "Good, 'cause I wanna ask you something."

"What's up?"

"Well.. I kinda need a favor." She glanced down at her hooves.

Twilight waited, watching her friend. Why was she being so hesitant?

"I... I need you to help me fly." She said, looking up at the unicorn.

Twilight shook her head. "I can't, Rainbow. You know I haven't figured it out yet. You'd be the first to know if I did."

"Not that," Rainbow answered, shaking her head. "I just... need to fly." she said, a wild gleam in her eye. "Can't you magic something up?"

"Well, there's always Tank's machine. You could wear that as a hat!" Twilight's grin faltered as she saw the expression on her friend's face. She continued after clearing her throat. "Well, I could levitate you again but that wouldn't last long, you're heavier than you look."

"No, not like that. I need to get higher!"

"How about my balloon? That'll get you plenty high!"

“Too slow!”

Twilight struggled to think of solutions. “Uh... Pinkie’s copter?”

“No!” Rainbow snorted. “I need...the wind in my hair. I need the adrenaline.” she said quietly, a manic tone in her voice. “I need wings!”

Twilight frowned. “I just told you I haven’t figur-oh!” she said, as realization struck her. “You... want magic wings.”

“Yes!” Rainbow Dash replied, almost shouting the word. “I need to fly, Twilight. You don’t understand how it is after all these weeks!”

“Actually.. I kinda do, Dash.” Twilight pointed towards her horn.

“Oh. Right.” Dash grinned guiltily, then stared at Twilight again. “So, can you get me wings?” she asked, her face lighting up with an eager glow.

“No.”

“Cool, thank-” the pegasus paused as her brain caught up with her ears. “What?” She sputtered, now yelling at full volume. “Why in the hay not?!”

“Rainbow, I’ve already messed you and Applejack up enough with that teleportation accident. Even if the nurses say you’re fine, I’m not risking it until I’ve figured out how to reverse this! I have **no** idea what the consequences would be if I tried adding even more magic.”

Rainbow Dash sat still, shell-shocked at the refusal. “But you just levitated me...”

Twilight shook her head. “Not the same. Levitation just moves your body around, the wings actually connect to where your real wings used to be.” She looked at her friend, pity in her eyes. “I’m **not** going risk crippling you for life, Rainbow.”

“But-”

“**Crippled**, Rainbow.” Twilight repeated, now glaring. “That means no

flying. Ever again. I'm not willing to risk that!" Her voice softened as she saw Rainbow cringe. "Please. Just give me time to figure this out..."

The blue mare's ears drooped as she gulped "I'll... okay. I'll wait."

The pair sat in silence for a minute, one pony staring dejectedly at the floor while the other watched her. Eventually, Rainbow Dash stood up, clearing her throat. "Thanks, Twilight." She said quietly. "I... I guess I'll see you later?"

Twilight nodded. "Sure... And I'm sorry, Rainbow. Really."

The pegasus just nodded, then turned away and left the library.

-----

Rainbow Dash wandered aimlessly through town, unwilling to return home just yet. The prospect of returning to the farm did not entice her, her brain vaguely registering the fact that she had not thought of her cloudhouse as home, but of Sweet Apple Acres. Instead, her mind was too focused on the storm of emotions she was feeling. Dejection was foremost, as her best chance at scratching her itch, her **need** to fly had been shot down. She did accept Twilight's reasoning, and understood the fact that Twilight was, truly, looking after Rainbow.

Yet she still couldn't help a simmer of anger from bubbling up. Twilight being as smart as she was, why couldn't that egghead find a solution? Why was Rainbow forced to wait this long? Why, for that matter, wasn't Princess Celestia helping out with this? She had saved the town from Twilight's doll with what seemed like a wave of a hoof. This... this wouldn't take more than a few minutes for the Goddess to fix.

But no. Instead it had been turned into... a lesson. A ponyfeathering **lesson**. For Twilight. Why always Twilight? What made **her** so special, huh?

Her anger reached a boiling point, and she acted on impulse, bucking the nearest hard object. Her hooves connected solidly with a tree, resulting in a crack that rang through the street. Shocked at its volume, Rainbow looked at the tree, gaping as it now leaned at a precarious angle. She quickly

made her escape as doors and windows started to open, startled ponies poking their heads out in an attempt to trace the source of the noise.

Slowing down as she reached the park, Rainbow angled towards a bench, and draped herself onto it. *Calm down*, she thought. Property damage was not a good way to vent. Not that she should have had the need to vent. *Some Element of Loyalty I am. Blaming my own friend.*

Even if Twilight was, truly, the cause of her current situation, she was also trying her utmost to fix it. And Rainbow, for all that she called Twilight an egghead, had faith in her friend. She'd get to the bottom of this. Rainbow just wished Twilight would manage to do so sooner, rather than later.

She took a deep breath and sighed, stretching out on the bench. Maybe a nap would help.

-----

*Rainbow Dash quietly closed the door behind her, as she exited one of Manehattan's tallest buildings. Over time, she had worked her way up the company ladder, each greater position earning her new responsibilities and titles, as well as a new office on a higher floor. It worked well as a motivation for pegasi, as the more important you became, the closer you got to the sky where every pegasus belonged.*

*Plus, the view from her office was pretty awesome, she had to admit. She had one of the keenest eyes in the business, able to glance at the sky and formulate a work plan for the weather ponies in moments. Her coverage of Manehattan had increased as her view expanded ever higher, and had she still been able, she would have managed entirely different cities and regions.*

*But she wasn't able, was she? She understood that, and understood as many promotions that should by rights have been given to her were instead handed to other ponies. She certainly understood it.*

*But it still hurt.*

*She angled towards her home, amongst the innumerable apartments dotting the city. She walked into the shopping district, stores lining both*

*sides of the road with every kind of product, restaurants vying for attention with countless different aromas wafting from their kitchens.*

*A splash of color caught her eye, attracting her gaze to a toy shop's display. The Wonderbolts had a new plush toy added to their list, to commemorate an important event. The promotion of a new captain. Spitfire had retired many years before, along with Soarin' and many of the members Dash had been familiar with. These days, the wonderbolts were young ponies she did not recognize nor knew the name of.*

*Except the captain. The young filly had trained long and hard, devoting years of her life to the goal. It had taken her several tries, and thus several years worth of waiting, but she had eventually been accepted into the ranks of the elite fliers. And she had worked even harder after that, a testament to her skill and determination. Her plush stood proud, the purple mane looking windswept, purple eyes staring straight ahead, the dark orange coat visible around the edges of the Wonderbolt uniform. She sure had graduated from that little scooter of hers.*

*Rainbow Dash couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy, but she had lost her chance long ago. She gazed at her reflection, thinking how her chance had never really existed at all. The reflection stared back. The blue coat still had its luster, but the chromatic mane was becoming faded. The years had taken their toll. She was old, wrinkly.*

*And wingless.*

Gasping for breath and biting back a cry, Rainbow Dash jolted awake, almost falling from the bench she had been lying on. She looked around, trying to recover her bearings. She blinked as the sun shone in her eyes, the Ponyville park stretching out before her. She'd apparently slept away half the day.

*A dream, she thought, shuddering in relief. It was all a dream. But it had shaken her, badly. It had been so vivid, felt so **real**. Sliding off the bench, she started walking back to Sweet Apple Acres. She needed someplace familiar, someplace welcoming. She needed the sanctuary of home.*

-----



Meanwhile, Twilight continued to busy herself around the Library. As much as she had found the weeks quarantined in her bed annoying, she felt no desire to be outdoors. Her talk with Rainbow Dash had reinforced this, sending Twilight diving back into her books in an attempt to fix her mistake. She'd even requested numerous books on teleportation from the Royal Canterlot Archives, which had arrived during her convalescence. Unfortunately, they had not helped at all. She had gleaned a few snippets that filled some blanks in her knowledge, but nothing that was of use to her.

Sighing, she cast her magic at one of the tomes, preparing to read it once more in the vain hope of finding something she had missed, but was interrupted by the sound of her front door crashing open. Startled, Twilight dropped the book, and spun around to face the invader.

A pink blur sped towards her, causing Twilight to instinctively teleport away. As she reappeared a few feet away, she surveyed the damage that had resulted from her avoiding none other than Pinkie Pie.

Books were piled in a heap, entirely covering Pinkie until her head popped out of the mount, grinning at Twilight. "Twilight! I heard you were better! Are you better? You look better!" she asked in her usual cheery manner.

Twilight couldn't help but smile at her friend. "Yes Pinkie, I'm fine. Though I'm still working on-"

"Yay!" the party pony shouted as she leapt at Twilight. "This calls for a party! 'Twilight's not sick anymore' party! Oh I gotta invite everypony!"

Twilight shook her head. "That's nice Pinkie, but I've really got to work on this... I've got to help Rainbow Dash and Applejack get better too."

Pinkie gasped, shocked. "Why, are they sick too?!"

Blinking, the unicorn tilted her head in confusion. Sometimes she truly did not understand how Pinkie's mind worked. "Uh, no? I mean Dash's wings..."

"Oh yeah!" Pinkie exclaimed, then shrugged. "Maybe 'Twilight's not sick anymore and is going to solve the problem' party?"

Twilight smiled, unable to help it. As much as Pinkie confused and sometimes even annoyed her, she truly embodied the Element of Laughter, and was always able to make her grin. "I'll think about it, Pinkie. Just give me a few days."

"Oki doki loki!" Pinkie bounced up, then paused in mid-air as she looked around the Library. "Hey!" she said as she landed. "I just noticed something!"

"What?" Twilight asked, wondering what her friend may have noticed.

"This place doesn't have several walls!" The pink pony said, pointing around. "Look! It's all just one big round wall!"

Twilight had certainly not expected that. "And you've been here how many times now...?"

"Silly, I was just wondering where I'd have to drill a hole for my party cannon! I've got to find the best angle after all!"

"Drill a..." Twilight started, then facehoofed. "Pinkie, there's a door. Why would you have to drill... a hole in a wall..."

Twilight's voice faltered as she stared at the walls in realization. She sat there, thunderstruck at an idea that weeks of study and research had not produced. Her horn started glowing, levitating a quill and parchment, on which she furiously started scribbling. *I have to do a bunch of tests, but.. this could work. This could work!*

Pinkie stared at Twilight, wondering what had set her off. "Twilight?" she asked, confused.

The unicorn spun around, momentarily startled at Pinkie's presence. She had completely forgotten about her. "Oh, Pinkie! You're a genius!"

"No I'm not!" Pinkie grinned happily. "I'm a pony!"

"Yes you are! And I've made up my mind! Let's get a party going!"

“Yay!”

“But... in a few days, if possible.” She asked, hesitant. She didn’t know how long these experiments would take.

“Still yay!” the pink pony shouted, then bounced out of the library.

As the quiet once more filled the Library, Twilight shook her head, and set to work.

-----

“Applejack! Are you okay?”

The orange pony shook her head, attempting to clear the numbness that the impact had caused. She had just completed her longest glide yet, her control near perfect throughout its duration, until a sudden gust of wind sent her off target. Unable to correct her trajectory, she had drifted into a tree, getting tangled in the branches and knocking her head on the trunk. Momentarily stunned, her eyes locked onto Fluttershy as her vision cleared. “Am ah on the quay?” She shouted, her ears still ringing. “Ah don’t think so! Ah’m in a.. tree?”

Ignoring the confusing reply, Fluttershy put her forelegs around Applejack’s midsection, and gently lifted her out of the tangle of branches. She flew back down to the ground, setting Applejack on the grass under the tree, and inspected her friend until Applejack’s wits returned. Thankfully, none of the branches had caused any significant damage. A few scrapes here and there, but on the whole the bump on Applejack’s head was the worst injury. “Are you okay?” Fluttershy repeated, as she watched Applejack relax.

“Ah think so,” Applejack replied, lifting a hoof to her head. She hissed in pain as it brushed the bump. “Though ah’ll probably have a headache for a while.” She took a deep breath, and started to trot back up the hill.

“Uhm.. Applejack?” Fluttershy asked quietly, causing the other pony to pause. “Why are you going back up?”

Applejack stared in confusion at the yellow pegasus. “Ah’m lining up for another try! That one didn’t end too good, now did it?”

“Oh no, no no no...” Fluttershy said, rushing over to Applejack’s side. “You need to rest after a crash like that!”

“But ah feel fine!” Applejack insisted, flaring her blue wings for emphasis. “See?”

But Fluttershy would not be swayed, and gave Applejack a stare that had made a dragon back down. “No! You need to put some ice on this and cool it down! It’s a big bump.”

Being much smaller than a dragon, Applejack had little chance of resisting the stare. Gulping, she nodded frantically, wincing as that made her head ache. “Yes ma’am! Ah’m going! Ah’m going!”

Insisting that she could manage the walk home on her own, Applejack bade Fluttershy goodbye, and made her way back to the farm, the watchful eye of the yellow pegasus following her until she disappeared behind a hill.

# Chapter 10

Sunday morning, I flew to Farrington to buy some things. It wasn't an easy decision at all. But after racking my brain for all of Saturday trying to remember everything about my childhood, I came to the conclusion that I needed a more organized method to collect my thoughts. I had the money, so *that* wasn't a problem; I just didn't enjoy the idea of material possessions.

It was more than that, actually – it was that, based on the nature of historical documents, whatever I wrote was going to outlive me. From birth, we had been instilled with an obsession over our *legacy* instead of our actual lives and, from a mathematical standpoint, I could see the reasoning behind it.

It also bothered me that I didn't know how long I was going to need *Gildas Tagebuch* – my pet name for the chronicling that I was about to undertake – for. Part of me hoped that it would be a simple manner of accounting for every month or so of my childhood and that I could burn it afterward, but I knew better than to hope for something so convenient. I liked *nothing* about the situation I was in, but I eventually decided that posthumous embarrassment was a smaller price to pay than going through the rest of my life not knowing when I was going to stumble into another memory like I had at Starfall's.

Depending on what happened after death, I reasoned that there was a good chance I wouldn't even be able to feel it. Each of the three tribes had their own version of what happened after death, and they were all conflicting on some level. With a shrug, I supposed that with all the dragons and other mystical beings that I had read about historically existing, it wasn't a huge stretch that there was a hidden group of beings that acted like a pantheon of gods.

However, I sure as hell hadn't had *Ing* or *Frija* there to protect me while my father beat the crap out of me for over a decade.

Back on the physical plane, I shook the thoughts out of my mind and focused on my flight to Farrington. My original plan had been to fly up to the northern gate to get to the Market District, where there was a store that sold writing supplies. When I saw Iron in his booth, though, I quickly changed the plan to include stopping by and saying hello to my boyfriend. He gave me a perturbed look when I landed, but he still greeted me, "Good morning. Is everything all right?"

I remembered the circumstances under which I had left him on Saturday and couldn't help but feel guilty that he was practically an oversight that morning. "Ye... no," I admitted with a shake of my head. "I'm trying to put everything in order from my past, but it's getting complicated to keep everything straight. I came to get ink and stuff."

He nodded. "Well, there's a stationary store in the Market District that sells writing supplies. I'd check there first."

"Thanks," I replied lightly, even though the information was redundant.

"After that... are you going to stay here past noon?"

I didn't know what time it was, but I decided I at least owed him a lunch together. "Uh, sure. Did you want to eat on your break?" He nodded, and we made plans for a diner in the Market District; it wasn't a dramatic difference, but weekend shifts got a fifteen-minute longer lunch break than their weekday counterparts. With our plans set, I smiled and waved goodbye; I had business to attend to in the Market District before our meal.

\* \* \*

Lunch with Iron was quiet. I spent most of it trying to work things out about why I needed to purchase supplies in the first place and, apparently, Iron took that as a cue to not press the matter. I appreciated that, even though ten minutes into our meal, I started to question the wisdom of agreeing to the date when I hadn't wanted to talk in the first place.

Iron finally broke our silence to tell me about his dinner with Starfall the previous evening, and I was glad for him; they were old friends, so fighting was only a waste of time. I didn't vocalize it as much as I probably should have, but then again, I had taken something entirely different from my Saturday visit with Starfall.

When the meal was over, or really, when we just called it quits with twenty minutes to spare, Iron walked me to the north gate. I felt bad for everything that had happened between us that weekend, so I apologized to him.

He returned the apology with a one-armed hug and whispered near my ear hole, "Don't apologize. It's not your fault. I hope you find peace in your chronicles, though."

I hugged him back with the arm that was holding my bag of writing supplies; unintentionally, it whipped around and struck him lightly on the neck. I don't think he felt much through the armor. However, in response, he rustled the feathers between my wings by rubbing my back a few times; when I gave him a flat look, he grinned apologetically and tried smoothing them back down. I didn't *really* mind, but that was as good a point as any to end on. I didn't want to maim his mouth with a deep kiss, so I just said goodbye and took off for home.

\* \* \*

When I reached my cave, I unpacked everything I had bought: ink, a little notebook, and a sturdy, flat piece of polished wood. It had been part of a desk at one point, but apparently one of the legs had broken during shipment, so the shopkeeper sold me the top at what I guessed was a

decent price. When I set it on the wooden box that housed Iron's gift, it made a neat little desk for me to brood over or lie down at. Combined with my paper and ink and another feather from my wings, I was ready to start remembering things from my past.

Chronicling my history of abuse was not exactly pleasant or straightforward. For one, my memories sort of blurred together into a series of images and voices rather than a chronological list of events. That meant I couldn't just pick a date in the past and start going forward from there; I had to remember things based on their relation to other events. When I came across an incomplete memory, I was unable to entirely fill it in more often than I would have liked.

There was also the fact that I didn't like remembering that stuff in the first place. I lost count of the number of times where the recollections became too much and I had to stop for a while. On one such break, I stretched my left arm out behind me and noted that, at that angle, it was easy to see how the bone hadn't healed straight. These memories and scars were a part of who I was, I knew, but they didn't define me. Or if they did, I didn't want them to. With that thought, I brought my arm back down to steady the page I was on and kept writing.

By eight-thirty, it wasn't bright enough in my cave to write anymore. I was definitely done for the day, but I had written a good amount for every year, leading up to a forty minute lull where I couldn't think of anything else to add, so I felt confident that I might be entirely finished with the project. I licked my quill clean and put everything away into a corner.

I wanted to review everything that I had written, but I was also hungry and dirty. I had never written anything longer than a single page before, so I had never really known how messy of a process writing actually was. I washed my hands down at my pond before I started looking for dinner; that came in the form of a too-curious squirrel that must not have thought I could see him.



After dinner, I flew back up to my cave, grabbed my journal, and then took a small trip to the western edge of my mountain. It was slightly lighter there, so I spent the rest of the twilight hours reading over my account of everything that I could remember my father doing to me.

Given my original purpose in getting the writing supplies, I found it ironic how unorganized my memories ended up being after all. However, near the end, I *had* gone through and assigned ages to all of the incidents, to the best of my ability, so if I wanted, I could put it all in order. As I read through it, I felt a sense of relief – if that was the word for it – that there weren't many large gaps between events. The ones that I did find, though, were accounted for by how 'happy' I had been at the start of the next incident that I had been able to recover from the last 'lesson' I had learned.

With my facts laid out straight, I closed the journal and flew back to my cave. Collecting my thoughts filled me with a mix between serenity and uncertainty. I knew what my father had done. I knew how, and when, and where, and to whom... The last question that I had, the one that had burned inside me for almost fifteen years, the *only one I wanted an answer to*, but I still drew a blank.

Why?

It seemed so simple of a question, with simple conditions that weren't being fulfilled: Parents were supposed to nurture, not hurt. It was a simple evolutionary drive to make sure the next generation had the best chance to survive. Why had I been different, been singled out? Sure, we had all known to stay out of his way when he was in his home, but unless I was missing something, none of my other siblings had gotten it nearly as badly as I had.

I was so used to the opposite, the absence of his affection, that I never stopped to question why it was missing in the first place. Yes, I wished that he had loved me. Was that so selfish of a thing to want, though?

It was late now, and I was tired. I set my alarm with disdain for the morning; for the first time that I could recall, I didn't want to go to work the next day. Iron hadn't really mentioned much in terms of the punishments for not showing up, but I knew I had to go anyway; if anything, I had reading to do that night at the hospital.

As I lay down to go to sleep, I wished I knew some ponies other than Dash and Iron. She wouldn't have the answers, I knew, and he... he was everything that I wanted in a relationship. I didn't know why I wanted what I did or why he was able to fulfill that role, but after everything I had been considering, I was beginning to question whether or not it was the healthiest thing for me to be dating someone who also amounted to a father figure.

Of course, by that point in the summer, I had given up trying to settle things between Iron and me in my head; I knew the only way things were going to get done was if I asked him myself. I got up to re-set my alarm clock for an earlier time, so I would have time to do that before my shift.

As I drifted off to sleep, I tried to comfort my uneasy mind by assuring myself that Iron would have some sort of answer to the problem I was now facing.

\* \* \*

Iron was notably speechless after I told him what was bothering me. Finally, he broke through his confused-looking daze to answer, "So... you're disturbed because I'm... fatherly?"

I shook my head; he was missing the point. "Not that. I mean, you've been great to me, and I appreciate that. But I keep coming back to... how do I know that's not just some sort of psychological dent on my part?"

His eyes widened as comprehension dawned on him, but he still didn't say anything at first. "Uhh..." he eventually started, "What's the difference between a father and a boyfriend?"

*That* caught me off-guard, and had several disturbing implications in and of itself. I hoped he was going somewhere with this, so I decided to answer as plainly as I could. "One's about rearing children, the other's about..." I trailed off and felt my face flush as I realized *what* I was about to imply about myself and Iron. I didn't want to talk about that yet, or at least, not right now.

Luckily, what I had said had been enough for him. "Er, sorry, but that's what I was getting at. A parent-and-child relationship is a lot less equal than a boyfriend-and-girlfriend one. Ever since we started dating, I've tried my hardest to treat you like an equal, or at least, to balance the favors I do for you with my utmost respect. Just because I help you through some of your problems doesn't mean I do it out of a sense of superiority. I mean, discounting events that we've already discussed, have I ever done anything to make you believe otherwise?"

I thought about what he said, slowly, but eventually, I shook my head. "No, you haven't."

I stood there, thinking it over for a while. With a sigh, I admitted that introspection was, at least for me, a jagged process. I didn't like how much self-analysis I had been forced to do over the past weekend. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that, given the circumstances, I couldn't blame Iron if he was a good boyfriend and my father was a horrible parent. On that note, I looked back up at Iron with a solemn gaze, but I couldn't decide how I wanted to tell him that. Finally, I settled on asking him a slightly unrelated question that had nonetheless been bothering me off-and-on since Saturday afternoon: "Do you think I'll ever be... normal, after everything that happened?"

He shook his head back with a somber grin. “No.” I felt my spirits deflating as Iron continued, “But you’re an exceptional griffin who came from extenuating circumstances. I don’t think ‘normal’ suits you.” The clarification didn’t help as much as he probably hoped it would, but he caught himself and sputtered on, “I mean... yes, you have your demons, but you’ll eventually come to terms with them in your own way. But even then, you’ll still be special to me.”

That was better, I decided. I gave him a quick kiss – which was more allowing *him* to kiss the end of my closed beak than any conscious effort on my part – before setting out for the citadel and my morning patrol.

I spent the rest of the morning thinking about my past, the present, and, in a rare deviation for me, the future. Specifically, I came to the conclusion that I was currently a product of my past environment, so what would that mean for the future? What if Iron’s knee-jerk reaction was right, and I would never be free of the scars that my father had given me? If I compared myself to who I was six months ago, I knew that I was capable of achieving *some* things on my own, even though I had to admit that I had kind of accidentally fallen into the Guard. But it was almost two months since I had taken my oath, and excluding the obstacle that I encountered with Starfall, I wasn’t *terrible* at it.

Similarly, I was fumbling my way through a relationship with Iron at a steady pace. Intellectually, I knew that two months was too soon to judge the success rate of anything, and I wasn’t naming the kids or anything, but at the same time... the more I found out about him, the more I felt that we had a deeper connection, and that we might have a chance at staying together for a long-term relationship.

That thought filled me both with hope and terror. I wanted things to work out between the two of us, but at the same time, I wasn’t sure if I was ready to make that sort of a commitment. With a shrug, I allowed myself to set that worry aside: it was something I’d have to deal with in the future, once things got that far.

I had to admit, though, that regardless our lives' eventual destinations, for the time being, I was glad to have Iron by my side.

\* \* \*

The rest of the week passed smoothly for us, or at least there weren't any stabbings, fights, or other breakdowns that we had to deal with. I was slowly coming to terms with just what Iron meant to me and, like he promised, he was there for me by means of conversation and company.

On Saturday, he took me to see a play. When I asked him if it was a special occasion, he was somewhat perplexed, but he said it wasn't. That didn't entirely come as a surprise to me; ponies put on dramatizations of stories outside of special holidays. It was one of the differences that I noted early on at Junior Speedsters' and part of a disturbing truth that was becoming more apparent as I spent more time with Iron: Compared to the griffins in my tribe, ponies were cheery and... alive.

I used to find it annoying. The more exposed to it I became, though, the more I realized that my irritation had been a reaction that stemmed from jealousy. I thought about mentioning it to Iron, but before I did, I realized how moot of a point it was in the first place to be envious of a society that I was a part of because it was more lively than the one that had cast me out.

Instead of mentioning the differences in our cultures, I focused on enjoying the performance. The auditorium we were in wasn't exactly run-down, but it could have used a fresh coat of paint. The cushions looked comfortable enough, though, and I moved mine right next to Iron's before sitting down and resting my head on his shoulder.

When the lights dimmed, the play began. It told a simple story that revolved around two warring pony nations, which was an interesting tidbit of history – I hadn't ever heard of anything other than a unified Equestria. I dismissed it as fictional, at least, and focused on the plot. When the story began to

focus on two lovestruck ponies whose warring countries forbade them from being together, though, I turned and glared at Iron. “*Really?*” I whispered.

He looked mortified when he whispered back, “*I **swear** I didn’t know what this was about before I got the tickets.*”

I just shook my head quietly and watched the rest of the play silently, up until the two main characters got married, which ended up stopping their countries’ war. “*Ha! Wrong!*” I whispered. Iron started cracking up, much to the dismay of an older patron sitting behind us. She hushed us, so we went back to watching the end of the play in silence.

When the play was over and we were outside, Iron apologized again. “If it means anything, Sherry was the one who suggested it to me in the first place.”

I felt bad for him; he was really bent out of shape over the parallels between the play and our relationship. I stopped walking, so Iron stopped, and I rubbed his neck with my head. After the gesture, I pulled back and said, “I was just kidding. I liked the play.”

Iron smiled back at me and said, “I’m glad, then.”

We walked to the southern gate and kissed goodbye. As Iron pulled back up, we shared a quick smile; it was the first time that we had managed the gesture without him cutting his lip. I was glad, too; I didn’t mind cauterizing the wounds I gave him, but at the same time, there was something inherently *wrong* with knowing how good his blood tasted.

As it stood, though, it was a good end to a good week. I flew home, but I was filled with warmth at how, when things weren’t falling apart around us, Iron made me happy.

I should have known it was too good to last.

It all started on Tuesday morning, when my lieutenant was waiting for me in the citadel with an air of disdain. Sherry wasn't much for presentation-level authority, but my lieutenant *did* expect a proper greeting, so I saluted him and offered as sincere a "Sir?" as I could manage.

He quickly tapped his temple before he started, "You're on duty this Thursday night. Which adjoining day do you want off to accommodate that?"

I blinked at the abrupt change to my schedule. "Uh... Friday," I decided, thinking it would be better to rest *after* the double-shift than before it.

He gave me a curt nod before heading out of the Guard's quarters, so I went over to Sherry to see what the hell was going on.

"Your patrol starts in two minutes, so I'll give you the short version: Starfall's coming back, but he requested a patrol. Theoretically we're gaining *two* guards because he's doing both a sergeant's and an officer's duties, but in practice... the schedule gets a bit weird to accommodate him because..." She pointed at me. "But actually, any new hire in your position would have gotten the 'lone patroller' route, so that's not your fault. But one plus one is two, except no one thinks it's a good idea for Sergeant Starfall to partner up with you, so throw in another officer's long-overdue shift transfer request..." Sherry shrugged. "Enjoy your Friday off, huh?"

I stared at her blankly. "I think I might have everything you just told me worked out by then."

She let out a bark of laughter. "Anyway, Residential District. Dismissed. Et cetera. Scoot." She waved me away, so I just went to my morning patrol before someone could change *it* to include the top of Mount Farrington.

By lunch time, I still didn't know *why* I was working that Thursday night, so I went to go ask Iron to shed some light on the convoluted situation.

“It’s not that...” He bobbed his head and squinted. “Okay, I’ll admit. It’s either incredibly graceful or horribly convoluted. Basically, every morning and day sergeant gets three patrols they need to have covered. Through a series of unfortunate events in April, one of Sherry’s five officers got fired, and *his* partner resigned in protest. So, she was down to three day officers when you showed up, and even then she had to split up a pair of long-standing partners to manage that. Normally we don’t like having lone guards on patrols, but...” He shrugged. “We’re currently under capacity. When you joined under Sherry, though, she grouped that other pair back together, which left you the odd griffin out. Since there haven’t been any new hires in a few months now, Starfall was going to patrol under her, technically, but then another day officer reminded me that she had previously asked to be put on the night shift, so *she’s* getting that and Starfall’s getting *her* old spot. Usually when someone changes their shift like that, they pull a double-shift in order to keep things running smoothly; however, when it came to him for authorization, Lieutenant Horatio personally volunteered you instead.”

“Lucky me,” I grumbled as I tried to make sense of the logistics Iron had just buried me in. Finally, I gave up and admitted defeat: “What sort of hell goes into planning everything like that?”

Iron chuckled, “It’s easier to learn it if you have to deal with it, I suppose.”

“I’ll say,” I agreed. “Still... a double-shift?”

“A double-shift,” Iron replied. “Even if I wanted to change it, that would be a difficult situation due to how we’ve agreed to do things. I’m sorry, but I can’t play favorites.”

“I wasn’t asking you to,” I cocked my eyebrow. “I was just wondering what the hours on that are.”

Iron nodded, pleased. “Your usual shift, then a six-hour break, and then from eleven to seven.”



*Six hours*, I mentally scoffed. I had community service that night, too; after my patrol, I'd have to read, leave the city to eat, come back, kill three hours, and *then* start another patrol.

Instead of focusing on just what level of torture that night was going to be, I decided to take a proactive route and give myself something to look forward to. "So, what do you want to do this weekend?"

Iron knew what I had on my mind. He nodded and assured me, "Something to make up for the days leading into it. However, if you want something before that, we can get breakfast after your patrol, too."

"That sounds good," I replied. That evening was going to be hell on my sleep schedule, and I didn't like how I was being forced into it out of what felt like a grudge, but the prospect of spending a proper weekend with Iron at least made it bearable. With a shrug, I decided that it would be over soon enough.

\* \* \*

By the time Thursday night came around, I had come to terms with it as much as I was ever going to. I had gone to sleep early Wednesday evening, so I was well-rested for the day. After my community service and meal, I spent most of the time at what amounted to my favorite diner. The waitress there was definitely in a better mood than she had been after my run-in with the media; we both sat at the counter, bored, so we passed the time by swapping stories. Apparently, she was putting away money to move out-of-town and start an acting career in Manehattan; I had never heard of the city, but I wished her luck nonetheless.

She was an interesting conversational partner, but by ten-thirty, I was still getting drowsy. I bought one last cup of coffee, hoping against all reason that it would be enough to last me the night. On that note, though, it was

time for me to start my shift, so I paid twice as much money as I owed her “for the company” and went south toward the citadel.

My sergeant – or ‘the’ sergeant, there was only one night sergeant – was a colt I had never seen before because he worked nights. Nonetheless, he seemed excited to see me; as soon as he saw me walk through the doors of the Guard’s quarters, he commented, “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

There was a crowd of about thirty guards around him, but they were facing the opposite wall from where I was; with a loud ruckus of clanking metal, they all looked at me. I heard murmuring as I walked over to join them, but I discounted it; half of me reminded myself that I had a job to do, and the other half was thoroughly convinced that I couldn’t care less what a bunch of ponies I’d never see again thought of me.

When I got over to the crowd, they parted in what was either politeness to accommodate me or willingness to give me a wide berth. The sergeant asked me, “So, do you know how things work here at night?”

“No, sir,” I answered. Iron had given me some of the basics, but I didn’t know what patrol I would be assigned to or who I would be assigned as a partner. I didn’t know what to make of the sergeant, either, but I didn’t want to give him any reasons to make my night more miserable than it already would be.

He nodded with a shrug, as if he were somehow disappointed with the answer. “Basically, it’s the same thing as the day: make laps, stop crimes. However...” He stopped speaking, grabbed a wooden rod, and pulled down a rolled-up map of the city. “The routes are a little different.”

I read the map as quickly as I could. My first reaction was to note that almost every patrol ran through some part of the Artisan District, focusing mainly in the west and central part. There was the same shorthand for ‘multiple patrols on the same route’ as the day map – arrows indicated the

direction of each patrol, and the number of arrows corresponded to the number of patrols on the route. Other than the heavier presence in one single district, though, things were the same, so I simply nodded and waited to be assigned my patrol.

“Before you get a route, though, you’re going to need a partner. You’re standing in for Officer Brass tonight, and his partner was—”

He didn’t get to finish, which struck me as odd. Two guards cut him off, politely but technically out-of-line:

“Sir, don’t pair me with that beast.”

“Sir... requesting permission to partner with the griffin this evening.”

Everyone in the room looked at the two speakers, who were standing side-by-side. A murmur overcame the crowd, but our sergeant frowned and held up a hoof for silence. He scowled at both of the guards who had interrupted him, but instead of rebuking them for it, he focused on the issue they brought up. “Okay, then. Officer Gilda, your partner for the evening is Officer Scabbard, not Shield.”

I looked at the colt who had volunteered to be my patrol partner; with a slight reel, I decided that the only thing I liked less than someone who was unwilling to pair up with a ‘beast’ was someone who was *overeager* to do it. I had eight hours to try and discern what sort of angle he was playing, but I was already wary and making guesses as to what it was.

After I had a partner, though, the planning segment of the evening was settled in fairly short order. We were assigned our patrols; Officer Scabbard – the last name of ‘Empty Scabbard’ – and I were assigned to a patrol that was right on the edge of the Artisan and Market districts. *My favorite place to be at night*, I thought. My patrol route was one of the two that passed through the Market Square; based on the schedule we were keeping, I

realized that I had *just* missed the patrol when I got there for my duel with Starfall.

Lucky me.

At any rate, Officer Scabbard and I fell into 'formation', which was basically a line of pairs of guards. We marched out of the citadel and to the north, at various intersections, pairs of guards would leave our line to start on their patrols. As we did it, I noted the grace and intricacy of the formation and wondered why we didn't do that in the morning. I came to the conclusion that it had something to do with schedules, and decided I wouldn't try to learn the specific reason from Iron; the actual reason was probably some long, drawn-out procedure that was also overly complicated for something so simple.

I spent the first half hour of my patrol trying to make small talk with Officer Scabbard, but he didn't make it easy. Every time I asked him a question, he'd respond with as simple an answer as possible. I still didn't know what his deal was, but I could take a hint well enough: He wanted to be my partner, but he didn't want to talk to me.

With conversation out of the picture, I instead focused on being alert and watching out for suspicious-looking ponies. Between the bars and the run-down apartment complexes in the Artisan District, there were plenty of those, though, so I quickly revised my criteria from 'suspicious' to 'actively breaking the law'.

It was still tiring work, and the coffee definitely wore off around midnight. Our shift included a quick break around three o'clock to eat or use the bathroom or whatever, so I miserably shuffled along as I kept an eye on where I was going and the dwindling number of ponies who were still outdoors that evening. There was a city-wide curfew at two o'clock, so the last hour leading up to my break was especially miserable – no one was out that late, so there wasn't even *that* to distract me from tedious vigilance.

When the clock tower finally struck the halfway point of our shift, I turned to Officer Scabbard and said, “I need some cof–”

My partner wasn’t there.

Instinctively, I stopped and looked around for some trace of him. I knew for a fact that *I* was on the correct patrol; there was a fairly long stretch in the Artisan district that didn’t turn until a block away from the northern wall, and *that* was just over five blocks still. There weren’t any diners or bars nearby that he might have ducked into, either, and that concerned me: I had *just* seen him out of the corner of my eye. Now, he had disappeared.

I came to terms with the situation as quickly as I could: I was alone in one of the not-so-great parts of Farrington. My gut reaction was to find another patrol and ask them for assistance. Sure, they weren’t thrilled with me as an individual, but at the same time, based on the sheer amount of coordination that the night patrols required, I was pretty sure that I didn’t want to stay alone for too long.

The nearest patrol to me, then, was several blocks west. I turned left to meet up with them; the longer I was alone, the more sure I was that I didn’t want to stay that way.

---

As I ran through the streets of the city, I was driven by a rare sense of duty – honor. In what amounted to a bona fide, down-to-earth moment of clarity, I realized the money wasn’t worth it to keep silent, and I needed to try and put a stop to everything that was happening that night.

From there, it would be a simple matter of getting to my apartment, lying low for a few hours, and then getting the *hell* out of Farrington to move on with my life and start over someplace. First, though, I needed to square things away so that maybe, someday in the future, I might be able to live with myself.

Now, that didn't mean I was going to go around showing my face to everyone and telling them how much I had to do with everything, either. The challenge became finding a way to stop what I had helped to start, and to do it without letting anyone involved know that I was a part of it in the first place. I mean, they'd find out *eventually*, but I just needed to buy a few hours so I could get out of town.

I wasn't that good of a planner, coordinator, or even a blackjack player, but as I ran to the northern part of the Market District – the opposite direction from my home – I thought of one colt I thought could do something about it. He wasn't in the Guard, true, but he still had a good sense of justice and an even better combat training regimen. If I woke him up, he'd probably go looking for a guard to report suspicious behavior, and from there...

I hoped to Luna I was right about his ability to hold himself in a fight, but then again, it wasn't like I was going to stick around in Farrington to hear the outcome, either...

---

I woke up when someone pounded on my front door. At *three-fifteen in the morning*. I hoped to Luna that whoever it was had a good reason; otherwise, my door wasn't the only thing that was going to have several hoof-shaped dents in it.

Comet woke up next to me and groaned, "Who's at the door so late?"

I rolled out of bed as elegantly as possible and grabbed my knife, the sheath of which was now reattached to its harness, off the nightstand. "Someone who had better have a damned good reason."

"Don't do anything stupid, Star," she chided me, as always, about the knife.

Instead of throwing her comment back in her face by reminding her how stupid it would be to answer the door unarmed this late at night, I simply grunted agreement. She was right, in a way; I wasn't the happiest pony in Equestria when my sleep got disturbed.

The pounding didn't repeat itself, which was a small favor; from the sounds of it, Hailey and Moonshine were still asleep, but I didn't know if that would last another round of knocking. When I got to our foyer, I debated the best way of opening the door; I settled on doing it as quickly as possible.

No one was on the landing.

Granted, that didn't mean there wasn't someone waiting outside, just out of sight. I recognized the thought as idle paranoia, but at the same time, there was a thin, blurry line between paranoia and preparedness. I unsheathed my knife and used it as a mirror to slowly check both sides of the landing, but no one was lying in wait, either.

Finally, I risked sticking my head outside to look around. When I checked our yard, the first thing I saw was that the front gate was hanging open, despite my nightly ritual of closing it, but there wasn't anyone in the street. That only added to my level of concern, though: they might still be around my house, lurking at a window or something.

"Who was it?" my wife asked in a quiet voice behind me that almost made me jump out of my skin.

"I don't know," I answered. "Check the lock on the back door and get the kids in the living room; I'm going to look around outside."

"You think it's some sort of ambush?"

"I don't know," I replied, turning to face her. "But better safe than sorry, huh?"

She nodded briefly, turned on the light in the living room, and left to go wake our children. If I ever found out who was responsible for this... I shook my head. Anger wouldn't solve anything. I needed my intuition now.

I stepped outside, locking the door behind me, and started looking around for signs of my unwanted guest. If it was some burglar, he had picked the *wrong* house to target. I honestly couldn't think of any sort of *pleasant* alternative to him being a thief, but I fueled that disgust into alertness as I searched the perimeter of my house...

---

My goal to meet up with another patrol hit a roadblock – literally. There was a huge stack of crates and barrels that were blocking the entire street. It was at least fifteen feet high, so I wouldn't be able to clear it in a single jump – maybe if I used my wings, but I still wasn't completely clear on the rules of how that worked. I thought about climbing over, but that only reminded me of another disturbing truth: I had gone down that *very* road earlier that night, and it had been clear less than an hour ago.

Someone had put obstacles in my path, and I didn't like that one bit.

With a sigh, I looked around again. If it was some sort of trap or message or something, I didn't want to expose my back to the rest of the street where an unknown adversary might be hiding. Climbing was out of the question, then, and I still hadn't found my partner, so I was desperately alone. Now, the best option to continue west toward another patrol had been blocked.

The next-best route, then, was to cut through a fairly long alleyway nearby that let out in the north, roughly two blocks away from a new patrol route that I could meet up with. I didn't like the feeling that I was being herded, but I was getting anxious from being alone, so I muttered, "*Was soll's*," and entered into the alley. There were a few lit torches in it, which struck me as both curious and fortuitous; I didn't like the idea of walking alone through a



dark alley. In the flickering light, though, I could see that there wasn't anyone in it, which further set my mind at ease. The only thing in the alley was a sizable amount of crates and barrels. *Here*, though, they weren't obstructing the path; they were simply piled behind various buildings, and they probably held supplies for the businesses that were ran inside.

About three quarters of the way through the alley, I heard hooffalls behind me. My first thought was that Officer Scabbard had finally caught up with me, so I turned around to ask him just where the *hell* he had gotten to.

Instead, I was met with a colt who was instantly familiar, yet I had no idea from where. He was almost the same color as Dash, if slightly darker; however, unlike her mane, his was a solid, bright red that made me think of fire because of how the torchlight was hitting it.

His eyes scared me. Before I got a chance to dwell on that fact, though, he began speaking in a thick accent that, again, was familiar, but I couldn't place it. "Good evenin', Officer Griffin." He smiled broadly at me, but combined with his eyes and the strange sense of *deja vu* that I now felt, it was a more unsettling gesture than if he had pulled out a weapon.

It reminded me of Father, and *that* gave me as good a reason as any to shorten my time with this individual. I swallowed my fear and spoke as boldly as I could, "You are out past curfew. Go back to your home or I will place you under arrest."

He laughed. It was deep, almost merry, which made me feel it was genuine, but that didn't do any favors for my outlook on the situation. Anyone who straight-up *laughed* at a guard's threat wasn't going to be easy to bring to compliance.

As soon as I thought it, I realized where I knew this individual from. He saved me any doubts, though. "You *clearly* don' know who you're dealin' with, Officer Griffin. Allow me t'introduce myself: I am Red 'oooves, buisinesscolt extraordinaire, and master o' this fair ci'y."

Despite my situation, I couldn't help myself. "Huh. I thought that was some filly up in city hall."

Red Hooves gave me a wink and a grin. "Ci'y Hall and me, we've got a bit o' agreement. I'd go into details, but I don' wan' t' bore you, Officer Griffin." Every time he referred to me as that, he lowered his mouth slightly to make more direct eye contact with me. It annoyed me on several levels. "But you're a bright gal, from wha' I hear. I'll bet you don' need two guesses as t' why we're 'ere."

"I arrested your sister." I nodded. I didn't know what his *specific* plans were, but I was definitely ready to end this confrontation.

I took a step towards him, and his smile hardened into a glare. His accent dropped into a cold, murderous tone. "Now, now, there's no reason not to be civil, is there? I just want to say my piece and we'll go from there, right?" I was confused, but he continued before I had a chance to reply. "Now, I believe in 'onesty above all other things, Officer Griffin." He clenched his jaw that time, but he continued on with, "That's why I'm here with you now; I don't want you having thoughts like I'm doing what I've planned for fun. But Bulwark, he's got someone / love locked away, see. So I figure, we can make things nice 'n square, if I get someone *he* loves. *His* sister's a shut-in in *this* city, though, which makes her hard-to-get. That leaves you 'n the pegasus, and I figure *you're* more likely than he is to think about what I'm about to offer. And if not that, then at least you're more directly involved anyway."

My stomach felt like it dropped a foot. Despite his faux-polite demeanor, he wanted to take me hostage. I was torn between how much I *hated* that idea and how thick this colt's head had to be that he thought he was going to be a threat to me, unarmed, to a point where I would actually comply. "Thanks, but I've got a better idea for a solution to your sibling troubles. You miss your sister? Let's go visit her. You're under arrest."

I walked towards him, but from above me, I heard the echoing sound of crossbows being drawn. I didn't know enough about them to recognize their model by sound alone, but if they were anything like the crossbows that the Guard used, they were hoof-mounted sleeves that, because of the lever built into the firing mechanism, could fire at a steady, deadly rate. I stopped walking mid-step. Red Hooves burst out laughing again, and I finally recognized it as a condescending laugh. "Do you *really* think I came to this little meetin' under-prepared? Please, Officer Griffin, please. Right now, you've got two options: come peaceably, or we're gonna get a bit... nasty."

The alley exploded all around me, and about a dozen ponies – mostly colts, but I saw at least two fillies in the mix – burst out from inside crates and doorways. They were all carrying some sort of weapon: maces, swords... one of the fillies had what looked like three chains tied together. Within a matter of seconds, I was surrounded by the small army. What disturbed me more, though, was the distant sound of a fight. Red Hooves heard it too, and he commented with a broad smile, "Well, well, well. Looks like your friends have run into a bi' of trouble themselves, huh? I guess that makes you all alone, Officer Griffin, and there's fourteen of us. So..." He started speaking with his accent again. "Wha's i' gonna be then, eh?"

I thought about his question for a moment. I was desperately surrounded, and these ponies wanted to take me prisoner. It would probably be suicide to resist, but at the same time, there was no telling *what* level of hell lay in store for me if I was the hostage to a criminal organization. If there had been one thing that I was reminded of in reading my tribe's histories, it was that, compared to being *kept* alive, death wasn't the worst fate one could endure.

Plus, I didn't like the idea of simply 'accepting fate'. I wasn't going to kill any of these ponies, not if I could help it – there was a difference in killing for food and killing a thinking, knowing being – but I sure as hell wasn't going to go down without a fight, either.

That was even if it came to a fight – I figured that, with a hard and fast enough push, I could get through the ponies in front of me, they'd be behind me, and I could try my luck at outrunning them. The crossbows on the roof of the buildings on either side of the alley worried me, but I figured that the farrier's apprentice hadn't scrimped on materials when he reforged my armor. As long as they didn't hit me in the neck, I'd probably live long enough to get help, but again, it all depended on how fast I could run. My gauntlets would help in that regard; I just had to make a decisive move.

I surveyed the hoof stances of the ponies in front of me, looking for weakness or something that would reduce balance. They were all standing on three hooves so they could hold their weapons, but I saw one stance that was a bit too wide in the front and narrow in the back.

I had a target, so now I just needed to buy some surprise. I tried a tactical feint: I shut my eyes and shook my head, clearly stating, "Neither of those options. You..." I opened my eyes and gestured to everyone around me. "All of you are now under arrest."

The gale of laughter that my response drew was perfect; in a flash, I pounced on the colt with the unsteady stance. I figured I could hedge my bets slightly by disabling him, so I bit into his shoulder socket as quickly as I could. It was intellectually disgusting but familiar in a primal sense. At any rate, I severed his tendon before pulling my beak out and jumping over him in a mad sprint down the alleyway.

The ponies on the rooftops were quick. I had barely cleared the colt when I heard the clattering of a bolt deflecting off the cobblestones behind me. Before I could register the luck of a miss, I heard a metallic blow and felt a sharp pain in my left wing: I had been shot. From the feel of it, the bolt didn't pass through the *second* level of armor, beneath my wing and the wing guard, but that only meant that my wing was now pinned to my armor. I couldn't fly, which was a shame, because I *just* realized that flying at a low altitude would be faster than running. With flight out of the question, though, at least I had adrenaline from the injury that made it easier to run.

I heard a gust of compressed air, and seconds later, there was a fluid weight that tangled around me, especially my legs. Finally, I tripped, and lamented that, while the net guns that the Farrington Guard used were good for grounding flying targets, they were also effective against fleeing ground-based ones. I fought to get out of the net, but struggling only made it worse. In a matter of seconds, I was completely and totally trapped, and I began to despair.

---

I finished searching the neighbors' and my back yards; no one was in them. Optimistically, I wanted to call it a prankster and go back to sleep, but realistically, that wouldn't happen. Someone had disturbed my family's rest, and I would not stand for it.

On that note, I went back to check how they were doing. Inside our living room, Comet was sitting on the couch with our two children. As soon as they saw me, they came over to me and asked what was the matter.

I weighed the truth versus my desire to not scare them; in the end, I settled on, "Someone knocked on our door and ran away. It's probably nothing, but I want you two to stay with your mother while I tell the guards in this area about it."

"But—"

"No buts," I interrupted. Looking at my wife, I told her, "I'll be back shortly, they're probably on the main drag as we speak."

She nodded, and I made sure the knife's harness was tight around my shoulders before I turned to walk out into the streets of Farrington.

---

I calmed myself down as quickly as I could; it would only make things worse if I wasted time complaining. However, I also had a hard time appreciating my armor at that moment. Sure, it was a great gift, and yes, it made walking bearable, but in that situation, the gauntlets only served as a blunt metal barrier between my talons and my bonds.

Of course, Red Hooves and his group were already rushing over to me. I had gotten a good head start in running away from them, but I was currently immobilized, so they would be upon me shortly. I was done panicking, though, so I worked calmly to get myself free. I compacted my shoulders, and worked my right gauntlet up to my beak as best as I could. It was a painstakingly slow and deliberate process, but I knew better than to try and rush it. As I worked on freeing myself from that net, I was reminded of an instance of 'training' with my father, one that had ended with me exhausted and bruised, but luckily, not broken.

*He stepped back to admire his work, and I tried not to glare as I stood back up. "You hate me," he said with relish. "I see it on your pathetic face as clearly as I can see the leaves on the trees. As amusing as it is, your hate is good. You hate me now, but just know that one day, there will be those who intend to hurt you."*

I got the gauntlet to my beak and shredded the leather strap. I bit one of the metal fingers and pulled my hand free, grateful that I could now start to work on the ropes of the net.

*His words did nothing to assuage my resentment. "Why... who..." I tried to speak, but I was winded from about six punches too many to my diaphragm.*

Progress was slow at first, but after I got a big enough hole to free my arm, I just had to work on cutting all the ropes in a row until I could fit my head and other shoulder through. I heard the crowd of Fast Hooves' army drawing closer; they were less than thirty feet away now.

*“Why?” he asked in an amused tone. “You are too young to understand. Or perhaps, you are selfish and want to know ‘why me?’ If that is the case, name a sister, and I will gladly rid our race of your ineptitude.”*

I got free of the net and turned around to face my assailants. They were about ten feet away from me. Red Hooves held up a hoof to stop everyone, but when he spoke, his eyes were flared and his accent was replaced by flat tone of hatred. “Last chance, half-breed. If you make my boys shoot again, I’m gonna let ‘em know t’ shoot for the kill. Ransom’s easier than you’re making it; don’t make me choose an easier target.”

*I came in low and fast on his left, where he couldn’t see well, if at all. He moved to dodge but I hadn’t been aiming to hit him, but to grapple. I got behind his head and brought my right hand down, hoping to injure his good eye. Before it landed, though, he grabbed my wrist and swung me to the ground like a club. He chuckled “It is good you have someone to fight for. But always remember to choose your battles wisely. Some are worth fighting. Others...” He twisted his hand, snapping my wrist. “Will only bring pain.”*

My eyes darted across the rooftops. There were three ponies up there; two had crossbows, one of them had the huge, metal tube of a now-spent net launcher. The two with crossbows had set up flanking positions, and were now directly to my right and left. *They* were the real threat; as long as I didn’t get surrounded again, the melee-range ponies on the ground would be... not easy, not in that volume, but certainly manageable.

I could run, I realized, but Red Hooves’ literal threat also worried me. I didn’t want someone else to pay the price for my failure to win a fight. It was either me or someone else. At that thought, anger welled up at that colt, a lowlife piece of criminal scum, who dared to threaten me, my boyfriend, the citizens in *my city*... it was an anger that I thought I had forgotten, but now, I welcomed it like an old friend and wore it like a second suit of armor.

If Red Hooves wanted to kill me, I could show him just how hard it was for a mud-borne *Beute* to kill a Sky Lord.

Fury tinted my vision, and I realized I could kill them all if I wanted. A tiny shred of restraint held me back, though; that would probably result in my death, too. Instead, I released a centuries-old battle cry, shrieking like an eagle. The ponies in front of me shrank back slightly, afraid of their superior; as the sound echoed through the night, I had no illusions that there was a single guard in the city that *hadn't* heard me. From a tactical standpoint, the battle was already won: There would be reinforcements soon, and Red Hooves wouldn't be able to escape.

Until then, I had a score to settle. I grabbed the bolt in my wing, and pulled it out. It hurt even more coming out, but the pain steeled my will, and I needed my wing for what I was about to do.

"Officer Griffin..." Red Hooves warned in what I guessed was his version of a polite tone.

"*Mein Name,*" I hissed, "*ist Gilda.*"

I whipped the crossbow bolt at the colt on the roof to my right before darting off to the left. At that point, I still didn't know the legal difference between flying and jumping, but I wasn't really drowning in options, so I flapped my wings in a giant leap up to the ledge of the roof on the left. Using one hand to steady myself, I grabbed the forelimb of the colt there with the other. I was rewarded with a sharp pain in my back; the other colt had hit me. I was alive, though, so I pulled my victim down to the street, right into the crowd that had formed below me. I landed with one foot in his groin, but even before his breath escaped him in a yelp, I sank my right hand's talons into his shoulder. He was thoroughly disabled; even if he stood back up, he couldn't wield a weapon unless he wanted to break his neck trying to swing a sword in his mouth.



I stood back up, and the crowd quickly recovered from having one of their own thrown at them, but not quickly enough. They started to close in, so I grabbed my baton with my left hand, ready to meet them. There was still another colt with a crossbow to worry about, but he still had to reset his weapon, so I had a few seconds' break from his danger.

Two colts came at me, one from the side, one from the front. I hit the one on my left across the eye with my baton before turning, sinking my right hand into the other colt's shoulder, and jumping with my back legs. I flapped my wings as I leaped over him, severing his shoulder socket's tendon in the process. I landed as the two I injured started screaming; now, there were three colts and a filly near me.

I swiped my claws across one colt's face. As he screamed, the colt next to him swung a mace, but it was slow and easy to dodge – but I stepped right into the arc of the filly's chains as she swung them. They hit my left elbow, causing me to drop my baton in pain. The chains wrapped, and she pulled me in, but I let her; seconds later, she was on the ground and unable to move her impotently-twitching forelimb.

I saw movement on the roof where the crossbow-wielding colt was, so without thinking, I used my right hand to grab the chains off my arm and fling them at him. They flew over his head as I threw a left-handed punch at someone's face, so I didn't hit him, but it was enough to make him duck, which bought me some more time.

Now that I was without my baton, I bit the strap of my left hand's gauntlet to let me fight with my talons. I still didn't want to kill these ponies, but it would be easier to disable them with my talons than with punching. Two colts emerged from the edge of the group and now stood between me and the roof. Another pony came at me from my left, so I dove forward and in between the colts in front of me. Using my wings to stand up in a spin, I backhanded one in the temple and swiped the other one's face. At the end of my maneuver, I used the momentum to hurl my gauntlet at the colt on the roof. It missed.

*I'll have to deal with you in close-quarters*, I mused as I jumped up to pull the colt down off the roof. He was smart, though, and he pulled back; without a second thought, I pulled myself up to the ledge, right as he shot his crossbow at me. The bolt hit my arm, which would have been agony if I weren't enraged, but I flapped my wings to get me up on the roof with him.

"That's cheating!" he yelled, and I rewarded his stupidity by merely grappling him and throwing him over the ledge. The other colt on the roof swung the net launcher at me, but I dodged it and sunk both of my hands into his shoulders before throwing him down to the alleyway as well.

With the roof support taken care of, it was time to focus on my main target: Red Hooves. I felt myself calming down slightly, which was *not* what I wanted. The clarity of reason reminded me that, according to procedure, I had given him a warning, so he was technically in the 'resisting arrest' stage of things; however, he still hadn't crossed the line where 'lethal force' would be authorized. I would have to subdue him the old-fashioned way.

I looked down at the crowd; they were huddled around the building's base, and there were nine of them – Red Hooves and eight of his lackeys – remaining that weren't blinded or disabled. In order to get myself ready for the fight, I pulled the bolt out of my arm and spat on the wound; the pain helped bring back some of my earlier furor. Red Hooves was hiding like a coward behind his troops, so I decided that the simplest attack would be to glide over everyone and hit him from behind. I got ready to jump...

At the last second, someone threw a sword at me.

It didn't hit me, but it threw me off-balance; instead of a giant leap, I simply fell into the crowd. I recovered as quickly as I could and got both a colt's and a filly's shoulders in the process, but the sheer mass of everyone made it difficult to move, let alone dodge blows. Someone hit me in the head, another in the back; someone hit me in the elbow, and my rage finally abandoned me. My legs gave out, and I dropped to the ground.

The colts – there weren't any fillies left – piled around and on top of me. Not content to have finally beaten me, they proceeded to bludgeon me some more. I tried to struggle, to resist, but the pain and weight of everyone became too much. I went limp, finally admitting defeat.

To their honor's credit, the colts didn't keep hitting me for that much longer. Once they stopped, I felt my wrists being bound together, and someone tied my feet together. They at least had the decency to bind my wings to my body instead of breaking them, but they had to rip the bolt out of my back in the process. It hurt like hell, but I had felt worse.

When they were finally done with their knots, I could barely breathe, let alone move. Red Hooves took his victory in a smarmy manner. Leaning in next to my face, he gloated, "Well, well, well. You're quite the fighter, eh?" I snapped at him, but he pulled back and chuckled. "But no matter, let's get the lioness to 'er cage, then."

"What about everyone else?" one of the other colts asked.

"No time. They knew what they were gettin' into. Get the weapons 'n they'll go to hospital, not prison."

After Red Hooves finished abandoning his injured troops, I felt myself being hoisted up onto the backs of pair of colts. When the colts that weren't carrying me were done gathering weapons, we all started heading... north, I noted, but it wasn't as if that was helpful knowledge at that point. I began to despair: I was going to be held prisoner, and Iron was going to have to choose between my life and his job.

I didn't know what scared me more: That I didn't know which option he *would* choose, or that I didn't know which one I *wanted* him to choose.

Red Hooves was relentless with his gloating, now that I was captive. His faux-accent returned when he mocked, "Lookit you, screamin' like a bird,

not no-one showed up t' help. Makes me 'ope you're even worth somethin' as ransom; otherwise, we'll have t' find some *other* way t' make up for the nuisance you've been." I just glared at the road ahead of me, trying not to think about what *that* was supposed to mean.

Instead, I tried to make peace with death, because one way or another, I felt that it was in my near future. I had many regrets, things I should have done sooner, things I should have said to the individuals that were close to me. I regretted that, if I was going to die, I didn't at least have the chance to see my family one last time. On the contrary, I was probably going to die underground in some sort of a cage.

When the mob that was escorting me to my tomb was about to reach the intersection, I saw Starfall gallop past the opening of the alleyway. Or at least, he almost did. Instead of running past, he gave a confused sneer that quickly turned to rage. The crowd that had taken me hostage stopped for a moment, and finally, Starfall turned to face us with his hoof on his knife.

"You are all going to cease and desist *at once*," he spat.

Red Hooves sounded overjoyed. "Or wha', ex-Lieutenant', no'-yet-Sergean' Starfall? You'll *arres'* us?"

"Fights are breaking out all over the city. Two guards are dead, and here you are... *taking*... a third. I'll let the courts settle this one; it's a citizen's arrest."

"It's one-on-seven, son. You don't stand a chance."

One of my captors drew a sword and put it near my neck. "Get out of the way, fly boy, or you'll take her place."

I didn't even see Starfall's hoof move as the captor fell away from me, gurgling with a knife sticking out of his throat. I was still alive, but Starfall

was already running, unarmed, towards the now-six colts that were holding me captive.

In response to his attack, the two that were holding up let me fall, and I heard the clattering of weapons as the other colts dropped their loads. I landed on my back, so my world was dazzling in pain and upside-down as Starfall rolled through the attackers, pulled his knife out of the dead colt's throat, and cut my bonds in a quick motion. He was rougher than he probably should have been, and I got cut on my feet and one wing, but when I flexed, the bonds slithered away loosely.

Without wasting any more time, I ripped two colts' shoulders as Starfall performed a similar action with his knife to a third.

The last two colts near us looked at each other before dropping onto the ground, prostrate, in a gesture of surrender.

We had won.

Except for one fairly-important detail: Red Hooves was missing.

Turning around, I saw him behind us, running south. Starfall told me, "I can't arrest him if I catch him. Go."

Every muscle in my body screamed protest, but I tried to take a step. Without adrenaline, though, I was completely spent.

The crossbow that was on the ground next to me wasn't, though.

I picked it up and set it; there was already a bolt in the firing mechanism. I tried to use it with my bare hands, but it was made to be worn, not held. I managed to fit my right arm through it so I could fire it with my wrist, but by that point, Red Hooves was at least a hundred feet away.

I had no idea how accurate the weapon was supposed to be, but I lined up the sights as best as I could, aiming for his right knee. I aimed above him, figuring gravity would have something to do with the equation, and I twisted my wrist to fire the hopefully-incapacitating bolt at Red Hooves.

It hit him square in the groin.

Or, I imagine... all things considered, his tail was blocking my view. Wherever I hit him, though, the effect was immediate. Instead of continuing to run, he fell forward, on his stomach, before he jerked onto his side in a fetal position. He threw up, and I figured that the only reason that I couldn't hear his screaming was because he didn't have enough breath in his lungs for it.

Behind me, I heard Starfall half-shudder, half-cough before saying, "Ah, r... *really?*"

I was about to retort, but I saw another pair of officers turn the bend at the southern end of the alley and start galloping toward us. Their presence raised an interesting question, though, so I asked Starfall, "What now?"

He gave me a serene grin and pointed at them. "Those guards are going to arrest everyone properly, and take us all down to the citadel."

I nodded before it dawned on me and I shook my head, "Wait, *us?*"

Starfall nodded back. "Citizens' arrests are one thing, but vigilantism is a crime. Don't worry about me, though." He pointed at the guards at the other end of the alley, "Once they secure the scene, you should get to the hospital."

It was good advice, and I tried to take it, but the rest of that night was a blur. Pain and exhaustion took their toll on me, and everything turned foggy and distant. Eventually, I made my way to Farrington General, and the nurse or whoever helped me to a room, even though I was bleeding from at

least four different injuries. My last thought before I fell asleep was how I was going to pay for my bills, but as the darkness welcomed me, I decided that I didn't care too much.

\* \* \*

The sun was up and peeking in through the window when I woke up on my side. Iron was there and dressed in his captain's regalia, but instead of greeting me with words, he leaned down in a kiss. I turned to meet him, but he broke away before things got too heavy.

"Starfall told me what happened. Are you okay?"

I ran my hands over my limbs; nothing was broken, but the more I woke up, the more I felt that I had a substantial headache. "I'll be fine. What about everything else? Red Hooves?" I tried sitting up, but the world started spinning, so Iron pushed me back down, firmly, but gently.

He rubbed my shoulder through the bed sheet I was under and told me, "There's still some work to do, but from what I can tell, you've gone two for three on imprisoning the Hooves siblings."

"Three?" I suppressed a groan.

"Don't worry. From what I recall, the third moved far away from here with her daughter, and aside from being their half-sister, she has nothing to do with them."

That was good enough for me. I didn't want to have any more run-ins with that family if I could help it. "And Starfall?"

"Managed to delay his return to the Guard by at least a month, but as he was following Guard protocol despite not wearing the armor, I doubt his sentence is going to be anything serious. Which is good; we lost three guards last night, I wouldn't want to lose another due to *valiance*."

Something about his tone caused me to question what he meant, but before I could ask, he brought up a small bag from a bakery. “I promised you breakfast, though I didn’t want it to be like this.” He set the bag on my bedside table, and I nodded at it.

Iron couldn’t stay for long, though; his shift was starting. We kissed good-bye as well as we could manage, given our positions, and then I was alone again.

I ignored whatever baked good that Iron left me, though, and fell back asleep almost instantly.

\* \* \*

I woke up when Sherry coughed, and though it was weird to have her sitting where Iron had been sitting when I woke up the first time, I was more perplexed by her expression. “Uh... hi?” I tried, still trying to make out whether she was going to hug me or punch me.

“Twelve ponies, injured or dead, in an altercation last night. That *you* were part of. *My* officer. Do you have *any* idea what that’s going to look like on paper?”

“Like a cheesy fight scene from a book?” I offered. I didn’t know whether I was on-duty or not, but I decided that I didn’t care to be berated for the consequences of my actions.

Instead of responding, though, Sherry stood up and hugged me, again, as best as she could manage given that I was lying on my side. I was perplexed before I remembered that I had arrested the colt who had killed her boyfriend a few years ago. I tried to pat her on the back, but my talons sliced through the bed sheet, so I just put my arm back down.



She whispered a quiet “Thank you” before breaking away, and after that, she snapped open her saddlebags and pulled out some documents. In a louder, deathly-serious voice, she told me, “You *will* help me through all this shit, though.”

I sat up and the room stayed in one place this time, so I nodded back at her. Together, we started to sort through the aftermath of my night on the Farrington Guard.

---

I looked at Starfall through the glass in the Farrington Jail’s visiting room.

It had been almost nine hours since he came home for a few minutes to tell me where he was going, but I was still having trouble wrapping my mind around the situation. My husband was in jail after killing someone. Granted, it was in defense of an officer – Officer Gilda, no less – and he had made several efforts to let me know what was going on, but still, it was a rather pressing situation. Visiting hours were at one o’ clock, so now was the first time that I could finally ask him, “So... what happened?”

He raised an eyebrow and asked, “Where do you want me to begin?”

I fought to keep from glaring as I told him the obvious, “How about starting with what happened after you left our home?”

Starfall nodded and leaned in towards the holes in the glass so he could speak in a lower voice. I mirrored his movement so I could hear him. He told me about how, during his search for a guard, he came across the corpses of two; after that, he went to investigate what sounded like a sword fight, but he was distracted by a piercing screech. It then boiled down to a desperate, ‘I killed him or he would kill her’ situation, and now he was here, in jail.

When he finished his explanation, I sat back up straight and shook my head slowly, almost in disbelief. Starfall took that as a prompt to sit up and start defending himself with, “I already told you I’m sorry, but I’ll tell you again: I’m sorry. But at the same time, once I got to the scene, I wasn’t going to just stand around and do nothing. I mean—”

“Star,” I interrupted. “I’m not mad at you over this.”

His eyes widened. “You’re not?”

This time, I did glare at him. “You want me to be?”

“No, no.” He shook his head. “But I thought you might be, is all.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, I can’t say I’m thrilled about you being locked up, but out of every scenario I can think of where you end up behind bars, this definitely...” I shook my head. “I mean, you’re... a guard, and you killed a criminal in the middle of committing a crime.”

“Well, technically...” He paused to roll his eyes. “Technically, I didn’t start my first shift until Monday, nor was I wearing my armor, so I’m being tried as a citizen.”

“That’s a load of crap. Can’t Iron—”

Starfall shook his head. “He already looked into it. He can’t retroactively deputize me, which was the closest sort of a save he *could* do, given the situation.”

I shrugged. “Well, then, what’s going to happen?”

He let out a sigh that almost sounded ashamed. “Iron’s going to help out as much as he can. He pulled some strings with a judge who owes him a favor to get my bail hearing moved to tomorrow, so unless that’s some ridiculous amount, I should be able to come home soon.”

At the mention of money, I felt my stomach churn. “And what—”

“Iron said he’ll take care of it for now, and help out with groceries and stuff until the dust settles.”

I hadn’t really noticed that I had been on the verge of tears, but apparently, that was the tipping point for me. I shut my eyes as I broke down, and heard Starfall say, “Hey, hey,” followed by a loud bang that startled my eyes back open.

On the other side of the glass, Starfall was standing on the counter and frowning slightly at his hoof; apparently, he had hit it on the glass which, to the credit of the ponies who made it, didn’t break. In spite of the situation, I chuckled quietly at his gusto. He gave me a warm smile in return, and assured me, “It’s going to be okay.”

I believed him.

There was a moment of silence after that, which he finally broke by asking, “Where are the kids?”

“I left them with Hard Hat for the afternoon, so probably playing with her son.”

A concerned look came over Starfall, and his voice turned grave. “You should probably get back to them right after this... Iron thinks there’s a chance of some sort of retaliatory strike from Red Hooves, so if they went after his girlfriend...”

I cut him off with a nod. “Okay, then.”

“Iron also asked if he and his sister can stay the night at our place, just to be sure. I said yes, but he wants to ask you personally.”

“Okay, I’ll stop by the south gate, but that’s no problem. Did he tell you when his sister’s going to show up?”

---

At five o’ clock, I left the post office, hating my brother.

Or... at least, I hated all of the crap he was pulling. He had come into the post office a little after noon, talked to Mr. McFeely, and now I was on vacation for a few weeks. I hated that job, but it was *my* job; Iron didn’t have the right to just waltz in and get me fired.

*That* would’ve been bad enough, but then he mentioned how he might be ‘putting me up’ in a hotel in Hoofington with Comet and ‘maybe Starfall’ for the next few weeks. I almost lost it at that, but he backed down pretty quickly. He still wanted me to go to their house after work, though, and he had been pretty adamant about that, so I agreed to that.

I headed to the north end of town, ‘being careful’, but not really worrying: during the day, there were enough guards on the main drag of Farrington where nothing was going to happen. After I crossed the main intersection of Farrington, though, I stepped into a bar. I didn’t even care anymore; if Iron had a problem with a drink or two after he *uprooted my entire life*, he could get stuffed.

Ten minutes and three shots later, I was feeling better, a little. But a little *too* better. So, I had to make sure not to, uh, stumble. I *wasn’t* drunk, but if I started walking funny, then someone’d find Iron, then *that* whole thing again...

Still, it was still his fault for messing me up with everything in the first place.

Suddenly, I saw Iron’s old sergeant, or friend, or girlfriend, or whatever they had going on for those few months... Whatever. She was headed towards me, and all I could think was, *Well, shit*. She was going to pick up on

everything, then it'd get back to Iron anyway, then more shouting, and damn it...

---

After I left the hospital, I ran into Iron's sister a few blocks away. She and Iron lived in the eastern part of the Residential District, so I was somewhat curious as to what she was doing so far north. I smiled at her and said hello, but like always, she gave the bare minimum of conversation required to get away – today, it was a rushed, “Hi.” I had heard of her Stalliongrad nightlife, but I didn't know how true those rumors were. I was almost inclined to dismiss them, based solely on how *shy* she was. I pushed it out of my mind – I had more important things to do that evening.

For starters, I had two saddlebags that were heavy with all of the damn paperwork from Officer Gilda's late night debacle. It had been eleven o' clock when Iron gave me leave from the citadel to go visit Officer Gilda. It was close to *six* when we were done filling out forms, taking statements, and, despite how wary as I was about making friends with my subordinates, bonding over it.

Special Sergeant Stabler had offered to take over the bureaucratic end, as technically, she *was* serving under him; however, seeing as how one of his own guards was now being hunted down and two had died, I figured he had enough on his plate.

Plus, Gilda was *my* officer. I wouldn't have shirked that responsibility for anything.

I got to the citadel and I took care of business, which was just a quiet manner of dropping off the forms in the appropriate mailbox. They *almost* didn't fit, and I had a quiet chuckle at the sheer amount of paper.

Any humor I felt drained from me when I left the citadel, though. I had a difficult decision ahead of me, and even though I had a shift the next day, I

already knew that it wasn't one that I was going to be able to think about while sober. On that front, I stopped at a liquor store on the way back to my home.

Red Hooves was apprehended now. I was aware that Red Hooves was in prison and probably soon going to be sent straight back to Hell. I had also heard that Gilda had made a gelding out of him.

He was still getting off too easy.

In a last-ditch effort, he had tried to wax heroic and offered a full confession, complete with evidence, in exchange for leniency for his twin sister. There was enough evidence, currently, to convict him of attempted kidnapping and assaulting a guard, but those crimes were minute compared to the actual extent of his evil regime. But, they were also crimes that we didn't have evidence for.

Iron had told me all of this before my shift started because, in his words, it was my choice to make more than anyone else in the Guard. It was *that*, more than my sense of duty for my underlings, that drove me to visit Officer Gilda in the hospital that morning.

One of the two siblings had killed my husband. I needed to know for sure which one it was before making my decision.

Gilda hadn't been much help in that regard, though, and in hindsight, it was obvious. She wasn't a psychologist; she was just someone who had *met* both of them – briefly, before arresting them. I would be better off asking Iron, or one of the interrogators... Even sober, though, I was slowly coming to the conclusion that I knew what had to be done.

When I got back to my house, I put on my favorite record – our favorite record. It was a slow song, but I remembered how we had used to move the coffee table against the wall and dance in our living room. I blinked back tears; there was so much I would have done with him, so much I

would have said, if I had just known that we were going to be taken away from each other so abruptly.

It got too hard to think about, but I had come home prepared for that. Three hours later, I had gotten two-thirds into my first handle of whiskey, and I had come to a depressing realization: It didn't matter which sibling got an easier sentence. Well, not to me, at least. Nothing was going to bring my husband back. We would never be able to dance or caress or even talk with each other again.

His murderer, whoever it was, was finally captured by the Guard. But it wasn't enough for me. When I recognized how close I was to 'justice' and how far away I was from 'things being fixed', all I could do was sit there, get drunk, and weep.

I missed him so much.

I would never see him again.