

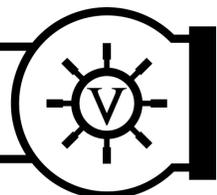
Where Earth Meets Sky

Cloudy Skies

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PONY FICTION VAULT



Fluttershy spat the soup out with a grimace and sighed dejectedly. It was not the first sigh of the morning, and it probably wouldn't be the last one either. Everything was going wrong today. Feeding carrots to the birds and giving hay to the turtles were among the smallest of her blunders. The poor bunnies still wouldn't even *look* at her.

It had been like this all week, and was only getting worse. She used her mouth to fish out the ladle she'd been using to stir her now-ruined soup and put it in the kitchen sink. The nearby salt bowl was conspicuously empty, explaining the horrid taste. Why and when she'd added it to the soup was a mystery even to her.

Moving the pot off the stove, she gave another sigh just for good measure. Normally she wouldn't be so loud, but it wasn't like there was anypony around to scold her for it. No longer feeling hungry, she drug herself over to her living room and flopped on to the couch, burying her muzzle in the pillows. She was done with this morning's chores anyway.

Not that there wasn't anything left to do, though; there was always work to do for a pony who loved her garden. Failing that, her sneezeweed stock was getting dangerously low. If a flock of bluejays came down with a cold, she'd need far more than the little jar in her store room. The fickle herb refused to grow in her garden, meaning she would have to go foraging.

It was an inspiring thought. Sure enough, the bluejays were unlikely to catch a cold in the middle of the warmest summer months, but she had to be prepared. Maybe this was the push she needed to head out of her cottage and *do* something. She was needed, and it would not do for the poor little bluejays to suffer for her failure to act.

Except it wouldn't work. If the day so far was any indication, she'd probably come back with rawroot instead of sneezeweed. Fluttershy burrowed her snout deeper in the mound of pillows until it looked like the sofa had swallowed the lethargic pony. Only her hindquarters and mane poked out and betrayed her presence.

Her mind would not stop wandering off. She summoned up a frown and peered out from under her velvet fortress, staring at the messy little den of pillows and blankets that occupied a corner of the room. Up until recently, it had been the home of a poor little fox cub that had been brought to her in a terrible state. He was all better now, but she hadn't had the heart to clean up the makeshift den, already missing the little vulpine. *Maybe that's all there's to it.*

Taking care of the kit had eaten up what little free time she had this month. She hadn't even had time to go watch Rainbow Dash practice in the afternoon. She didn't dare think what she would have done if Pinkie Pie hadn't come by with food every now and then. Even something as simple as finding time to head into Ponyville proper for supplies had

been hard. *But that's no excuse for neglecting your friends. Fluttershy, you have been a terrible pony.*

Since she had put so much time and effort into helping the little kit, it was only natural that she'd be out of sorts now that the fox was safely back home with his mother, right? That was probably it. That, and she was just tired still. Nothing more.

"Stop lying, Fluttershy," she scolded. Her voice was muffled, but she heard herself well enough. She didn't want to be thought a liar, not even by herself. Truth was, Fluttershy knew exactly where her thoughts wanted to go. The wounded cub had been a great distraction, but with the patient treated and gone, it was yet again impossible to focus.

Her head surfaced from the sea of velvety cushions to glance out one of the windows of her home. Seized by routine she'd observed every morning for weeks now, she was drawn over the wooden floorboards to stand before that particular window, and she really didn't feel like she had a choice in the matter.

The yellow pegasus pony rested her head on the windowsill, absent-mindedly scratching the underside of her muzzle against the woodwork. She had spent so much time exactly like this, she imagined she was beginning to make a small groove. Fluttershy did not dare check to see if this was the case for fear that she might be right.

It smelled like summer outside. The scents of the innumerable herbs and vegetables she grew in her little garden were so intimately familiar to her that she could pick them out and name them one by one if she so desired. Windwort and merryroot made for the most wonderful combination, but as delightful a treat the day was to her nose, there was a different reason she frequented this window.

Her eyes came to rest on the evenly spaced treetops of Sweet Apple Acres, barely visible over a nearby copse of smaller trees. She imagined she could smell the apples that were the farm's namesake. Far off in the distance, the iconic apple-adorned weather-vane of the central barn could be seen, a reminder of what Fluttershy was certain was the cause of her problems.

Fluttershy would never blame Applejack, but she was the cause. Applejack was why Fluttershy had crashed into her bedroom door this morning. Applejack was why Angel's breakfast wasn't ready on time. Applejack was why she had this unbearable tightness in her chest, a heavy knot that simply would not come loose. It already felt like it had been there forever, and it was just getting worse again now that she had nothing with which to distract herself.

Ever since the whole debacle with the dragon earlier in spring, Fluttershy had learned to appreciate the staunch farmpony's support. She'd thanked her, of course. She had thanked Applejack for helping her and for being there for her. She had thanked her for her patience and her kindness and for always believing in her, too. Every time Fluttershy and

Applejack found themselves alone, something that happened far too seldom, she'd quietly say as much. "*Thank you.*"

In the end, it seemed that even Applejack couldn't help but feel it was getting a little silly. "*That's just what friends do - right sugarcube? Please stop worrying about it,*" she'd said, and Fluttershy had instantly felt terrible. She hadn't meant to imply that she didn't think Applejack was a good friend, or worse, didn't think her a friend at all. Fluttershy had the best friends anypony could ever ask for, and she was lucky to have them all.

She had tried so very hard to obey Applejack's wishes after that, but sometimes, the words still slipped out. They always lurked, ever ready to leap out of her mouth, or wherever they came from.

For all her efforts, it still felt like she was just bottling it up. The knot didn't go away no matter how many times she thanked her, apologized to her, apologized for thanking her or thanked her for accepting her apology. She had tried to think of something nice to do for Applejack, but what could she possibly do for a strong and independent pony like her? What could Fluttershy do to help an outgoing mare who didn't feel the need to hide from strangers, and kept giving and helping everypony, uninhibited by fear?

She had long ago resolved to insist that she be allowed to help next applebuck season, if only to carry apples - if Applejack didn't mind, that was. Applebuck season was still so very far away, though, and it seemed a very meager hope.

No matter what she told her, there was still something left unsaid. She just didn't know what it was she couldn't tell her. The last time she'd tried talking to Applejack, she swore the earth pony looked almost a little disappointed. Applejack would never lose her temper with her, and her patience seemed infinite, but there was something in her eyes that made Fluttershy apologize right away, though she didn't know what for. Of course, that had been exactly the wrong thing to say at the time. She hadn't dared go back after that embarrassing little episode.

The sullen pegasus sat down and let her wings sag listlessly to the floor. Applejack was the only pony who lived close by, and as such, was the only one of her friends Fluttershy had the time to visit while she took care of the little fox cub. She didn't have any such excuses left, now, yet she'd spent the last few days completely alone without quite knowing why.

Sometimes she wished that Rainbow Dash would come visit, but Fluttershy had no business even thinking that. It was a selfish thought, and she was *fine*. It wasn't a lie. Not really. She could hardly think of anything less important than her own little problems.

"Oh, get a hold of yourself," Fluttershy said as she picked herself up from the floor, snorting derisively. "You're being very silly, and *very* stupid."

She cringed at the harsh words and flattened her ears. "Sorry. And stop talking to yourself, please."

Fluttershy took a small step towards her cottage door, a plan suddenly forming in her mind. She pretended she was just going to head outside and check up on the turtles who lived under the little bridge that crossed her brook. Shellby had been looking a little sick, hadn't he? She simply *had* to check up on the poor little turtle *at once*.

She nudged the door open and slipped outside. A budding resolve had sprung forth from nowhere, and she intended to make the most of it. Before she could ask herself what she was doing, she had trotted over the bridge. Shellby was fine. She had told herself a white little lie. Even Applejack would agree that sometimes you had to do such things. Probably. *Hopefully*.

Fluttershy broke into a full gallop, unable to keep a smile from her face as she outraced the inevitable doubts. The sound of her own hooves gave chase down the dirt road as she kicked up dust, happy to be free of her cottage.

The smile quickly faded as soon as she had completed the thought, and she replaced it with a more demure expression. She didn't *dislike* her cottage. Not even a little bit. She was simply glad to have managed to sneak out.

Her determination only grew stronger as her home disappeared from view behind her. Moments later, she stood at the neck-high fence that marked the edge of Sweet Apple Acres' orchards. Her first instinct was always to go around, but when Applejack had first seen her come trotting alone down the path that led to the farmhouse, she'd asked why the pegasus had not simply flown over in a more direct route. Fluttershy didn't want Applejack to think she was stupid, so she usually crossed the orchard these days.

The pegasus pony spread her wings and flapped them a few times, soaring over the fence with ease only to land as soon as she was clear. It was something of a compromise. Fluttershy picked her way between the apple trees with all four hooves securely on the ground. While she had her wings unfurled just to enjoy the feel of the air against the delicate feathers, she wouldn't give up the grass under her hooves for anything.

The yellow pegasus allowed herself to feel a little hopeful as she wandered under the apple farm's canopy. Perhaps she should just tell Applejack everything? Well, what little she knew, anyway. "*Hi, Applejack,*" she'd say. "*Um, I know you said I should stop saying apologizing so much, and I'm sorry about that, but I want to tell you something. I just don't know what. I, um, you're a very good friend.*"

That would be a start. Normally, she'd ask Rarity about how to deal with these kinds of problems. Rarity knew all sorts of things about how ponies worked, just like Fluttershy knew the animals, but it felt wrong. She had no idea *why* it felt wrong; it wasn't like this was a secret, but she'd talk to Applejack first, just in case. Applejack was smarter and stronger than Fluttershy in so many ways, and she usually saw the truth of matters right away.

It made so much sense. She should - and would - talk to Applejack. No going back now. She briefly entertained the notion of simply stopping by the Cutie Mark Crusaders' little clubhouse and pretending she was just intending to visit them. It would make for a terribly convenient excuse to turn around considering the rambunctious little fillies were at school now, but no. She was going to be strong and brave this time, and nopony was going to stop her, *especially* not herself.

Her legs carried her past the empty clubhouse, stride unfaltering. She was taking matters into her own hooves, and it felt good. Well, strictly speaking, she was trying to get Applejack to help her, but that was almost the same. It was all about finding cause to celebrate the small victories. Pinkie had said as much once, though she used other words. Very different words, in fact, but Twilight had said that was what she had meant.

Fluttershy gleefully flapped her wings a few times before re-folding them, trying to get this odd giddiness out of her system before she crested the next hill. When she finally cleared the northwestern orchards and approached the farmyard proper, she got a lot of help in that department. Fluttershy froze, and something dropped in her stomach. She had never before quite figured out where in the body "bravery" resided, but she was pretty sure hers was now a lump of ice dissolving in her belly. Applejack was not alone.

In fact, Applejack was as not-alone as anypony could ever hope to be on a weekday morning. Sure, she had expected Big Macintosh to be around somewhere, but what were Twilight and Rainbow Dash doing here? The four ponies were crowded around a pile of oddly shaped wooden objects: petite works of fine carpentry and a mess of papers upon which Twilight was furiously scribbling with a quill.

Fluttershy couldn't make out much more from this distance, and began to back off, hoping nopony had seen her. Her courage was rapidly waning, and she wondered if perhaps she shouldn't go gather those herbs instead. She'd turned around and taken all of two steps before Rainbow Dash's voice rang across the yard.

"Hey, Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy winced, but took care to put a smile on her face before she turned around again. Rainbow Dash had already crossed the farmyard and was hovering in front of her, head tilted.

"What've you been up to, huh? Did Applejack ask if you could help, too?" she asked, the energetic pony seeming a bit confused.

"Hi. Uh, I don't think so? I've been, um, busy. I was just coming to visit, but I should probably head back home," Fluttershy muttered, but it was too late. The others had of course seen where Rainbow Dash had gone off to. Big Macintosh nodded in greeting and Applejack waved. Twilight was apparently so absorbed in whatever she was doing that she hadn't noticed.

Inexorably drawn to follow Rainbow Dash so as to not offend, Fluttershy soon found herself standing in the half-circle with the other present ponies. She nodded politely to the two Apple family members and tried to see what Twilight was doing. The purple mare was drawing complicated graphs and figures that went straight over Fluttershy's head.

"How nice of you to come visit!" Applejack declared, smiling at Fluttershy. "Ah was starting to get right worried you'd forgotten about us other ponies, seeing as how you haven't come by for a while."

Fluttershy hung her head dejectedly. She'd been a terrible friend lately, it was true. "I'm sorry, but, um, maybe I can help you with, um..." she trailed off, having no idea what was actually going on.

Surrounding the paperwork that had snared Twilight lay vast quantities of finely shaped models of tubes, half-tubes, supports and other things besides. It looked like a model set. Some of them were placed in a line on a map of Sweet Apple Acres that somepony had unrolled on the ground.

"Oh this here?" Applejack asked, arching a brow. "Well, since *somepony's* stingy with the rain -"

"I can't make rain if there are no clouds to begin with. I told you!" Rainbow Dash growled, flushing.

"Well, point is, we ain't had a proper rainfall for a good while," the farmpony soldiered on, her eyes never leaving Fluttershy as she spoke. "The apple trees're fine for now, but Ah worry about our smaller crops. The corn and the like, it's all too much to water by hoof, so we're setting up some irrigation for it."

"At least, that's the 'theory'," Big Mac drawled.

"Yes, well, it *should* be easy enough. We got the engineering down, pure pony power present aplenty and the plans are perfected," Twilight hummed. "Oh, hi Fluttershy."

Fluttershy smiled at Twilight by way of greeting, letting the bookish unicorn carry on.

"The problem is with the materials. Logging is heavily regulated in Whitetail Woods, so we're very short on lumber, and we won't get any help from Mayor Mare, either. Crosscut, who operates the sawmill, is in Clopenhagen on a vacation." Twilight scrunched her face up, staring at the sketches and numbers she had scrawled as if they would spontaneously solve the problem.

"You know, I think we would've had enough to build a waterslide thingy from the brook to the corn place if you hadn't wasted all the wood in Applejack's barn by making all these toys," Rainbow Dash said with an oddly contemplative look on her face.

"It's called an aqueduct, and they are *models*, Rainbow, not toys," Twilight muttered, blushing a little. "And that volume I found on magical woodworking was really good."

"And that helps us how much now, again?" Applejack asked, frowning.

"Um, not a lot," Twilight admitted, her horn glimmering as she levitated a dozen of the little models. She had even sanded them to perfection. "Sorry about that. The guide suggested that you use only the core of each log as the base for each piece. It had *diagrams* and everything."

Fluttershy's eyes darted back and forth as she watched her friends not-quite-quarrelling. Applejack's face darkened, but it passed quickly as she drew breath and exhaled slowly.

"Don't you fret none, Twi'. You tried, right? We'll find a solution lickety split, just you watch," the apple farmer said with a shrug. She had put on a smile, but Fluttershy saw that it was tainted by concern, and she caught Applejack stealing a quick glance in the direction of Sweet Apple Acres' corn crop.

Fluttershy wanted to offer her hoof, say that she could help, but she had no idea what she could possibly do that her friends couldn't. She made a small noise and opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't think of what to say. Applejack was looking at her with an arched brow. Rainbow Dash, Twilight and Big Macintosh followed Applejack's eyes, and soon all attention was on her.

It took all her strength to not curl into a ball and hide under her tail, but she managed. Instead, she merely shrank back a little and *eep*-ed. Her mother would have been so very proud to see the strides Fluttershy had made with regards to social situations. That was a small comfort, though. She needed words, and she needed them now. She was looking very silly in front of Applejack. *Again*.

"O-kay?" Rainbow Dash hummed, scratching her head with a forehoof.

An excuse. That was what she needed. Excuses weren't quite lies. Not always. If she could make herself believe she needed to do something, then that meant she could *make* it be true.

"You okay there, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, voice full of concern.

She'd already decided she needed to go pick more sneezeweed, and Shellby might actually have had a limp the last time she saw him. Granted, he was swimming at the time, so it was hard to tell, but that just meant she couldn't be sure, right? Oh, and she hadn't seen Angel since the fiasco with the bunnies. He *could* be hurt.

"This again? I thought she was done doing this," Twilight commented, though Fluttershy barely heard her. "Perhaps we've reached critical mass? Four ponies is one too many? Rainbow Dash, could you try moving out of sight-"

"I'm sorry, I, um, have to go feed Angel turtle, um, sneeze... *bye!*" Fluttershy squeaked and ran off as fast as her legs could carry her. She raced across the yard and into the orchard. She didn't trust herself to fly right now, and the boughs of the apple trees were quick to hide her from view. She didn't really think that any of her friends would pursue her. They'd probably chalk it up to Fluttershy being herself. They'd be right.

A quick glance around told Fluttershy that she'd made a minor mistake when she darted off. The farmhouse and the other buildings were between the pegasus and her home. She'd run in the wrong direction, and she'd have to take the long way around to get home. That was okay, though. And she was okay. It's not like she had any problems beyond a slightly longer walk home, right?

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Rainbow Dash watched as her foalhood friend disappeared amidst the trees. If she was going to worry every time Fluttershy was being such a - well, *Fluttershy*, she'd never get anything done. She rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to her other friends. Apparently, they were less willing to instantly dismiss it.

"What is up with her?" Twilight asked, eyes still on the horizon - as far as one could look to the horizon when surrounded by hills crowded with apple trees.

"You know how she is. Look at her a little too hard and she panics," Rainbow Dash suggested, shrugging and beginning to move the wooden models around. Her face lit up as she was suddenly seized by an awesome idea.

"Hey, give me those," she commanded, scooping up all the little tubes and shafts Big Macintosh had placed on the map.

"Ah don't know. It's not like this is new, really," Applejack said at length, every word measured.

"How do you mean? I haven't really seen her lately," Twilight admitted, frowning at herself. "I guess I've been a little too busy with my studies."

Rainbow Dash glanced over at her own flank, then back at the assorted wooden pieces she had to work with. She needed smaller pieces. Everypony else seemed caught up in talking, and that suited her just fine. No pony noticed it when she subtly broke apart two of the tubes with her hooves. Her project was taking shape.

"Naw, it ain't you, Twi'. It's Fluttershy. She's been holed up in her cottage lately except to come by the farm. Last market Ah asked Rarity, and she said she's not seen Fluttershy this week either." Applejack shook her head slowly.

"I thought it was my fault. I've got some new volumes on metamagical theory that I've been studying. She's been coming here, though?" Twilight asked, not even trying to mask her surprise.

"Yup. Except for the last week, she's been comin' by almost daily," the orange earth pony said with a shrug. "That ain't what Ah mean though. She's just been acting weird, you know? It's not just that she's been busy-"

That made Rainbow Dash perk up. "She's been talking to *you*? Why?" It came out a little louder and angrier than she had intended to, but she fixed Applejack with a stare as she waited for an answer.

"That's what Ah said ain't it?" Applejack retorted, furring her brow as she turned to face her. The farmpony looked a little conflicted. "Ah'd love to know why myself, you know, but Ah ain't exactly a mind reader. She's probably just -"

"Uh-huh," Rainbow Dash muttered dismissively, going back to her project while Applejack's voice faded to a distant droning, but her heart wasn't really in it any more. She nudged the models around with a hoof, thinking. When Fluttershy stopped showing up for Dash's daily practice sessions, she'd always assumed there was a reason. Hearing that she was suddenly best pals with Applejack was a blow.

It was unfair, she decided. Yeah, they were *all* friends, and it wasn't like she had monopoly on Fluttershy's time, but it hurt a little. The annoying kind of hurt in her chest. A sprained wing hurt like a motherbucker, but she could survive that. Go have a rest, good in the morning. Somehow she doubted this was going to go away. Besides, she was losing to *Applejack*.

"Rainbow Dash?" Applejack's voice startled the pegasus, and she snapped to attention, wings flared. What had she missed? The orange mare was giving her an odd look.

"Ah was saying that if making new clouds is right out, can't you just go get clouds from elsewhere?"

"I could." Dash sighed in annoyance, wrenching her mind back to the problem at hoof. "But it would take days to find anything. Do you see any clouds anywhere that aren't my *house*?"

"There's some right over there, ain't there?" the apple farmer asked, pointing a hoof over to the west.

The blue pegasus frowned at her friend and shook her head. "I am *not* chasing clouds over the Everfree, AJ. No way."

"Ah ain't gonna ask you to do something you reckon is a bad idea," Applejack said, raising a hoof in a placating gesture. "You're the weather expert here, but why not? Flier fast as you could grab'em lickety split."

"It's called the Everfree effect," Twilight interjected. "It's not just limited to the animals, but also the expressions in the weather itself. It's fascinating really. Some scholars have put forth theories that with old, controlled cloud matter, you could actually stabilize-"

"It's probably really easy for anypony as awesome as me, sure," Dash said, stopping Twilight before she could bore anypony to death. "Except, you know, we don't *have* any clouds in the first place? That's the problem!"

"Uh huh, right," Applejack muttered with another mournful glance in the direction of her poor crop. "So, what other options do we got?"

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Applejack waved companionably to Twilight and Rainbow Dash as the two set off back towards Ponyville. Big Macintosh had already gone back to the farmhouse with the intent of checking up on Granny Smith. There was precious little they could do now except wait. The four ponies had spent the entire morning and a portion of the afternoon trying to devise alternatives to Twilight's aqueduct. "Asking Celestia really nicely" and "finding like, a *lot* of buckets" had been the best suggestions so far.

The orange mare looked down at the useless little model pieces. *Somepony* had begun to arrange them in the shape of Rainbow Dash's cutie mark, though the effort had apparently been abandoned halfway through. She nudged them with a hoof and sighed. The farm would of course persevere somehow. If the corn crop failed, they had only lost a small portion of Sweet Apple Acres' revenue. She'd need to sit down with the ledgers to figure out exactly how to recoup that loss all the same.

Applejack hated the ledgers with a passion. Rows upon rows of necessary but mind-numbingly boring numbers. It was every bit as vital to running the farm as applebucking itself, but it felt so far removed from honest work that it was all she could do not to buck the books themselves sometimes. It was her turn this year, though, Big Macintosh having dealt with it last year. She really should head inside and get started before dinner.

She didn't, though. She remained rooted to the spot, and let her gaze drift over to the north, past the barn. A familiar frown crept up on her face and settled comfortably as she contemplated Fluttershy's departure.

It wasn't like it was terribly odd for the skittish pegasus to run off like that. Or, it didn't use to be, but Twilight's earlier words rang true. They were really past that, weren't they? All the same, neither Twilight nor Rainbow Dash had elected to find out what was up with their friend. If they suspected something was truly wrong, or if Fluttershy was in

danger, they would of course all be there faster than a mule could eat an apple, so it was probably nothing big.

There was *probably* no reason for Fluttershy running off, and Applejack was *probably* just imagining that Rainbow Dash was giving her angry looks throughout the morning. Overreacting was not on the farmpony's agenda, particularly when there was work to be done.

"Probably" was simply not good enough for her to leave it alone. "Probably" belonged with "maybe" and "possibly". They were vague, indecisive and dishonest words, shiftier than a sapling in a storm. Applejack shook her head as she started towards Fluttershy's cottage under the baking sun.

She'd be back in time for dinner, and then she'd take a double shift with the ledgers before bed. Fluttershy had been behaving so strangely lately, and she'd never gotten a proper answer as to why. Trying to get answers out of that pony was frustratingly hard sometimes, but perhaps going to her home would help?

Tree trunks whisked past her as she broke into a gallop out of habit more than anything else. Her strong hoofbeats kicked up bits of grass and earth as she ran. She always thought better on the move: the faster the better.

The more she considered it, the more likely she thought it was that going to Fluttershy's cottage would help. She and Fluttershy were different in many ways, but she was certain that the other mare was more comfortable in her own home, surrounded by the animals she loved. Applejack herself always felt more at ease here at Sweet Apple Acres. Sometimes it felt like the fence was twice as tall when she was leaving as it was coming back, but the purpose that guided her was absolute.

Fluttershy's cottage bustled with life as always. Myriads of animals, some of which Applejack didn't even know the names of, swarmed around the cottage playing, eating and whatever else it was that they did. Normally, Applejack didn't really give animals much thought if they weren't Winona, a threat, or varmints trying to steal her apples.

Even so, she slowed down as she crossed the little bridge that led to Fluttershy's house. She might not fully understand Fluttershy's fascination with all the little birds and beasts, but it wouldn't do to be disrespectful. The tranquility of the area surrounding the unassuming little cottage, the gentle chuckle of the nearby brook - it was hard not to appreciate it. Without hesitation, the orange mare walked straight up to the door and knocked, twice. The noise felt harsh, angry and out of place.

Silence. Or rather, an unbroken susurrus of birdsong, bunnies and all other manner of creatures. Still no reply. Applejack knocked again, gentler this time. She knocked both a third and a fourth time, and had even tried calling Fluttershy's name before she was about ready to give up. As she turned around to leave, she noticed a white bunny standing at the

corner of the house. She'd not think twice about this except for the fact that the bunny was looking very angry and stood with his forepaws crossed.

Very few bunnies ever looked angry, and the air of frustration and annoyance was fairly unique.

"Angel?" Applejack asked. She'd never really conversed with the bunny himself, but he seemed more clever than any bunny had a right to be, at times. Apparently, he could understand her just fine, given the way he looked at her expectantly.

"So, uh. You seen Fluttershy 'round here lately? Is she out?" she asked.

The bunny turned away from her, glaring hard down the other side of the house from the corner he stood at. It looked like the furry little creature was trying to re-enact the Stare, but it was hard for Applejack to take him seriously. She chuckled at the little critter only to have her mirth cut short by a crash from inside the cottage. Angel rolled his eyes and bounced off, leaving Applejack very confused.

"Fluttershy? You in there?" she called, growing more and more concerned by the minute. Yet again, no reply. She shrugged and squared her shoulders. This had gone on for long enough. "Ah'm coming in."

"No! Wait! Um, I mean -" came the reply from inside. Applejack could hear Fluttershy sigh, even through the door. "Okay."

Applejack carefully nudged the door open. The room was stifling hot, but otherwise looked as it always did: a cozy little living room with assorted comfortable furniture, spattered with dens and birdhouses. The only creature present right now, however, was a decidedly shamefaced Fluttershy half-hiding behind a sofa.

Again, the report of Applejack's hooves felt loud and she thought she must look clumsy as she admitted herself, feeling almost like an intruder in Fluttershy's sanctuary. Trying not to spook her friend, she stopped a respectful distance away, in the middle of the room.

"Fluttershy, sugar, mind tellin' me what in the hay is going on? Have Ah said something wrong? Have Ah done wrong by you?" she asked.

Fluttershy's eyes went wide with panic, and she shook her head violently. "Oh, no, no, never!"

Applejack nodded, almost a little disappointed by her friend. She never pretended to understand how Fluttershy worked. She'd always assumed that they were simply very different, and left it at that, but this stung. Fluttershy had always been straight with her.

"Then Ah don't rightly understand why you're avoiding me, and Ah won't lie that it smarts a little," she said, rolling her jaw. "What's the deal? Why're you hiding?"

Something broke in Fluttershy. She cast her eyes down and disappeared behind the sofa until only the top of her pink mane could be seen. It seemed that the very light in the room dimmed, and Applejack felt a little stab of pain even though she knew she hadn't said anything unreasonable. She began to walk around the furniture that separated them.

"Listen, sugarcube," she began, stifling a sigh only to pause when she heard a quiet snuffle. *Oh now you've gone and done it, AJ. Good going. Now somepony's gonna yell at you for being insensitive again, and they're gonna be right as usual.*

Applejack crossed the remaining distance in a few short strides and sat down, planting her rump next to Fluttershy without looking at her. She was terrible at this sort of stuff, and she knew it.

"Wanna talk about it?" she asked, feeling very awkward. It was so much easier when ponies needed help hauling stuff, or when things needed a good bucking. She could clear an acre of apple trees before breakfast, but she had no idea what to say to console a sad pony when she didn't know what the problem was.

Fluttershy gave a delicate sniff before nodding. "I'm sorry, I really am, I just, I don't know what to do."

"You don't have to do anything. You tell me what's up, and if somepony's hurt you, Ah'll buck'm from here to Canterlot," Applejack huffed, hazarding a glance over at Fluttershy. The pegasus was still hiding behind her mane, but Applejack imagined she could both hear and feel her smile at that.

"You're always so nice, but you can't always carry me. It's like Rainbow Dash says. I have to stand on my own four hooves sometime," Fluttershy said, glancing up at her. "You girls can't carry me *all* the time."

Fluttershy seemed unable to stop mentioning that whole trek up the mountain at every turn. That, or this was some sort of metaphor. Applejack didn't know or care, and simply smiled back. "You see if Ah don't, sugarcube. Ah got a strong back and Ah ain't going nowhere. Now tell me what's up, please? What's the real problem?"

Fluttershy muttered something unintelligible, more of a squeak than actual words. Applejack leaned in closer, straining to hear.

"Mind repeating that, sugarcube?"

"You."

Applejack licked her lips and nodded, reaching up to adjust her hat with a hoof. So she *had* done something. Had she been a little too forceful when told her to stop being so silly with all her apologetic nonsense last week?

"Right. Well. What've Ah done now then? Let me have it."

"No!" Fluttershy exclaimed. "You haven't done anything! I mean, it's me! I- I tried telling you. I've tried so many times. I just..."

Applejack leaned back, resting her head against the sofa and smiling bemusedly. "'Thank you for helping me with everything up on that awful mountain?' Except you saved all our hindquarters in the end?"

Fluttershy shrank a little, retreating once more back under the curtain of pink that was her mane. Applejack's eyes were on the wooden ceiling. She idly noted that it could do with some maintenance. "'Thank you for bein' a good friend', except last time Ah went and checked, friendship was kind of a give-and-take deal?"

Yep. The support beams would hold, of course, and Applejack was no carpenter, but she was pretty sure that she could shore up the ceiling better than this. Fluttershy hung her head, but Applejack wasn't done. "'Thank you for the apples for my little animal friends every week?' Forgettin' how many times you've taken care of Apple Bloom or Winona?"

"Please stop, Applejack," Fluttershy said, defeated, but Applejack refused to relent, getting up to stand before the other mare.

"Ah would like to. And Ah would like for you to stop, too," she tried, fixing the yellow pegasus with the kindest of looks she could manage. "If something's wrong between us, you need to help me understand, 'cause Ah'm just plain confused."

It was impossible to try to decipher whatever Fluttershy's face displayed. Applejack extended a hoof to help Fluttershy up, which her friend gratefully accepted.

"It doesn't go away, the feeling," Fluttershy said, obviously trying to compose herself. Applejack just stood there and watched as the pegasus began to wander around the living room, cleaning up little odds and ends. "I'm sorry if I'm just, um, saying the same thing over and over, but I just don't know what *else* to say. I really just..." she lowered her voice, turning over to look back at Applejack as she moved to put a book back in her bookshelf. "Thank you?"

Applejack scratched the back of her head. Of all the problems she'd had in her years, this must be the oddest one yet. She tilted her head and crossed her forelegs. "Could try giving me a hug, Ah s'pose?"

Fluttershy gave a start, dropping the book with a squeak. She had stopped moving entirely.

"Ah mean, Ah just figured maybe it might help? If you're happy, perhaps you just need a hug to let it all out? Plenty of times when Ah'm happy, well, then a hug's just the nicest thing, right?" Applejack said, chuckling nervously.

She had no idea why Fluttershy was being so, well, *shy* about it. They'd shared plenty of hugs in the past. Did she smell? She'd bathed not two days ago. She gave her mane a subtle sniff, but found nothing amiss. When she looked up again, Fluttershy was in front of her, eyes on the ground.

"Okay," was all Fluttershy said. She looked about ready to bolt, fidgeting with her forehooves.

Seeing her like this, Applejack doubted that a hug alone would fix whatever was going on, but she wasn't going to over-think it. She leaned forward to cross necks with Fluttershy, hugging her close with a foreleg. The poor pegasus quavered, and Applejack could feel her heartbeat as their coats brushed against each other. She quickly drew back, eliciting a whimper from Fluttershy.

"Heavens to betsy, sugar, are you feeling alright? If you're sick, why didn't you just say so? Let's get you to bed," Applejack commanded, nudging her lightly in the side with her head. The pegasus barely moved.

"I really like you, Applejack," Fluttershy said, extending her wings and furling them again. It was an odd sort of gesture that the farmpony had no idea how to interpret.

"And Ah like you too, sugar, which is why we're gonna get you to bed," Applejack insisted, getting behind her and prodding her gently on the flank with a forehoof. The pegasus hopped forward a little bit, but turned around to face her. Applejack opened her mouth to say something, but Fluttershy's gaze was urgent and fearful.

Applejack herself had a healthy relationship with fear. She'd been taught long ago that fear was natural. Fear was healthy and good, and kept you from doing stupid stuff. Sure, she could be a little bull-headed at times, but she also knew that fear was nothing to be feared in and by itself. Granny Smith was a veritable wellspring of wisdom on the subject.

Right now, all the tell-tale signs of fear made themselves known to Applejack. She could hear the rush of blood in her ears, and a shiver ran down her spine. When she spoke, her voice sounded tinny, and she wasn't really quite sure if it was she who had spoken. The words came from somewhere far away.

"You mean you *like* me."

Fluttershy nodded, but whatever source of courage she had been drawing from to stand up to Applejack and admit this seemed to be rapidly running dry. Her eyes slipped to the ground, and she began to lower her head. "I'm sorry for being such a bother. Please, this

is *my* problem, and if you don't want to see me any more, I understand, I - I probably shouldn't even have said it, I really shouldn't, it was stupid and selfish, oh Fluttershy, why do you *say* these things, I didn't mean to-"

Before she could even consider what she was doing, Applejack had torn herself free from the invisible shackles that held her in place. She stepped right up to Fluttershy and put a hoof under her chin, raising her head back up. Applejack looked her right in the eye. The pegasus shook.

"This why you've been feelin' out of sorts, sugar?" she asked.

Fluttershy said nothing, and Applejack got the feeling that the only reason she was looking back at her was because she was too afraid to even run away. It made the orange farmpony feel wretched, but she could not make herself let go if she thought she could help.

"You're hurting 'cause you're sweet on me? Honest?" Applejack pressed. Fluttershy took a step backwards, eyes wide and wings spread. All this served to do was upend a small table behind her, sending a wooden bowl of fruit clattering to the floor. Applejack followed, not letting her off her hoof. She felt like a bully.

Having nowhere to run, Fluttershy shook her head ever so slightly. "No, I mean, I can't know for sure. I just, I think about you a lot. And I can't stop. But I'm probably wrong, I usually am, and I should really go back to, um, what I was doing. Which is, um. You know, I was probably just having bad day. Week. Month."

Applejack leaned in a little closer. It was almost a little uncomfortable, the tips of their snouts touching, but she really needed to drive the point home. "For all the hooey Rainbow Dash spouts, she's sure got one thing down right. You need to be more assertive. No matter how many friends you have, some things you just won't never get unless you reach out and take it."

Fluttershy nodded vigorously, biting her lower lip. "I promise I will, so, um, thank you. Uh, so we're okay. I'll just..." she looked around, obviously looking for a way out. Considering they were in her living room, options were rather limited.

"Ah'll leave you well enough alone if you can answer my darn question, Fluttershy," Applejack said with a huff. "You sweet on me?"

The poor pegasus mare's bright blue eyes found Applejack's, again. She sounded downright pained, lowering her voice. "Yes. I think so. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Okay, let's give it a shot then," Applejack said with a shrug, letting go of Fluttershy's muzzle. The pegasus awkwardly collapsed to the ground as if Applejack's hoof was all that had been holding her up. Fluttershy looked almost indignant.

"That's not how it works, you can't just say that," she protested as she stood back up. "Please don't joke about this, I really am sor-"

"Sugarcube," Applejack cut her off. "You say that word one more time, and Ah swear Ah'm gonna, well. Ah've no idea idea what Ah'll do, but just please let that poor lil' word have a rest fer once."

"You can't just say that," Fluttershy repeated. She made a noise that Applejack was certain was intended as a snort, but it came off as something between a squeak and a wheeze instead. "You're not in - you don't..."

Applejack was content to wait in silence. She hid nothing as Fluttershy stared at her with her mouth hanging open. She had no idea what her friend was looking for, but she simply smiled politely as the flustered pegasus scabbled for words.

"Why would you do this?" Fluttershy managed, at length. "I mean, oh my goodness, you're a really good friend, I didn't mean to say you're not, but, um. This isn't... this isn't how it's supposed to work."

"And just how is it *supposed* to work, sugarcube?" Applejack asked. "Have you been listening to Rarity's fancy tales again?"

Fluttershy's silence at this spoke louder than any words possibly could have. Applejack sat down on the hard wooden floorboards and puffed out her cheeks. "Ah'm your friend, Fluttershy. No matter what happens between us, nothing going to be changing that, ever. You're not going to be losing me."

"We're both grown mares, consarn it. Ah ain't promising you my hoof in marriage," she sighed, though she could quite hold back a smile at Fluttershy's blush. "Ah care about you. Can you for once try to just say yes? Not for me, but for yourself, and don't overthink it, okay? We'll go out, see what happens."

Applejack blew a stray stand of hair away from her own eyes. Fluttershy looked reluctant still, but said nothing, and the silence stretched on. Applejack would have paid good bits to know exactly what was going on inside the head of her pegasus friend. It felt like she sat there for hours waiting, though she rationally knew it couldn't have been more than a minute or two. The sun told the tale well and simple; it was still afternoon.

"A date? O-okay," Fluttershy finally said, her voice shaking ever so slightly. "I mean, yes. Please. If - if you really want to and if it's not too much trouble?"

Applejack raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "Date? Ah guess you could think of it like that. Ah'll just come by tomorrow afternoon after Ah'm done at the farm. We'll have us a picnic," she suggested, making for the door as she looked over her shoulder. "Ah gotta get back to work, but you shut your brain off for once now you hear? Stop worrying!"

Fluttershy silently stared back at her, and it was all too tempting to just skip dinner and stay when faced with those big eyes. Applejack knew Fluttershy would love nothing more than to ask her to stay, but duty called. The pegasus nodded bravely, and Applejack slipped out the door with a parting nod of her own.

Only when she had crossed the bridge and was hidden from view by a copse of trees did Applejack let herself breathe again. She sat down heavily and leaned back against the trunk of a large tree by the side of the road. Her head made a satisfying *thunk* as it impacted, and she closed her eyes tightly.

"What in the hay are you doing, Applejack?" she muttered to herself before letting out a shuddering sigh. She knocked her stupid head against the tree a few more times just for good measure. It hurt, but she had no doubt the tree would crack long before her thick skull. She could be such an idiot sometimes.

She wasn't in love with Fluttershy. Fluttershy knew this. It was obvious, but if neither of them expected this to go anywhere, why was she doing this? Fluttershy had protested, and she was right to do so, but seeing her friend in pain triggered every protective instinct in the farmpony's body. She wanted to make Fluttershy okay, and she had just set herself up to do the exact opposite.

Had Fluttershy only agreed because she trusted Applejack? It sounded all too likely. The pegasus mare *did* trust her, and Applejack was mocking that trust. Love didn't just spring forth from nowhere just like that, did it? What would happen when it turned out that Applejack didn't feel the same for Fluttershy? What was Applejack hoping would happen?

She briefly entertained the notion of running back to explain to Fluttershy how it was all a mistake, but that would only hurt her more. Fluttershy was a grown and clever mare, and Applejack had told no lies. *No, Applejack, you've gone and managed to set her up for heartbreak without lying even a little bit. Good going.* The realization stung something fierce deep in her heart.

Another thud. That one was going to leave a bump on her head for sure, and her hat fell halfway over her face. Shortly thereafter there was a rustle of leaves and a noise that was most certainly not her doing. Applejack cracked an eye open, expecting to see leaves and twigs falling or some such.

Rainbow Dash may have been a slim pony, but she was not a twig in the literal sense of the word. The rainbow-maned mare stood in the middle of the dirt road right in front of her. Applejack didn't even have the energy left to be surprised, and closed her eyes again. Dash wore a suspicious frown, and Applejack did *not* want to have to deal with this right now. Whatever "this" was.

"Been to see Fluttershy, huh?" Rainbow Dash asked. Judging by the sounds of light hoof-falls, she was pacing back and forth, and Applejack hated the tone of her voice. It

sounded like a challenge, and she was plenty busy being annoyed with herself without having Dash adding to it.

"Don't rightly see how that's any of yer business, but that's right. You spying on me now?" she murmured tiredly.

"I don't know, *is* it none of my business?" Rainbow asked innocently, her voice saccharine.

Rainbow Dash couldn't know what Fluttershy and Applejack had just discussed, of course. At least, that's what Applejack told herself. Regardless, it raised the uncomfortable issue of having to tell their friends. Sure, they didn't *have* to, but skulking about in the shadows didn't sit right with her. How would they take it? She'd love to say buck 'em if they didn't like it, but they were *friends*. It couldn't stay a secret forever.

Rainbow Dash was probably still waiting for an answer, but Applejack had no real answer to give. She had no idea what Rainbow Dash was getting at, either. "Ah don't have time for this, RD," she sighed.

"No, I see you're very busy sitting here doing nothing when you're not *hanging out* with Fluttershy," Rainbow Dash grumped. "But hey, you give me a poke when you need some rain, because that's all I'm good for, right?"

Thud. That was a good one. Applejack's hat fell off, and she opened her eyes. Rainbow Dash was staring at her with intensity that made no sense to the apple farmer. When Applejack spoke, she didn't have to work very hard to sound weary. The pegasus was starting to get on her nerves.

"That's mighty rich coming from Equestria's best napper. Aren't you supposed to be asleep or something?"

"Oh, buck yourself, then," Dash hissed, taking off with a blast of air that sent Applejack's head thudding against the poor battered tree one final time. A rainbow contrail pointed straight up into the sky, partially obscured by all the dust kicked up from Dash's takeoff. Applejack's head refused to stop ringing.

She accepted the pain and spat on the ground. If Rainbow Dash was going to be an idiot, whatever the reason, then she'd let her. She grabbed her stetson, put it back atop her head, and set off towards home. It wasn't as if she didn't have enough on her plate as it was. Tonight, her ledgers needed her. Tomorrow, Fluttershy.

She wasn't quite sure which of the two she dreaded more, nor was she entirely convinced about the word "date", but she had a picnic to plan nevertheless.

Fluttershy's eyes popped open. Again. The stifling humidity rendered her mane a sticky, tangled web that clung to her face, and her bedsheets were soaked. Apparently, she hadn't moved at all. For all she knew, what she thought had been a short nap could just have been an extended blink. She had no idea, being so very tired yet utterly unable to fall sleep. Glancing out the open window of her bedroom loft, she saw only darkness. A sea of stars still jealously hogged the sky, and Fluttershy wished they would go away.

It was a mean thought. It was *very* mean to the beautiful stars of the night. It wasn't as if Fluttershy would ever say she liked the day better than the night, and the moon was usually *ever* so nice. It was just that right now, she would really like to see the sun. Sunrise meant morning, and when the morning came, she was one step closer to seeing Applejack again. One step closer to their *date*.

Her heart soared at the thought as it had countless times before this night, and her one free wing gave a few useless flaps as she smiled. The sun would have to shine very brightly if it was hoping to match the way she glowed as she thought of yesterday. A hint of a blush crept up on her face as she remembered Applejack's breath on her face. The warmth, her scent, the orange mare's eyes trained on her own.

Fluttershy rolled over on her other side so quickly she nearly hurt a wing. There were a million reasons why this was all wrong. She'd tried telling herself this, but she was too stubborn to listen. All of yesterday evening had been spent trying to convince herself that this was all a terrible idea. She had paced her cottage until her head hurt thinking about all of this. She would have forgotten all about eating if it weren't for Angel.

So many reasons why this was a bad idea, yet she'd failed spectacularly at *caring* about them. All her fears and apprehensions were eclipsed by the promise of more spending time with Applejack, just the two of them together.

Of course it wouldn't *work*. Not at length. Applejack wasn't in love with her, and nothing could change that. It was one-sided, and Applejack was being a good friend letting Fluttershy pretend for a little longer. When this came to its natural conclusion, she would thank her for what was sure to have been the best time of her life. She could cry later. For now, she would dream.

And dreaming was exactly what she must have done. Fluttershy had apparently fallen asleep at some point, and now the sun was well clear of the horizon. The day had started without her. Fluttershy squeaked and rolled off her bed in a tangle of bedsheets and pillows, landing awkwardly on her side. The ruckus scattered a few of the birds that perched in the rafters, sending them fleeing out the window.

She quickly extricated herself from the mess, flinging the thin duvet back atop the bed with a flick of her neck. She would apologize to the little birds and *promised* to make the bed properly later, but she had so very much to do before Applejack arrived. Half the

morning was already gone, and she hadn't even begun to feed all the poor animals who lived about her home.

Fluttershy skipped right past the panic. She'd take care of that later, too, but she had no time for such luxuries now. Torn between elation and stress, she squared her jaw, spread her wings, and glided down the stairs to the ground floor. Step one, refill birdseed. It was one of the many things she had skipped last night in her eagerness to, well, think. Dream.

She blushed again as she opened the cupboard where she kept much of the animal food, noting that she'd have to open a whole new sack of birdseed. She paused after fishing a small paper sack out from the lower shelf.

A lot of things had fallen by the wayside yesterday in favor of doing exactly nothing but thinking and dreaming about the upcoming date. She hadn't even cracked open her new Mareian Keyes romance novel. As much as she liked reading a good book now and then, life today seemed far better than any fantasy could possibly be.

She glanced over at her bookshelves and smiled. No offense to them, but the novels she read seemed almost silly now. While the books were snug and safe in their own place, Fluttershy was going on a date with Applejack.

With perhaps a little too much enthusiasm, Fluttershy bit down to open the sack of birdseed. The sack immediately responded by exploding. Fluttershy squeaked loudly as the world became a hail of brown and yellow pellets, covering her living room floor in sunflower- and thistle seeds. Birds came flocking in through all the windows and hopping out of the birdhouses in the room, hailing the arrival of an impromptu feast with a deafening chorus of squawks and peeps.

Fluttershy blew her mane out of her face and sighed. "Well, don't you eat too fast now, and share nice, okay?" she suggested, putting what was left of the willful paper bag back in the closet. On the brighter side of things, the little bird babies were old enough that she didn't have to go digging for worms. She always felt so terrible when she had to do that. Relieved and buoyed by this delightful silver lining, she decided to take care of feeding the bunnies next.

The pegasus promptly set course for the kitchen and surveyed the shelves. After a moment's deliberation, she grabbed a bundle of carrots she'd uprooted yesterday in her mouth and tucked a bundle of leftover salad under a wing. That would do for the bunnies for today. She could make them something nicer tomorrow when she had more time. She giggled around the carrot stalks, proud of how assertive she was being.

Fluttershy froze on the spot. Was she being assertive or just plain selfish? If she was a bunny, she would be a little sad that the salad wasn't fresh. She would of course be a very polite bunny about it, and all the bunnies here were very nice bunnies indeed, but she couldn't bear to think that they might secretly be a little bit disappointed.

Applejack could arrive at any moment though. For a farmpony, "afternoon" meant just that - any time after noon. Applejack would have risen with the sun and could be making her way over to Fluttershy's cottage right now. Fluttershy struggled to push back the thrilling little surge that went through her.

Spinach and broccoli both for the bunnies, *tomorrow*. She nudged the kitchen door open with her head, causing a cascade of birdseed to fall out of her mane. Quickly as she could, she flew past her little garden patch to where most of the rabbit dens were, putting her cargo down on the grass. Bunnies were already poking their heads out from their burrows, eyeing her critically. She was never going to live down her little mistake yesterday.

Thankfully, one bunny hopped up to her immediately and without reservation. The bunny she needed. Sure enough, Angel was not holding back his scorn - he was impatiently tapping his wrist and pointing at the sun, reprimanding her for her tardiness, but that was okay. She deserved all the anger her friend could muster.

"I know I'm late, Angel, but, um, I have something very important to do today," Fluttershy explained. Angel rolled his eyes at this.

"Oh. Well, okay, I suppose you know why," Fluttershy muttered, blushing furiously. Her jaw was threatening to lock up as she tried to hold back a giggle. "But, if it's not too much trouble, could you maybe make sure all the other bunnies get their share today?" she asked with a smile that became twice as wide when Angel saluted and set about divvying up the food with skilled paws.

Fluttershy leaned down to nuzzle him affectionately, feeling ever so grateful for his help. The bunny sighed and turned around to pat her head before going back to his work. She was really ever so lucky to have Angel to help her when things got rough.

Bunnies, check. Birdies, check. Turtles next, then. Fluttershy took to the air, flapping her wings to gain some height so she would clear the hill and the trees of her garden, aiming for the kitchen entrance. She could feed the turtles and the otters in one go. There was a basket of grapes in the kitchen, and she knew she still had some prepared fish left *somewhere*. That latter fact was a source of immense relief; she had no desire to taint the day of her big date with such unpleasant business.

The day of her date. Which was today. Fluttershy closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she soared through the air. What if Applejack was coming down the road right now, ready to meet her? Oh, wouldn't that just be the most wonderful thing? At the same time, it was a *scary* thought. She was almost afraid of opening her eyes now.

This was different, though. Usually scary was *terrible*. Scary was a bad thing that made her want to curl up and hide, but this time, it was exhilarating too. It was a little bit like those times when she was reading a good book and just couldn't contain her joy over it. Sometimes she had to hide the book under the pillow until she had calmed down.

Then again, what if Applejack was already here? She could have arrived while Fluttershy was in the meadow behind the cottage! It would be very silly to fly around blind then. Almost certain that she'd find Applejack waiting for her, she opened her eyes and -

Fluttershy looked up at the clear and painfully bright blue sky above. Her head was ringing, and her face was wet. She lay on her side in a vegetable patch, and there was an insistent rapping on her flank that wouldn't let up. Confused as though she was, she'd recognize those soft kicks anywhere.

"Angel? What happened?" she groaned. Her throat was dry and her voice sounded raspy. Bringing a hoof up to her face, she realized that the sticky wetness was blood. She must have stubbed or broken her snout.

Her bunny friend quickly came into view, hopping up on her shoulder. A very relieved-looking Angel pointed to a tree close-by. More specifically, he pointed to a large and conspicuously cracked branch on the tree closest to the kitchen door.

Fluttershy slowly got back up on all fours, fervently hoping that the branch wasn't broken. As much as she cared about the trees in her garden, she knew there was something else she was supposed to be worrying about, though. Her head felt like it had been stuffed with cotton and dipped in honey. She experimentally moved her head from side to side. The world seemed very reluctant to follow where her eyes went.

"Fluttershy?"

That wasn't Fluttershy. She hadn't said that. Sure, she had a nasty habit of talking to herself sometimes, and she really shouldn't, but she didn't think she would say her own name for no reason. Fluttershy peered over at Angel. The concerned-looking bunny hadn't spoken either.

She glanced up at the tree branch, rapidly running out of explanations.

"Sugarcube, are you hiding again?"

Applejack, Fluttershy realized. It was Applejack who was speaking, her voice ringing out loud and clear from the other side of the cottage. Fluttershy's brain returned to full function in less than a second, all the blood in her veins suddenly turning to ice. Her friend sounded disappointed, perhaps even hurt. How long had she been waiting? The sun was still climbing, but there was no guarantee that it was the same *day*.

It was her fault. Everything was her fault. Perhaps it was next week, and Applejack was here to tell her that she didn't want to be friends with such a horrid, neglectful pony? She certainly didn't want to be her own friend right now.

"Fluttershy...?"

Fluttershy stood perfectly still, breathing faster and faster, her eyes unseeing. If she waited long enough, perhaps it would go away. Applejack would go away too, and she didn't want that, but at least she wouldn't have to deal with having disappointed her. If she never saw her again, she could avoid that confrontation. Not seeing Applejack for the rest of her life? Fluttershy's entire body shook.

A potato bounced off her head from behind, thrown by an annoyed little bunny.

Applejack was at the front door. She had to answer her front door. Fluttershy looked around and found to her dismay that there was a house in the way. That was her house, of course. She had to go through the house to get to Applejack. She had to get to Applejack. *Applejack.*

The pegasus launched into the air and swooped in through the back door, past the kitchen, through the living room and up to her bedroom in a feat of indoor aerial acrobatics that she was grateful she was too hurried to contemplate. Applejack was here, and she couldn't even begin to count the ways in which she wasn't ready.

A series of hard, insistent knocks on the door downstairs. They may as well have been funeral bells. Time was up. Applejack called her name again, louder this time. In a blind panic, Fluttershy galloped over to her vanity and grabbed her favorite brush in her mouth. She twisted her head and started working on the mess that was her mane. Anything was an improvement at this point. As she fruitlessly battled with the cascading mass of pink, she flung open the doors to her dress cabinet.

"Fluttershy, Ah can hear you in there. This is getting stupid. Ah'm coming in."

She had planned on wearing her gala dress. Out of all the dresses she had, it was still her favorite, but she wasn't quite sure it would be suited for a picnic. She had a large number of dresses, leftovers from her modelling career, but she had never felt comfortable with any of them. She simply didn't know which dress to wear, and when.

It was a terrible thing to only miss a friend when you needed them, but she was sure that Rarity would not only be able to tell her what to wear, she'd also be able to calm her with a few words.

Words. What had Applejack just said? That she was coming *in*? Fluttershy tried to yell something in protest - she hadn't even had a bath yet - but with the brush still in her mouth, all she managed was a muffled *mrph*. She made to toss the brush onto her bed as she ran for the stairs, but it got stuck in her mane instead. The pink hairbrush did not make for a particularly elegant ornament.

It went downhill from there, all too literally. Too busy trying to get the hairbrush out, she missed the last step of the stairs, falling flat on her face and sprawling out on the living room floor with a squeak. This in turn startled the birds, who were only now wrapping up their little party. Cuckoos, parrots, owls, hummingbirds and jays of every color scattered

in surprise, filling the room with a cacophony of squawks, peeps, flaps and feathers. It was messier than the Best Young Flier competition afterparty.

When the noise finally died down and the last of the birds had flown away in a huff, Fluttershy didn't much care to get up. Applejack stood nearby, a picnic basket on the floor at her side. Fluttershy shut her eyes and let the tears come. They'd been begging for a chance ever since she realized she had overslept. She figured she could reschedule and get it over with right now. This was an *excellent* time to panic and cry.

"Fluttershy, what in tarnation *happened* here?" Applejack asked, incredulous. "Are you okay?"

Fluttershy pinched her eyes shut even harder and nodded, scraping her chin against the floor. She was fine. She'd just failed in every conceivable respect to be ready for her big moment. She had been given this one chance, one day during which she would be able to pretend that something wonderful had happened. A day where she could let out that indeterminable something that had built up inside of her. Applejack had offered to take her out on a date, just the two of them, and that was more than she could ever have hoped for.

And she had blown it. She sniffled, once, before a series of sobs wracked her. She covered her face with her hooves and tried to be as quiet as she could, but it was no use. She wasn't normally ashamed of crying in front of her friends, but the weight of the moment pressed down on her and pinned her to the floor.

"Sugarcube, you're bleeding."

Applejack's voice was closer now, and her hoofsteps got louder still. Fluttershy curled up on sheer instinct, but to no avail. A strong set of forelegs cradled her head though she didn't deserve it. She felt the brush being gently removed from her mane.

"Ah need you to tell me if you're okay - *right now*," Applejack said. Her voice was low and quavered ever so slightly. "Talk to me, sugar. Do you want me to go get Nurse Redheart? Ah can carry you if you can't walk. Or if you don't *want* to walk."

Fluttershy forced herself to stop making such a ruckus with her sniffles. It took all her efforts and she felt like she was going to choke, but she managed to shake her head and croak a "*No*." She wasn't hurt, and she didn't want to bother Applejack anyway.

"Okay," Applejack muttered with a huff. "Ah'm a little confused as to what in the hay Ah'm supposed to do if you don't want help, and won't tell me what's going on either."

It felt so good just resting there in Applejack's embrace. It was a wonderful lie, but at the same time, she was very conscious of how she must look. Her snout was bloody and her mane was a mess speckled with birdseed, grass and leaves. Tired of being tired,

Fluttershy slowly slipped out from between Applejack's hooves to sit on her haunches, wobbling a little as a surge of dizziness seized her.

Opening her eyes, Fluttershy looked at her friend through a veil of rapidly drying tears. Applejack was frowning. She was no doubt disgusted with her. There was no point in trying to keep up this silliness any longer, best to just get it over with. She drew a shuddering breath as she faced the orange mare.

"I overslept," she said, trying to force her voice up from a whisper. It was not an easy thing to do under the constant, unblinking gaze of Applejack, but the farmpony's expression softened a little as Fluttershy began talking.

"I tried to feed all the animals quickly because I knew you were coming, and it didn't go very well. I haven't even fed the otters and the turtles yet," she confessed, rubbing her forepaws together. "And then I, um. I had a little accident, and I guess I panicked a little bit and crashed." She rubbed her snout, wincing in pain.

"A little bit," Applejack repeated, looking about the feather-and-birdseed covered room.

"When I heard you were coming, I realized I was late. I - I mean, even later than I thought I was," Fluttershy said, swallowing. "I didn't have time to brush my mane, or put on my dress, or even wash up, and now it's all ruined, and you don't want to go out." That painful knot in her chest had returned, and her whole body tensed up. "I look horrible, and everything is ruined."

Applejack shook her head slowly from side to side. "Sugar, d'you see me wearing a dress? Do Ah smell like Ah've bathed in a trough of fancy perfume?"

"No?" Fluttershy said, though it was a question more than an answer. Was this a test? Was "no" the right answer? It was such a negative and mean word. Was it too late to change her mind?

"Then why in all things cinnamon swirl would you think Ah'd expect *you* to fancy yourself up for a picnic? Am Ah under dressed for having a snack?"

Fluttershy's eyes went wide as panic fought the budding hopelessness. "No!" she said, aghast. "You're perfect! You look lovely, you're just right, you're..." she sighed, realizing this wasn't helping. She was caramel-glazing the apple that hung outside of her reach. "Perfect."

Applejack did not so much as blink, apparently entirely unimpressed. She held out a hoof, for some purpose Fluttershy could not immediately discern. "That's mighty sweet of you to say, but it means nothing if you don't play by the same rules as me. Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

Fluttershy reluctantly accepted the hoof, getting up with Applejack's help. It was an entirely unnecessary gesture, but her touch lingered. Her head was still throbbing as she followed Applejack into her own kitchen where the earth pony mare was quick to turn on the tap. Grabbing a clean piece of cloth, Applejack immediately set to cleaning Fluttershy's face.

The pegasus closed her eyes and surrendered herself to Applejack's ministrations, trying to keep her pained noises to a minimum. Her snout was still tender. The last thing she saw was Applejack giving a quirky smile.

"Ah'm surprised you're not fussing over the blood." Applejack chuckled softly around the cloth in her mouth, before quickly adding, "Ah. No offense of course, just..."

It was hard for Fluttershy to imagine where she could have taken offense. Applejack sounded almost pleased with her, and she was sure she was blushing, now.

"Not at all," she muttered, trying to keep her muzzle still. "I help a lot of animals, you know. Sometimes they are hurt really bad." She winced at the very thought, memories of injured animals creeping unbidden into her mind. It did wonders to further blunt her mood.

"Ah suppose that makes sense," Applejack agreed, finishing up with an appreciative grunt. "Right, do you wanna go eat now? Because Ah'm starving."

Fluttershy was so surprised she forgot to hide or even look away. She stared openly at Applejack as her friend tossed the bloody rag onto the counter. "You're... not leaving?"

It took a while before Applejack replied. The orange mare rubbed her face with a hoof and sat down with much deliberation, looking thoroughly exasperated. Fluttershy cringed and drew back, unsure of what she had done to annoy Applejack, wishing she could take back anything and everything she had said.

"Fluttershy, you know Ah ain't going nowhere. Have any of us ever left you alone when you needed us? Tell me once when we've abandoned you, sugar," she said with a weary smile.

Fluttershy couldn't, of course. Her friends were always there for her. Applejack was right, and she knew it, but that wasn't at all what she had meant.

"Um, you're right, of course, I mean, my *friends* have always been there for me," she replied with emphasis on that one word. She wasn't afraid of losing her friend Applejack. It was another Applejack entirely she feared she had already lost, even though she never really had her.

Applejack cocked her head as she thought. Fluttershy fidgeted with her mane, extricating a few small twigs for lack of anything better to do, and to distract herself from the way

Applejack was looking at her. She hated it. She wished she knew what to say to make Applejack happy again, but she had no idea words those would be.

"Fluttershy? Try to, Ah dunno, ease up a little, okay? Ah ain't much for these kinds of talks, but you're bein' sillier than Pinkie Pie after she's had a tray of muffins. Stop obsessing about the whole *date* thing for a bit, and let's just go have us a nice picnic out in the meadow, outside, okay?" Applejack said, smiling. "Ah reckon you're not much up for a long walk anyway, and it's right proper nice outside."

Fluttershy felt a series of little stabs in the back of her neck like somepony had used her as a pincushion. Bitter disappointment. So it *was* over, then. She gave a little nod at that, not wanting to seem impolite. "Food sounds lovely," she admitted. In fact, she was famished, having skipped breakfast. Her stomach rumbled loudly in agreement, causing her to blush sheepishly.

"Well then. If you're sure you're okay, Ah say we go eat," Applejack announced, regaining some of her vigor. She didn't wait for a reply, walking off towards the living room, the front door, and the large picnic basket she'd left there.

Fluttershy tried not to let her head or her tail droop. She obediently followed as Applejack grasped the basket in her mouth, setting off out through the door and through the tall summer grass. She tried telling herself that it was over - no more date, just a picnic. Even so, though her head still hurt and her snout was tender, she realized then and there that she would have followed Applejack to the ends of Equestria.

Well. That would be terribly sad for the birds and the bunnies, but she'd read that phrase in a book, once. Applejack did not seem like she intended to go quite that far anyway. She'd put down the picnic basket in an area where the grass only barely reached their knees.

The spot Applejack had picked was a flat grassy area near the Everfree Forest, yet still well within sight of her cottage. What little wind there was made the entire expanse of green and yellow grass sway ever so slightly, making it look like an oddly colored river. Lunch with Applejack was becoming a better and better prospect by the minute.

With a single flap of her wings which pained her more than she cared to admit, Fluttershy sailed over to alight on the other side of the basket. Without hesitation, she reached out with a forehoof to help with the picnic blanket. Applejack was evidently having some problems unfolding it on her own.

"Ah can manage," Applejack said, even as she gave an end to Fluttershy, one brow raised. "My treat and all, you know?"

"Oh, but it wouldn't be right at all," Fluttershy retorted. "If you made the food, this is the least I can do." Indeed, she felt a little bad that Applejack had gone through so much trouble just for her sake. The farmpony smiled warmly in return.

"It ain't much," Applejack chuckled. "Ah think the fritters might not be as warm anymore, and the pie's a bit light on the cinnamon on account of needing to cut some corners on the farm. Budgeting around losing the little crops, corn and all."

Fluttershy fished out a bottle of apple juice from the basket, passing the small container along to Applejack along with a slightly bigger frown. "Oh my, is it really that bad? Rainbow Dash really can't fix it?"

Applejack snorted and dipped her head into the basket, surfacing with a pie balanced on her head. "No, it probably ain't *that* bad, whatever that means, but the new crops were outta the fancy stuff budget. So we gotta run it a little tighter if we're gonna bank the usual amount."

"Um, 'fancy stuff budget'?" Fluttershy repeated, helping the pie off of Applejack's head, safely setting it down between them.

"Yeah," Applejack said, as if it were obvious. "It's basic economics. You got your fancy stuff budget, and then you got your normal stuff budget, right? Ah do the book-keeping this year, and Ah'll be darned if we're gonna let the barn go another year without fixing just 'cause Rainbow Dash is a chicken."

Even though she was well used to her friends' competitive spats, the comment hurt a little. The quarrels always did. She made an inquisitive noise as she seized the basket from Applejack, taking care of the final touches. Two plates, a pair of fritters and a small flagon of sauce. Luckily, Applejack didn't seem to be truly annoyed. She sat down on her rump and snorted as Fluttershy served them, grinning at herself.

"Don't you listen to me. All there's to it is that she's afraid to go get clouds from the Everfree. Well, she didn't say *afraid*, just some magical mumbo-jumbo about needing clouds to get clouds. It doesn't matter. Just 'cause Ah would risk my flank for Sweet Apple Acres doesn't mean she should, Ah guess," she said with a shrug. "Now you'll excuse me if Ah just dig in. Might be it ain't much of a feast, but Ah'm starving."

"Oh, not at all," Fluttershy protested. She leaned down to take a bite out of the apple fritter just as Applejack did the same, taking care not to make a mess. After tasting the treat, she didn't even have to sugar-coat her words to make them all nice. "This is really good. Better than anything I could ever make. I mean, I'm not much of a cook, but..."

Fluttershy's eyes fell to rest on her own forehooves. It was true. She was hardly much of a cook, but the worst part of it was that she couldn't imagine going back to eating her dinner salad all alone after sharing such a cozy meal with Applejack.

When she got no response, she glanced up to find Applejack grinning at her. Just like that, the gloom was dispelled, and the sadness failed to find any purchase in her mind. She'd made Applejack smile.

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Two corkscrews next, wings closed - make it three, four, five. No. Change of plans. Dash lost count of how many times she spun as her momentum shifted, taking her from a horizontal glide to a plummet. Even with her eyes closed, she was in full control. She could *feel* the right moment approaching. It was an almost tangible thing in and by itself, that critical point at which she had to pull up unless she wanted to become a pony pancake. Years of training made sight obsolete.

The moment came and went. She waited another quarter-second this time before she spread her wings and opened her eyes again, pulling out of the dive. Her hooves created furrows in the grass as she soared along the ground, passing right by her audience.

"Go Dashie! That was super neat!" Pinkie Pie yelled, hoof-pumping and cheering. She'd acquired a pair of bright pink pom-poms at some point and was waving them around with more enthusiasm than skill.

The windmill up ahead spoke to Dash. The imposing stone structure practically begged to be incorporated in today's maneuvers. She flapped her wings hard, rocketing towards the building with a huge grin on her face.

Rolling over, she set herself spinning as she began circling the windmill. Equestria below became a blur as she twirled, working to try to keep her turns around the white stone building tight. Knowing how *awesome* it must look was ample motivation for her to give it her all, but she knew she could take it further still.

Spreading her wings wide to stabilize herself, she set about looping around each of the arms of the windmill in rapid succession, each time closer to the center, still trying to accelerate, ever going faster. *Faster*. Her eyes started to water and she could feel her muscles straining as they worked to keep up with the frantic twists and turns.

She could hear Pinkie Pie cheering even over the rush of the air. Pinkie was cool. One of Dash's best gal-pals. Of course she had wanted to come see Dash when she was training. Who wouldn't? They just needed to be reminded of it, sometimes. She couldn't expect everypony to remember she trained out here.

Fluttershy knew, though. Fluttershy used to come watch almost every day, but apparently she'd found better friends since. Sure, she wasn't as much fun as Pinkie, but having Fluttershy sit there and watch her was nice in a different way. It was their thing.

Not that she *needed* her, she thought with a snort. Rainbow Dash didn't need anyp-

The world spun and the ground was suddenly rushing up to meet her. Rainbow Dash was spinning far too fast to have any hope of regaining control. Within seconds, she went down in a heap with a yell, cratering in a patch of tall grass.

The fallen pegasus lay as still as she could while she tested her limbs one by one, confirming she was unhurt. Dash was just starting on her hindlegs when Pinkie Pie's face broke through the brush.

"I really liked the bit at the end when you were all *whoooosh* and then *eep, no way!* and suddenly, *bam!*" Pinkie Pie whooped, miming Dash's finale with embarrassing accuracy, landing the party pony flat on the ground next to her.

"Uhhuh," Dash said as she completed her all-too-familiar post-crash check routine. Wings? Functional. Legs? Four out of four. Hooves? Not a chip. Body? No pain, and breathing didn't hurt. Head? Fine. One of her best friends forgetting about her and hanging out with Applejack instead? *Check.*

Apparently, Dash was very easily replaceable. She could of course just let Fluttershy and Applejack be *best friends* all they wanted. She could make new friends easily, even though the whole elements of harmony thing was kinda cool. It would just be terribly *unloyalful*.

If she asked Twilight, she'd probably say something boring that would never work. The master of eggheads would burrow her snout in a book and suggest she talk to them about it or whatever. No, what Rainbow Dash needed was for somepony to *understand*, and right now, she did have *a* somepony with her.

Pinkie Pie had gotten up and was standing almost unnaturally still, staring at her with unblinking eyes. "What?" Rainbow Dash asked. "You're kinda freaking me out here."

"Oh nothing, you just looked like you were having a monologue. I was waiting for you to finish!" Pinkie chirped.

"Right," Rainbow Dash said. "Hey, wanna head over to see what Fluttershy is doing? I bet she's doing something really cool. Like, right now!"

"Oooh, really?" Pinkie bubbled. "I usually prefer fun stuff, but cool stuff is cool, so that's cool!" she giggled. "Let's go have some fun! Or, coolness. It *really* is hot today."

Dash nodded, latching on to the only thing that made even a little sense; it really was too hot. Rivulets of sweat were running down her face. The only reason she had even bothered with practice today was because she was frustrated with the whole situation. If she flew fast enough, she could outpace the frustration for a little while. Twilight had laughed at the idea when she had told her, once, but what the hay did a unicorn know about flight anyway?

She joined Pinkie Pie on the ground, trotting alongside her friend at an easy pace as they set course for Fluttershy's cottage. Pinkie was more than happy to fill the journey with a long speech about her plans for a huge slingshot or some such. The words passed straight

through Dash. Poems about supersonic muffins only briefly halted between her ears, confirming they weren't relevant to her mood before sailing out the other side.

"Do you need a hug?" Pinkie suddenly asked.

Rainbow Dash only really heard the question because Pinkie had been oddly - and blessedly - quiet for the last few minutes as they finally approached Fluttershy's cottage.

"I don't need a hug," Dash immediately replied, adding a snort for good measure as she upped the pace. The place was as noisy and crowded as ever, and the roof was swarming with birds. Dash spread her wings just as a matter of course. With so many flying critters about, it didn't hurt to show them who's boss.

"You look like you could use a hug," Pinkie suggested, frowning with grave suspicion.

"Well, that's really weird, Pinkie, because I *don't need a hug*," the pegasus protested as she knocked on the door. The door, in turn, slid open as she touched it. It had obviously not been shut properly.

"Uhhuh," came the reply, flat and unconvinced. "Except, you could be lying, and lying is terrible, it makes - ooh sunflower seeds!" Pinkie abandoned her scrutinous glare in favor of darting in through the open door and setting upon the seeds that covered much of the floor like a vengeful pink chicken.

"Best surprise ever! I *love* sunflower seeds!" Pinkie declared amidst pecks, hitting the little treats with unerring accuracy.

"The Nightmare Night thing *was* just a costume, right?" Dash asked with a half-smile, looking about the room. It was quite a mess, or would be considered messy by Fluttershy's standards, at least. The pegasus was nowhere in sight.

"Actually, you know, let's go to Applejack's place instead," Rainbow Dash suggested, turning around. She knew they'd be together. In fact, that was what she was counting on. If they weren't here, then they would be over at the apple farm. Pinkie would see.

"Huh? Why?"

Pinkie's question was no real surprise. Dash had been lucky to avoid any real questions so far, happy to see that the party pony was as bouncy and blissfully ignorant as she could be. She didn't want to have to *explain* that Applejack and Fluttershy were meeting behind their backs and ignoring the rest of them. She wanted Pinkie to see for herself.

"Well, heh. I mean, since we can't find Fluttershy, and we're nearby -" she began, taking the two of them down the path leading away from the cottage.

"Not that, silly! If we're looking for Applejack or Fluttershy, why don't we just head over there?" Pinkie Pie giggled as she caught up, pointing towards the tall grass nearby. When she looked closely, Dash noticed that somepony must have passed through there recently, judging by the flattened grass.

"How in the hay did you..." Dash asked, leaving the half-formed question hanging.

"Well, duh," Pinkie rolled her eyes and then tapped her snout. "I smell apple pie! And apple pie is for picnics. Where there are apples, there's Applejack!"

"I eat apple pie for dinner sometimes," Dash muttered in protest. She was rapidly acquiring a dislike for that one particular fruit, though. Apples were apparently deceitful. Apples ruined friendships for everypony.

A quick hop and a hover confirmed that two ponies were indeed sitting on the far side of the meadow. Her quarry spotted, Rainbow Dash landed again to gallop through the grass as fast as she could, Pinkie right on her tail.

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"Made by myself, matter of fact. I reckon you really mean it when you say you like it, huh," Applejack said, and it really wasn't a question. This was really quite cozy. She couldn't tell why Fluttershy insisted on being so formal about this whole deal, though. This was so much nicer.

Well, she had been *trying* to make it all fancy-like, at any rate. Applejack couldn't help but grin inwardly at the scene that had met her when she arrived. She'd waited outside the door for so long she had begun to suspect Fluttershy might've gotten cold hooves. The familiar doubts had begun seeping back into her mind. She had kept thinking this was a bad idea all through yesterday and up until now.

Watching Fluttershy gratefully dig into the food she'd made, those doubts seemed very distant. Insignificant, even, like stubbing your hoof at your birthday party. There was a simple joy to be had in watching somepony enjoy your cooking and your company. Sure, she got some silly notions into her head at times, but how anypony could ever be mad at Fluttershy for anything was a mystery to Applejack.

"Um, did I say something wrong?" Fluttershy asked, looking up at her. The poor pegasus had frozen in the middle of reaching for the sauce, apparently worried about the sudden silence.

Why Fluttershy was so timid when she was one of the strongest ponies Applejack knew, that was another such mystery. She smiled at her friend and shook her head. "Not a thing, sugarcube. Ah was just thinking."

"Oh. Okay," Fluttershy said, nodding in understanding before adding, much more quietly. "This is very nice. Thank you, Applejack."

"And that there was what Ah was thinking just now, matter of fact," the farmpony chuckled in response. She was instantly rewarded with a smile from Fluttershy. Seeing her like this, calm and untroubled, filled Applejack with a sense of peace that reminded her of a the soft afterglow of an applebuck season come and went.

"Really?" came the reply from the demure yellow pony. Her face half obscured by her mane. Her smile was well reflected in the one eye Applejack could see. "You're having a good time, too?"

"Ah ain't tired of apples just yet," Applejack grinned. "Besides, Ah get far too caught up in farmwork sometimes. Not there's anything wrong with keeping busy with honest work. Ah ain't got no regrets. Just saying, well, maybe Ah needed this too. Time off."

Without much more to say on the subject, Applejack got up and set about cleaning up the leftovers. Fluttershy looked like she was about to rise and help, but Applejack shook her head, relishing the simple task. When everything was back in the basket, she briefly paused, realizing she didn't feel like leaving just yet. She let the picnic mat alone for the moment, lying down again a little closer to Fluttershy this time. The yellow pony seemed content.

"You ever been out on a date before, then?" Applejack asked on impulse. The curiosity was genuine; she knew very little of Fluttershy's past, truth be told.

Fluttershy tensed up at the question and blushed furiously. "Um, sort of, almost, maybe? I... don't really know. Sorry."

"Whoa, easy there, sugarcube. You don't have to answer," Applejack said. Despite herself, she had to know, now. It couldn't hurt to give the apple tree *one* more gentle buck. "Uh, but if you don't mind me asking, how in the hay can you *not know*?"

Fluttershy awkwardly scratched a forehoof with the other and looked away. "Um, because it was only really one date. Rainbow Dash heard about a colt who sort of liked me, maybe, a little. Back in the last year of flight school, I mean-

"Hold on, Ah thought Rainbow Dash dropped out?" Applejack interrupted. Fluttershy looked twice as uncomfortable now, but she didn't run or hide. That had to count for something. Applejack put a reassuring hoof on Fluttershy's withers.

"She did, um, quit, sort of, but she still stayed in Cloudsdale, and she helped me get through the classes," Fluttershy muttered. Her eyes were misting over, but she was smiling, and it was all Applejack could do to sit still and let her speak.

"Rainbow Dash has helped me a lot. But um, I guess this wasn't one of those times," Fluttershy admitted. "When she heard this colt had a crush on me, she set us up for a date. She was, um... very enthusiastic about it. About me 'getting out'."

"It didn't really work out," she continued, her ears going flat as her snout pointed to the ground. "Talking was really hard, but I think that was the best part, because he didn't really listen anyway. Um, and he - he sort of, uh," the butter-colored mare struggled with words, sinking down on the ground.

"Take your time sugar. Ah ain't going anywhere," Applejack murmured, leaning closer to the other mare. She was a little surprised when Fluttershy leaned back on her, but she neither minded nor offered comment on it.

"He said some things," Fluttershy said, exhaling slowly. "Things I didn't like. I didn't really want to see him any more after that. That was really easy, because, um, he left."

Applejack rolled her neck and worked her jaw trying to dissipate the sudden surge of anger that went through her. She wanted to ask what he had said or done, but resolved not to press the issue if it made Fluttershy uncomfortable.

"Just up and left?" she asked, instead.

"No. Or, yes. That is, Rainbow Dash told him to go away," Fluttershy sighed, collecting herself. "She's always looking out for me. I just hope he's okay. I - I mean, I'm sure he is. Don't you think?" The pegasus looked almost desperate.

"Sugar, sometimes ponies do stupid stuff and just need a buck to the head, no way around it." Applejack snorted.

"I don't think anypony deserves getting bucked in the head," Fluttershy quietly remarked.

"It's a figure of speech, sort of. That's what you call 'em, right?"

"Oh but it really wasn't. Not for him."

"Aha," Applejack said. She had to turn away to hide her brief grin. Unlike Fluttershy, she had no problems enjoying the thought of Rainbow Dash roughing up a rude suitor who deserved it. It was a ridiculous thought of course. Without any idea what had actually happened or been said, there was no telling if had been justified. It just didn't matter compared to the fact that he'd been sent packing. She had no idea what to think of that.

"Um, so, what about you? If you don't mind me asking, I mean. You don't have to answer," Fluttershy said after clearing her throat. It wasn't very subtle as far as topic changes went.

"Nah," Applejack said with a shrug. "Never came up much. Ah think Caramel was sweet on me for a while some years back. At least, Big Mac thought so. Ah told him what a bunch of hooey that was and sent Caramel to work on the other side of the farm next harvest."

"Not your, um, *type*?" Fluttershy asked, the last word spoken with some trepidation.

"Sure? Maybe?" Applejack laughed. "Like Ah told you, ain't put much thought into it. Wanna share the last bottle of apple juice? Ah brought an extra."

Fluttershy nodded and smiled. "I would love to."

A comfortable sort of silence settled over the two ponies as they sat together, sharing small sips of lukewarm apple juice. It was really quite unlike anything else Applejack had ever experienced, simple as though it was. At the dinner table back at the farm, there was always something to be said, and if there wasn't, Apple Bloom would not let silence reign for long. Even with her other friends, there was always the expectancy of a topic in the air unless they were particularly tired or some such.

Silence, to Applejack, was a thing tied to solitude. It belonged to the moments when she sat in the shadow of an apple tree relishing a job well done. Silence was a rare and almost curious thing that visited her when she wanted to reflect on the day that lay behind her. Or better yet, it descended upon her as the only company she had when she *didn't* want to think.

Yet here she sat with Fluttershy, feeling utterly at ease. The silence did not so much hang between the two ponies as it casually reclined on the white-and-red checkered picnic mat, sharing the bottle of apple juice with them. It felt almost unkind to ruin it, but the sun was almost halfway across the horizon now. Applejack reached up with a foreleg to rub her eyes.

"Ah think Ah best start moving soon if Ah'm gonna help with dinner," Applejack said, her voice sounding all too loud even to her own ears. Fluttershy stirred. Apparently she'd fallen asleep leaning on Applejack. How had she not noticed?

"Hm? Sorry, I think I, um, closed my eyes," Fluttershy mumbled, blinking to try to clear her eyes. Her mane was a mess, or would be considered thus by Rarity's standards, and the sleepy pegasus had a little bit of apple pie on her cheek. Applejack couldn't bring herself to point that out.

Nor could she make herself repeat her own words. "Ah was saying nothing, sugarcube. Nothing at all. Go back to sleep," Applejack murmured. She could give it another half-hour. The heat was a little less oppressive now, and the wind had picked up ever so slightly. Big Mac was always complaining that she never took any time off anyways. She could cash in on that now and watch the sea of greens, yellows, and pink.

The pink was new. Or rather, it was unexpected. Applejack's spotted not one, but two ponies making their way through the grass towards her and Fluttershy. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash were galloping - and bouncing - full tilt. Applejack gently nudged Fluttershy awake again.

"Sugar? Pinkie and Rainbow Dash are, uh, coming to visit," Applejack said, a little uncertain of what was going on. Two of the group of friends approaching another pair? Usually nothing was weird about that, but today, it was kind of different.

She still remembered her confusing little spat with Rainbow Dash yesterday. Applejack's mood plummeted as the newcomers drew nearer and she spotted the cyan mare's face. She had that all-too-familiar sneer that meant impending conflict. Somehow Applejack doubted she was about to be challenged to a hoof-wrastle.

"Hi guys!" Pinkie chirped as the new arrivals stopped just short of the edge of the blanket. "What's up?"

"Oh, hi Pinkie Pie, hi Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy said, covering her mouth as she yawned. "It's nice to see you."

"Howdy," Applejack said, nodding.

"So this is where you're hiding, huh?" Rainbow Dash said with a huff. Fluttershy's lazy smile slowly vanished at her tone, and Applejack sighed inwardly. More of this, whatever it was.

"I - um, I'm sorry?" Fluttershy said.

Rainbow Dash ignored her, rounding on Applejack. The farm mare had expected as much, and had to work hard to remain lying on the ground. She would not rise to the bait, literally or otherwise. Rainbow Dash got under her skin all too easily, but she would not let that happen today.

"Oh, like I don't see what's happening," Dash said, rolling her eyes. "Sneaking off just to hang with Fluttershy like this, all alone? Do you think you *own* her? Well, newsflash, she doesn't belong to *anypony*." Her voice had risen steadily, cracking a little on that final word.

It was no use. Applejack slowly rose up on all fours and leaned closer to Rainbow Dash's face whilst narrowing her eyes. "A'course not, and Ah fail to see how that's your dang business, then," she retorted.

Whatever anger Dash had been building was gone in an instant. The pegasus dismissed her by suddenly turning around to face the perplexed pink pony she had brought along.

"See what I mean?" Dash implored. "Have *you* seen Fluttershy lately? No? I didn't think so! This is totally why! It's just *Applesnack* and Fluttershy now! Just the two of them!" she implored, ignoring the fact that Pinkie nodded an affirmative to her second question.

"Uh-huh," Pinkie replied, breaking into a broad grin as she bounced on the spot. "And I think it's *great!*"

Rainbow Dash stared, jaw hanging open and eyes wide, frozen for a moment.

"Um, Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy said, trying to catch Dash's attention, but to no avail.

"You're taking *their* side? Wait, let me guess, you're hanging out with them, too? This is all just a huge prank, huh? A joke? Let's make fun of the Dash?" Rainbow asked, incredulous. "Well it's *not funny!*"

"No Dashie, you silly -" Pinkie began to say, smiling as brightly as ever, but she was cut off when Dash jammed a forehoof in the party pony's mouth and snarled.

"Just don't. *Not*. Cool," she said. She launched herself skywards without a backwards glance, disappearing in the slowly darkening afternoon sky. Three stunned ponies watched her go until it was impossible to make out her shape against the blue backdrop above.

Applejack's first instinct was to check on Fluttershy. The yellow pony had not moved an inch, and was still staring off in the direction Dash had disappeared off to, face blank. Anger warred with confusion in Applejack's head, neither emotion giving any ground.

"Huh, I think she really *did* lie to me," Pinkie Pie said, rubbing her chin with a hoof. "She *does* totally need a hug, but if she doesn't want it, you can have it! No sense in letting hugs go to waste," she declared, bouncing over to throw her forelegs around Fluttershy and Applejack both.

"You don't know what that was about, either?" Applejack asked, awkwardly patting Pinkie on the back with a hoof. Hugs were, in fact, the last thing on her mind now.

"Nopey-dopey!" Pinkie shrugged. "She's been a mopey-pony all day, but don't let that ruin your date. You guys are really cute together!"

To her surprise, Applejack felt her face heat up a little. She was utterly unable and unwilling to keep from smiling.

"That obvious, huh? Well -" she started to say.

"Oh, we're not really -" Fluttershy said at the exact same time.

Applejack looked at Fluttershy, and the pegasus looked straight back. It was easy to imagine her own face was a perfect mirror of Fluttershy's confused expression, and for a few long seconds, neither of them spoke.

"OooooOOoo," Pinkie voiced, her mouth forming a perfect circle as she leaned closer. Applejack extended a hoof to gently push her away.

"D'you think maybe we could have a little bit of privacy? Don't you have, uh, some, muffins to bake or something? This sure is a *great* day to be baking muffins, ain't it?" Applejack asked in her best salesmare voice.

"Oh no, that's okay!" Pinkie chirped, sitting down in the middle of the now-dishevelled picnic blanket. "I took the day off to hang with Rainbow Dash. I got all evening free to watch you two lovebirds!"

"Um, I thought this wasn't a date," Fluttershy quietly remarked.

"Pinkie." Applejack sighed.

"Aw fine," Pinkie Pie said with a pout. The party pony hopped over to bump snouts with Fluttershy. "You two fillies play nice! I'm gonna go bake sunflower cupcakes for Dashie to cheer her up! No pony can stay frowny in the face of sunflower cupcakes."

Applejack tapped a hoof on the ground and patiently waited as the energetic pink mare disappeared in the general direction of Ponyville. She turned to sit facing Fluttershy the very second she thought Pinkie was out of earshot. Fluttershy would not meet her eyes.

"Okay, sugar. Shoot. How's this not a date?" Applejack asked, simply.

"Um, you *said* it wasn't, I'm sorry, I guess I must have misunderstood. Sorry," Fluttershy whispered, peering at her hooves. Her ears were flat back against her head and her wings tight against her body.

Closing her eyes and thinking back, Applejack couldn't for the life of her remember the exact words she had used earlier, but she remembered the sentiment she'd tried to get across. A lot of things suddenly made sense, now.

"Fluttershy, Ah was saying that Ah thought you were fussing too much about this *being* a date, that's all. Ah don't need no fancy saddles or dresses, consarn it. It's about you and me, ain't it?" she explained, but if anything, the pegasus mare looked even more dejected.

"I'm a mess," Fluttershy muttered, resting her head on her forehooves. "I look horrible, and then I fell asleep, being all boring and uninteresting."

Applejack snorted and nudged Fluttershy. "You look just fine, and Ah've had a real good time, sugarcube."

"Until Rainbow Dash came by," Fluttershy said, inconsolable. "She knows and she hates me. Or maybe she just thinks I'm a bad friend for not having time for her. She's right, you know."

"Oh that's a load of horseapples," Applejack retorted, getting up. "She was angry with me, not you, and Ah don't know if it's because she 'knows' and don't like it, or if she just got some other foolish notion into that feather-brain of hers. Ah don't care which. Ah won't stand for it either way, and Ah certainly won't let it come down and hurt you."

Applejack was very aware that somewhere deep inside of her there burned a bright flame, a desire to protect those she loved and called kin or friend. She was surprised at how intensely she burned for Fluttershy right now, even if she knew it was ridiculous - Dash would never truly want to hurt either of them. It wasn't in her nature, and she was a friend, too.

What she had expected, however, was some reaction to her words. Perhaps appreciation, or at least acknowledgement? Instead, Fluttershy's mood only seemed to darken further.

"No. You're right. It's not about me. She didn't say a single word to me," Fluttershy quietly commented, once more training her eyes on the horizon, towards Ponyville.

"No, she -" Applejack started, but whatever she intended to say evaporated before she could give it voice. Rainbow Dash had ignored Fluttershy, and she reckoned that must feel terrible. The yellow mare was notoriously quiet and soft-spoken, but acting like she wasn't there at all was just downright disrespectful, even if she'd never complain about it.

She herself had ignored Fluttershy when she asked Pinkie to leave, too. It had been obvious that the pegasus had no problems with having an extra pony present, but she'd never stopped to consider that. How was she any better, then?

Applejack doubted Fluttershy thought about it in the same way. Most likely, she was worrying about Rainbow Dash right now, and any possible slight passed right through the empathic and kind mare. Whether or not Fluttershy chose to take offense was simply utterly irrelevant to Applejack. She'd wronged her.

"Sugar, why don't *you* pick the spot for our next date?" Applejack said.

"Next... date?" Fluttershy repeated, slowly, *finally* looking back up at Applejack. It looked like she wanted to smile so very badly, but she didn't quite dare. The farmpony felt a stab of pain at how surprised she sounded, but it was eclipsed by the sheer relief of meeting her eyes. It was a little frightening how good it felt to see those shimmering pools of blue again.

"Ah meant it when Ah said Ah had a good time, so yeah, sure," Applejack said with a shrug. She hoped the gesture was as nonchalant as it looked in her mind. "That gonna be a problem? If you don't want -"

"No! I mean yes! Um, please. Oh my goodness, if - if you still want to, I -" Fluttershy stammered, awkwardly furling her wings after they'd flared. "Y-you want me to pick the place?"

Applejack nodded. "You call the shots, sugar. Name the place, name the time and tell me if Ah should dress fancy. Oh, and you're paying." She grinned at that last bit, and was happy to see that Fluttershy seemed to liven up a little at this, too.

"You don't have to, I mean, I'm sure we can find someplace we both want to go," Fluttershy suggested.

"No way, no how, sugar. You're in the saddle now, no turning back!" Applejack concluded, walking over to one of the edges of the picnic blanket. "Now help me get this wrapped up neat, will you?"

Fluttershy obliged without a word, and it took the two of them mere minutes to tidy up the site of their little picnic. Soon enough, the pair left behind the growing shadow of the nearby Everfree forest, the basket safely balanced on Applejack's back. All seemed well in the farmpony's world, for once. Well, if they could figure out what the hay was going on with Rainbow Dash.

"Thank you."

Applejack wasn't quite sure Fluttershy had spoken at all, or if she'd imagined it. She stole a glance back at the other mare who was following her through the rustling grass. "Uh, beg pardon?"

"Um, I mean, for letting me take you out. It's probably the nicest thing anypony has ever done for me," Fluttershy explained, her cheeks tinged with red.

It was harder than Applejack thought, finding an answer or a comeback to that. Part of her wanted to say "no problem", but it felt wrong. Insufficient. Another part of her wanted to chastise Fluttershy for suggesting that she was doing her a favor. It was frightening, and perhaps a little bit exhilarating - realizing she had no idea what she was feeling. The farmpony simply smiled back at her friend.

It was remarkable how hard it was to be sneaky when there were no clouds to hide on. Half of the reason why Rainbow Dash left a smattering of clouds in the sky even on days scheduled to be "sunny" was because they were convenient for *her*. Need a nap? Find a cloud. Need to impress somepony? Kick a cloud. Trying to get hard evidence of certain farmponies being no- good friend-hogging apple -*applesmackers*?

Dash scowled. *Find a cloud*. The only cloud in the sky today was her own cloudhome, and she'd spent too much of the past few days moping in there, flipping through old magazines. It was just as well, really - she had half a mind to kick asunder any clouds she spotted right now. There was always the chance that they might rain on Applesnack's precious little crops.

The crops themselves weren't so bad, of course. Not as bad as the deceitful apple-flank who grew them. No, the crops were useful as camouflage. Enough waiting. Today, it was time for *action*. Rainbow Dash readjusted the yellow bandanna she wore to blend in with her surroundings, adding another piece of cornstalk to the bouquet atop her head before she peered back over the fence to observe her target.

Rainbow Dash had no real idea what actual farming was like beyond bucking apple trees, but today apparently began with watering some rows of strawberries planted by the side of the farmhouse. The tranquil, dopey grin Applesmack wore in place of her habitual smile must be part of some sort of ritual. Dash had heard that some ponies sang to their plants, and Appleback probably did that too. Still, she seemed almost *too* happy as she kept this up for the better part of half an hour.

Dash's legs were cramping up from sitting still, and her wings itched. This was *boring*. She already knew what she needed to know, really. Fluttershy had replaced her with Applesack, and the two of them were trying to split the six friends apart. All that remained was to find some hard evidence with which to convince the *others*. Pinkie was too, too... too *Pinkie Pie* to even understand, but Twilight and Rarity wouldn't be able to deny *evidence*.

Evidence was another one of those tricky words though. She didn't have a camera, and she doubted that *Ampleflank* was about to write a letter for her to steal, detailing exactly what she was up to. That would be too simple.

In the stories with the awesome guardponies, evidence could be anything: a shoe, a half-eaten daffodil sandwich, a scrap of cloth would fix that. Everything was fair game as long as it was "connected to the case". Dash wasn't quite sure how anything on the farm would take the magical journey from item to evidence, but if it happened, she would be there to catch it.

Applesplat did not seem very concerned with generating evidence, however. Having watered the strawberries and some of the other minor crops that were small enough that it

could be done by hoof, she set course for the nearby barn. Dash was losing her quarry. She'd have to pass over the farmyard to follow, but her corncob-bandanna would look laughably out of place over there. She needed to update her disguise, *fast*.

Think, Rainbow Dash. You can figure this out. What do we have to work with here? Fence, corn, more corn, basket of - oh yes. That never looks out of place here.

With her camouflage improved, Dash tip-hoofed across the exposed farmyard and slipped inside the huge red barn that dominated Sweet Apple Acres. Giving her eyes a moment to forget the brutal shine of the sun outside, she darted behind a pile of hay in the relative darkness of the barn's interior. After a moment's deliberation, she grabbed a hoof-ful of hay with which to improve upon her disguise.

She had barely completed her adjustments when *Applebat* passed her by, already on her way out again, now carrying a large bucket of over-ripe vegetables. Farm life was fast-paced and confusing. Why was she still smiling, though? Why would *Applebat* look so *content* while taking out the trash?

The befuddled pegasus crouched down, her head almost at ground level as she stalked after the unwitting earth pony. She had to get to the bottom of this. Perhaps the treacherous apple-obsessed pony was relishing a job well done, thinking about how she had turned Pinkie Pie against Dash, too? *No. Applefat isn't even smart enough to realize how well her plan is working. Pinkie is the victim, here. Okay, where are we going? Oh horseapples, did she just look at me? No, she couldn't have. Where are we going? All this walking is boring. This small house? What's that smell? Oh, no.*

Pigs. Rainbow Dash wasn't exactly fussy about these things, but the place reeked. She crinkled her nose as she followed Apple- uh, *Applecat* inside. Dash stuck out like a sore hoof in here. *Okay, need to blend in, blend in, how do I blend in, ah-*

The piglet squealed loudly as she tried to pick it up. She froze, squirming pig still in her grip. This was bad. On the other side of the pen, slop bucket grasped in her mouth, *Applejack* was staring straight at her. There was a slight chance that she might have been discovered.

Applejack calmly put the bucket down and sighed. The lazy smile was gone, and that was good. Rainbow Dash had been about to fly over and ask Nurse Redheart if there was any sort of disease that could cause stupid grinning anyway. That the smile had been replaced with a frown was to be expected, but *Applejack* didn't look angry in the least.

"RD? Ah've tried to be patient with you today, but enough is enough. Ah'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for you trying to steal a pig while wearing a corn-and-hay hat and balancing apples on your wings, but Ah will admit that Ah can't figure this one out myself, so you'll have to help me out here a little."

"It's a bandanna," Dash retorted.

"It's made outta my produce, so Ah reckon it belongs as much to me as it does to you, and Ah say it's a darn hat," Applejack snorted.

"I got it from Pinkie for my birthday last year, and she said it was called a bandanna. It's from Neighpon. Shows what you know!"

"It's corn and hay and it *looks* like one of Rarity's silly hats, so it's a *hat*. Now put that darn pig down!"

Rainbow Dash obliged, mostly because the annoying little creature was making so much noise they practically had to shout to hear each other. The offended pink creature immediately *oinked* and ran over to the other side of the pen.

"Now, care to tell me what in the hay is up, sugarcube?" Applejack asked, tilting her head.

It sounded almost innocent. Like she believed it wasn't obvious. Rainbow Dash snorted and folded her wings, letting the apples fall to the ground. "I'm on to you," she said, frowning. "Just because you got Pinkie on your side doesn't mean you've *won*. I'm going to tell Twilight what you're trying to do."

Applejack puffed out her cheeks and closed her eyes. "And what is it Ah'm tryin' to do?"

"I don't know *exactly*," Dash admitted, taking to the air and making for the exit at a leisurely pace. "But I know the plan involves trying to make Fluttershy forget about me, and hey, nice job there, you won that battle, but the war *isn't over!*" *Okay, that was the Coolest. Line. Ever.*

"It ain't nothing like that, consarn it!" Applejack called, galloping after her, but her voice rapidly faded as Dash made her ascent up into the clear blue sky above. Equestria spread out around her, and Applejack became a tiny orange dot far below yelling something about Fluttershy and some varmints.

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The small rock landed just short of the lake with a clatter of stone on stone. Rainbow Dash spat furiously to try to get the taste out of her mouth. Flinging rocks into the lake was really more of a unicorn thing. Kicking the rocks had worked fine, but only until she chipped a hoof.

She was running out of rocks anyway. She'd spent a lot of time out here. The sun was already setting, and what did she have to show for it? Nothing. Truth was, she was fed up with being angry with Applejack. Was she too stupid to understand that she was ruining it for everypony, even if she was just trying to hog Fluttershy all for herself?

Not that she missed either of them, Dash told herself as she resolutely planted her rear on the rocky shore. Her life would be far *better* without deceitful earth ponies and fair-weather pegasus friends.

A soft rumbling sound lazily poked at the silence that had settled. It took a moment before she realized it had actually been her own stomach complaining that she hadn't eaten since yesterday. What she wouldn't give for a muffin right now.

Muffins or cupcakes. Something sweet. Rainbow Dash stared at the waters of the lake as if she could force a bright and cheerful pink pony forth just by thinking about it hard enough. It was extremely unlikely that Pinkie Pie would surface with a tray of tasty treats for her, and that was why she was sure it would work.

Come on, close eyes - wait, no turn around, close eyes then pretend to hope that Pinkie Pie doesn't bother me today. This always works.

Minutes passed, and precisely nothing happened. Not that she minded or missed Pinkie, either. It was her own choice if she didn't want to hang with the Dash. She'd come crawling back. Tomorrow, probably. Or the day after. How long would she wait, anyway? How long were you supposed to wait when these sort of things happened? Twilight probably had a book about it. *Egghead's Guide to Friendship Ruining* or whatever. Applejack would've read it.

Twilight. Now there was a thought. She hadn't talked to Twilight or Rarity about this yet, and here she sat, moping like a foal. No, worse; she wasn't moping. She was *losing*.

Sure, Applejack was *almost* as athletic as her, and perhaps about half as cool, but she was not letting that apple-brain win this one. The Dash did not go down with a fight. She didn't intend on losing, either, but she couldn't win until she *fought*.

This wasn't just about the three of them any more. The friendships of the entire gang were at stake here. She just needed to explain what was going on to Twilight and Rarity, they would side with her, and then this stupid mess would go away. AJ would stop being so stupid, and Dash could have all of her friends back.

Rainbow Dash grinned. That had sounded really cool to her, and cool was half the battle.

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"AJ?"

It was the third time her big brother had called from downstairs. Each time he was a little more urgent and a teensy bit louder, but never quite so loud as to wake Granny Smith from her second afternoon nap. She had heard his baritone voice clearly each and every time, and she wasn't ignoring him. Applejack simply hadn't been *ready*.

Reluctant wasn't supposed to be in her repertoire. Nervous wasn't something that was known to her, and fussing was not a familiar feeling for her. Yet there she was, planted in front of the old hallway mirror. *Enough dilly-dallying. Time to move. Nope, still standing here, AJ. Move consarn it!*

It was stupid as hay. Sure, she may've started seeing Fluttershy in a new light recently, but that didn't at all excuse her being like this.

Being like what? Being utterly contradictory? She's at the door, and you're standing here fussing like a filly. Granny said yesterday that fear doesn't make you weak, but Ah sure as heck ain't feeling high and mighty right now.

Yet the Applejack looking back at her in the apple-framed mirror was smiling a wide and earnest smile. She had tried to frown, just as an experiment, but it just wouldn't stick. She had to shake her head in disbelief at how silly she was being.

"AJ?" Big Macintosh asked for the fourth time. Applejack could see him approach in the mirror, but she made no reply, letting him draw up beside her. "Fluttershy's outside, waiting for ya," he murmured with infinite patience, looking at her through the reflection.

"Ah know," Applejack said.

"Reckon you do, at that," Big Mac replied thoughtfully.

Applejack gave her big brother a sidelong glance. "You wipe that smile off of your face, right now," she threatened with exactly zero conviction. Sure, he wasn't actually smiling, but she knew her brother well enough that she could *hear* his version of amusement in his voice.

"You first," he retorted, smug behind his poker-face.

Having no real reply, Applejack gave him a shove on the shoulder before she turned and headed for the stairs. She knew he was laughing on the inside, and she didn't blame him in the least. Peeking her head into Apple Bloom's room as she passed, she gave her younger sister a wave, receiving a sullen glare in return. Explicitly forbidding her from following and trying to earn her paparazzi cutie mark hadn't been a popular decision, but she'd respect it.

Just like that, she stood before the heavy oaken door she exited every morning right after the sun brought to the first light of day to her farm. It was amazing how she only considered the existence of that door now, probably for the first time in years.

She was seriously thinking about *a door*.

Exasperated with her own nonsense and eager to get on with it, she tore open the door hoping to find Fluttershy waiting on the other side. She had not seen her for two days, and hadn't the faintest clue what she would say to her, but there she was.

Except she wasn't. No pony at all waited for her on the other side of the door. She took a few tentative steps outside, finding Fluttershy giving Winona belly rubs at the other side of the farmyard. Applejack chuckled softly and began making her way over. She'd probably have gotten fed up with waiting in half the time, herself.

"Sorry for making you wait," Applejack said as she drew near. Fluttershy looked up and smiled, rubbing the top of Winona's head. Were it any pony else, Winona would dart back to Applejack at the sight of her, but the pegasus mare's way with animals was downright uncanny.

"Oh, it's not a problem at all, it's my fault - I should have, um," Fluttershy began as she got up. She was wearing a white lily in her mane, and looked absolutely beautiful.

Beautiful? Applejack would never before have used that word about her friend, but she wasn't about to question herself. What she *would* do was stop Fluttershy before she could try to find a scenario in which this non-issue was her own fault.

"Nonsense. Ah knew you were waiting," Applejack said, shaking her head as she cut through. "Ah like the little flower."

"Oh. Um. Thank you?" Fluttershy said, drawing back a little and blushing. "You look really nice, too."

"Ah look the same as always, sugar," Applejack said with a snort and grin.

Fluttershy merely nodded an affirmative at Applejack's words, wearing the cautious beginnings of a smile. It was Applejack's turn to blush.

"Ah, so, anyway! Where're going? You said nothin' too fancy, right? Rarity's not been putting ideas in your head?" Applejack asked with a grin, tilting her head in the general direction of Ponyville. There was only really one path off of Sweet Apple Acres, so she started heading down the road at a slow walk once Fluttershy joined her.

"Oh, I haven't really had the time to talk to Rarity," Fluttershy admitted, looking a little saddened. "I've been so very busy with an extra turtle census - oh, and I had a new family of otters moving in from the river, and they really aren't wanting to play nice at all." The pegasus frowned. "And don't even get me started on all the mess the raccoons have stirred up with the chickens!"

Applejack nodded at that and made a sympathetic noise. She knew too many ponies who thought Fluttershy only lazed about her cottage all day - even some of her friends would

probably laugh at the notion that the quiet mare was a hard worker. Applejack knew better.

Part of Applejack wanted to say what was proper - that if Fluttershy was really busy, they could do this another day. Fluttershy would almost certainly refuse, of course. The odds that Fluttershy would take her up on the offer and postpone their date were slim.

"So how'd you pick the place then?" she heard herself ask instead as they trotted down the road side by side. She had never been very fond of gambling.

"Well, um, it's not entirely true that Rarity didn't help, but I didn't ask her," Fluttershy admitted. She hung her head a little, but Applejack saw her smile. "We talk a lot at the spa, and she mentioned The Gilded Carafe, you know, if I ever found somepony nice."

As much as the last words warmed her heart, it was hard to not feel a little sceptical. It was harder still to hide the uneasiness in her voice. "With it being Rarity, no offense, Ah'm half expecting us to be a little lacking in the fru-fru department for that sorta place. You sure this is a good idea?"

"Oh, she said it was very nice and a little, um, informal? But- oh my goodness, I wouldn't dream of making you go if you didn't want to," Fluttershy said, her words rapidly picking up speed as she herself slowed down. The pegasus looked aghast. "I mean, we can have another picnic just like last time, too. I - I can head back -"

Applejack halted, chewing pensively on her tongue as she turned to face Fluttershy. Panic was slowly spreading across the yellow mare's face.

"Applejack?" Fluttershy tentatively asked, unaware of the gears churning in in the farmpony's brain. Applejack would normally never leave a friend floundering like this, but right now a few pieces of the puzzle were clicking into place up in her head. Fluttershy was anxiously biting her lower lip when Applejack finally found her voice.

"At some point," Applejack said, "you're gonna have to start believing that Ah ain't doing this just to be nice. If Ah used to, if there was a point when Ah did, well, that just ain't the case no more."

It was news to Applejack herself, but there it was. She wasn't doing it for Fluttershy. She was looking forward to this date for *herself*, and she really didn't want anything compromising it. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to go out with Fluttershy and have a nice, intimate evening away from the chores of the farm. More to the point, away from the *lack* of chores of the farm thanks to the impending drought. She was looking forward to it in a way that was new to her, and it wasn't unpleasant at all.

Fluttershy looked up at her and seemed to struggle with words for a moment. She began to say "Thank -", but stopped herself mid-sentence, giving Applejack a sheepish smile as she amended herself in a quiet whisper. "I mean, 'okay'."

"That's more like it," Applejack said with a grin as she set them moving again. Every now and then, she'd feel compelled to glance over at Fluttershy. More than once did she catch the pegasus doing the same, but she was quick to avert her eyes and made no comment. It seemed that no matter what Applejack said and did, there was a hard little core of hesitance that simply would not crack.

The silence held for minutes that felt like hours. It was so incredibly stupid that they would be *more* shy around each other when they were trying to get closer. The same silliness that had been building inside of her all evening seized a hold of Applejack just then, rebelling against this nonsense.

The evening air was almost pleasantly chill compared to the oppressive heat of the day. Suddenly, the tall grass of the nearby fields was all too tempting. She had never really done this with anypony before, but it just felt so darn *right*.

Applejack cut in front of Fluttershy, and upped her pace as she cantered straight off the road and into the sea of belly-high grass that brushed against her in the most delightful way. When she stopped and turned, Fluttershy stood on the road still, watching her from a small distance away.

"Um, where are you going?" came the entirely reasonable question, tinged with obvious nervousness.

Applejack scratched the ground with a hoof. Truth be told, she was a little nervous herself because the simple answer was that she had no idea. It was never about the "where" of it. It wasn't even a clearly defined "what". Sometimes, she was seized by urges, and it was hard for her to understand how anypony could not want to just *run*, sometimes.

If they did, they kept it to themselves - and so did Applejack. She hadn't even told anypony about this except for her brother. It was something she did alone. Usually.

"Ah was thinking of going for a run," she called back, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Because to her, it was. She tossed her mane and swallowed. "Wanna come along?"

It sounded almost pathetically hopeful. She stood there smiling at Fluttershy for a good minute, hoping and wondering. Fluttershy, for her part, stood on the road glancing nervously about every few seconds, her attention torn between Applejack and the nearby Ponyville. The corners of Applejack's mouth had just started to dip when Fluttershy hopped off the road and waded into the field of grass made golden by the sinking sun.

It was all the encouragement Applejack needed to finally let go. She could have sworn her legs were just starting to tremble with suppressed energy, but now she was freed. She reared up on her hindlegs and nickered before bolting off through the grass, grinning at the surprised little squeak from Fluttershy somewhere behind her.

There was nothing but clear, flat fields ahead of her. Only free running as far as she could see. She had meant to start an easy pace, but such plans never lasted. She held her head high and enjoyed the wind in her mane as she galloped through the dry grass that whispered at her passing. The familiar bliss of simply letting herself go was doubled when she heard the soft flapping of wings above her. She slowed her pace just a tiny bit to let Fluttershy land and fall into step at her side, the sound of their rapid hoof-falls intermingling.

If she had feared that Fluttershy would hold her back, she was sorely mistaken. She stole a glance at the pegasus pony galloping next to her, and her smile grew larger still. Fluttershy's head was low and she was focusing on keeping a steady pace. When Applejack turned left, she followed without even looking at her. Words had no place here. Talking would ruin it, and it seemed that Fluttershy understood.

It had been far too long since she let herself loose. She left her worries about the farm back on the road, stamped her concerns into the dirt, and together they ran huge circles around her problems in the fields, leaving them powerless. Every time she and Fluttershy galloped side by side from one field to another, she shed a little more tension, and the world belonged to them.

Applejack had no idea for how long they ran. Time ceased to have any real meaning as they dashed about. She put all of her being into simply enjoying the freedom of the run. Where Fluttershy had worked hard to keep up initially, Applejack found she could up the pace, little by little. Soon she was doing nothing but watch Fluttershy as she ran. Never once did she complain. When she looked at Applejack, it wasn't a nervous glance of askance or a timid look - it was a question of *where next?*

Those glances became rarer and rarer. There was no destination, only the run. It didn't take long for Fluttershy to understand this. When Fluttershy finally began to flag after they had half-circled the outskirts of Ponyville, Applejack herself was starting to get a little tired too; the sun had already given way for the moon and the last rays of daylight were gone. They came to a stop on some wordless and mutual agreement at the edge of Whitetail Woods, both of them breathing hard.

"Oh goodness no," Fluttershy stammered as Applejack immediately began moving again. "Please, no more, I- I can't-"

Applejack chuckled as she trotted small circles around Fluttershy, pausing every now and then to give her legs a good stretch or a shake. "Just making sure Ah ain't gonna feel this in the morning, sugar, that's all."

"Oh," Fluttershy said with a sigh of relief as she hung her head and went back to trying to catch her breath.

As much as she wanted to avoid feeling sore in the morning, it also gave Applejack a great excuse to collect her thoughts. She wasn't a pony prone to blushing, but she knew it

wasn't just exertion that had her flustered at the moment. She offered a silent prayer to Luna that Fluttershy didn't think she was crazy for sharing this - even if she *was*. If she could have a second and a third wish, too, it would be for more evenings like this.

Yet Fluttershy hadn't said a thing, and she didn't seem to mind. Perhaps she was just too tired to protest? No. The pegasus was tired, but it couldn't just be Applejack's imagination - she seemed more at ease. She trotted up to Fluttershy and experimentally nudged her snout with her own.

"Um, what?" Fluttershy asked, scratching her snout-tip with a hoof. "Is there something on my nose?"

Applejack nickered with joy and lay down on the ground, rolling onto her back. Fluttershy hopped back in surprise.

"What?" Applejack asked, grinning as she ground her shoulders into the soil. She always relished the way it scratched itches she never knew she had. "It's just grass and dirt, sugar. Come on down!"

Fluttershy bit her lower lip, but the hesitation was short-lived. Slowly lowering herself down to the ground, she held her wings tightly to her side as she rolled over, her legs flailing a little. Unbalanced, she flopped over on the other side almost immediately, giggling.

"This is really very silly," she said rolling back and forth in the grass, looking a little awkward but no less enthusiastic for it.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Applejack retorted with a laugh. The two soon lay facing each other, both on their sides. Fluttershy stretched her free wing and smiled brightly, finally meeting Applejack's eyes without wavering.

"That was fun," Fluttershy murmured. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly, and she sounded out breath still. Still not a single word of complaint. Applejack could feel her own heartbeats keenly.

"Ah reckon you got more than a little bit of earth pony in you, sugarcube," Applejack said, reaching out to run a hoof through Fluttershy's mane. They were both sweaty and covered in grass, but it mattered exactly none. "You ain't too fussy about stuff that don't matter, and you're made of tougher stuff than anypony gives you credit for. Least of all yourself."

Fluttershy blushed brightly, though there was nowhere to run for the poor prone pony. Applejack felt her own cheeks burning, too, even if it took her a while to understand why. They were earnest words, and could just as easily just have been spoken from a friend to another as encouragement. An innocent compliment, even.

Except that wasn't at all what it had sounded like, nor was it how she had meant it. It was far, far more. She cleared her throat and changed the subject before she could find room for another set of hooves in her mouth.

"Uh, so, hate to ask, but were we s'posed to be at the restaurant at some specific time? Did you have a reservation?" she asked. "If Ah made us miss it, Ah feel plum terrible now."

Fluttershy looked over at the distant lights of Ponyville. Thanks to their run, they were further away from the restaurant than ever. Applejack lay there in silence watching as those bright blue orbs slipped away from the promise of their dinner and came back to meet her own eyes again.

"I don't really think I am all that hungry," Fluttershy said. "I mean, if you are hungry -"

"Ah'm not," Applejack said almost immediately. It was the purest, most innocent lie she had spoken in her entire life. She was famished.

Fluttershy smiled back as she got back up on her hooves. Applejack lay still for a moment longer, watching. The flower that had adorned the pegasus' mane had fallen out somewhere. It probably lay in the fields somewhere, Applejack mused. Was it too soon to reminisce fondly about something that had happened minutes ago? She was about to get up when Fluttershy offered her a hoof.

"Why, thank you kindly, ma'am," Applejack drawled as she accepted the helping hoof, making them both giggle. "What d'you want to do then, if you're not feeling like dinner anymore?"

Making no immediate reply, Fluttershy set off in the direction of Whitetail Woods. Applejack grabbed her hat and followed. In the wake of their maddened evening gallop, the trek to the woods proper seemed little but a short stroll, and soon they were in under the boughs of the forest. Fluttershy led them with determined purpose for a few minutes before she slowed down and put a hoof to her mouth, creeping up on a bush.

"Ah'm not sure I follow," Applejack admitted, raising a brow in puzzlement as Fluttershy cringed and peered over the rim of the greenery she hid behind.

"It's just, if you could lower your voice a teensy bit? Please?" Fluttershy whispered, beckoning her closer. Applejack adjusted her hat nervously as she approached. For Fluttershy, that was a harsh rebuke indeed.

"Pardon," she muttered as sat down on the soft soil and pried a few branches apart to try to see. "What's up?"

Yet again, Fluttershy didn't reply right away, but this time it was because words were redundant, the answer quite obvious. Past the bushes and trees, a small family of foxes

made their home. One larger fox, not much smaller than Winona, sat outside a den keeping watch while three kits were playing.

Watching the little critters here in their own home was odd. It was hard to think of them as thieving little varmints as she watched them jump about trying to pin each other down for playful nips. The smallest of the three wasn't jumping about quite as much as the others, though. Once, after he'd gone for a bite on the tail of one of its larger siblings, the other two ganged up on him.

Applejack had been about to intervene. She was up, ready to burst through the bush to stop them, but Fluttershy put a gentle hoof on her side which arrested her as surely as bonds of iron. At her confused, wordless query, Fluttershy didn't so much as bat an eyelid. The yellow mare sat completely still, calm and quiet, watching.

Over by the den, the grown-up fox had already separated them, and the three kits were playing nice again while the bigger one scanned the bushes for any threats.

"They're just playing. She's clever, and a good mother, that vixen," Fluttershy whispered. She was still watching, transfixed and smiling warmly as she spoke. Applejack, for her part, couldn't take her eyes off Fluttershy. "She came to me when the little cub there got hurt. He's the fox I've been treating."

"So you just come here to watch, then?" Applejack asked, trying to keep quiet. It was amazing to see how comfortable Fluttershy was here. She'd always thought of the cottage as Fluttershy's home, but it wasn't quite so simple, it seemed.

"Oh, I'm not really, um, oh goodness, I don't mean to sneak around. I mean, I usually don't have to," Fluttershy admitted sheepishly. Even as she spoke, a little bird with brilliant red feathers flitted down from a tree to perch on her head. She barely even seemed to notice.

"I just, um. I didn't want to startle them because they don't really know *you*. I'm sorry," Fluttershy said, dropping her eyes as it was her fault while it was really quite sensible.

"Oh," was all Applejack could think to say. Even as she fumbled for more words, Fluttershy's whole face lit up.

"I'll go talk to them," Fluttershy shot in an excited whisper. "I'm sure they'd like to meet you!"

"Uh, no, that's okay sugarcube, I -" Applejack whispered, but Fluttershy had already soundlessly disappeared through the bushes with uncanny grace. She sighed and sat down again, cringing at the noise she was making. Applejack was doing her darnedest to keep quiet, but being around Fluttershy here, she felt clumsy no matter what she did.

She sighed and scratched her snout. It wasn't that she disliked animals, and she was right grateful that Fluttershy had wanted to share this with her, but -

But what? There *was* no real "but". *Out of your element, Applejack? This ain't no competition. Now be a polite guest.*

She poked her head through the bush and watched as Fluttershy approached the family of foxes, immediately getting swarmed by the curious little cubs. Whatever she was saying to the vixen was lost to her, too faint to hear. Before long, Fluttershy beckoned Applejack with a hoof.

"You can come out now if you want," she offered, sitting down next to the vixen by the entrance to the den. The clearing seemed a very different place with her in it, more birds arriving and lining every branch even as she watched. It was a very reluctant Applejack who slipped through the bushes and into plain view. If not for the invitation, she'd have felt like an intruder rather than a guest.

"Uh, hello?" she offered awkwardly, glancing every which way. A few of the birds scattered at that, and the fox cubs were hiding between Fluttershy and their mother, watching curiously. She stopped a short distance away and adjusted her hat. "Ah ain't right sure what to do, frankly."

"Just wait a little," Fluttershy suggested. It was frustratingly vague, but Applejack did as she said. She sat on her rump *waiting*, having no idea what she was actually waiting for. Sitting still doing nothing was nice enough when she was just enjoying the quiet, or - as she had recently realized - sharing a moment with Fluttershy, but all the animals quite frankly made her nervous.

"Um, begging your pardon, but how long am Ah supposed to wait?" Applejack whispered. "Ain't that Ah'm impatient, but..." Her voice trailed off as Fluttershy hushed gently. Applejack's protests died on the inhale when she saw what Fluttershy had been waiting for; the smallest of the fox kits was stalking towards her, body low to the ground. Fluttershy stifled a giggle as she watched with great interest.

"Okay, hi there little varm- er, fox-foal thing," Applejack said, drawing her head back and peering at the cub as it came near. It stopped not half a pony length away from her. "Um, Fluttershy, what's it doing?"

"He wants to play," came the amused reply. "Oh do be careful, won't you?"

"Careful?" Applejack snorted. "What're you -" she started to say, only to yelp in surprise and pull back one of her forehooves as the kit pounced on it. The little fox was lifted off the ground and flipped onto its back, losing its grip. Applejack's breath caught for a moment, but the kit scampered right back up to run in tight circles around her, yipping loudly.

"Uh, sorry. Ah didn't mean to do that," Applejack said, mortified. In hindsight, she was also a little surprised to find she had not been addressing Fluttershy, but the noisy little fox. The rambunctious creature was soon joined by its brothers - or sisters, Applejack

really couldn't tell. Within minutes, she had one of them hanging by her tail and another trying to climb up one of her hindlegs. She had no idea how to handle this.

"Fluttershy?"

The pegasus in question was covering her mouth as she giggled, watching the spectacle, but as she was addressed she quickly sobered up. "Oh, um, sorry Applejack, are you okay? I'm sure I can ask them to stop."

"No, no, it's fine," Applejack immediately retorted when she saw Fluttershy's expression. She swallowed what she'd meant to say quicker than a tankard of apple cider after a long week. "Just, uh, not sure what to do. Ah ain't cut out for this, Ah don't think."

Fluttershy exchanged an incomprehensible glance with the vixen and slowly approached Applejack. The kits were still swarming around her trying to climb up on her and nibbling harmlessly on her legs.

"Do you have to do anything at all?" Fluttershy asked softly. "Maybe you could lie down? Um, if you want to, I mean?"

"Sure?" Applejack said in what was more a question than a statement, lowering herself to the ground. Instantly, she felt the pitter-patter of small paws running up her flank, along her back, and come to rest atop her head. Looking up, she had to cross her eyes to see one of the cubs peeking down at her from the brim of her hat. It was hard not to laugh, but she feared the fox might fall off if she did.

"Why d'you do all this?" she asked, steadying her hat. It was yet another of those questions that just slipped out of her. "Ah mean, ain't saying it's not worth doing," she amended. "Is this what gets you out of bed all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the morning?"

Normally, Fluttershy might have quailed under the spotlight of such a question. Whether she was bolstered by the animals, Applejack or both, the farmpony couldn't tell. Fluttershy simply spread one of her wings and smiled as a trio of little birds landed on her wing's edge.

"I guess, maybe? I haven't given it that much thought, but I think that's it.

"They're my friends, too, you know," Fluttershy added as she moved to lean over the prone Applejack. For a moment, the farmpony idly wondered if she was about to run off with her hat, but all she did was gently help the stranded kit down by grabbing its neckscruff in her teeth. The kits scampered into their den, followed by their mother, leaving the two ponies alone save for a few lingering birds.

"Guess it's a bit like family, huh," Applejack said as she got back up, placing her almost snout to snout with Fluttershy. She didn't mind the closeness at all, except the pegasus pony was frowning and looking at something right past her.

"Is there something in my mane, sugarcube?" Applejack asked with a chuckle.

"Um, actually, yes," Fluttershy retorted with a little blush. "I think you took half the bush with you when you walked through it."

"Oh." Applejack laughed and twisted her head around, but she knew it wouldn't work. Her ponytail shifted over to the other side, making her just laugh even more. "It's no big whoop, sugar. We ain't exactly fit for a gala, us."

"I'll get it," Fluttershy offered, leaning past her to nip the leaves and twigs out of her mane with care. Without any real reason to object, Applejack simply sat still and let her do it. The fact that it landed her in the thick of Fluttershy's mane wasn't such a terrible fate, either.

Truth be told, she hadn't often had other ponies tend to her mane before. It was pleasant and peaceful, and she thought she might just fall asleep sitting there like that up until she heard a faint voice far in the distance.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, cocking her head a bit and turning an ear. Fluttershy made a curious noise and a little *eep* when Applejack's head bumped into hers. The pegasus gave her a questioning look as she pulled back and spat out a mouthful of leaves.

When nothing else happened, Applejack gave a little mental shrug and resigned herself to Fluttershy's ministrations again, something the latter was more than happy to do, tranquility once more settling in the small forest clearing.

Only to be rudely shattered when Rainbow Dash thundered through the canopy, sending branches and birds flying every which way and destroying the peace quite thoroughly. Fluttershy froze almost completely, slowly turning around to see what was going on even as she stood half-buried in Applejack's mane. Rainbow Dash was advancing upon them, branches and leaves raining down around her.

Somewhere nearby, Applejack could hear multiple sets of hooves approaching and somepony calling Dash's name, but the pegasus' more immediate presence drowned them out.

"Okay, your jig's up, Applejack! I got you red-hooved -" Rainbow started to say as she stalked towards them.

The worst part was, Applejack couldn't really bring herself to be surprised. She wasn't a pessimist. At worst, she was a realist, but even though she hadn't really expected this, she felt she *should* have, and it made her weary. All the little things she'd shoved to the back

of her mind during her evening with Fluttershy flooded back to join her in the present. The spell was broken. She wearily turned to face Dash.

Rainbow Dash stood still, her mouth hanging open as looked at the two entangled ponies. Applejack couldn't even muster up a smile at how she and Fluttershy must look, but if nothing else, the colorful pegasus finally seemed to get it. Her eyes were wide, first with shock, then with fear.

"Oh buck *me*," she breathed. "You guys were - oh." Her voice trailed off as she furled her wings and shrank a bit. "I thought..."

"Or how about this, Rainbow Dash, you *didn't*," Applejack snorted, but she couldn't stop at exasperation. She tried pulling the brakes, but her anger just accelerated and made her whole body shake. By the sun, she loved her friend, but this was really *too much*. "You don't *ever* think, do you?" she spat.

Rainbow Dash had her ears flat against her head. Never had Applejack thought she would see Dash so cowed, and while she heard the warning bells in her head, she couldn't make herself heed them. The ever-louder hoof-falls similarly went ignored.

"Ah tried telling you, but for all your *talk*, you never stop to *listen*," Applejack went on. She took a step towards Dash, leaving Fluttershy behind. "If you have a problem with this, then just say so, and if you don't?" She trembled. "Then go. Away."

Dash's mouth opened and closed soundlessly once, twice, and she looked completely lost.

"And *now* you ain't got anything to say? That's rich," Applejack said. She was fishing for more choice words to hurl at Rainbow Dash when her view was blocked by pink and yellow. Fluttershy stood between them, looking straight at her. She seemed calm, and in here eyes there was no trace of anger, only suffering.

"Please, Applejack, that's enough," she implored.

"I - I gotta go," Rainbow Dash stammered. Applejack could only watch as the pegasus looked away and took off, tore through the canopy in an explosion of leaves.

"Yeah, fly away. That'll help," Applejack muttered.

"I said that's *enough*," Fluttershy said. Applejack drew back, looking at the strange pegasus that stood where Fluttershy once had been. Her eyes had misted over, but there was a strength in her voice that was both terrible and heartrendingly beautiful: an iron resolve. The pegasus' stance was wide and low, and had she not not looked so sad, it might have been threatening.

"You're gonna take her side in this, of course," Applejack retorted, rolling her eyes. "Oldest friend and all that." It was so deliciously simple to just be *angry*.

Fluttershy made no reply, regarding her silently. Her lower jaw trembled, and tears lined her eyes, but it was all too easy to imagine she was defending the image of her departed foalhood friend behind her.

"Does Rainbow Dash know you stole her Element?" Applejack chuckled bitterly. "Seems Ah got Loyalty right in front of me here."

"I'm *not* taking sides," Fluttershy whispered as the tears began to fall, obviously trying to keep her voice under control. It wasn't going very well. "So please stop trying to make me."

And check. She'd made the pony she thought she might love, cry. *You are a class act sometimes, Applejack. Go home before you can ruin anything else tonight, you complete hay-brain.*

"Ah'm heading home," she heard herself say as her body finally listened to her brain. It felt like the only sensible decision she'd made in the past few minutes. Fluttershy whispered something in return, but it was lost to Applejack as she walked off in the direction they'd come from.

She hadn't taken more than four steps before Rarity and Twilight burst through the bushes looking like they'd just finished the the last stretch of the annual Running of the Leaves. Twilight stopped right before they collided, wide-eyed and breathing hard. Rarity, her normally-perfect mane askew, lay straight down on the ground. Applejack had no idea what was going on, and she simply didn't have the capacity to care right now.

"Ladies," she muttered as she passed them by before either of them recovered enough to speak. She just wanted to go home to her own bed to think on exactly how she just blew it.

"Ah'm heading home," Applejack said, turning and walking off without a backwards glance. Fluttershy swallowed and watched, her vision blurred. However dearly she wanted to follow, she simply didn't dare. She regretted everything and nothing all at once, the last few moments replaying over and over in her head. It was hard enough to keep breathing; thinking was nigh impossible.

It seemed to Fluttershy that Applejack's stance had changed at the end, her entire body suddenly acquiring a slouch. An immaterial *something* left her, and she suddenly seemed tired. The anger was all spent. As much as she hated it when her friends fought, Fluttershy wasn't sure if this was an improvement. Was Applejack disappointed in her? Did she hate her? Was this it?

"Please don't leave," she whispered, slowly sinking down to the ground. She thought for a second that she would be left alone with her animal friends. In fact, she almost came to appreciate the promise of solitude right before Twilight and Rarity crashed through the bushes to deny her even that. Applejack did not even pause, passing them by with a mutter. Just like that, Applejack was gone.

"What in the wide world of Equestria is going *on* here?" Twilight asked, exhausted and clearly exasperated. She cast a glance back over her flank at the much-abused bushes.

"Hush," Rarity said, immediately trotting over to Fluttershy. The usually impeccable fashionista was in quite a state, but she immediately lay down in front of Fluttershy, nosing the top of her head. "What's wrong, dear?"

Fluttershy tried to cry. She tried with all her might to just let it happen and lean on Rarity for comfort, but it wouldn't come. Her throat was tight, and she felt cold in places inside of her she couldn't even identify. It all gathered somewhere in her, but found no release. Better to pretend everything was okay, then.

"H-hi girls. What are you doing here?" she asked. Trying to smile hurt, and she was fully aware of how pathetic she must look. Her voice quavered, too. It wasn't that she was trying to be rude to Rarity by ignoring her; the question was just too big for her to think about. Rarity brought up a hoof to wipe her tears.

Twilight approached, equally dishevelled and wearing a sceptical frown. She was still glancing about the area. "Before we get to that - Rarity? Do you think one of us should go after Applejack?"

"I am absolutely *not* going to leave the poor thing here!" Rarity snapped, making Fluttershy cringe. She did not think she could take much more anger, no matter who it was directed at.

"Right. We, um, tracked you down," Twilight began, her attention flitting between Fluttershy and Rarity. She looked decidedly uncomfortable, and while she couldn't see her face, the pegasus could *feel* how uneasy Rarity was, too. Something about the way she was grooming her, the light of her horn flickering a bit.

"For the record, I didn't think I would ever have to use the spell, and I'm not happy about it," Twilight interjected, interrupting herself. Fluttershy just shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Please Twilight," Fluttershy pleaded, desperate even though she wasn't sure what she was begging for. As much as she loved her friends, she just wanted to know how to fix this.

"Right. Rainbow came by earlier. She was upset -"

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," Rarity muttered.

"She demanded to know where you and Applejack were. You weren't at the cottage, and she'd checked the farm, but Big Macintosh wouldn't say where you were. He told her you had headed out together, and that was Applejack's own business." Twilight frowned as if she were analyzing her own words even as she spoke. Fluttershy listened numbly, her tears long since dried.

"So she asked me if I didn't have a spell or something for this," Twilight said, hanging her head. "I guess I should have lied, but I didn't. I said I did, and I wasn't going to use it. Celestia taught me how to pull on our connection as bearers of the elements, but, well -"

"It's downright rude, is what it is," Rarity huffed, still working to get Fluttershy's mane and coat free of flora. "It's an invasion of privacy, and if you ask me, you never should have cast it."

"Well, unlike some, *Rainbow* doesn't really have a habit of being dramatic," Twilight replied, rolling her eyes. The fashionista cleared her throat delicately.

"Anyway, I did cast it. I followed the residual elements of the, well, *Elements*, using ley-line deduction in a pattern -"

"So you cast the spell," Rarity primly suggested.

"Right, cast the spell because she wouldn't say another word until I told her where you were. She was out the door right after, saying she was 'doing this for all of us'. I have no idea what's going on, we just followed her," Twilight finished, puffing out her cheeks and giving Fluttershy a cautious smile. "Your turn. Where's Rainbow Dash?"

"And what in Equestria were you doing here with Applejack, dear? Are you okay? What happened with Applejack, anyway?" Rarity asked. The soft glow of her horn had faded, and she looked at Fluttershy, full of concern.

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Fluttershy stared at her bedroom wall, still feeling terribly numb. She was half tempted to touch a hoof to a foreleg just to see if she had any feeling in them at all, but she didn't want to disturb the neatly laid duvet.

Rarity and Twilight had not only followed her home, but taken her inside, too. She lied and told them she was fine time and again, but it hadn't worked. The unicorns had made her a simple salad in her own kitchen and forced her to eat as she explained what had happened. All done, Rarity had insisted on tucking her in before leaving, and there she lay now, thinking.

They had listened patiently as Fluttershy told them of the past week, and they were both thrilled at the news. Rarity assured her that everything would be fine in the end - and why not? Ponies got into fights every now and then, and then they made up and everything was okay again, all nice just like that. With some, like Applejack and Rainbow Dash, it sometimes seemed that fighting was all they ever did, but they were great friends nevertheless.

Except they didn't usually have Fluttershy doing her best to break them apart. She couldn't remember the last time she had been in a real fight or an argument, and now she wasn't just *in* one, she was the problem, the cause, and the wedge between two other ponies; she was a *terrible* pony.

There was already a gaping chasm somewhere inside of her because she had hurt Applejack, even though she knew she couldn't have done anything different. That was what made it twice as terrible. Fluttershy had stared at the exact same knothole in the wall for over an hour now, slowly realizing she would have done the same if she could go back and do it again. Did Applejack know that? Was that why Applejack had left? Fluttershy would never let herself be made to choose like that, and Applejack had seen it, and now she hated her.

And then there was Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy had known her long enough that she understood her; her friend was hurting even though she would never admit it. Fluttershy bit her lower lip. It was an unbearable thought.

Unlike Fluttershy, Dash was strong, though. Perhaps she and Applejack *would* make up, eventually. They usually did. The sensible thing to do would be leaving it alone. *Let Applejack and Rainbow Dash talk it over, and stay away. You've done enough, silly Fluttershy. You just make everything worse. You're hurting Applejack, and you'll just figure a way to hurt Rainbow Dash too.*

But it was her *fault*.

Fluttershy slipped out from under her covers and alighted on the floor as quietly as she could so as to not wake up Angel. The little bunny had dragged his basket up to her

bedroom and put it next to her bed. It was impossible to resist giving him a little nuzzle before she headed downstairs. Thankfully he didn't wake up. He'd try to stop her, though she knew she wouldn't be cowed by harsh glares or soft little kicks this time.

Rarely did Fluttershy wander her cottage at night. Unless she had to tend to an injured animal, she much preferred to sleep the night through for fear of waking up all the creatures that made their home in and around her house. Tonight, though, she had to brave the threat of inconveniencing her friends. On gentle hooves, she snuck down the stairs and through her living room, offering a reassuring smile in response to the curious looks she got from a pair of bats.

Just like that, she was out. She was *doing* something. Enough with hiding, hoping and waiting. It just wouldn't work. But what, then? What could she possibly do? Her rump found the hard stone path outside her door.

She needed to see Rainbow Dash, but she also needed to apologize to Applejack. Both of those were *selfish* impulses, though. What she needed to do was make *them* be friends again, but how? She sat there for a while, staring at the apple trees of Sweet Apple Acres that hid in the shadows of night. For a moment she thought she could see the gleam of a light somewhere in the distant farmyard, but when she blinked, it was gone.

Fluttershy sighed and turned around. It wouldn't do to sit there dreaming now. She cast her eyes over to the Everfree - a far gloomier sight in the silver moonlight, but more fitting for the moment. The clouds hung low over the forest, denying the gloomy woodland even the gentle illumination of the moon.

Clouds. Fluttershy's eyes widened, and she even dared smile a little as a plan formed in her mind. Applejack had told her that she thought Fluttershy was a bit like an earth pony. It had been meant as praise, and just thinking of those words filled Fluttershy with pure happiness. Her wings spread of their own accord as she relived that shared moment just one more time.

She'd always loved the ground and all its wonderful creatures, and yesterday Applejack had shown her another side to it. Nature was not only there to be observed, but to be enjoyed first-hoof. While she still felt a little stiff from the run, it was a sweet pain that came with vivid and beautiful memories. She recalled the rhythm of their hoof-falls. She could still feel the unspoken bond that led them ever on as the sun set. The scents of the dirt and grass, and the feel of the ground against her body, it all lingered.

Perhaps she *was* a little like an earth pony, then. She would treasure that moment forever no matter what happened. If she was to fix this, though, she had to be a pegasus tonight. With only a token amount of hesitation, she took off and headed for the Everfree forest, soaring high above her meadow.

It was hard to keep her wings going as she drew closer to the ominous clouds that carpeted the air above the Everfree. Her brain had a million good reasons why she should

turn back and threatened to send her careening to the ground - all to no avail. For better or for worse, she was getting better at simply not listening to herself. *I can't hear you. Um, or me. Sorry. But I really have to do this.*

Fluttershy would gather up the clouds in the dark of the night and fly them over to Sweet Apple Acres to save Applejack's crops - only to tell her that Rainbow Dash had done it. Twilight Sparkle had told her that the best plans were those that achieved maximum effect with the least amount of steps. This plan really only had one big step. It *had* to work.

Despite herself, Fluttershy stopped mid-air, hovering above the clouds. An expanse of dark grey covered the night-darkened green below. There was really a lot of cloud-stuff - and was it just her, or were they getting darker even as she watched? She hadn't done anything like this in a very long time, and it was hard to figure out where to begin.

"Um, so, first, I don't need *all* these clouds," she muttered to herself, letting her eyes roam over the cloudscape below. "I just need a teensy-weensy bit-"

There was a flash of color in the corner of her eye. Fluttershy squeaked and lost a bit of height before she remembered to keep flying. The very second she had recovered, the expanse of ever-darkening grey rumbled ominously. Her heart was struggling to leap out of her chest and images of her bed crept to the fore of her mind. More specifically, she thought of that special safe spot *under* her bed.

Another flash of color. A streak filled with all-too-familiar colors shot up through the clouds and back down again like a breaching whale given the grace of a hummingbird.

"Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy called, confused. She repeated herself, louder, but was drowned out by a sudden peal of thunder that made her cringe. No reply came except for a steadily growing rumble from below. Fluttershy hurried over to hover above where she last saw the rainbow contrail dive. When nothing happened, she couldn't help but fidget.

Okay, okay, you're not going home, Fluttershy. Think of nice things. Birds. Bees. Honey badgers on good days. Tortoises. Tomatoes - ohgoodness what was that noise?

"Fluttershy?"

The yellow pegasus mare nearly fell out of the sky in surprise for the third time today, but this time she was caught in a pair of strong hooves that gripped her tight. Rainbow Dash held them both aloft and stared at Fluttershy with eyes wide. Even though they were snout to snout, it was hard to hear her over the cacophonous roar below.

"What the hay are *you* doing here?" Dash asked, suddenly letting go of her. Fluttershy wobbled a little before she found her rhythm again.

"I - I was going to bring some clouds over to the farm," Fluttershy stammered. She glanced down at the roiling darkness.

"You?" Dash snorted and shook her head dismissively. "Yeah, uh, this is probably a little too dangerous for you. I mean, no offense, but you're not exactly weather patrol material."

She was right, of course. Fluttershy knew it was a bad idea. It was, in fact, a terrible idea. She had been listening when Twilight and Rainbow Dash discussed this - it was just among the many, many thoughts she decided not to listen to.

"Then, um, what are you doing out here, Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy asked. She knew the answer, of course. She knew the answer just as well as she knew that she wouldn't get the truth.

"Go home," Rainbow Dash said, frowning.

"I want to *help*," Fluttershy said, surprised at how angry she sounded. Her eyes stung and she sounded angry and mean, but she wasn't at all angry with Rainbow Dash. "I want to help, because I ruined *everything!*"

Rainbow Dash gaped. "You? Oh come on, you know *you're* not the hay-brain who -"

Dash paused. Fluttershy watched and waited, blinking profusely. She was crying again, but she was long since past caring. All she did was hover in place and wait because she had no real plan. She just knew that she would not be denied this. She would make this right.

"Fine," Rainbow Dash said, at length, holding up a hoof in a placating gesture while the other rubbed at her temple. "I forgive you. We're cool. And I'm sure AJ does the same. So everything is *fine*. Everything is super. Awesome. Now *go back home*, this is too dangerous!"

As if to prove her point, the clouds below lit up with a flash, punctuated by a loud crack. Fluttershy's gut clenched, but she was unmoving, hovering right in front of Dash still.

"Let me help. *Please*," Fluttershy implored in a voice that may as well have been a command.

Rainbow Dash licked her lips and glanced down below before puffing out her cheeks. "Okay, you know what? Fine, *help*, but don't come crying to me if you get hurt," she huffed. "The clouds are getting riled up, and we need to separate them, *quickly*. I've already lost a lot of time here with you -"

"Sorry," Fluttershy muttered.

"- so if you still remember how to kick clouds apart, get to it! It won't work from the topside, come on!" Dash finished, diving through the cloud-layer without waiting for her. Fluttershy followed as fast as she can, plunging through the darkness. Her face and coat were moist by the time she pierced the clouds to find herself just above the tree-tops of the edge of the Everfree.

It was a scene right out of one of the timid pony's nightmares. It was all too easy to imagine that the dark shapes of the clouds above boiled with hatred for the pegasi that bothered them, and she doubted she could fly through them a second time; she was trapped. The malicious darkness spat lightning that brought the twisted trees of the forest into sharp relief, casting sharp shadows that seemed to reach out for her. Raindrops were falling faster and heavier with every second, adding their weight to hers and pulling her down towards the jagged treetops.

She swallowed and shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. Rainbow Dash was already going to work kicking and piercing the clouds deeper in, her form a blur as she darted about. Fluttershy was just about to see how she could help when a bolt of yellow lightning lanced towards Rainbow Dash, splitting apart both the night sky and the sound of the rain. Fluttershy cried out and rubbed her eyes, but when her vision cleared, Dash was still weaving in and out of the clouds with practiced ease, unfazed.

Right. Of course Rainbow Dash will be okay. No more stalling. Time to go to work, Fluttershy. You know what to do. Or, you know the theory. Okay, you knew the theory once. You read it, at least.

Fluttershy swallowed and flew over to a likely patch of cloud-stuff. In an awkward and unpracticed maneuver, she turned in the air and struck out with her hindlegs. She noticed with satisfaction that the clouds scattered with a puff, and was resolved not to feel bad for them. Taking a moment to wipe the water from her eyes, she bucked again and again, working to create a furrow. In the distance, Dash could still be seen zig-zagging in and out of the clouds, though she had slowed a little.

It was hard and unusual work for Fluttershy. Soon, her mane was slick and seemed almost determined to get in her face. She could have sworn her tail had a mind of its own and consciously tried to drag her down with its rain-soaked weight. One small blessing was that the heavy roar of the rain partially drowned out the thunder, but it didn't feel like a particularly big victory. As she paused to consider her progress, frowning at how the channel was already closing and undoing her work, she noticed that there had been neither thunder nor lightning for a short while. Even the wind had calmed down a smidgen.

The weather itself had apparently been waiting for that very moment. Before she had even completed the thought, Fluttershy's was seized by a strong gust of wind that set her world spinning. With a squeak, she was buffeted out of the air, impacting on something with a crack and a crash in the darkness. She tried to keep her wings flapping, but it

wouldn't work. Something was stopping them on the pull, but not the downbeat. She couldn't see, and there was a pressure on her back.

"Fluttershy?"

The voice was faint, muffled by her head's ringing, and with it came the realization that she wasn't flying any more. She was on the ground, on her back, and she was breathing very fast.

"Hey, Equestria to Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash called. Apparently, Fluttershy had closed her eyes when she crashed. It wasn't altogether surprising really. She opened them again to find that she lay between the roots of a large, twisted tree. Dash stood above her, shielding her from the rain, though her coat was wet and dripping so much that the effect was somewhat ruined.

"Um, sorry, I fell," Fluttershy explained as loudly as she could to be heard over the din. It came out an awkward croak. Her head still hurt.

"Yeah, I kinda noticed," Rainbow Dash shouted back, rolling her eyes. Her mane was rain-matted and she shook her wings like clockwork every few seconds without apparent thought. "I *told* you this was dangerous."

"I'm fine," Fluttershy said, struggling to get back up on her hooves. She felt a little stiff, but otherwise okay. "I'm sorry, I - um, I didn't mean to worry you. I just, uh, I'm not sure what happened."

"The storm happened, that's what! This is out of control," Dash said, tapping the side of her head with a hoof. "No, seriously, go *home*, I gotta go get my goggles and some - uh, some other stuff. I can't see anything inside the cloud layer any more. Just stay low on the ground, and *walk* out of the forest."

Rainbow Dash took off and hovered above the ground, considering the black lid of clouds that hung above them. She did not look very pleased.

"I'm sorry," Fluttershy said. They were simple words that made up for in intent what they lacked in volume. Rainbow Dash looked down at her, exasperated.

"Sorry for *what*?" she cried, throwing up her forehooves. "What the hay are you sorry about *now*?"

Fluttershy cringed and drew back. As much as she'd like to hide behind her mane, it was plastered to her body where it wasn't resting in the mud. "I'm sorry I didn't come watch you practice," she blurted.

Dash muttered something that was lost in the rain, but she reluctantly landed again. "You're still on *that*?" She tried to sound annoyed and exasperated, but there was something in her eyes. A hurt. A hunger.

"I meant to come," she said, looking away. "I just had to take care of a little fox who got hurt. And then, um, with Applejack -"

"Yeah, okay," Rainbow Dash said. "I get it."

Despite the finality of her words, Rainbow Dash did not move. When Fluttershy looked back up, the other pegasus pony was staring at the ground between the two of them, intently focused on a particular piece of muddy ground where her mane dripped to create a little puddle.

"But, um, you know, you could maybe have come by and asked," Fluttershy suggested, grinding a hoof into the ground for lack of anything else to do. "I mean, if you wanted to, and I didn't visit for a while, maybe you could have asked why I didn't come."

"Yeah," Dash repeated, so quiet that Fluttershy had to strain to hear. "Maybe."

"And thank you," Fluttershy added with a cautious smile. Rainbow Dash still wouldn't look at her, but that was okay.

"For *what*?" Dash snapped with a half-hearted attempt at anger. It might have been the rain distorting the noise, but Fluttershy thought her voice was a little unsteady as she wiped the water from her eyes. "No, ugh, don't answer that."

There was another moment where the heavy rain was everything. No pony moved or spoke, Dash's eyes still downcast. Nothing challenged the all-consuming storm until Rainbow Dash finally took two small steps to cross the distance between them. Fluttershy offered no comment as her friend reached out. For a second it looked like she might give her a hug, but she instead simply pet her on the head awkwardly with a forehoof.

"Hey, thanks, okay? But seriously, go home," Dash muttered. "I got a plan, but I *really* gotta go get those goggles and a little something else."

There was little more to say after that. Rainbow Dash took off and zig-zagged through the trees, lost in a matter of seconds. Fluttershy was left under a tree, soaking wet but smiling. As the storm raged all around her, she found the cold couldn't touch her any more. Sure, she was tired and scared, but while most ponies wouldn't think so by looking at them, she and Rainbow Dash understood each other. They would be okay, now.

Fluttershy scraped some mud off one of her forelegs with the other hoof and shook the water off her wings. She was happier, but not yet done. She had to show Applejack she was sorry. She was sorry that she *wasn't* sorry, because she would defend any of her

friends from each other if she had to. She just didn't know how to tell Applejack this if she was still angry with her.

All she had to work with were the clouds. It was harder to lift off than she had thought it would be, thanks in part to a downwards draft that seemed wholly unnatural. The Everfree did not want to give anything up quite so easily. She gritted her teeth and gave her wings all they had before she even neared the cloud layer above, straining to reach the furrow Dash had created. Fluttershy could barely see through the torrential downpour, but there was a glimmer of light nearby. The moon shone through that one crack in the cloud-cover.

As if guided by Luna herself, Fluttershy finally managed to pull through to the rift, buffeted by wind and rain. Rainbow Dash had created a wide gash in the dark clouds, and Fluttershy immediately set about following her pattern with wing and hoof.

The first protest came in the form of a bolt of lightning that struck a tree not far from her. Her wings threatened to lock up in fright, but all she needed to do to keep aloft was remind herself why she was doing this. For whom she was doing this. Fluttershy could never have done this by herself, or for herself. This wasn't her own doing.

Another bolt, closer, this time. She kept at it, kicking the angry clouds further and further apart, finding a rhythm.

Fluttershy was weak, but Applejack was not. This stubbornness, this almost silly drive that kept her flying and dispelled the cold and fatigue wasn't hers. It belonged to her friends who cared for her, and it belonged to Applejack, even if she might not want to see Fluttershy ever again.

A loud *crack* joined the next thunderous boom as a lightning strike split a tree in half. Fluttershy lost her rhythm for a second, and had to pause to gather herself. The thought was really unbearable. She wanted to leave this horrid place, to fly over to knock on the door of Sweet Apple Acres' farmhouse and pour her heart out to Applejack. She just didn't dare. She didn't know if she ever would.

The next bolt struck a tree so close that the flash blinded Fluttershy. She cringed and made a little noise, but when her vision cleared, she heard somepony giggling, and she was quite certain it was her.

She was wrangling storm clouds in the Everfree forest in the dead of night just because she was too afraid to go talk to Applejack, the most trustworthy and understanding of ponies. She had already decided that she would tell Applejack that Rainbow Dash had made it rain, and it wasn't even a lie any more; she was being terribly unhelpful compared to the seasoned weathermare. This wasn't an apology from her to Applejack. She didn't even know what she was doing here any more.

"Oh goodness, help me," she whimpered to herself, her mirth instantly turned sour. The reality of where she was and what she trying to do set in all at once. She was engulfed in a chaotic mess of darkness, thunder and lightning, way in over her head. Rainbow Dash had *told* her to go home, and she was right. She hovered on the spot and shivered, deciding she would count to three before making a dash for the edge of the forest.

She was doomed to fail, and she knew it even before she reached *three*. The biting cold and the harsh winds were taking their toll, and her wingbeats slowed down steadily. As soon as she noticed, she tried to redouble her efforts, but her wings were tired. Her whole body burned, and she began to drop again. It was too much. She locked up, her wings furling mid-flight of their own accord, and she closed her eyes against the inevitable impact.

Fluttershy's breath left her as she collided with something, and she tried to curl into a ball on instinct, only to find that she couldn't quite manage. She was trying to curl up *around* something.

"Whoa, hey - *jeez*, mind the wings!" Rainbow Dash's familiar voice called, annoyed.

Fluttershy opened her eyes and came face to face with Rainbow Dash, the latter now wearing her flight goggles. "I - I'm sorry, I'm so sorry -" she stammered. "I didn't mean to - thank you -"

"Can you fly?" Dash interrupted her.

Fluttershy swallowed and looked away. Dash frowned as she peered over Fluttershy's shoulders, inspecting her. "Okay, that's a no. Hold tight."

"I cramped," Fluttershy muttered uselessly into Dash's mane as her friend carved a path through the wind and rain. She seemed utterly unimpeded by the weather as she found a likely hole in the canopy and took them in under the trees. While this wasn't much of an improvement, Rainbow Dash soon found a tree that grew close to a large boulder. Without much ado, she put Fluttershy down in what meager cover there was to be had from the storm.

"Listen, I got something going on up there," Dash said, scratching her snout as she glanced skyward. "Can you just, I don't know, *not* do anything for a little while? Just don't go anywhere, give me a minute. I'll take you home when I'm done."

Fluttershy began to formulate a reply in her mind, but Dash was apparently happy enough with her lack of immediate protest. The colorful pegasus mare shot back up into the air and forced her way through both the trees and the clouds with more speed and urgency than finesse.

The ground was just fine for now, Fluttershy thought as she sat peering up at the clouds. The little hidey-hole Dash had found for her was snug and almost cozy as she sat there

watching the spectacle through the holes in the canopy. Safe as she was, she was starting to feel not only weary, but sleepy, too. Her eyes must have been playing tricks on her, because it seemed to her that the chaos above was getting brighter, the darkness relenting.

She rubbed her eyes with a foreleg once, then again, but though her eyes were drooping with exhaustion, she was certain now that a pure white was radiating out from the center of the cloud mass. The wind was definitely dying down, and even as she watched, the rain that had been pelting her for Celestia-knows how long suddenly struggled to find her through the trees.

Sitting there watching the clouds was mesmerizing. The center of the clouds above had taken on a pure, puffy white color, looking very much like the friendly and nice cumulus clouds that usually dotted Ponyville's skies. Not only that, but it was spreading in the most beautiful way with pure white cracks lining the darkness and blooming in wonderful patterns.

Fluttershy's neck started to hurt from looking straight up, but she didn't want to miss even a second of this. Already being quite a mess anyway, she simply lay down on her back to watch, wings spread on the ground. The inky blackness was losing the battle. Soon the thunder had stopped altogether, and the rain was a pleasant drizzle. She blinked, or rather, she *thought* she just blinked, but when she opened her eyes, the clouds were moving. If she had any designs of protesting, the words morphed into a yawn.

Fluttershy struggled to open her eyes. Somepony was calling her name. *Rainbow Dash again*. The sky was clear, and stars twinkled pleasantly above them. Were it not for the squishy ground below and the steady dripping from rain-abused foliage, it would have been hard to imagine there had been a downpour.

"Come on, let's get moving," Rainbow Dash muttered, helping Fluttershy up. She was absolutely soaked, and her goggles rested atop her head with one of the lenses cracked. Even so, the weather-mare had certainly gotten the better deal out of the two of them. Fluttershy was caked in mud all over. Her wings wouldn't even fold right. That got a grin out of Dash.

"Yeaah, how about you just get on my back, huh? Mind the wings and the mane."

"Oh goodness, no, I'm sure I can, um, walk," Fluttershy protested, though she wobbled a little. She really was quite tired still.

Rainbow Dash's response was to unceremoniously back into her, crouch under her, and get up again before Fluttershy could quite react. She wrapped her forelegs around Dash's neck on instinct to keep from falling off, and Dash took off right away before Fluttershy had a chance to dismount.

"*Rainbow Dash*," Fluttershy squeaked in protest and surprise.

"Remember that time back at Flight School when Hoops left you out on that little cloud above the factory?" Dash yelled over the roar of the wind as they soared up above the trees and over the Everfree into the dark night sky.

"What?" Fluttershy asked, but the second she realized what Dash had said, she *did* remember. She had spent the better part of the day alone on that cloud. She could see the pegasi working not far below, but none looked up to see the lonely filly in distress. She didn't want to yell to get their attention, hesitant to interrupt their no-doubt-far-more-important work.

In the end, Rainbow Dash, her newest, and truthfully her *only* friend, had found her. When she realized exactly how terrified Fluttershy had been, she'd grudgingly offered her a ride on her back. She had never felt quite so safe in all of her life as she did then. Fluttershy had never thought that Rainbow Dash remembered it, too.

"Um, nothing," Dash said, upping the speed a little and pulling her broken goggles down over her eyes. "Never mind."

Fluttershy hugged closer and ground her snout into Dash's mane. The furiously working muscles of Dash's wings underneath her were oddly calming, and her last reserves were finally spent. A long blink led to another, which in turn resulted in an empty promise - a white lie. She'd let her eyes rest for ten seconds before opening them again.

When her eyes cracked open again it was to the sound of a hoof rapping on wood, something that confused Fluttershy even more than the soft patter of rain around her. "Um, the door is open, you can go right in," she murmured. "I can walk."

"RD? Huh. This your doing then?" Applejack asked cautiously.

Fluttershy just clenched her eyes shut again and tried to will herself away to anywhere but Sweet Apple Acres. The moon would do just fine. She couldn't face Applejack. Not yet. Part of her knew that she might never find the courage if she didn't do it now, but that seemed far less threatening right *now* than the reality of the situation.

"Uh, no. Fluttershy did," Dash replied. "I found her like this in the Everfree, so, uh."

Fluttershy's cottage was far closer to the Everfree and Applejack hated her. Why would Dash take her here? She couldn't do this. She clung tighter to Dash trying to curl up and hide atop her to minimal effect except for a strangled noise by Rainbow Dash herself. There was a profound lack of dry, poofy manes to cower behind.

Applejack didn't ask why they'd come here. She didn't ask why the two pegasi knocked on her door in the middle of the night in such a state. There was the distinct sound of hooves shuffling a little, and soon enough, Dash carried Fluttershy out of the rain and into the warmth. Rainbow Dash and Applejack had started talking about something, but she couldn't quite make out the words. Soon enough, she was asleep again.

• • •

"*Out* you little varmint! She's still asleep and - aw hayseed."

Fluttershy opened her eyes reluctantly. She was lying in the bed that was the centrepiece of Applejack's room. Said pony was giving her an apologetic look as she nudged her little sister out the door with a hoof. Apple Bloom muttered a "*sorry*" right before the door closed, leaving Applejack and Fluttershy alone.

"Morning," Applejack said, flicking her hat off her head. It hitched smartly on a wall-mounted knob near the door whilst she sat down at the foot of the bed. A nearby chair had an old blanket pooled at its feet.

The bed she lay in was a mess, Fluttershy noted. She wasn't nearly as muddy as she remembered from yesterday, but it was not a pretty sight at all. She wiggled a bit and winced at the feeling of the dry mud of her wings against the bed's covers.

"Um, sorry about the bed. I - I should probably leave," Fluttershy muttered.

"D'you really want to?" Applejack asked. Fluttershy's eyes were drawn up to meet hers. She tried to find the anger and hate she had expected, but there was nothing of the sort in those beautiful green eyes. Unreadable but harmless. Not a shred of anger or hate.

"No," she breathed, tired of hiding and afraid of even the smallest of lies. "I don't want to go."

"But you're lying there thinking Ah am angry with you," Applejack said, sighing so deeply Fluttershy could feel her breath. The farmpony broke eye contact and hung her head in shame.

Fluttershy said nothing, but she couldn't look away, either. She waited and watched Applejack fidget and run a hoof through her mane. When she was stopped by the band she used to keep her blond mane in a ponytail, she tore it off and muttered to herself. She shook her mane out and crept a little closer to the bed.

"Listen, sugar. You stood up to me when Ah was being dumber than a doornail and let my temper run off with me. You did the right thing. Perhaps it ain't right, and maybe you'll think less of me for saying this, but Ah am *proud* of you."

"Ah keep saying you're stronger than you think, stronger than anypony thinks, really. You've gone and proved me right, far as Ah see it," Applejack said, nuzzling one of Fluttershy's forelegs affectionately. "You can tell me when Ah am being stupid. Ah won't be offended. Least, not when Ah come to my senses..."

Having absolutely no idea what to say to that, her heart fluttering, Fluttershy shrank down into the bed. It was made a little awkward when she couldn't bring herself to pull back the

foreleg Applejack had nosed. She looked so beautiful with her mane like this, Fluttershy couldn't help feel bad that she had gotten her snout all dirty with her muddy hooves.

"And then you go and forgive and forget instantly right on top of that, something Ah can't never do. Ah don't know how you do it, but Ah hope you'll teach me," Applejack continued, chuckling. Her smile faded quickly as she rested her head on Fluttershy's hoof. "Reckon you're the one who should be mad at me, frankly."

Fluttershy's other foreleg, which had been slowly questing out to tentatively stroke Applejack's cheek, froze. "What - no, never, I - I mean, you've been so nice to me!" she protested.

Applejack nuzzled into that other hoof and shrugged. "Ah ain't gonna stop you from thinking so, nor am Ah about to try to change your mind, sugarcube. Ah just know Ah feel plum terrible about yesterday, so Ah ain't about to let that happen again. Ah am really sorry about that."

Fluttershy blinked, suddenly aware that she wasn't worrying nearly enough. That could be interpreted in so many ways. She had read the most terrible story that used words that were all too similar to those.

"Uh, you okay, sugar?" Applejack asked, one eyebrow raised. Maybe she was just reacting to Fluttershy not stroking her face any more. Maybe she had picked up on the fact that Fluttershy was hyperventilating a teensy little bit? *Oh goodness*. She really had gotten Applejack all dirty, too. It was just that in the third book of *Forbidden Pony Love*, Dark Bolt had said he didn't want Star Ray to have to suffer him any more, and then he had gone away forev-

"Hey! Speak to me," Applejack barked, sitting upright.

Fluttershy drew a deep, shuddering breath and exhaled. "What do we do?"

Applejack shrugged, relaxing again and giving Fluttershy an easy smile. "Ah know Ah like being with you. Making you happy makes me happy. Ah was thinking of doing just that, if that's okay with you."

"Oh," Fluttershy squeaked as Applejack closed her eyes and nuzzled into her hooves again. "Um. If - if it's not too much trouble? I mean, me too, I, oh my, oh goodness."

It was really too much. It was far too much joy for any one pony to handle. She could feel it welling up in her, but she didn't have to hide it. She didn't have to tie it up so it hurt. It was the silliest thing, but the first thing she noticed was that her nose was running. She just had to laugh.

Applejack stared at her for a second before she giggled right back, but the farmpony was entirely caught by surprise when Fluttershy reached out and hugged her around the neck,

squeezing tightly and nuzzling into her mane. Fluttershy tried to put words to her feelings, she tried finding something coherent to say, but nothing seemed to suffice. She just hugged Applejack as tight as she could while crying quietly into her mane, and Applejack let her, hugging right back.

When Fluttershy finally managed to calm down enough to disentangle herself from Applejack, the farmpony's eyes were glistening as well.

"I - I think I got some, um, nose stuff in your mane," Fluttershy muttered between snuffles. "Um, a lot, actually. Sorry."

Applejack chuckled and shook her head. "Don't you worry none about that."

"And, um, I really am sorry about the bed, too," Fluttershy added lamely.

"Ah am gonna keep telling you to stop worrying until you stop worrying," Applejack repeated with a wry grin. "*Don't worry.*"

"Sorry," Fluttershy muttered, though there was still something poking at the back of her mind. One worry that was decidedly *not* silly. One worry that couldn't be fixed by demanding she get to help Applejack wash both her bedclothes and her mane. "But, um, about Rainbow Dash."

When Applejack's smile stayed put, Fluttershy knew that she *could*, in fact, stop worrying for a little while. The apple farmer hopped onto the rear-leg end of the bed, making it creak ominously.

"We had a bit of a talk after we got you to bed. Once we got past the part where she threatened to buck my head in if Ah ever hurt you, she told me what you did. Saving our crops and all," she said, gesturing out the window. Wispy thin clouds covered the entirety of Sweet Apple Acres, all spent. "Frankly, it could've been bad for the apples too if it went on for much longer. Ah didn't want to worry anypony, but it looked real bad for a bit."

"No," Fluttershy protested. "But - Rainbow Dash was the one who did it!"

"She said you'd say that," Applejack chuckled.

"But, I really didn't do anything, she -"

"And that, too."

Fluttershy began to rise out of the bed, but Applejack was quick to lean over and ease her back down. "Whoa, easy there, sugarcube. Say what you want, but Ah ain't slow in the head. Dash is a terrible liar, but we both know she won't be caught apologizing or

anything that smells like it. Ah can add two and two together. It adds up to a wonderful friend of ours."

Fluttershy swallowed and nodded, slowly relaxing again. Hearing Applejack say those words about Rainbow Dash made her so very happy, and she was seized by an urge to hug both of them. Her body disagreed with her sentiments, however. Trying to get up just now had been a terrible mistake.

"What this also means is you're lying when you say you ain't had nothing to do with it after coming to my door drenched and hurt in the middle of the night."

"I didn't -" Fluttershy whispered. She *had* been trying to lie to Applejack. It was true. She truly *was* the worst of ponies. She closed her eyes and retreated under the covers. "I'm sorry."

"Ah'm only teasing," Applejack chuckled, mercilessly pulling back the covers to give her a nuzzle.

Fluttershy was quite sure her poor little heart couldn't take much more of this, but for once, she knew exactly what to say. "Thank you," Fluttershy whispered, nuzzling Applejack back. "And I really am sorry about the sheets.

"It's just grass and dirt, sugar," Applejack muttered with a grin as she ground her nose into Fluttershy's neck.

• • •

The first light of dawn was threatening to spill over the horizon when Rainbow Dash landed underneath her home. She had her favorite cloud-pillow firmly grasped under a foreleg, and her Wonderbolt nightcap rested atop her head. The adrenaline was finally spent, but she had to make sure everything appeared normal from below.

Rainbow fountain flowing fine. The bottom has the same shape as it did before. The entrance - let's see from over here, yep. Looks fine and whole and not at all like an empty shell of a house with nothing inside. No pony will suspect a thing, least of all Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash, you are awesome, she thought as she took off for Ponyville, grinning widely. She knew she was awesome of course, but it never hurt to have some concrete proof at hoof.

The memory of last night's storm was still fresh. She had dealt with building tornadoes and scattering hurricanes before, but to actually *fight* the weather like this? Better yet, to *win*? She got little jolt of energy for free just thinking about it, pulling a little loop that dropped her nightcap straight down towards the ground. She barely caught it before it landed in a flowerbed. When she pulled up from the dive, she re-aligned herself with the distant Sugarcube Corner. The town was still silent. With luck, Pinkie Pie would already be awake and - well.

Dash slowed down a little to give herself more time to think. She hadn't really planned this part out. After she left Sweet Apple Acres, she just knew she didn't really want to see anypony for a day or two. Regrets just weren't her thing, nor was shame. Sure, she had gotten to fly in the coolest storm ever, so it wasn't a complete loss, but she did feel a little silly regardless.

Sugarcube Corner was the natural choice. Pinkie Pie was the only pony who hadn't seen the whole mess go down. Besides, it wasn't like Pinkie even had the *capacity* to hold a grudge. She wouldn't be angry just because Dash said some stupid things to her that she obviously didn't mean, would she? Rainbow Dash came to a near-stop mid air. She hadn't seen Pinkie all day. Where had she even been while -

Was that a *banner* over Pinkie's bedroom window? All her earlier questions evaporated in the face of curiosity as she drew closer to investigate. Sure enough, a festive banner graced the top floor window of the confectionery, decked out in all the colors of the rainbow that Dash knew so well; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, that other blue and the weird blue. Framed by this banner and the window both, a familiar pink pony waved.

Dash clutched her cloud pillow tight and covered the distance to the window in a matter of seconds, coming to a sudden stop right in front of a grinning Pinkie Pie. The banner read "*Rainbow Dash's Surprise Sleepover Party*".

"Hiya, Dashie!" Pinkie chirped, taking a step back from the window to admit the pegasus.

"Uh?" Dash eloquently asked as she alighted on the windowsill, nudging her little cloud inside ahead of her.

"My right rear hoof got itchy!" Pinkie said, as if it explained everything. At Dash's silence, she tilted her head and giggled. "It said that I would get an unexpected visitor! And I mean, that's kind of silly, isn't it? Because when I started expecting an unexpected visitor, I was already expecting it! So I thought to myself, what am I expecting that I'm not expecting?"

"Uh-huh," Dash muttered. The bell of her nightcap had fallen in front of her eyes. She blew it away and frowned. She was rapidly zoning out.

"Of course I didn't expect you to come here for a sleepover, but if I made a little party of it, why, then I would *obviously* be expecting it!" Pinkie declared triumphantly, indicating her room with a sweep of her forehoof. She was grinning ear to ear.

Sure enough, every corner of Pinkie's loft apartment was decorated with all manner of party paraphernalia. The door on the other side of the room was almost lost in the chaos of streamers, banners, balloons and other assorted colorful items.

"Uh. Cool. It's a bit much, isn't it?" Dash suggested as she tentatively stepped inside and closed the window behind her with a rear hoof. She was no party planner, but the lack of any clean floor place on which to stand was probably a bad thing for non-pegasi.

"Maybe," Pinkie replied, observing the mess while rubbing the underside of her muzzle with a hoof. "I had a party kit that I meant to use for when the Cakes come back from their vacation, but I figured, hey, wouldn't the party be even *more* fun if we had ten times as much party? Or, I mean, the same party, but in a tiny space? I don't have to be a smartypants like Twilight to know that this means *more party!*"

"If that means you're cool with me crashing here, whatever," Dash retorted with a smirk as she corralled her pillow onto the bed. She immediately followed it by hopping onto the bed herself.

"Yay!" Pinkie cheered, bouncing around a little, disappearing in the jungle of streamers before surfacing right next to the bed. "This is going to be the bestest sleepover ever! What do you wanna do first, huh? Pin the tail on the pony is a *classic*, but I just got a new set of party games, too!"

"Can we start with napping? I like napping," Rainbow Dash suggested. "And, uh, I might have to stay tomorrow night too, if that's okay."

"Sure and sure!" Pinkie chirped, hopping into the bed.

"And the day after," Dash added, closing her eyes and rubbing her cheek against her pillow. Her nightcap's little Wonderbolt-shaped bell gave off a jingle as she worked herself into a comfortable position, sleep rapidly claiming her. "And probably a few more. Until the weather changes, really and - Pinkie, what are you *doing?*"

"You did *so* need a hug," Pinkie declared, snaking her forelegs around Dash.

• • •

Fluttershy waited until the last of the animals had gotten seated. Well, those who were given to sitting, anyway. The bunnies, foxes and most of the other mammals generally sat while the birds perched. The lone tortoise in attendance didn't have too much to offer in way of relaxed postures, so she simply assumed that they were all ready and listening.

"Thank you all so much for coming," Fluttershy said, smiling at each and every one of her little animal friends. "Apple Bloom? May I have the apples, please?"

Apple Bloom handed her two apples from a small basket on cue. The little filly was moving with exaggerated slowness, staring wide-eyed at all the animals assembled behind Sweet Apple Acres' barn.

It was quite a sight. Even Fluttershy herself had never before seen so many animals gathered at once, but that just made her even happier. It was wonderful to see that so many had come. The two ponies sat in the middle of a large semi-circle of furry and scaly creatures, and birds lined the roof above. Fluttershy cleared her throat as she held up the two large, red apples.

"This one," she said, holding up her left forehoof, "is a healthy apple. If it's not too much trouble, it would mean so much to me and the Apples if you could maybe not eat so many of them. Um, none at all, actually. If that's okay."

This triggered some very subtle reactions in the audience. The bunnies got a little antsy, some of them rubbing their noses. One of the smaller foxes got up and looked as if he might just up and leave, but was forcefully seated again by another kit. A bluejay spread her wings and furled them again.

Fluttershy had anticipated this, and the smile never left her lips. She handed exhibit A back to her slightly nervous assistant filly and held up the other apple with both hooves.

"Ah, but this, this is a 'damaged' apple," she said, brimming with confidence as she gave the apple a hungry look, trying to engage the animals. "It's still just as tasty and sweet, I promise! But if the apple is bruised like this, or if it has holes, then we can't really use it for everything we want to."

She gave the bruised fruit back to her trusty assistant and brushed her hooves together. "Now, the Apples are really tired of trying to chase you away, and I'm sure you are all tired of running, too. Many of you probably didn't even manage to get a single bite last year."

The crowd had gotten more quiet now, but there was a smattering of nods and sighs. Some of the bunnies hung their heads, and Fluttershy felt terrible for them. She had to be strong, though. Applejack had trusted her to be Sweet Apple Acres' ambassador for this applebuck season. The idea was her own, though. It would really be better for everypony, and every other creature besides. She drew in a sharp breath, steeling herself.

"This season, you all get *one* apple each," she said, narrowing her eyes and hoping she didn't sound too angry. She was still working on determining where assertiveness became anger. "One apple," she repeated, "but no pony is going to chase you or try to catch you. You get your apple, and unless you are trying to cheat and take *two* apples, we are okay."

The animals, by and large, seemed to take this well, but Fluttershy spied a few clever grins. She frowned. "And if you think you can sneak away with more apples because you are feeling clever? If I see you trying, you're not welcome in my cottage for a whole week," Fluttershy added.

A ripple went through the crowd. A few of the foxes drew back. There were a few surprised squawks, and one of the bunnies hid behind his friends in terror. Fluttershy cringed and took a step back herself. "A day. I meant a whole day - oh, um. An hour?"

"Okay, sorry, never mind," she muttered. It was no use trying to be mean. She puffed out her cheeks and stared at her forehooves. "Just please be nice, okay? Applejack is trusting me to take care of this, and I don't know what I'll do if I you don't listen. I don't want to let her down."

Of course Applejack wouldn't be angry. She wouldn't even be disappointed; the Apple family had managed for generations without her. Her marefriend would hug her and thank her for trying, and say she loved her all the more for it.

A bird alighted on her head. She only noticed because she saw a flash of color, but the little redjay weighed next to nothing.

"Uh, Fluttershy? What's goin' on?" Apple Bloom asked, her voice tinged with nervousness. "All the varmints are, uh - *Fluttershy?*"

Fluttershy looked up to see that the animals were indeed moving. Apple Bloom was guarding the basket of apples wielding a mighty frown, but none of the creatures showed any interest in the tasty fruits. A small troupe of bunnies hopped up to her and made a show of nodding to her before bouncing off into the fields. Shortly thereafter a large flock of jays circled her, tweeting their promise to listen before giving way to a family of foxes on the approach.

Fluttershy sat still and bathed in the animals' love, thanking them all as they promised they wouldn't disappoint her. When the last of the animals had left, Apple Bloom finally gave up her death-grip on the apple basket and approached Fluttershy tentatively.

"What in the hay was that all about?" she asked, glancing after the two badgers who passed her by, leaving. "Are you okay?"

Fluttershy smiled and nosed the top of Apple Bloom's head affectionately. It was all too easy to forget that other ponies couldn't always hear the animals as she did. "You can tell Applejack that the animals will listen, so if you see any of them taking some of the bad apples, you just let them be, okay?"

Apple Bloom nodded and darted off like a bolt of red-streaked lightning. She had so much energy sometimes, it was hard for Fluttershy not to just stare and smile. Once she had rounded the barn, Fluttershy took wing. She had intended to return to Applejack now that it was time for a break, but it was very hot for an autumn day, and she had gotten an idea while waiting for her animal friends to gather.

She flew higher than usual. Up and above, past the barn, past the weather vane and twice as far again before she finally stopped. Below her, the entire Sweet Apple Acres spread

out with all its red-speckled trees. She spotted a familiar orange shape hard at work bucking the trees in the nearest orchard, and her heart fluttered. It had been nearly four months now, yet she still felt that little thrilling surge whenever she saw her. It was all she could do not to fly back down to Applejack right then and now, but she knew she was being silly.

Fluttershy cast a quick glance about. There were very few clouds about because today had been scheduled to be sunny, but she knew Rainbow Dash usually kept a few clouds near her house. It wasn't far anyway.

As she drew near the cloud-home that belonged to Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy could see the usual assortment of stowaway clouds hiding near the house cloud proper. While she didn't really cloud-nap or prank other ponies, she'd been assured that if she ever needed a cloud from the weather patrol, under the table-like, she could help herself. So she did.

She felt a little bad, of course. Fluttershy wasn't really *stealing*, but she was taking without having asked for permission more than once, and that was really almost quite as bad. Still, she knew she should feel silly for worrying about it. She began pushing the cloud towards its destination giggling at herself. What was the worst that could -

"Cloud-thief! Stop right there!" a shrill voice cried.

Fluttershy froze mid-air and dropped a little before she got her wings working again. She whirled around, terror-struck and sputtering. "I'm sorry, I - I -"

She came face to face with a laughing Rainbow Dash hovering on her back. The colorful pegasus was pointing at Fluttershy while shedding tears of pure mirth. Fluttershy blinked and blushed, hanging her head.

"I'm sorry. I - I really should have asked," Fluttershy muttered, swallowing as she waited for Dash to recover. She glanced back at the cloud she'd picked. Greedy, naughty Fluttershy had taken the biggest and nicest of the clouds. Normally she'd take the smallest, but it wasn't really for herself, so she'd gotten a little too eager.

"Hey, come on," Dash said, wiping the tears and poking her shoulder with a hoof. "I was just joking. What do you need a cloud for anyway?"

"Oh, I just wanted to get some shade for our lunch," Fluttershy explained, sighing in relief. "I mean, if that's okay. I can take a smaller cloud-"

"Get in," Dash said, pointing to the cloud.

"Um. Sorry?"

"I'll give you a ride. Sweet Apple Acres, right?"

"You don't have to, it's very nice of you, but -"

Dash looked indignant for a second before she glanced about shiftily. "Nice? No, I - uh, well, if the other ponies see you flying around with a cloud, they'll be wondering why I'm not giving them out to everypony who asks for it, right?"

"I guess?" Fluttershy asked.

"Yeah, well, you guess, I *know*," Rainbow Dash grinned. "Now hop on."

Fluttershy deferred to Dash's expertise in the field and sat down on the soft cloud-stuff facing her friend. Dash immediately put her forehooves to the edge of the cloud and set course for Sweet Apple Acres at a speed that sent Fluttershy's mane standing straight out past her face and billowing in the wind like a flag.

"Oh, um, Rainbow Dash? Applejack asked if it was okay if she came along to watch you practice sometime once we're done with applebuck season," Fluttershy said. She'd been meaning to broach the subject for a little while now.

"Huh? Uh, sure. More ponies is always good," Dash chuckled. "It's not like you have to ask about that, you know."

"That's nice, thank you," Fluttershy replied, smiling and lying down on the cloud. It wasn't exactly a common way to travel, this, but it was nice. It was almost tempting to close her eyes and take a little rest, but Dash was looking up at her like she wanted to say something. Fluttershy made an inquisitive noise.

"Uh, just, like, not every day, right?" Dash asked.

"Oh, no. She's usually busy at that time of day, but you know she loves watching you perform even if she'll never say so," Fluttershy giggled. "Oh, goodness, I probably shouldn't have said that, promise me you won't tell!"

Rainbow Dash's face flared up in a broad grin, but it waned quickly. "Hey, I promise. It's not a problem, I mean, I didn't worry, but -"

"I know," Fluttershy said.

"I mean, it's sort of, you know -" Dash muttered.

"*Our thing*," Fluttershy muttered in chorus with Dash. She averted her eyes for a few seconds and smiled.

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Applejack tapped a hoof on the ground and glanced towards the barn for the twentieth time. She stood in the sparse shadow of an apple tree on a hill that was otherwise bare, save for two bottles of apple cider. All that was missing was the second pony for the second bottle. She had just decided that she'd give it exactly to the count of five before she started looking for her when the hill darkened.

"What in tarnation -" Applejack began as she looked up to find Rainbow Dash waving down at her and Fluttershy peeking out from the cloud she occupied.

"Hey Applejack!" Dash called, swooping down to land on the hilltop. The pegasus glanced about the orchard just as Fluttershy landed next to them. "Uh, hey, you don't actually need the rest of us until next week, right?"

"Naw," Applejack said, chuckling at the terminally lazy mare. "We're handling the inner orchards and planning this week. This your cloud?"

"Um, actually, it's mine - or, oh, I mean, I guess it is really Rainbow Dash's cloud, and she was ever so nice in helping me bring it -" Fluttershy began.

"It's hers," Dash declared flatly, pointing at Fluttershy who immediately fell silent. Applejack nodded and stepped over to nuzzle Fluttershy's neck affectionately.

"Don't know how Ah managed without you, sugarcube," she murmured. "That's real sweet of you."

Dash coughed. It wasn't a very delicate sound, nor subtle. In fact, it sounded a little more like a retch. Applejack rolled her eyes and smirked. "Feel free to stay, RD," she offered.

"Yeah, so you fillies have fun, I'm outta here." Dash snorted and grinned, slowly ascending. "And hey, Applejack, if you want a chance at beating me at bowling, it's your turn to pay next time, remember!"

"It was *five* darn points," Applejack yelled after her, but the pegasus was quick to up her pace and zip out of earshot. She would have to get her revenge on the bowling-pin littered field of battle, then.

"Um, where are the others?" Fluttershy asked, glancing about. "Is something wrong? Are we behind schedule? Oh my goodness - should we even be taking a break? I am not tired at all! I'm sure I can carry two baskets at once if I have to, I mean."

Applejack silenced Fluttershy quite effectively by gently nuzzling her cheek. It never failed to make the pegasus mare blush and quietly sit down on her rump.

"Easy. Everything's going just fine, sugar, thanks in no small part to you," she said, sitting down right in front of Fluttershy. "Not having to worry about the animals helps, and having another pony out here all day is good, too."

"The fact that you ask and worry like that, well, silly as it is, that just makes me love you all the more," Applejack admitted, giving Fluttershy's snout a little lick. Fluttershy turned a deeper shade of red, but sat entirely still, looking back at her.

"And last, well, Ah told them that perhaps they could eat somewhere else, on account of Ah want to spend some time with my mare. If you want, we can go join them over in the southern orchard, it ain't no problem by me. Celestia knows that Apple Bloom has enough questions about whatever it was you pulled with all them animals."

Fluttershy shook her head and smiled serenely. "No, this is lovely. Thank you."

"Thank me' my flank," Applejack snorted as she nudged Fluttershy's head with her own. "Ah ain't the one who set us up with this cloud, and far as Ah recall, you helped me make this batch of cider long ago."

"I just watched," Fluttershy corrected her, giggling.

"Same thing!" Applejack retorted, but rather than make a bid for the cider, she simply lay down on the ground, flopping onto her side and closing her eyes.

"Um, Applejack?"

"What's up, sugar?" Applejack murmured.

"Are you okay?" Fluttershy asked, and she could hear the pegasus approaching tentatively. Applejack chuckled.

"Ah'm fine, just a bit sore. First day of applebuck season's always the worst. Gotta get the legs used to it all over again every year," she explained. "Sorry, don't mean to be bad company here, just give me a minute."

Fluttershy made no reply, but a moment later, Applejack could feel a set of hooves on her haunches. She almost kicked out on instinct. "What're you doing?" she asked, unable to suppress a growing grin. The hooves began drawing gentle but firm circles.

"Um, massaging you? I think? I mean, I can stop if you just want to rest, or if it doesn't feel nice?" Fluttershy suggested, slowing down a little. Applejack drew breath, but before she could even speak, Fluttershy continued. "I know, sorry. You'll tell me to stop if you want me to stop."

Applejack let out the breath she had been holding and resigned herself to Fluttershy's massage, enjoying the peace and quiet. Fluttershy knew what she was doing, and she could feel her entire lower body becoming putty in her hooves.

They had come a long way, she and Fluttershy, but some things would never change. She counted down twenty seconds in her head. She was at "three" when Fluttershy spoke up.

"Um, you *will* tell me if you want me to stop, right?"

Applejack's body shook as she chuckled silently. Some things would never change, and she would never want them to. Fluttershy continued kneading, moving higher up on Applejack's body until she was rubbing her back. *Oh sweet mother of mercy that feels so. Darn. Good.*

"Of course you will," Fluttershy murmured to herself as she kept working Applejack's body into bliss.

Applejack must have dozed off for a second. It couldn't have been very long, but it felt like she woke up from a restful night's slumber. Perhaps it was the wonderful sensation of skilled hooves working her shoulders. Perhaps it was the fact that she awoke to the voice of the mare she loved. She didn't have to choose; she got both.

"Um, Applejack?"

"Yes, Fluttershy?" Applejack muttered, popping one eye open.

"Did you, um, mean it? What you said?"

Fluttershy's voice was oddly careful, even for her. There was a specific brand of frailty that put Applejack on high alert. She turned to look at Fluttershy where she sat at her side, her beautiful eyes half hidden behind her mane.

"Ah make it a point to mean everything Ah say, sugar," she said, furrowing her brow.

Fluttershy nodded and dropped her eyes. "I just liked it when you said, um. 'My mare.'"

All the worry she'd managed to build up in those few seconds scattered and fled before the flood of relief. The worry was gone in an instant, replaced by something else altogether. She looked up at Fluttershy, and she saw the truth of her own words. Judging from the pleasant prickling sensation that went through her, so did her body.

Ever so slowly, she got up on all fours. Never once did her eyes leave Fluttershy's as she stood before her.

"Ah meant it more than Ah'll ever be able to tell you, 'cause Ah ain't too good with words, which is a shame sometimes," she said, leaning in close. "But you can bet your pretty little flank Ah meant it. You're *my* mare, and if you'll have me, Ah am yours. It's not a question of whether or not Ah'll ask your hoof in marriage, but *when*. If you beat me to it, if you feel ready, well, Ah ain't likely to say no, either. You are what Ah want."

Fluttershy nodded slowly and closed her eyes, sending a trickle of tears down her face. Applejack reached out and hugged her tight, and Fluttershy hugged back with all of her

strength. They sat like this for long enough that Big Mac eventually crested the hill, but Applejack sent him packing with a glance.

"Um, Ah take it these're good tears, and that you feel something of the same?" Applejack finally had to ask, though her own eyes felt moist as it were.

"Yes," Fluttershy said, giggling intermingling with sobs, her entire body shaking as she held Applejack tight. "Yes, they are, and yes I do."