

Left Behind

Gold

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Special.

It was a word that never bothered Applejack before today, but for some reason she could not get it out of her mind. She sat upon one of the many apple orchard hills, watching the sunset, looking out over the bare trees and the baskets of apples she picked. She had worked herself to the bone, trying to get every apple she could buck down from those trees. For the first time, this work, which usually brought her immense satisfaction and pride, felt worthless and unimportant.

A thought had drifted into her mind, and now she couldn't get it to drift away. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was the least special of her friends.

There was Twilight. Anypony could see why she was special. In the last few years, her studies had made her easily one of the most powerful magicians in Equestria. There were very few spells she had not mastered, and her wisdom and magic were often sought by other ponies. Rarity's fashion boutique – *no*, corrected Applejack, *fashion boutiques* – were doing very well. Anypony who cared for fashion was falling over themselves just to get at one of her dresses. Pinkie Pie was throwing parties for all sorts of famous ponies, and couldn't be happier. Her schedule was booked for months, trying to keep up with all the ponies who demanded her extraordinary party planning talents. Fluttershy kept accidentally falling into successes. From becoming a model, to that book she wrote on animal care. Sure, it took her friends some convincing before she would actually allow it to get published, but once it was, it couldn't be more of a hit.

Rainbow Dash? She had gone from being the fastest young flyer to being the fastest flyer, period. She was in the Wonderbolts, and it was rumored that in a few years she would be captain. Not to mention, in pegasus culture, the better you were at flying, the more attractive you were. Stallions and mares alike were lining up to ask for dates, or... more intimate things.

Applejack hated to admit it, but that was part of the problem. Ponies marveled at Twilight's intelligence, Rarity's beauty, Pinkie Pie's sense of fun, Fluttershy's kindness, and Dash's speed and agility. How special her friends were had earned them success, and their success had earned them many admirers.

But what did Applejack have? If she worked herself to the bone, every day, doing what she loved, what would she manage to achieve? At best, keeping the farm afloat. Maybe even having a little success with it. But she would never obtain fame and fortune like the

others could. And when was the last time anyone had asked her out? When was her last kiss?

A while back.

She hated herself for even having this train of thought. She had never considered herself to be an envious pony. At least, not until these thoughts started flowing in. She was happy for all of them, truly happy. But for the first time... for the first time, she felt left behind.

She didn't feel special.

"Ah guess," Applejack said to no one, "Ah guess that's just the way it is."

"What's the way it is?" asked a loud voice.

Applejack, surprised by the voice above, yelped. She tripped over her own hooves trying to get up and found herself on her back, looking up at the sky.

Lying in a branch above her was none other than Rainbow Dash, who was making no attempt to contain her laughter. Applejack felt heat rush to her cheeks as she got back up.

"Oh my gosh! You have no idea how long it took to sneak up on you, but it was totally worth it to see that!" Rainbow Dash could hardly speak, she was laughing so hard. "And to see you trip over yourself? Oh man, that was *awesome*."

Applejack was not amused. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up."

Rainbow Dash tried to calm herself down. "Aw, come on, AJ, it was just a little prank." Unable to help herself, she began laughing even louder than before.

"Don't you think yer getting a little old for pranks?" asked Applejack, with more malice than she had intended. She grabbed her hat off the ground, and looked up at Rainbow Dash, whose laughter had stopped abruptly.

Seeing Rainbow Dash's hurt face, Applejack sighed, realizing she had gone too far. She flipped her hat onto her head and spoke with a warm tone. "Aw, Ah'm sorry Rainbow. Ah guess Ah had an off day. Ah didn't mean that at'all."

In a blur, Rainbow Dash was standing in front of Applejack, showing off her speed and grace. "Why? What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Applejack almost chuckled. Rainbow Dash sure was the embodiment of loyalty. As soon as she sensed something was wrong with one of her friends, she always became very serious, ready to help. Applejack couldn't help taking a second to admire her. She stood so proud, so ready for action, her strong wings flared as if she was ready to go fly off and beat up whatever was bothering Applejack. Her friend's fierce loyalty warmed Applejack's heart. Unfortunately, her worries were not so simple.

"'Tain't nothin' but a few bad thoughts, sugarcube. But thanks for askin'." She turned to start walking towards her house, but found herself face to face with Rainbow Dash again.

"Bad thoughts?" asked Rainbow Dash.

Applejack would never lie to her friends, but this wasn't the kind of thought she wanted to share. "Ah'm not sure Ah want to talk about it."

"Come on, you can talk to me, AJ. You usually do," said Rainbow Dash. "Unless... unless your thoughts are about me?" The concerned look she wore turned into a sly smile. "Say, what kind of 'bad' thoughts are we talking about here?"

Applejack snorted as her reply, and moved around Rainbow Dash to hide her blush. She started walking towards her house again. "Ah guess having all those admirers has inflated your ego even more, huh."

"Well, I couldn't blame you for checking me out every now and then," said Rainbow Dash with her usual confidence, trotting at her side. "I am pretty sexy."

Applejack grinned at how forward she was. "No, i'tain't those kind of thoughts, Dash."

Rainbow Dash paused, seeming like she was waiting for more. "You didn't answer my question," she said, in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"Which one was that?" asked Applejack, afraid of the answer.

"Were you thinking about me?"

Applejack couldn't possibly tell her that she had been. What would Rainbow Dash think? Maybe one little white lie wouldn't hurt. "No."

Rainbow Dash suddenly stopped in her tracks, laughing.

"What?" asked Applejack, stopping to look at her.

"AJ, you are the worst... liar... ever!" she laughed out. Applejack blushed and started a quick pace back towards the house. Rainbow Dash's laughter stopped again. "Hey, alright, I'm sorry! ...again!" Applejack kept walking towards the house, not bothering to look back at Dash.

"Hey, hold on a minute." She was suddenly back at Applejack's side. "Applejack!"

"Yeah?" she asked, with just the amount of malice she had intended.

"Just stop for a second, will ya?" Applejack sighed and stopped to look at her. "Look, I'm sorry I laughed. Something is clearly bothering you, and I want to help. Talk to me!"

Applejack looked into those concerned eyes, and for one second thought about telling her how she felt. But, she thought, what would Rainbow think of her? Being jealous of everypony else's success? "Ah told you, Ah don't want to talk about it, Dash."

"Is it something I did?"

Sort of, thought Applejack. "You did nothing wrong, Dash."

"But it's something about me?"

Applejack almost cursed. How in Equestria did the cyan pony read her so well? Rainbow Dash seemed to know exactly what she was thinking at all times. Was there even a point in trying to hide things from her? "Yes, you. You and the other girls."

Rainbow floated over to Applejack, landing softly in front of her. "So what is it? I promise I won't say anything." Applejack looked at her, still unsure. "Come on, it'll feel good to get it off your chest!" she said, poking Applejack affectionately with her hoof.

"Alright, Ah'll tell. But promise you won't think no worse of me?"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes, as if to say such a thing was impossible.

"Rainbow Dash, do you promise?"

"Of course I won't think any worse of you!" wailed Rainbow, throwing her hooves up as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Applejack sighed. She'd been doing a lot of that. She looked back out to the setting sun and took a deep breath. "Look, Ah don't reckon I know how to put this, but... I'll try. You

and the other girls... well, we've all been working real hard these past few years to achieve our dreams. And all y'all are having a lot of success with it. Now don't get me wrong, cuz Ah'm mighty proud of each one of you. But sometimes Ah feel a little... left behind."

"Left behind?" asked Rainbow softly, having never considered that before.

"Yeah. Ah mean shoot, all of you are famous! And me? Ah'm just a farmer, Rainbow. I feel like I've been working hard all these years..."

"Nopony works as hard as you!" said Rainbow Dash softly.

"...but all Ah've managed to do is keep the farm afloat. Barely. And now all y'all are getting all these admirers, ya know? Everypony sees how wonderful you guys are. And you each deserve it, Ah would never say otherwise, but... you know, who notices the farmer next to the Wonderbolt, or magician, or author? Nopony, that's who." Applejack pushed some dirt around with her hoof. She still had not looked at Rainbow for her reaction.

She suddenly got furious at herself for having these thoughts. "Ah know, it's horrible of me to be thinkin' this! Ah've never been jealous of y'all before. Never. But I just can't get the thought out of my head, that all of my friends are special... but me. Ah'm just not. Just your average, run of the mill farmer."

She finally looked at Rainbow Dash, who was staring at her in shock. "So..." started AJ awkwardly, crossing her front legs. "So, that's what's on my mind. Is all."

There was an awkward pause while Rainbow Dash took in this new information. "AJ, I had no idea you felt this way."

"Ah didn't!" she replied automatically. "Well, not until today."

"Well, AJ, I don't know what to tell you, because you are totally, one hundred percent wrong," said Rainbow simply.

Applejack huffed in disbelief.

"You're wrong!" said Rainbow Dash, finally raising her voice to its usual level. "You don't think you're special? You've got to be crazy! You, the Element of Honesty? You, the hardest working pony in Equestria? You, the..." Rainbow Dash trailed off, seeing that she wasn't getting through to Applejack. "Alright, do you think that any other pony in the world could run Sweet Apple Acres?"

"Yes. Ah do."

Rainbow Dash gasped at her reply.

"Look, Rainbow, Ah didn't tell you all that to fish for compliments. Ah just told you to get it off my chest. That's just how it is, alright?"

"But it's not!"

"Shush, Rainbow Dash! Now, if you don't mind, Ah gotta start getting dinner ready." Applejack marched towards her house, and this time, Rainbow Dash did not follow.

Alright, thought Rainbow Dash. *If you don't believe me when I tell you, I'll just have to show you.*

The usually spontaneous and lazy Rainbow Dash had a plan.

The next morning, Rainbow Dash lay on a low-flying cloud above Ponyville thinking. She knew the plan: she had to show Applejack how awesome she was. The only question that remained: how? How do you show the most hardworking, honest and tough pony around... herself? Rainbow Dash knew that no other pony could run the apple orchard as well as Applejack, but how could she prove that? She couldn't make Applejack stop working on the farm just to show her how poorly it would do.

It was almost funny that Applejack, of all ponies, couldn't see herself honestly.

Rainbow Dash sat up suddenly as a thought struck her. One thing didn't add up. Why in Equestria did Applejack think she had no admirers? That couldn't possibly be the case. Applejack was cute, smart, and hardworking, so why weren't the mares and stallions lining up for dates? Rainbow Dash began to worry that she was biased. Was she too close to Applejack to see how others felt about her?

Rainbow Dash peered over the side, looking down into the busy market square, with all the stallions and mares buying and selling their wares below. The spot where the Apple family wagon usually stood was empty. *It must be an apple picking day*, she thought, *not an apple selling day*.

Rainbow Dash put a hoof under her chin, thinking. An idea struck her.

She could just... ask.

"Hello?" she asked loudly, standing up on her cloud to see better. "Excuse me, everypony? Hi, excuse me! I just need a second, here!" The muttering and moving in the square slowly came to a halt.

"Hi, hello... thank you, everypony! Sorry to interrupt, but I have a quick question." She thought for a second how best to phrase it. "How many of you think Applejack is... attractive?"

Dead silence.

"You know, Applejack? The one who sells apples here every couple days?"

Nothing.

"Anypony?"

A yellow pegasus in the market below urgently muttered to a pony next to her before flying up to Rainbow Dash. Her face was the most red Rainbow Dash had ever seen it.

"Oh, hey, Fluttershy."

"Rainbow!" said Fluttershy in an urgent whisper. "What are you doing?! You can't – oh goodness – you can't just ask a whole town that sort of question!"

Rainbow Dash snorted. "What? Of course I can." Fluttershy looked like she wanted to add more, but Rainbow Dash turned back to the crowd. "Come on, ponies, I wasn't born yesterday! We've got ourselves a tall, blonde pony who spends like eight hours each day bucking trees. I hear that does great things for your..." *Wait, there are some children down there.* "...tail-end! Do you mean to tell me that nopony thinks she's cute?"

Nopony said anything. Fluttershy, floating close, looked like she was going to explode.

"Look, I'll start. I think Applejack is cute," said Rainbow Dash, surprised at how true those words felt. "There, I said it! Anypony else?!"

Nopony said anything. They all just stared at her, in complete shock that anyone would think to even ask them the question.

"Anypony?" murmured Rainbow Dash, shocked.

Another silence.

"Shoot, I do!" said a male voice.

"Me too!" said a feminine one.

"She's as cute as a button!" said an older voice.

"I love her accent!"

"Me too!"

"And those freckles!"

"I wish she'd let her hair down!"

At first it was just a handful of voices, but soon the whole crowd was buzzing with compliments for Applejack. All the voices toppled over each other, and the crowd

laughed at the strange freedom of shouting these things. Fluttershy looked completely baffled by the display.

"I knew it!" whispered Rainbow Dash to herself. She addressed the crowd once more. "That's great to hear! So how come nopony ever asks her on a date?"

There was another pause, but this time someone in the crowd was braver. "When would anyone ask her out?" said the male pony. "She's almost always on her farm, and when she's here, she's so busy selling apples it's impossible to start a conversation!"

That's it, realized Rainbow Dash. *She worked so hard on the farm and in the market that nopony knew when to approach her!* Applejack had almost no free time, and she probably spent all she had visiting her five closest friends, not meeting new ponies.

"Great, thank you all! That answers my question. You can go back to your day!"

There was an awkward pause as they all still stared at her, unsure of what to do.

"Hey! What did I just say?" she beckoned, her Wonderbolts logo absent from her flank yet plain in her air of authority. "Go back to your day!"

Suddenly the crowd was buzzing again, trying their best to look busy.

Rainbow Dash flipped back over on her cloud, looking up at the blue sky. She was right all along! The whole town thought Applejack was attractive, so there was nothing to worry about there. Rainbow just needed to figure out how to give a few of them the chance to talk to Applejack! So how...

"Uhm... Rainbow?" said a voice.

"Oh!" gasped Rainbow Dash, who had completely forgotten that Fluttershy was there. Rainbow Dash sat up to meet her eyes. "Sorry, Fluttershy, what's up?"

"Fine... just... uhm... why... why did you just ask the whole town about Applejack?" she asked.

"I had to find out if I think Applejack is cute because I'm so close to her and I know her so well or because she's just... cute. As you heard, it's 'cause she's cute!"

"Um. Why did you need to know... that?"

Rainbow Dash remembered her promise to Applejack. "I can't tell you," she said.

"Oh," muttered Fluttershy, sounding hurt.

"Not that I don't want to! I just made a promise I wouldn't tell," she said. Fluttershy still looked a little sad. Rainbow Dash's mouth turned up in a sly smile. "Why? Would you like to ask me if they think *you're* cute?"

Fluttershy turned bright red. "Rainbow Dash, don't you dare!" whimpered Fluttershy in terror.

"Are you sure? I bet you're curious!"

"Oh, please don't!"

Rainbow Dash leaned out over the cloud, taking in a big breath as if she was about to yell out to the crowd. Fluttershy dropped to the cloud, next to Rainbow Dash, and covered her head in her hooves, letting out a tiny, panicked scream.

"Fluttershy, I'm just kidding! Fluttershy!" The yellow pony's eyes stayed hidden. "Fluttershy, I would never do that to you, I'm just kidding! Don't worry!" Her eyes peeked out, and it was such a cute sight that Rainbow Dash had to chuckle. "I'm sorry, that was mean."

Fluttershy looked relieved that it was just a joke and sat up. "Oh... no, it's alright, Rainbow... I just get so nervous in front of crowds...!"

"Yeah, I know. Hey, aren't you doing a book reading soon?"

She squeaked out something that Rainbow Dash took to mean yes. From the look on Fluttershy's face, there could be no worse activity.

"Aw, come on, Fluttershy, you'll be great! I was there at your book signing, and that was alright, wasn't it?"

Fluttershy looked thoughtful. "Well... yes, but I only had to talk to one pony at a time. That wasn't so bad. This time I'll have to read to a big crowd!"

Rainbow Dash smiled at Fluttershy. Fame would never change the shy, soft spoken little pony she grew up with.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll do great."

"I'm glad you think so, Rainbow," said Fluttershy, relaxing a little bit.

"You know, you never said anything when I asked. Do you think Applejack is cute?"

Fluttershy flushed yet again. "Oh, I'm not... I'm not a..." she stammered, unsure of what to say.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, Fluttershy, you don't have to be into mares to say if one is cute!"

"Oh! ...Well, yes! Applejack is very pretty." Fluttershy hesitated for a second before continuing. "Rainbow Dash, aren't you worried that Applejack will find out... what you asked everypony?"

Rainbow Dash froze. She hadn't considered that. What would Applejack say if she found out? Would she be mad? "Well," she said, "I dunno." She flopped on her back with a crooked smile. "I guess that's future Rainbow Dash's problem!"

Fluttershy giggled at Spike's famous quote. "I guess it will be. Rainbow," she started, and then looked unsure, "do you think you could come to the book reading? It would mean so much to me if you were there."

"Sure!" said Rainbow. "Of course I'll –" Rainbow Dash froze again.

"Rainbow Dash, what –" asked Fluttershy.

"Shh!" she said. "Do you hear that?"

Fluttershy gracefully lifted her ear up. "I don't hear anything at all."

"Exactly!" said Rainbow Dash, and leaned back over the crowd. Everypony had stopped shopping and selling, and the crowd was once again frozen in silence.

...Uh oh.

"Fluttershy, I'll go to your reading," she said in a whisper, "but you have to help me with something first."

Fluttershy looked uncertain, but nodded loyally.

• • •

Applejack's least favorite part of her week was dragging the apple cart to the town square. The trip there with all the apples loaded up was hard work. The trip back, when the cart was empty, wasn't so bad.

But she had finally made it to the square. She was late because she had to fix one of the cart's wheels this morning. She hated being late; it meant she missed potential customers.

She was about halfway into the square when she realized that everypony in the square was dead quiet.

And staring at her.

She stopped pulling the cart, and looked around. A bit of red touched her cheeks from all the attention, but mostly she wondered *why* everypony was looking at her. They certainly had odd looks on their faces.

Well, thought Applejack, *I might as well use the opportunity!* "Ah guess y'all are hungry for some delicious Apple family apples!"

The crowd laughed at this for some reason, but they went back to their shopping, and the buzz went back to its normal level. Applejack had no idea what had just happened, but decided to simply set up the cart and think about it later.

She dragged the cart to its usual spot and bumped it open, revealing all the fresh fruit inside. With the cart ready to go, she took a moment to stretch her aching back. It had been a tough week, and the trip with the full wagon didn't help.

Suddenly a blur of colors landed in front of her.

"Howdy, Rainbow," said Applejack. "Making a grand entrance as always, Ah see."

"Always!" said Rainbow Dash, posing proudly.

Fluttershy made the complete opposite entrance, gently floating in and landing gracefully next to Rainbow Dash. "Well hi there, sugarcube," said Applejack to her sweetly. "It's nice to see you both. Are y'all hungry?"

"Nope," said Rainbow Dash. "But you see, me and Fluttershy here were talking, and it seems like you're so busy lately, you haven't had any time to yourself!"

Fluttershy shyly avoided eye contact with Applejack and nodded, staying quiet. She was doing her best to follow Rainbow Dash's lead.

"So we figured maybe we could take over selling apples for a while today, and you could... I dunno, do some shopping around the market, just relax, walk around, or whatever."

Applejack had some horrifying flashbacks to the time she allowed Apple Bloom to run the store. Rainbow Dash had about one hundred times the spunk that her little sister did, so this seemed like a horrible idea.

"Rainbow, thank you for the offer, but Ah don't think -"

"Now wait a minute before you say no," said Rainbow Dash. "I'll just be yelling to get attention. Like this." Floating up above the stand, she started hawking the fruits. "Apples! Apple family apples! Get your delicious, red, green and yellow apples here!" She floated back down. "Like that, see? No problem! I'll get the ponies over to your cart to buy the apples, but Fluttershy will be the one they'll buy from, so you don't have to worry about my horrible pony skills!" she finished, cheerily.

Applejack looked uncertain.

Fluttershy finally spoke up. "And I won't let them haggle me down, Applejack, I promise."

"Well," mused Applejack, "Ah guess it's been a long time since I got to shop around the market..."

"See?" said Rainbow Dash, "So why don't you take a while to walk around the square? And you'll always be able to see the two of us, so if anything goes wrong, you can just come galloping back!"

Applejack looked at the pair suspiciously. Fluttershy had a shy smile on her face, but refused to look in Applejack's eyes. Rainbow Dash had a giant, Pinkie-Pie-like smile. Applejack knew they had to be up to something.

Still though, thought Applejack, it had been so long since she could shop and not worry about all the work she had to do. And she would be close, so... what's the worst that could happen? She had learned a long time ago to accept help when she needed it, and, well, she needed it.

"Okay," she said, "I'll let you two run the stand for a while. Shoot, ponies will be lining up to get apples from a famous author and a Wonderbolt!"

Rainbow Dash jumped into the air, happily, and Fluttershy looked pleased. "We won't let you down," said Fluttershy, softly. "I promise."

"Ah know you won't, sugarcube," she said to Fluttershy. Applejack's mouth twisted up into a sly smile as she added, "And try to make sure Dash doesn't do anything stupid."

"Hey, I heard that!" barked the cyan pony, and stuck her tongue out.

Applejack winked at Rainbow Dash, which caused Rainbow Dash's heart to flutter for some reason. Applejack started to walk around town square and tried not to think about the two of them running her beloved stand.

"So, uhm," started Fluttershy. "Now what?" she asked.

"Now we sell apples!" laughed Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow flew above the stand and restarted her pitch, but as she yelled to the crowd, she never once took her eyes off of Applejack. The country farmer casually perused the shops, looking at a few items and, every now and then, checking back on her two friends and her stand.

Rainbow watched as she stopped at a stand, out of the way, filled with hourglasses of different shapes and sizes. A chestnut stallion with a kind face ran the stall, and the two of them struck up a conversation.

It was working, thought Rainbow Dash with excitement. Now that she had free time, anypony could ask her on a date! It was working, and of course she would realize how many admirers she had!

She saw Applejack laugh at something the stallion said, and watched as she blushed and crossed her front legs.

Something funny happened in Rainbow Dash's mind. Something made time stand still as she saw that blush creep across Applejack's face. Rainbow's big smile slipped away as she watched from across the market. This is what she was trying to do, right? Show Applejack how many admirers she had? Of course the amount of admirers wasn't what made Applejack so special... but knowing she had them would help her see how special she was, wouldn't it?

That was the plan, right?

Right?

Rainbow Dash felt something in her chest she had not felt in a long time. It was a tight pain as she watched Applejack laugh and blush at somepony who was not... her.

It was the same feeling that Applejack had confessed having just the day before. It was horrible, awful, and she had no idea why she was feeling it.

Rainbow Dash was jealous.

Rainbow Dash's hooves dug at the dirt road.

She was hitched to the empty apple wagon and was moving it back to the orchard. She was giving herself a chance to get out of the market and have some time to think. Moving the unwieldy and heavy cart was hard work, but Rainbow Dash was making good time back to Applejack's farm.

She was glad to be out of the square and to be doing something active. Things usually seemed to snap into focus for her when she was exercising, but even so, she couldn't quite wrap her head around her feelings in the square as she had pitched the Apple family apples. She had seen so many different ponies come up to Applejack and talk to her, make her smile, make her laugh, make her blush...

Ugh. That feeling again. That tightness in her chest.

Rainbow Dash was baffled. Why was she feeling this way? Was she just feeling protective of one of her closest friends?

Or was it something more?

After she and Fluttershy had sold all the apples, she had quietly hitched herself to the wagon without Applejack noticing. She just wanted some time alone to think. To figure this out.

"Rainbow!" yelled a voice, far off behind her. "Rainbow Dash!"

Well, so much for time alone. She stopped the cart and craned her neck to see Applejack in a full gallop, trying to catch up with her. It took very little time for the mare to catch her. Rainbow Dash may have been the fastest pony in the air, but Applejack could very well have been the fastest pony on land.

"Hiya, Applejack," muttered Rainbow Dash as the country pony trotted up to her.

"Rainbow, you didn't have to drag my wagon all this way for me!" she said with a smile. "Thank you, though. Ah appreciate it."

"Well, it seemed like you were having a good time hanging around the market," said Rainbow. "I didn't want to stop you!"

"Ah was having a nice time, yes," she said, the smile still on her face. "Ah have to say, when Ah looked over and the wagon was gone, Ah panicked for a second. Ah reckoned you two had lost it somehow!" She laughed, and Rainbow Dash could not help laughing herself, realizing how much happier Applejack seemed since their talk yesterday.

"Nope, I told you we'd do well! Every last apple sold. Fluttershy gave you the bits, right?"

"She sure did," said Applejack. "And a heavy bag of bits at that. Ah should never have worried about you two running the cart!"

"So, how was your time off?" asked Rainbow, starting to pull the cart again. Applejack walked alongside her.

"It was very nice, not having to think about work and all. Ah didn't buy nothin', but it was great just to browse." Applejack hesitated before adding with a blush, "And... Ah guess I was wrong, the other day. Ah guess... Ah do have some admirers."

Rainbow Dash laughed at how shy she seemed on this subject. "I know you do! I told you! You were totally, one hundred percent wrong." Rainbow Dash wasn't sure how she felt about it, though. Suddenly she wished Applejack had been right. Rainbow Dash almost kicked herself for her selfish thoughts, but simply bit her bottom lip instead. "So," she started, trying to sound light and casual, "any dates lined up?" Her friendly tone sounded forced, but Applejack did not notice.

"Nah," said Applejack. Rainbow's heart jumped with joy, contrary to her completely neutral face. "Ah mean, a few asked, but... it was too much to handle, all of them asking on the same day!" There was an edge in her voice, making it seem as though she suspected Rainbow Dash had a hoof in her experience. "Maybe next time I get some free time, I'll ask one of *them* out."

Rainbow's heart dropped again, but she still tried not to let it show. She bit her lip again. What in Equestria was going on with her feelings today?

"Wait, what am Ah doin'?" asked Applejack to herself. "Walkin' next to you while you carry my wagon! Get out of there and let me pull it the rest of the way."

"No way! I'm giving you time off from your work, remember?"

"Rainbow, that was just for a while in the square! Come on, let me pull it back to the barn."

"Nuh-uh."

"Rainbow, come on, Ah had enough time off."

"That was probably your only hour off in the last month!"

"Rainbow Dash, it was more than an hour. Get out of the harness right now!"

"Make me!" quipped the cyan pony with a smile.

Applejack's serious expression was quickly replaced with a sly one. "Fine," she said, moving in closer to Rainbow Dash. "Ah seem to recall you telling me once you were very ticklish in one spot... now, where was it again?" she asked, knowing full well the answer.

"Applejack... don't you dare!" begged Rainbow Dash, the smile vanishing from her face.

"Oh yeah... now Ah remember. Under your wings!" With that, she pounced, reaching her hooves under Rainbow Dash's strong wings. At first Rainbow Dash yelled protests, but soon she was howling with laughter, her eyes were watering, and she was doing everything she could to get out of the harness to escape the country pony's attack. She managed to get out of it after a few seconds of struggling, and flopped onto the ground, relieved to have escaped the assault. Applejack took this time to strap herself to the wagon.

"That's what I'm good for, Rainbow," said Applejack, with a big smile on her face. "Helping to pull the load! You gotta..." She stopped when she met Rainbow's eyes. "...why are you looking at me like that?"

This was it. This was the moment Rainbow Dash would never forget for the rest of her life.

Somehow, in the tussle, both Applejack's hat and her hair tie had fallen off of her head, letting her mane flow freely. As Rainbow Dash lay on the ground, looking up at Applejack, she realized that she had never seen it like this, and promptly decided that she had never observed anything quite so beautiful. The sun behind her made Applejack seem to glow, and as Rainbow Dash looked up into her big, green eyes, she had an epiphany.

She was in love with Applejack.

It was so obvious. How could she have missed it? All the time they spent together, all the teasing they did... what other pony was more admirable, more hard working, more clever, and more honest than she was? Who else did Rainbow Dash have as much fun with? Who else could keep up with her? Who else in Equestria was this beautiful?

In other words, who could compare to Applejack in any way, shape or form? No pony. No pony in the whole world.

Rainbow Dash could hear her heart beating in her ears, and her chest felt ten times as tight as it had been before.

Applejack broke eye contact as she spotted her hair tie on the ground. "Oh, did my mane come undone? Is that why you're lookin' at me like that?" she said, and blushed. "It must look awful bad..."

Rainbow Dash almost groaned. How in Equestria, thought the pegasus, did she not know how sexy she looked right now? There was a big part of Rainbow Dash that just wanted to jump up and kiss her. What's the worst that could happen? Rainbow was willing to bet her life that she tasted like apples...

"Applejack," said the cyan pony, carefully, "I..." She didn't know what to say. Should she tell her? Just come clean? Or would it ruin their friendship? Should she just ignore it?

"What is it, sugarcube?" Applejack asked in a concerned voice, cocking her head slightly. The sun was shining through her blonde hair, making her look angelic.

Rainbow Dash shook off these new feelings and stood up. "Nothing, I just... realized something." Applejack looked on quizzically as Rainbow Dash walked over to the hat on the ground. She bit the brim of the hat and flipped it onto her head with as much skill as Applejack. "I'd probably look pretty damn good in your hat!"

"Rainbow Dash, gimme back my hat," said Applejack in a low voice, a small smile on her face.

"Whoa, you think you can just attack me and get away with it? No way! I think I'll be holding onto it for a while."

"Don't make me come over there again!"

"Think you can catch me, strapped to that wagon?" Rainbow Dash laughed and started a gentle trot towards Applejack's house. "I don't think so!"

"Oh no you don't!" yelled the country pony, and started pulling the wagon at a surprisingly fast pace.

Rainbow Dash had to switch to a full gallop. She almost laughed at how easily Applejack pulled the heavy cart.

"Okay, okay!" said the cyan pony, turning her head to look at Applejack as she ran. "I'll give it back if you admit I look better in your hat than you do."

"What?!" said Applejack with a laugh. "Never!"

"Guess I'm keeping it, then!"

"Get back here!"

The pair ran back to the Apple family barn, teasing each other and laughing the whole way. Once they got inside, Applejack ripped herself out of the harness, and jumped on Rainbow Dash, tackling her into a pile of hay.

Applejack bit the rim of the hat, flipped it into the air and smiled down at Rainbow Dash as it landed perfectly on her head.

"Let this be a lesson to you, Rainbow. Ain't nopony in Equestria that looks as good in my hat... as Ah do." Her smile was crooked and her eyes had laughter in them.

Well, thought Rainbow Dash, looking up at her from the hay... *I can't argue with that.*

She couldn't help it. She was so close... Rainbow Dash was a pony of action. She had to just... do it. So she quickly leaned up and kissed Applejack.

Just like she thought. Apples.

The kiss lingered for a few seconds. Rainbow Dash never wanted it to end. She knew that once it was over, they would have to deal with the consequences. Who knew how Applejack felt?

For those moments, Rainbow Dash was in heaven. She had kissed mares before, sure... but she knew this was different. This confirmed it: she was totally, completely in love. And it was awesome.

But as she let the kiss go, it became clear to Rainbow Dash that Applejack did not feel the same way. A look of absolute horror was frozen on her face.

"Rainbow, what... what are you doin'?" asked Applejack quietly, backing off her slowly.

Rainbow Dash felt her heart drop a thousand feet. "I... I just..." No, this couldn't be happening. Worst case scenario. "I wanted to..." Was there any way to explain it away? Of course not.

Suddenly the weight of what she did hit her like bricks. Stupid stupid STUPID STUPID WHY DID YOU KISS HER

"Applejack, I'm..." she reached a hoof out, but Applejack looked at it so strangely that she quickly recoiled it. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I don't know why I did that, I'm so..."

What was she doing? All of these weird emotions were bubbling inside her. She was so in love with Applejack, so mad she didn't feel the same way, and so stupid for thinking that she would.

Would their friendship ever be the same? It might not be. Rainbow Dash might have just thrown away her best friend.

"I've... I've got to..." Rainbow Dash stammered, but she was incapable of finishing any sentences. She felt tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Applejack..."

She leapt out of the hay and ran for the door. She pushed open her wings, and suddenly was flying anywhere else in the world other than the barn with Applejack.

Applejack watched as the blur of colors shot off towards the mountains, too shocked to even know what to think.

Rainbow Dash cut through the air over the mountains with no destination in mind. All she knew was that she had to get out of Ponyville and get away from everypony for a while.

She felt like her mind was on fire, and her thoughts caught up in the swirling inferno. The gravity of her actions was not lost on her. She worried that the kiss may have permanently pushed away her best friend.

She landed on a high ledge with a good view of the whole mountain range. It was a good place to think. The altitude made it very chilly, but she didn't mind the cold for once. It felt appropriate.

How long, she wondered, had she been flying? A half hour? More? None of the land around her seemed very familiar. She looked at the sun, which was getting close to the horizon, and judged that she still had a few hours before she had to fly home.

She lay down with her front hooves over the edge of the cliff, looking down at the sheer drop below. She sighed sadly. What had she done? The impulse to kiss Applejack had just overwhelmed her. The country pony had stood over her in the hay with such confidence and had been so close that it seemed like Rainbow Dash had no choice but to lean in and kiss her. Recalling it caused more of that tightening in her chest.

Her heart plummeted again as her thoughts turned to the look of horror on Applejack's face after the kiss. She had looked shocked and hurt, but what was worse was that she had looked betrayed. Rainbow Dash hated the feeling of betraying anypony, let alone Applejack.

It made her feel so low. She couldn't help but let out a pained groan, and was surprised when she heard it echo back. For some reason, this felt cathartic, so she groaned again and listened to the sound return to her.

She sat up and gave a small yell, listening to its echo. She yelled louder, surprised at how good it felt, and the sound bounced around the whole mountain range. Soon she was screaming at the top her lungs, feeling as though she was forcing all the bad energy and thoughts out of her through her voice. She screamed until her complexion was even bluer than its usual hue, and then she sat back, feeling a little bit better.

She chuckled. "Sometimes you just need to scream."

Lost in her own thought and guilt, she continued looking down over the mountain range, when suddenly there was a small noise behind her.

She froze.

She was very aware that there was somepony or something behind her. Could it be an animal? Probably not at this altitude, thought Rainbow Dash, and why would it get so close? Her sensitive ears twitched as she waited for another noise to tell her where to attack. She felt her heart race, but knew that she could outfly any real danger if worst came to worst.

She suddenly felt a wind at her back and her nostrils were filled with the distinct smell of smoke.

In a panic, she whipped around and confirmed her fears. Looming above her was an enormous dragon, with scales as black as pitch. Its deep purple eyes were filled with a sort of cruel mirth, like a cat with a mouse between its paws.

Her wings flared and she screamed, jumping up towards the dragon's face. She knew the eyes were a weak spot for dragons. She had learned long ago that she could not defeat a dragon alone, but if she could damage one of its eyes, she may be able to escape.

The black dragon casually swatted her down, and pinned her to the ground. She struggled hard against his claw.

"My little pony," boomed his deep voice, "you have woken me from quite a restful sleep."

She pushed hard against the claw, and managed to scramble out of his grip, diving for the cliff's edge. If she could just get out of his reach, she was sure she would be able to outfly him.

She found herself suddenly stopped in midair. The dragon had her tail pinched between two of his fingers. "I don't think so," he laughed. She flapped her wings as hard as she could, pulling against his grip. As precious as it was to her, she was willing to lose her tail if it meant not being trapped here.

She felt herself being dragged backwards as the dragon slowly crawled back to his cave. She had been so distracted when she landed on the ledge, she hadn't noticed it. He held the end of her tail casually as he dragged her in, her strength no match for his. "No!" she screamed in horror. If he got her in there, she would never be able to escape. "No... no, no, no, no!" They were only ten feet away. She hit the ground and dug her hooves in,

hoping to hold herself against him, to slip free from his claws, to tear her tail off, anything but enter his cave. But she was powerless in his grip.

Five feet.

"No, please, Celestia no!" Her hooves burned from digging at the ground, but she could not stop his motion.

They were at the mouth of the cave. She tried to fly one more time but nothing could stop his advance. He laughed coldly at her struggling.

She felt his claw release her and thought for a fleeting second she had won her freedom, won her ability to see Applejack again, to tell Applejack that she was sorry, and that she would never want to do anything to betray her. But to her horror, she felt the claw wrap around her, and was thrown into the complete darkness of the cave.

• • •

The next afternoon, Applejack was working in her fields. Though her body was going through the motions of bucking the apple trees, her heart and her mind weren't in it. She felt empty, and she didn't want to face her own thoughts. She felt cold.

Big Macintosh worked quietly next to her, as he always did. He was very in tune with his sister, and knew that if he gave her time and space, she would approach him for help if she needed it.

She bucked a particularly tall tree and watched as almost all the apples fell into their baskets. No one in the Apple family knew why the apples *always* landed in the basket, but it sure was a handy trick for the family to have. One lone, stubborn apple remained near the top of the tree. She bucked again. It didn't budge. Frustrated, she began to buck repeatedly, pounding her back hooves against the tree.

"Sis!" barked Big Macintosh.

She suddenly realised what she was doing. She turned around to look at the tree, and saw in the side of its trunk an indent of one her hooves.

"Shoot!" she cried, then let out a drawn out sigh. "Ah'm sorry, Big Mac. Ah guess Ah got a little carried away. Apple Bloom can get that apple up top later."

He nodded solemnly, then went back to his own work of loading up the wagon with the baskets of apples.

She moved to the next tree, readying herself to buck, and allowed herself to think about the experience. What a strange day it was, she thought with a huff.

"Big Mac, can I talk to you for a second?" she asked in an uncertain voice. The big pony stopped his work, and looked at her. She moved closer to him. "Let's say, hypothetically, one of your close friends... someone you've known and trusted for years... someone who's as close as family... well, they go and kiss you out of the blue." Big Mac raised an eyebrow. "What do you tell that pony?"

Big Macintosh opened his mouth to say something, but Applejack cut him off. "Now, Ah know what you're going to say! You're going to tell me it matters how I feel about this pony." She thought for a moment over this question, which had kept her up all night. "And the truth of the matter is I don't rightly know my own feelings! Shoot, she's my closest friend." She nearly kicked herself for giving away Rainbow Dash's gender, but kept going. "We've shared so much together, and I reckon I love her. I love all my friends! But I'm not sure if I'm *in* love with her, you see?"

Big Macintosh nodded.

"But is that even what she meant with the kiss? Was she kissin' me because she likes me? Was it because she's just attracted to me? And am Ah even attracted to mares?" She looked irritated before adding softly, "Ah mean, how do Ah even find out if Ah'm attracted to mares?"

A sly smile snuck onto Big Macintosh's face. Applejack snorted. "Yes, Ah can think of one obvious way, too. Wipe that smile off your face, mister." He did, but a ghost of a smile remained. "Ah just don't rightly know what to do. Should Ah ask her what the kiss meant? Should Ah try to figure out my own feelin's first?" She groaned and stomped a hoof on the ground. "Why's this kind of stuff always so hard for me?"

He walked towards her and gently leaned against her in an equine hug. She sighed, and leaned back into him. "Ah guess I should figure out how I feel before I talk to her about this. But Ah should probably talk to her soon." She kissed him on his cheek. "Thanks, Big Mac. You're a good big brother. You always give the best advice." She headed back to her tree.

Big Macintosh nodded at his job well done, and went back to his wagon. The two worked in silence without interruption for an hour more before they heard a voice come from above them.

"Applejack!" called a far off voice. The siblings' heads immediately snapped towards the sky. Applejack feared for a moment that it was Rainbow Dash, and she wouldn't know what to say. "Applejack?" called the voice again, and she realized with relief that it wasn't Rainbow Dash.

"Down here!" yelled Applejack. Within a few seconds, Spitfire, captain of the Wonderbolts, appeared above the trees.

"Aw, hey, Spitfire," greeted Applejack. She had only had a few interactions with the captain, but Spitfire always seemed very kind. "What brings you to Ponyville?"

"I'm looking for Rainbow Dash! She didn't come to practice this morning, which is... unusual. She's not at her house. Fluttershy told me she often hangs out in this orchard with you, so I thought I'd see if she was here."

Applejack was shocked. The Wonderbolts were Rainbow Dash's life. She had never missed a practice since joining the group. Applejack recalled a time when she was too sick to stand, but still went to practice. The team made her sit in the stands and simply watch, but her dedication was clear.

Would she really miss a practice because of the kiss?

"Truth be told, Spitfire, me and Rainbow Dash had..." Applejack, glancing towards the barn, took a second to figure out what exactly to call what had happened. "...an argument yesterday afternoon. Ah'm afraid she flew off afterwards, and Ah haven't seen her since."

Big Macintosh made a face as he connected the dots.

Spitfire looked worried. "Well, you're the last pony who saw her, then. Did you see which way she flew?"

"Off towards the mountains," she replied. Suddenly she was very worried. "Y'all don't think... something happened to her, do you?"

Spitfire shook her head. "I don't know. But we do know that she's been missing for at least a day, and that her last flight path took her over the mountain range. There's nothing to worry about yet, but we should play it safe, and ask Twilight Sparkle for help."

Spitfire shot off towards the Ponyville library. Applejack looked at her brother, worry in her eyes.

"Go on," he insisted, "I can handle the work. Go."

"Thank you," she said warmly. She gave him her strongest smile as she sped off in a full gallop towards Twilight's home.

• • •

When Applejack arrived at the library, she was shocked at how messy everything was. Twilight, roaming around the library reading books and gauging magical items that Applejack could not even begin to name, clearly had not slept last night. She seemed incredibly distracted, and Spike, who followed her every move, looked worried.

"Hey, Applejack!" greeted Spike warmly. "Sorry about the mess... come in!"

Spike had gotten to the size where he was eye level with his pony friends. Eventually it would be difficult for him to move around Twilight's house, but for now he was the perfect size.

"What in tarnation is goin' on...?" asked Applejack, confused.

Spitfire, who sat in a chair, motioned for Applejack to come over. "I haven't brought up Rainbow Dash yet," she whispered to Applejack. "Something seems wrong. Spike just sat me down here and told me to wait." From the look on her face, waiting was one of her least favorite activities.

Applejack approached Twilight. "Uh, sugarcube?" She spoke carefully. Twilight was always a little hard to deal with when she got like this. "Is everything... alright?"

"Hi, Applejack," mumbled the magician without looking at her, "I'm not sure yet. Here, sit down, I'll tell you and Spitfire what's going on."

She sat next to Spitfire while Twilight checked one more magical device, some kind of ancient-looking compass. She groaned, shook her head, and then turned towards the two of them.

"I've got a lot of work to do, so I'm going to do my best to keep it brief. Last night, something happened. I'm not exactly sure what, but many of the magic devices I use to monitor Equestria started... going crazy. Especially this device, which measures

fluctuations in magic over large areas." She held up the compass. "I created these devices because they can detect large increases in magic from magical artifacts or magical beings. For example, if a powerful magician were to come within 50 miles of Ponyville, I would know immediately, because the amount of magic in the area would spike. Or, if an ancient dragon were to awaken near us, his magic, dormant while he was asleep, would be easy to detect. These devices are wonderful tools to help predict when a magical disaster is coming. I would know the moment something was wrong. Do you understand so far?"

Applejack and Spitfire nodded, neither of them really understanding.

"Great. So, here's the problem. Last night, the magic changed drastically... but for the first time since I built the device, the magic spiked down." She looked at them, but neither gave any indication that they understood. "Don't you understand? Something is draining magic from Equestria!"

The two of them blinked. It sounded bad, but they really didn't have enough experience to know how bad.

"After doing some simple triangulation, I've determined that whatever is draining magic is in the mountains, and it –"

"Wait!" cut off Applejack, suddenly struck with fear. "Whatever this thing is, draining all the magic around these parts, it's coming from the mountains?"

"Yes, Applejack, without question. I have a theory on what it is, but nothing –"

"What is it?" asked Applejack, not really wanting to know the answer.

Twilight looked fairly scared. She hesitated before she gave her answer.. "I think... it's a black dragon."

Applejack felt her stomach drop. The only things Applejack knew about black dragons came from old pony tales, but the stories said that they were cruel, evil monsters who captured and killed for fun.

"I don't understand," said Spitfire. "A black dragon?"

"Yes. Black Dragons are not magic creatures, like their cousins. They are actually *anti-magic* creatures. They cannot use magic, but likewise, magic cannot be used against them. They feed off magical energy, and so they are like black holes, sucking up all the

magic around them. This is why they are considered to be the deadliest of the dragons: the usual tactics to defend yourself against dragons are magical in nature." She looked around at her devices. "Everything I have... everything I could do... would be useless against it," she added softly. She suddenly cheered up. "Still, though, we have lots of time to prepare! Dragons usually don't move very much the first year they wake up. Of course, we have to figure out a plan if it decides to come to Ponyville, but there's no reason for us to go looking for it."

"Twilight," whispered Applejack in shock, her voice shaking, "we have to go looking for it."

"What?" asked Twilight, looking at Applejack as if she were insane. "Why in Equestria would we do that?"

Applejack swallowed hard. "Because Ah think the dragon has Rainbow Dash."

Spitfire and Applejack exchanged nervous glances. They had told Twilight everything they knew about Rainbow Dash's disappearance, but from the look on Twilight's face, the information they had provided was not sufficient. Applejack had omitted the kiss, of course, but excluding that, she told Twilight everything she knew.

Twilight, as always, needed more details. "Is there anywhere she would go if she's upset? Someplace you haven't checked, Spitfire?"

"I've checked all of Rainbow's usual haunts, and talked to all of her friends. No pony has seen her."

"Applejack, when did Rainbow Dash leave from your barn? Be as precise as possible, please."

Applejack thought, but was still pretty shaken. "Ah... Ah don't remember, exactly..."

"This is important, AJ!" snapped Twilight. "Think."

"Ah guess... around 3:15?" The more she thought about it, the more confident she was. "Yeah, Ah left the market around 2:45... and it probably took us about twenty minutes to get home, and then..." She swallowed. "...the argument happened, so maybe... 3:10?"

"And which way was she heading?"

Applejack was aggravated at Twilight making her repeat herself. "Towards the mountains!"

Twilight looked irritated. "I know that, Applejack, which way *exactly*?"

"Let me think!" She could hardly remember anything from that day but the kiss, and Twilight was putting too much pressure on her. "It was... the barn door faces due east, and she flew sort of left out of the door..."

"How far left?"

Applejack thought, hard. She pointed out with her right hoof. "If this is due east," she said, now lifting her left hoof to make an angle with her two legs, "this is the way she flew."

Twilight studied her friend's hooves. "About fifteen degrees. And how fast was she flying?"

"About as fast as I've ever seen her, Ah'd reckon. Twilight, what does this –"

Twilight shushed her, looking deep in thought. Using her magic, she lifted a map of Equestria with markings on it and held it magically in the air between them. It was covered in magical notation that Applejack did not understand, and had a circle around part of the mountain range.

Twilight gestured at the circle. "This is roughly where the magical event happened, and it happened at almost exactly four o'clock. It's difficult to triangulate perfectly, but I can confirm that if there is a black dragon, it is around here." A few simple mathematical tools magically floated in the air to aid her thinking: a pen, a drawing compass, a protractor, and a ruler. "Spitfire, what's Rainbow Dash's average wingpower over long distances?"

There was no hesitation from Spitfire: she could answer that question for any of the Wonderbolts. "About eighteen."

The tools made their way to the map. "Here is your barn, Applejack." She dotted it with the pen. "Let's assume," explained Twilight, "from Applejack's observation that she started at a much higher wingpower, but probably could not hold it for fifty minutes. I'll say she was traveling at an average of twenty wingpower. Assuming that, I can very roughly calculate how far she could have gone in the amount of time before the event." She did a few rough calculations in her head, measured out the distance Rainbow Dash could have flown, and made a circle with the drawing compass around Applejack's barn, showing the whole area she could have flown in that time. Applejack felt her heart sink as the compass passed right through the circle marking the black dragon's domain. Using the pen and the ruler, she drew a line due east from the barn. "She was traveling approximately fifteen degrees north of due east." She measured out this angle with the protractor and drew another line. Applejack's heart sank again as Twilight drew another line right through the circle on the map.

Spitfire and Applejack stared at Twilight. They could feel how bad the situation was, but their minds wouldn't accept it. They needed to hear it from her. Twilight was in a pensive silence, worried by the evidence in front of her. She didn't take her eyes off the map. When she finally opened her mouth, she spoke very softly and carefully. "By my rough calculations, if she maintained twenty wingpower and flew for fifty minutes fifteen degrees north of due east without turning... she would be right on the event when it

happened." She looked Applejack in her eyes. "She would be right on top of the dragon when it awoke."

Applejack felt this hit her. It was all the evidence she needed. "We have to go."

"Wait, Applejack," said Twilight, "My calculations were very rough. If she was flying ten degrees more north or south, she would be clear of the area!"

"But she wasn't!" Applejack felt her voice rising.

"And what if she didn't fly straight? Or if she flew at fifteen wingpower instead of twenty? Applejack, this isn't enough evidence to assume she's in danger!"

"What?" She couldn't figure out what Twilight didn't understand. "Oh, so y'all think that nobody has seen her for a whole day, she missed practice for the Wonderbolts, *which she never has before*, she flies off over the mountains where you're reasonably sure she puts herself right over a huge 'magical event' and you think she's... what, napping on a cloud somewhere?"

"I just think we should make sure she's actually in danger before we walk into the jaws of a black dragon!" Twilight's voice was raised too.

"Well you know what Ah think?" spat Applejack venomously. "Ah think if Rainbow Dash were in our shoes, and she was even a tiny bit sure one of us was in danger, she'd already be halfway there by now!"

Twilight sighed, irritated. Her voice dropped and she spoke seriously. "Even if she is there, we couldn't start searching for her until morning anyway. We only have a few hours left of daylight, and more importantly, *we aren't ready to face a black dragon*. All we'd do if we went out tonight is get ourselves killed!"

"Fine," said the country pony, walking over to the map, "You can start looking tomorrow, Ah'm heading out tonight." She grabbed the map with her teeth, but immediately felt it magically pulled out.

"Absolutely not!" barked Twilight, her horn glowing. "You'll get yourself killed. Besides, what do you think you can do against a dragon, buck it to death?"

Applejack was hurt, her recent thoughts of insignificance drawn to the surface by Twilight's dispassionate scorn. Twilight probably didn't mean for it to sting as much as it had, but suddenly Applejack had had enough of her magician friend.

"Fine," said Applejack under her breath. She headed for the door.

"Don't go out tonight, Applejack," ordered Twilight. Her angry eyes locked on Applejack. "Don't go looking for her until we're ready!"

Applejack, standing in the door frame, looked her friend in the eyes and lied through her teeth. "Ah won't, Twilight. Ah promise."

She slammed the door behind her with a strong buck.

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Rainbow Dash awoke with a groan. For a few moments she wondered where she was and why she had been sleeping on the cold ground and not a cloud. Her memories suddenly flooded back to her.

She sat up, her eyes darting around the dark cave. She could hardly see a few feet in front of her. Where was he?

"Ahh, good," the deep voice echoed in the cave. "You're awake."

A purple eye suddenly appeared, and she realized that his massive form was barely ten feet in front of her. His black scales were the perfect camouflage for the dark cave.

Though she felt fearful, she met his eye strongly, sitting tall and proud. This caused him to laugh coldly again. "Good, good! You have a lot of spunk, little pony. I like that." He spoke with a slow, detached precision. She just stared into the two floating purple eyes in the dark. "Well, go on," he said. "Ask me. Ask me the question on your mind."

She worried her voice would waver, but it had its usual strength. "How come you haven't eaten me yet? I assume that's why you dragged me in here." She cocked a smile, wanting to seem confident and unconcerned. "I thought you would have at least plucked my feathers."

He chuckled darkly. "You don't know much about black dragons, do you?"

"Well, in the old pony tales you're always the bad guys, so I'm willing to bet you're all jerks."

There was a flicker in his eyes. "Black dragons aren't like many other animals: we don't eat meat or vegetables, nor do we eat gems like other dragons. We are similar to changelings, who feed off affection, but instead, we feed off magic."

"Magic?" asked Rainbow Dash curiously.

"Yes. I feed on the magic energies found in Equestria. Magic exists anywhere there is life. Some places more than others: for example, that tree outside only has a little magic stored up, but you, my lovely little pegasus, are quite a feast." The two eyes suddenly came in very close to her, and she could make out the form of his massive head. "I do not need to put you in my mouth and chew, like a barbarian. I can feed off the energy of everything in my vicinity. Sure, the process is slower... but I assure you, the result is about the same."

His white teeth flashed in the dark. "For the food, anyway."

"What are you saying?" she asked, her heart pounding.

"Well, you asked why I hadn't eaten you yet, didn't you?" There was laughter in his voice. "I'm giving you the answer: I've already started."

Rainbow Dash suddenly became very aware of how weak she felt. How she could barely lift her legs, how her wings seemed to be made of paper. Even sitting upright like this was a challenge.

She could hear her heart beat even faster. She thought that because she was still alive, there was hope that he wouldn't eat her, but the truth was, she could feel herself being digested just looking in his eyes.

Still, she maintained her unconcerned look. "Well, I hope I'm not too spicy for ya. What's your name?" she asked, flippantly.

"Oh please," he sighed. The eyes floated back up into the darkness. "Is that your plan? Try to get me to warm up to you?"

"I'm not really the planning type. I was just curious."

"My name is of no concern to you," he replied simply.

Her body felt like it was going to collapse, but her mind refused to allow it. "So if you can just suck on a few trees for magic, why do you capture ponies?" This time she chuckled. "Guess you guys really are jerks, huh."

Suddenly his eyes were furious, and one of his enormous claws came out of the darkness, wrapped around her body. In her weak state, she could do nothing but allow it to happen. "Careful, little pony." His anger caused fire to flare up in the back of his mouth as he talked. It lit up the cave, and she realized to her horror that the cave wall at her back was actually his tail. His body completely surrounded her. "For thousands of years, when I was a young dragon, I tried to live in harmony with my environment. I carefully drained the magic out of creatures without killing them." He squeezed. "But after decades of armored ponies coming to my cave, trying to kill me... after all those years of them telling me that I was the villain, and they, who came into my home to murder me, the heroes... well, I guess I finally decided to fill the role cast."

His grip relaxed, and she could not help looking weak, falling to the ground, wheezing. "And there's another reason. A more functional one." The laughter was back in his eyes. "Once you capture one pony, I've found more show up."

This idea hadn't occurred to Rainbow Dash, and it filled her with dread. She felt her stomach drop. They would send a rescue team, wouldn't they? He chuckled. "Finally we drop the cocky façade."

"Who would come looking for me?" she bluffed. "I have no friends, no family. No pony will even know I'm missing for weeks."

He shook his head. "Then why did you look so crestfallen when I mentioned other ponies? No, I'm willing to bet you have lots of little pony friends."

"They have no idea where I am," she said, realizing that this had to be true. She was filled with joy, knowing that her friends would not have to face this dragon, and dread, knowing that she would have to face him alone. "They won't find me."

"If there's any magician in Equestria worth a damn, they'll know where I am," he said. "But magicians don't run into battles they cannot win. No, usually, the first visitor will be someone who's very close to you. Someone who's very near to your heart. Somepony who would come as soon as they realized you were in danger. And then, I'll have two little ponies to feed on."

Rainbow Dash's anger flared as her thoughts turned to Applejack, who she knew would not hesitate to try to save her. Despite the kiss, she would come. Of that Rainbow Dash had no doubt. "You... monster..." she weakly spat.

He laughed. "You have no idea how many times I've heard that line."

She tried to stand up, but found herself collapsed on the cave floor again. She felt dizzy, and she knew she was going to slip out of consciousness again.

"Sleep, little pony," he said with a sneer she could barely see. "I'll make sure you're awake when our first visitor gets here."

She wanted to say something snarky, to have the last word, but she felt so weak. She knew she had to do something, she had to get out so she could stop Applejack. If Applejack got hurt trying to save her, Rainbow Dash would never forgive herself.

She almost laughed at how confident she was that Applejack would come to save her. She felt her heart ache. Even if they got out of this, would things ever be the same between them? Or had the kiss changed everything?

Right before she went under, her mind filled itself with Applejack. Her eyes, her face, her hair, and her crooked smile. Her kindness, her dependability, and her loyalty. The last thing she thought of before the darkness overwhelmed her was the taste of apples.

The dragon thought it was odd that the little pony passed out with a smile on her face.

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The night air was getting colder.

Applejack, saddlebag packed with only the essentials, made her way further into the mountain range. She remembered exactly the spot marked on Twilight's map. She was making her fastest pace, but moving up the mountain range was certainly harder than flying over it. She hoped that Rainbow Dash was all right. She didn't know what she would do without Rainbow Dash. Applejack's mind froze for a second as she thought of the worst, wondering if she was already too late.

She shook off that thought. "Can't think like that, Applejack," she whispered, comforting herself. "She'll be fine. Rainbow is a fighter. Need something more than a little old black dragon to take her down."

With mountains looming over her, she fearlessly headed towards the black dragon's domain, unaware of the trap set for her.

Applejack was close.

She was thankful for the full moon and clear sky. Finding her way through the mountains would be much more difficult without them. She only had a rough idea of where she was, but she knew that she was on the right path.

Applejack's ears were perked, listening for danger. The only sounds that she heard were the steady beat of her hooves on the ground and her even panting. Otherwise, it was strangely and unnervingly quiet. The sounds of nocturnal creatures and gentle wind, which usually graced the Ponyville nights she was accustomed to, were absent.

The trees she passed looked dull and lifeless. The mountain air seemed to be missing its distinctive crisp smell. What in tarnation was going on?

Then it hit her. She had entered the dragon's domain. Magic, which usually existed everywhere, was being siphoned out of everything around the dragon. This is what a world absent of magic felt like: dull, hollow, and colorless.

She felt a mix of joy and fear as she realized how near he must be. She stopped running and, catching her breath, looked around.

At first, she did not see any signs that may could help her. The mountains above her seemed in no way different from one another. *If I was a dragon*, she thought, *where would I be?* She could see no caves where a dragon could live. She knew he was close, but if she had to comb every mountain for him, it would take all night, and she might not have all night.

She nearly groaned, frustrated at her lack of ability to think like a dragon, stopping herself only when she realized how foolish it would be.

An idea popped into her head. Why was she trying to think like a black dragon, who she knew nothing about, and not Rainbow Dash, who she knew better than anypony? *If I were Rainbow*, she thought, *where would I land?*

She looked around again, and this time she tried to see the mountains as Rainbow Dash would. With that in mind, her eyes settled on a huge cliff face. Applejack could barely make out the form of a dying tree at the ledge on top of it. The cliff was so high, and the ledge undoubtedly gave a spectacular view. It practically screamed "land here!" to anyone that could fly.

Applejack smiled. That's where Rainbow Dash would touch down. No doubt about it.

Applejack felt another mix of emotions. She now had at least a place to start looking, but there seemed to be no way to get there but straight up the cliff face. Small ledges jutted out of the bluff, which would allow her to jump up the cliff face, if she was careful. Nonetheless, it would be a terribly tough and dangerous climb.

An image of Rainbow Dash hurt and alone suddenly flashed through Applejack's mind. Applejack could see her curled up in a cave somewhere, bloody and bruised, in need of help. Her need to be at Rainbow Dash's side overpowered any fear she had of the cliff face, and, without even realizing it, she had already made the run over to the imposing obstacle. Taking a deep breath, she put one hoof on it, and began the climb.

Climbing is a difficult task for a pony, even one as athletic as Applejack. She had to jump to and from precarious ledges, looking for any hoofhold she could. When she saw a branch or rock jutting out of the cliff, she could lasso it with her rope and pull herself up. The climb was grueling, but she was making a steady pace up the cliff.

Looking down from the height would paralyze her with fear. As long as she did not look down, she would be fine, though.

She prepared herself, facing a particularly difficult jump. She would have to clear ten feet of nothing before landing on the large ledge on the other side. She took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves, and then, with as much strength as she could muster, flung herself in the air.

Mid-air, she realized that she would not make it.

She watched the ledge drop. She was coming down too fast, and would not be able to land the jump. This was it. She would fall.

Her chest slammed into the ledge, and she managed to get her front hooves on top of it. Her back legs frantically scrambled against the cliff, until she somehow forced her body up and over the edge.

Before she had time to deal with the new pain in her chest, the ledge gave a deafening crack.

She scrambled away from the edge as quickly as she could, slamming her body against the cliff face, and watched as the ground below her cracked. The ledge was falling away from the cliff.

With only a few seconds to react, she pushed off and scrambled onto another one above it. Heart pounding, she could not help herself, and watched as the ledge fell down the side of the cliff.

She watched as the ledge broke into rocks, fell the dizzying height, and slammed against the ground, pulverized instantly. It was a informative display of what would happen to her if she fell.

She froze, hating herself for looking down. It was so high, she could not help thinking. So unbelievably high. And she was only halfway there. Doubt that she could make the climb alive, let alone save Rainbow Dash, suddenly filled her, nearly breaking her spirit and ending the journey.

The doubts were replaced in a flash by more thoughts of Rainbow Dash. This time, Rainbow Dash was cornered by a dragon and fighting for her life. She was alone, and she needed help.

Applejack found her resolve again, and, ignoring the stinging pain in her chest, continued to move up the cliff.

What was it driving her so fearlessly, she wondered? Why was it that every time she thought about Rainbow Dash, the fear melted away, and nothing but the will to get to her friend remained? Would she have the same resolve if it were anypony else?

What was it about the lazy, immature and overly competitive Rainbow Dash that pushed Applejack forward? Rainbow Dash had gotten on her nerves more than once in their friendship. In fact, she had argued more times with Rainbow Dash than she had with any of her other friends.

Still, there was no doubt that nopony was as loyal, as passionate and as driven as Rainbow Dash. She was the fastest flyer in Equestria, and pegasi all over Equestria looked up to her. Over these past few years, she had gained speed and grace. She was witty and confident. *And beautiful*, admitted Applejack to herself.

But all these thoughts just brought up more questions. Applejack decided that maybe she just needed to answer one, and she would feel better. These thoughts of Rainbow Dash were too confusing. She needed to start small. So, as Applejack was nearly at the top of the cliff, she decided to think about the simplest question that came to mind.

Did she enjoy the kiss?

Applejack thought back to the moment. How Rainbow Dash had looked in the hay. The way she had been looking into Applejack's eyes. The way she had leaned in, with so much confidence. The way her lips had felt. The gentleness in the kiss, yet the passion so clear. The way she tasted like... electricity. She lost herself in these thoughts, until suddenly, she knew the answer.

Yes. Yes, of course.

As Applejack climbed over the last edge, finding herself at the top, she felt the heat in her cheeks. She couldn't help but blush at her discovery. She enjoyed the kiss with Rainbow Dash very much. She stopped to catch her breath at the top, proud of herself for figuring out at least one question and for scaling the massive cliff. Her chest stung and her heart ached.

She found her breath stuck in her throat as she noticed the giant footprints and the cave where they led.

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Applejack carefully entered the cave. It took her eyes a few moments to adjust to the dark, but in a distant corner she saw a streak of color.

Rainbow Dash! Applejack almost yelled out to her, but restrained herself. Instead, she carefully looked around the cave for the dragon. She couldn't help but notice how weak Rainbow Dash looked. She was on the ground, completely still, and Applejack was filled with the horrifying fear that she was too late.

She didn't see the dragon anywhere in the cave, and so quickly and quietly made her way over to Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow!" she said in an intense whisper. "Rainbow!"

No answer. The fear increased exponentially. "Rainbow!" she whispered again, prodding her still friend with a hoof.

Rainbow Dash lay still.

She pushed her nose against Rainbow Dash's cheek. "Rainbow?" Her voice was weaker now.

No answer.

She nudged Rainbow Dash with her nose again. "No, no, no... please, no..."

She felt tears in her eyes, and the fear was drowning her. Her eyes tightly shut, Applejack pressed her forehead against Rainbow Dash's cheek. "...Dash?" Her voice cracked.

Nothing.

She began to sob, and curled up next to Rainbow Dash, now pressing her whole body against her fallen friend. She couldn't believe she had come too late. She couldn't believe this was it.

"What's the matter, AJ?"

Applejack's eyes flew open and saw Rainbow Dash weakly opening her eyes to look at Applejack. Applejack was utterly relieved and threw her hooves around Rainbow Dash's neck. "Oh, Rainbow Dash, you're okay!" She began sobbing again.

"Yeah, of course I'm okay," she assured Applejack weakly. "What do you..." Rainbow Dash trailed off, as she tried to make sense of her surroundings. In her weakened state, she was having a lot of trouble thinking.

Suddenly it all came back to her. "Applejack, listen to me. You have to leave, right now," she said urgently.

"Can you walk?"

"No, you don't understand!" whispered Rainbow Dash. "You have to go, Applejack, without me. This dragon knew you were coming... he wanted you to come! He'll be back any second!"

"Ah am not leaving here without you," explained Applejack, her voice still weak. "Nothing could make me leave here without you."

"I can't walk or fly, and you'll never be able to escape him carrying me."

"Ah will get you out of here," said Applejack. "Ah am not leaving you behind!"

"Go, Applejack, please!" she begged. She could not have Applejack getting hurt trying to save her. She would never forgive herself.

"Rainbow Dash, we can get out of here before the dragon comes back!"

"Come back?"

Rainbow Dash and Applejack looked about, completely thrown off.

The new, third voice boomed from the inky blackness of the cave. "How can I come back if I never left?"

Applejack whipped around, and to her horror, out of the darkness, an enormous black shape formed. The dragon's massive mouth opened, and the fire forming in his throat lit up the dark cave.

Applejack immediately jumped on top of Rainbow Dash, covering her in an attempt to protect her from the fire. She felt the heat at her back, and hugged Rainbow Dash tightly in preparation.

But the fire never came. His laughter did. The two ponies turned to look at him.

"I cannot tell you how many times I have been in this situation," he explained, "and that is the moment when our 'hero' shows his true colors. Most of them dive away from the fire, scared of losing their life. But you? You dove right on your damsel in distress. No hesitation." He eyed her before adding with sincere admiration, "You're a true hero, in the classic sense."

Applejack turned and took a step towards him, putting herself between him and Rainbow Dash. She may have been afraid, but with Rainbow Dash weak at her back, her fear didn't seem so important.

"So, because you are a true hero, I will treat you like one." He casually lay down in front of them. "Applejack, is it? Have you come to slay me?"

"No," she answered steadily. "Ah came to save my friend."

"And that plan did not involve killing me?"

"Only if it had to," she answered honestly.

He laughed. "You're very forward. What would you be willing to do to save your friend?"

She held his gaze. "Anything," she answered simply.

"Anything?" he said, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes," she said evenly, "Anything to save her."

He laughed. "I like that. But you know what I like more?" His tone suddenly turned very dark. "Seeing 'heroes' break their own moral code. Let's see how 'good' you really are." The humor was back in his voice. "They used to tell a story about me... completely embellished, of course... about how I made a young adventurer choose between what he wanted most, and what he knew was right. Unable to decide, the story says he ended up losing both." His head was suddenly inches from Applejack. "I quite like the story, it's a shame that it's a mere fabrication... so why don't I play me, the brilliant and terrifying black dragon, and you play the brave but foolhardy adventurer?"

He stood up, opening his huge, black wings as he talked. "Your friend Rainbow Dash will not live much longer unless she gets help from a good magician. You know one, or you couldn't have found me so quickly." He smiled. "My role in all this is to attack Ponyville... is that what it was called?... at dawn." Applejack gritted her teeth, angrily. "Just like in the story, I'm giving you two options, little pony.

"One: You leave now and run as fast as you can to warn Ponyville of my attack. You will give them time to prepare their defense and evacuate those would could be hurt. By doing so, you will save countless lives. But you have to leave Rainbow Dash behind. She will die by morning without help.

"Or, two: You carry Rainbow Dash back to your magician friend. You will save her life, but with her on your back you won't make it to your town before I do. The attack will come as a surprise, and your town will be completely unprepared. In other words: to save Rainbow Dash, you must sacrifice many."

Applejack was burning with anger. "Twi figured out where you are, she can figure out if you're coming!"

"Twi? Is that the name of the magician?" He laughed again. "How quaint. No, my skills in stealth are not just limited to blending in with darkness. I assure you she won't be able to track me. It will come as a surprise."

"Oh," he added, "and don't worry about this 'Twi' of yours. Even under my influence, a powerful magician could survive, huddled in a corner, her protective bubble stained by the fresh blood of your friends. She'll still be there to save Rainbow Dash. Most of her, anyway."

He started walking out the cave entrance as he finished. "You are their only hope for salvation. You are also *her* only hope for salvation. Choose wisely... 'hero.'" He spat the last word before flying off into the night.

Applejack turned slowly and looked into Rainbow Dash's eyes. Rainbow Dash looked as though she was having trouble holding her head up she was so weak. Applejack could not believe the choice she was being given. The weight of many lives was on her back, and there was no right answer.

She could save Rainbow Dash, but doing so meant she sacrificed countless amounts of ponies. But how could they live with themselves, knowing the cost? How could anyone? She felt tears well up in her eyes, and her heart felt so empty.

Because if she wanted to save all those ponies... if she wanted to go back and save her family, and her other friends, and her beloved town...

Rainbow Dash would have to be left behind.

The pair looked into each other's eyes in complete silence. Rainbow Dash hardly had the energy to keep her eyes open. Applejack was absolutely frozen, the weight of her choice made abundantly clear by the weak state of her friend.

Each second that passed felt like an eternity.

Finally, Rainbow Dash spoke, her voice barely audible.

"Leave me behind."

The tears that Applejack had been holding back were suddenly flowing. "Don't ask me to do that, Rainbow Dash," she begged, blubbering. She pressed her head against Rainbow Dash again. "Just... just don't."

Rainbow Dash quietly nuzzled the tears from her friend's cheeks before continuing, her voice steady but weak. "If you saved me, and we came back to a torn apart Ponyville, we could never live with ourselves. Every day until we died, we'd think about the cost of saving my life."

Applejack didn't say anything, just gently sobbed against her.

They both knew there was only one answer, they both knew what would have to be done. Rainbow Dash had resolved herself to this. But she was angry. Not at Applejack; she could never be angry at Applejack. At the dragon, for forcing her end to cause pain to a pony she loved.

There was so little time. Applejack had to make her decision quickly. She lifted her head off Rainbow Dash, forced her tears to stop, and with a sad but resolute nod, Rainbow Dash's fate was sealed.

"You're right. I know you're right, but..." Rainbow Dash cut her off with a gentle shake of the head. Applejack did not need to explain herself. They both knew it was the only way.

She studied Rainbow Dash's expression carefully. Applejack's demeanor broke again, tears streaming down her face, but she said nothing more. Then, she did something that surprised them both. She pulled herself closer, and gave Rainbow Dash a parting kiss.

Her lips were salty from tears, dry and cracked, quivering with pain and anger, and hot from adrenalin. For Rainbow Dash, it was bliss. The shock of it was easily cast aside for

the joy. In that moment, it dawned on her that when she lost the strength to hold open her eyes any longer, the last thing she saw would be the image she brought with her into death. She wanted that image to be Applejack. She could not imagine a more beautiful sight to take to the grave. She concentrated on etching it into her mind, taking in every hair, every freckle, every tear... and then she closed her eyes, and focused on the kiss.

But it had to end. Applejack gently drew away, dropped something at Rainbow Dash's side, and slipped into the silent, dark abyss.

This was it. Rainbow Dash tried to remember the last thing she had said to Applejack. Something about the dragon's choice. No, that would not do. Rainbow Dash wanted her last words to mean something. She wanted her last words to matter. She didn't want her life to end with a desperate plea, no matter the good intentions. With every ounce of strength she had left, she managed to murmur an appropriate farewell.

"I love you, Applejack."

She could not hear herself. She could no longer hear anything. She could not have heard that Applejack had gotten up and galloped away, now well out of earshot.

She refused to open her eyes, holding onto that image of Applejack, so she had to grope for the item that Applejack had dropped. She weakly dragged it close to her with a hoof and curled up around it. She knew what it was immediately. It smelled just like Applejack did. There could be no item more precious in the world.

Applejack's hat.

With that last thought, she slipped into unconsciousness.

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Applejack's run back to Ponyville was completely different from the run there. She was running faster, but was barely aware of the strain. She was barely aware of anything but the fire burning in her chest.

The sadness was gone. Replacing it was a rage so intense that she felt like it would consume her. She gritted her teeth, tears of heartbreak replaced with tears of anger.

It seemed to fuel her. She felt like she wasn't moving so much as she was kicking the whole world away from her, pushing her whole being into each stride. Her eyes were watery, she could hardly see, but somehow she found the way.

How could any creature be so cruel as to make her choose between her family and Rainbow Dash? How could he be so bitter, so evil?

She knew she would never forgive herself for her choice. Ever. But she would never forgive the dragon, either.

She had jumped down the cliff in no time at all. Not only was it much easier going down than it had been coming up, but she no longer felt fear from its great height. She had no time to feel fear, no room in her for any emotion but anger.

Everything blurred by as she ran down the mountain range. The colors of the mountains, trees, and rivers all blended together. She needed to warn the town. She needed to tell her friends. She needed to save her family.

She crested another hill, and saw Ponyville. With all of the emotions boiling inside her, she was having trouble figuring out how much time had passed on her journey. She only hoped that there would still be enough time until sunrise to get everypony out of Ponyville.

She pressed on, making her way to the library. She almost flew through the quiet town, kicking up dust as she went. She only had a little further, and time was so precious. Finally she saw it: the giant tree where Twilight lived.

She kicked down the door to see Twilight and Spike, both still awake, fiddling with magic devices. Spitfire had been asleep on the couch, but awoke when Applejack burst in.

"Applejack...?" muttered Twilight, completely confused by the sudden entrance of her friend. "Applejack, what are you doing? Where's your hat?"

Applejack looked at her with pleading eyes. "The black dragon is going to attack Ponyville!"

There was silence in the room as Twilight took this in. "How do you know –"

"Because he told me!"

Another silence. Twilight looked at her in disbelief. "You... went to him? I told you to –"

"Twilight, this is not the time to lecture me!" she screamed, tears forming in her eyes. Twilight did not try it again. Applejack lowered her voice. "Listen to me. He said he would attack Ponyville at dawn."

Twilight blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes Ah'm sure! He made me choose between coming back to warn you and saving Rainbow Dash." She started crying again. "He made me leave her behind to warn you."

"The dragon has Rainbow Dash?!"

Applejack was furious that they didn't comprehend. There was no time to explain. "Yes! What don't you understand?! We need to evacuate Ponyville right now!"

Twilight took another second to digest this information before she returned to her businesslike demeanor. "Spike, how much time until sunrise?"

Spike was still in shock over the implication that his home may be under attack. "About... about an hour?"

"How much time *exactly*, Spike?"

"Fifty-six minutes!" He shrunk back, not used to being the object of Twilight's scorn.

She looked out the window at the town. She was doing rough calculations in her head, figuring out how many families there were, how many lives had to be saved. After a few moments of thought, she nodded. "We can do it. That's enough time. Spike, write a note to Princess Celestia. Simply say, 'Ponyville black dragon attack imminent.'" By the time she had finished speaking, he had already finished writing the note, and was sending it off. "Next, I need you to wake everypony in the town up. Use this." Off a shelf, she pulled a small sphere with a switch on it. She flipped the switch, causing the device to emit an ear piercing screech. "Run around town, wake up everypony you can. Start with the Mayor." She handed him the sphere. "Tell them that that they need to remain calm, but they need to collect their family and a few essentials, and meet in the field to the west of town. Tell them that they don't have much time, and must be out of town by sunrise. Recruit anypony you can to help wake up everypony. Go."

Spike blinked at her.

"Now, Spike!"

He took off in a blur, but Applejack stopped him at the door. "Spike, my family... make sure they..."

Spike nodded knowingly and urgently, and took off out the door, activating the device as he went.

"Alright," continued Twilight, "I need to start laying down magical barriers and protection for the town. If –"

"No!" barked Applejack. "You said yourself, magical protection won't work against him!"

Twilight huffed, offended that Applejack was implying she was useless. "So what do you want me to do? Wait around while he kills everyone?"

Applejack's voice dropped. "We go back, the three of us," she said, gesturing at Spitfire. "We go back to his cave. When Ah left, Rainbow was barely holding on. While he's here, in the town, we know Rainbow will be in his cave alone. We have to try to make it to her."

Spitfire regarded her for a second. "Are you sure she's... she's still..."

"No," said Applejack honestly. "Ah'm not. But we've got to try. Ah'm not going to leave her out there."

The weight of this hit Twilight and Spitfire. Now they understood why Applejack had come back with tears and fire in her eyes.

"And Twilight, with you teleporting, we'll get there in no time!"

Twilight shook her head. "I can't teleport that far to a place I've never been. I have to visualize it, or else we could end up in a wall." She looked thoughtful. "Still, if I teleported us a few hundred feet at a time..."

Applejack's heart jumped for joy at Twilight's positive response.

"Count me in," said Spitfire. "I'm not leaving her out there to die. Spike and the Mayor can evacuate the town by themselves."

"Alright," said Applejack, "but we've got to go *now*. She was so close to... to death... when I left her."

Twilight nodded, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath to prepare herself. "Alright, you two. Get close." Her horn was glowing.

Standing at either side of her, Applejack and Spitfire prepared for the jumps through space.

"Ready?" asked Twilight, her eyes still closed.

"Ready," said Spitfire.

"Ready." Applejack had never been so ready in her life.

One last deep breath from Twilight. "Here... we..." Her eyes opened, her pupils lost in a purple glow. "...go!"

Suddenly they were on the hill between the town and the mountains. Another spell sounded, and they were another few hundred feet up the path to the mountain range. Another blink and they were going through the pass.

It kept going like this. The scenery would form for a few seconds, and then suddenly, they moved as far up the path as Twilight could see. As soon as she spotted a safe landing zone, they blinked there.

The process was significantly faster than running, and may have even been faster than Rainbow Dash's flying.

As the scenery flew by, Applejack could not help but wonder if they would get there in time. Rainbow Dash had seemed so close to death when Applejack left her.

Applejack could feel her heart pounding every minute they spent blinking through space. It seemed like an eternity.

They eventually got to a pass that Applejack recognized immediately.

"There!" she shouted, pointing up to the tree on the cliff. "That's where his cave is!"

Twilight concentrated once more, and suddenly they were next to the dying tree, close to the mouth of the cave.

"Come on!" ordered Applejack, and started running towards the cave, Twilight and Spitfire following close behind.

Applejack's heart leapt when she saw the bright colors that she knew must be Rainbow Dash.

And it dropped again when she realized Rainbow Dash was being held up gingerly by her tail.

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Applejack's mouth was agape. "You... you're still here...!" The dragon nodded, a smirk on his face. "You... you said that –"

"...I was going to attack Ponyville?" he asked in mock surprise. "Why would I do that?"

Applejack found the fire in her heart again. She was furious with this creature who toyed with their lives so carelessly.

"No, no, that sounds dangerous," said the black dragon, approaching them slowly at the mouth of the cave. Rainbow Dash was limp as she dangled from his claw. "Why would I go to town when you can just bring back more ponies to my domain?"

Applejack froze. It had all been a ruse.

"Put her down," she said, furiously.

He shrugged. "Okay." He swung Rainbow Dash around his body and flung her towards the cliff, her body careening for the sheer drop.

"Rainbow Dash!" screamed Applejack.

Twilight acted quickly. Her horn lit up with magic, and suddenly Rainbow Dash was suspended in the air. Twilight brought her back to the cliff's edge and put her down.

"Aaaah," said the dragon, his eyes locking on Twilight, "and you must be Twi." He slithered closer to her, bending his enormous head close to the ground. His eyes stared at her hungrily. "I can taste all the magic stored in you. You're a very powerful magician, indeed."

Twilight, frightened by how close he was getting, flared a spell out of her horn. The spell hit him clean in the face, and lit up for a second before the magic seemed to seep under his scales and into him.

He laughed at the look on Twilight's face. "Yes, that's right. All that studying you did, all the magic you know, all of it useless... against me." His massive jaws opened to attack her,

but she covered herself with a magic shield. He laughed again. "Protect yourself all you like... while I help myself to your friends."

Twilight gasped as his eyes turned towards Spitfire and Applejack. "No!" she yelled, pulling herself out the bubble.

"You ponies really are too easy to control," he said, the dark humor always in his voice.

Applejack had been waiting for him to be distracted. When his eyes turned back towards Twilight, Applejack shot like a bullet towards Rainbow Dash. Applejack was only halfway to her when he landed over Rainbow Dash's body.

He's fast, thought Applejack. Really, really fast.

"I'd like to thank you, brave adventurer," said the dragon, slowly walking towards her, "for dragging a powerful magician away from her home, and into my domain. Truly a charming gift!"

Applejack's fury grew even more as she backed away from him.

A blur shot towards the dragon's face as Spitfire began an attack. She made a few passes around his head, readying to swoop in, when suddenly his claw nonchalantly plucked her out of the air by the wings. He laughed, and slammed her to the ground.

"This is it, Applejack!" he boomed. "The stage is set! Your magician is worthless, she would only make me stronger with every move she made against me. The pegasus under my claw? A mere nuisance. Your damsel, behind me, could be alive... or dead! And I, the *brilliant* and terrifying dragon the only thing in your way from saving all three." He spread his huge wings and looked twice as massive as before. "Everything is on the line."

The sun, rising behind him, peeked over the horizon.

"What do you think? Will this epic end in triumph? Or tragedy?"

The black dragon glanced down at the unconscious Spitfire at his feet, and let forth a laugh.

Applejack had retreated slowly to Twilight, never taking her eyes off the dragon. "Twilight, are you alright?" she whispered.

Twilight's eyes also were held on the dragon, but they were filled with fear. There were so few problems she could not face with magic, so few enemies that could not be bested with her knowledge. And now she was face to face with one of them. "I... I think so." She shook her head. "I'm having trouble concentrating. I think... I think he's absorbing my magic."

Applejack took in her surroundings. He was too fast and too strong – not to mention, now that Spitfire was unconscious, he was the only one who could fly. They would be easy prey if they stayed out in the open. Not to mention having him stomp around their unconscious friends could be very dangerous.

"Twilight, we need to draw him away from Rainbow Dash and Spitfire." Applejack took her eyes off the dragon for a single moment and looked at Twilight so she would understand the gravity of the suggestion. "We need to bring him back in the cave."

Twilight swallowed at the notion of facing the black dragon in the dark, but nodded in agreement.

"On three, we turn and run for it. Fast as you can, now." Applejack prepared herself for the sprint. "One." The dragon eyed them curiously. "Two." He took a step towards them. "Three!"

The pair turned and sprinted back to the cave. Twilight was going half as fast as Applejack would have liked, but luckily for them, the dragon was not making chase. Applejack glanced over her shoulder and saw him slowly ambling towards the cave.

"Running, Applejack?" he boomed with a laugh. "I thought you were the hero of our story!"

The two ponies entered the blackness. Twilight was already winded.

"Twilight, listen to me," said Applejack. "He likes toying with me, but it's you he's after." Her eyes were still adjusting to the dark. "You've got to play it safe, alright?" There was no answer. "Alright, Twilight?"

"Alright," she answered hesitantly. "Okay." She suddenly began babbling nervously. "How do we defeat a black dragon, Applejack? I've never heard of one being defeated before!"

"Quiet!" said Applejack, glancing at his giant form approaching the mouth of the cave. "We can do this, alright? Don't start panicking on me. We need to keep our cool, okay?" She paused. "For Spitfire. And Rainbow Dash."

Twilight nodded, took a deep breath, and calmed herself down. "What should I d—"

"Little ponies?" gently asked the black dragon, who had reached the entrance of the cave. "Aah, hide and seek, eh? I used to play this with my mother, when I was a little hatchling." That edge returned to his voice. "Before she was killed."

He began to silently slither into the dark. It was amazing how little noise he made moving considering how huge he was. "Come out, come out wherever you are..."

Twilight looked frozen in fear. Applejack pulled her further into the enormous cave. Applejack needed more time to think, to figure out a plan.

"I can taste your magic, Twi." His voice echoed everywhere in the cave despite how quietly he spoke. They had no idea where he had gone in the dark. "I can feel your magic. Can you feel me? The vast emptiness?" The more he spoke, the more frozen in fear Twilight became.

"Don't listen to him, Twilight," whispered Applejack urgently, still running with Twilight. Running was nearly impossible in the dark, but they needed to buy more time. "He's just messing with your head!"

"You can, can't you?" he continued. "The cold nothingness that surrounds me? Like I am Death's given form." His laughter shook Twilight to her core. She glanced nervously about the cave, trying to figure out where the echoing voice was coming from.

Applejack stopped them. She needed to figure out where he was. She peered in the darkness.

His laughed stopped, and for a few terrifying seconds, there was complete silence. Both ponies held their breath.

Suddenly an enormous claw split the two of them. Sweeping the ground, the claw flung Applejack away from Twilight. She rolled on the ground and managed to stop herself just before slamming into one of the cave walls.

Applejack looked about her. In the dark she could make out only a few rocks, about the size of apples. An idea struck her.

Twilight screamed.

"Twilight, put your shield up!" hollered Applejack, preparing one of the rocks.

The black was gently lit with the magic shield that surrounded Twilight. Its light was weak, but it revealed to Applejack two forms. The first was Twilight, who, completely terrified, was cowering on the ground. The second was the dragon's head, only inches away from the shield. His mouth was open and drool dripped from one of his enormous fangs. His eyes were wide, staring at Twilight hungrily.

This was it, thought Applejack. One shot.

She flung a rock in the air, and using all the force she had in her back legs, bucked it at the dragon. The rock whizzed through the air like a bullet, losing itself in the dark. Applejack looked over her shoulder, praying that it found its mark.

With a horrifying sound, the rock embedded itself in one of the dragon's hungry eyes.

The dragon let forth a terrible scream, lifting his head into the air, grabbing at his eye with one of his claws. In his anger and pain, fire erupted from his mouth, spreading over the ceiling of the cave.

The fire revealed the entire cave for the first time: the enormous stalactites, the giant boulders, a pool of water in the back of the cave. It was even larger than Applejack had thought.

She pulled her rope out of her saddlebag, and dropped the bag on the ground. Applejack finally had a plan.

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The dragon held his useless eye socket for several seconds before speaking again. "You insignificant insect!" he raged, the humor completely drained from his voice. "You're going to pay for that!" He swiped one of his massive claws and flung Twilight away, no

longer interested in her, his mind only filled with vengeance. Twilight slammed against a wall, and promptly passed out.

Applejack was worried for her friend, but she needed to keep her cool. "Insect, huh?" her voice echoed around the cave. "Well, this insect just managed to take out one of your eyes, so maybe I'm not so insignificant as you think."

He looked around the cave with his good eye. "You are nothing compared to me, pony! You hear me? Nothing!"

"Is that so?" her voice echoed back. "You are really so powerful and strong, that Ah'm nothing compared to you?"

He started sliding around the cave, looking for his prey.

"See, Ah've just been thinking," she continued, casually. "You're an ancient dragon. You feed off of magic. You probably need a lot of magic to get back to your full strength after sleepin' for so long. And how much have you had? One tree, Ah saw that. Now, sure, it's a nice, big tree, but how much magic could there be in a tree? And one little non-magical pony."

"What are you getting at, insect?" he spat, still looking for her with one eye.

"Ah'm just saying that maybe you ain't as strong as you've been boasting."

He raged, slamming a claw into the cave wall. The rock crumbled under his strength. "I am the most feared creature in Equestria," he boomed. "Do not presume to call me weak!"

"Yee-eesh, layin' it on a little thick?" Applejack chuckled. "Here's another thing I've been thinkin' about: you can feel magic anywhere. I bet you could find Twilight with your eyes closed. Well... eye closed." The dragon's rage increased tenfold. "But Ah bet Twilight is throwing off all sorts of magic in the air. So I bet it's pretty hard to find me in the dark, huh? 'Tain't much magic in a lowly earth pony."

He froze, shocked at her ability to read him so well.

"Yep, I'm guessin' between losin' an eye and not being able to feel my magic, you have no idea where Ah am right now. Plus it's pretty hard to tell where sounds are coming from, what with all the echoes."

"I will find you, Applejack," he threatened in a low voice. "I will find you, kill you and devour whatever is left of your friends."

"Oh?" This time Applejack's laughter echoed in the cave, and caused more fury in the dragon. "What's takin' so long?"

He breathed fire on the ground, lighting up the cave, hoping to reveal her and burn her at the same time. He didn't see her. He turned around and did it again. Still nothing.

He blew fire behind rocks, around corners of the cave, around the pool, but each time he could not find her. With each successive failure, he grew more angry. His rage was beginning to blind him. "Where are you?! Where are you, you insignificant creature?! Show yourself to me, coward! Face me like a hero, so I can kill you!"

"That's the trouble with you, dragon," she said, dark humor in her voice. "You are so used to towering above ponies, that you forget to look for the ones above you."

He froze suddenly, and looked up. Even in the dark, he could see her form. A rope was wrapped around the top of one of the cave's massive stalactites. She had lassoed her rope around it, and climbed all the way up to the top of the cave. Hanging off the stalactite, she smiled darkly.

And bucked it as hard as she could.

The stalactite cracked cleanly, and before the dragon could react, it came crashing down upon him. Slamming on his head and back, the massive chunk of rock pressed him to the ground. It was a clean hit.

She fell from the roof of the cave, landing on his back and painfully rolling to the ground.

She ached, but managed to stand. She really hadn't expected to survive that fall.

She listened and watched the dark form in front of her. Had it worked...?

Suddenly the black dragon roared, his voice filling the whole cave. He reached behind him with his claws, grabbed what was left of the broken stalactite on his back, and threw it into a cave wall. He stood up, still roaring, throwing fire on the roof of the cave. His rage was all-consuming, blinding him.

The cave shook. Between her breaking part of the roof off, and the times he broke part of the cave wall, it was becoming unstable.

The cave's ceiling was falling in chunks, breaking into giant rocks which slammed into the ground.

Applejack thought as fast as she ran, heading towards Twilight. She leapt over rocks and barely dodged a falling stalactite that came crashing down next to her.

She got to her magician friend. She had woken up, but from the look on her face, something was wrong.

"My leg..." she said, having to yell over the noise. Applejack looked. Her back leg was a mess, cut up and bloody.

There was no time, thought Applejack, looking back at the enraged dragon. Never enough time.

Applejack threw Twilight on her back. All Twilight had to do was hang on. All Applejack had to do was make it to the mouth of the cave.

The rocks, falling everywhere, exploded noisily. She ran as fast as she could, making a fast pace despite her friend on her back.

She heard the booming footsteps of the dragon behind her. He was beginning to make an exit as well.

She saw light shining through the mouth of the cave. She pushed every ounce of energy she had left into her strides, running towards the rising sun. She had to make it. For Twilight. For Rainbow Dash.

With great effort she made it out of the cave. She quickly but gently placed Twilight on the ground, and turned back. The black dragon was quickly making his way back outside, his rage apparent in his one good eye and snapping jaw. She realized with a start that he would make it out before the cave collapsed.

With a smirk, Applejack bucked powerfully against the wall at the mouth of the cave.

No one in the Apple family knew why the apples *always* landed in the basket, but it sure was a handy trick for the family to have.

From her hoofprint a hundred cracks grew, making their way around the mouth of the cave and through the cave's roof. A piece of rock collapsed directly above the dragon, then another and another. He could only manage to get his head out of the cave before it

collapsed with precision upon him. There was a crunching noise, and the dragon was silent.

Applejack had beaten him.

Momentarily she was ecstatic at her victory, before her eyes turned to the two bodies that lay near the edge of the cliff.

Spitfire was in bad shape, crumpled on the ground, but her head was up, looking at them with great relief.

Rainbow Dash had not moved.

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Twilight limped over to Spitfire as Applejack ran over to Rainbow Dash.

"Are you alright?" asked Twilight, looking over Spitfire.

"I'll be fine," she said urgently, despite clearly being in pain. "Get to Rainbow Dash!"

Twilight moved over to Applejack, who was gently talking to the limp body.

"Rainbow?" asked Applejack, tears forming in her eyes, as she pressed herself against her friend. She listened for breath. Nothing. "Rainbow Dash? Please... please, please, be alive, please?"

Rainbow Dash just lay there.

Applejack turned towards Twilight. "Do something!" she ordered through her tears.

Twilight obliged, magic flowing from her horn to the body that lay before them.

They waited a moment after Twilight's magic stop flowing, but Rainbow Dash lay still.

"Do it again!"

Twilight pushed more magic into her friend, but nothing happened.

Applejack desperately stood above Rainbow Dash and screamed. "Wake up! Wake up, damn you, wake up! I just defeated a dragon for you! It will all have been for nothing if you don't wake up!" She turned back towards Twilight. "Do it again!"

"Applejack..." said Twilight carefully.

"Do it again!" she barked, putting her eyes back on Rainbow Dash.

Twilight let magic flow between them once more.

This time Applejack put her ear against Rainbow Dash's chest, right on her heart, and listened. Nothing.

"Please. Oh, please, please, please, please, please..."

She pressed her ear even harder against Rainbow Dash's chest, starting to sob.

It was hopeless. It had all been for nothing. Applejack felt the full sting of her choice to save the town over saving Rainbow Dash. She pressed herself against the empty husk that was all that was left of her friend, and cried quietly.

Twilight and Spitfire looked on at their fallen comrade and the friend who refused to accept her death.

"AJ," started Twilight, getting closer to her, trying to comfort her, but all Applejack did was cry harder and press herself more into Rainbow Dash. There were no words that could make this better, no comfort that would make this hurt any less.

Applejack was drowning in her sorrow, knowing that she had sacrificed Rainbow Dash for nothing, just to satisfy the dragon's false threat.

Pained feelings of inadequacy resurfaced once more. The fates had sent a worthless farmer to do the job of a hero. Had their situations been reversed, she knew that Rainbow Dash would not have failed her. All her friends had fame and prosperity for a reason. All her friends had fame and prosperity because they would never leave a friend behind.

THUMP-THUMP.

Her heart!

Applejack gasped. "It... it worked!" An enormous and hopeful smile appeared on her face. "I heard her heart! More, do it more!"

Twilight continued pushing magic into her friend. Suddenly Rainbow Dash coughed. Applejack was laughing through her sobs when Rainbow Dash looked up at her.

"Oh good," she said, weakly smiling at Applejack, "I was worried they'd send me to Tartarus. I'm glad I ended up here."

Applejack laughed and embraced her in a hug.

There was an enormous wheezing cough behind them.

They all turned and looked. The dragon had woken up. To Applejack's surprise, he was alive, trapped under the mountain.

She forced back her tears, gave Rainbow Dash one more hug, and walked over to the massive head protruding under the rubble.

"You... defeated me... hero." he wheezed, all the anger gone from his voice.

Applejack looked at him. She sighed, knowing she would never forgive herself if she didn't do the right thing. "If we get a few more ponies here, we can probably get you out of the rubble in a few hours."

His one eye regarded her with surprise. "You... are offering... me salvation... after all... I did?"

She nodded.

"Forgive me... I have seen... so many false heroes... I am surprised... to see... what a true one... actually looks like." He coughed again. "No... the roles... have been cast... the curtain... is falling... I have been... living... far too long... anyway. You... Applejack... do not let... bitterness change you... as it did me." He gave his last laugh. "Things are... darker now. I think I see..." He took in one more breath.

He was silent. The great black dragon was dead.

Applejack walked back to her friends slowly, head and tail drooping, the death of the dragon already weighing on her conscience.

She collapsed against Rainbow Dash, exhausted from her trials, unable to lift a hoof.

"Sleep," said Rainbow Dash. "We'll take care of *you* now."

The last thing she remembered was a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Epilogue – The Problem Revisited

Rainbow Dash sat on one of the many hills which overlooked Ponyville. The town had transformed for Applejack's celebration, ribbons and banners hung everywhere. The square was packed with ponies, all drinking and celebrating noisily.

It had been two weeks since that day. When Twilight had teleported them back, there was great confusion from the evacuated people, wondering why the dragon attack had not come. Word spread quickly, though: Applejack had faced and bested the black dragon alone, saving them from his terrible reign.

The four of them each had their own recovery to deal with. Twilight and Rainbow Dash recovered fairly quickly once they got away from the dragon's domain. They both had gotten a few cuts and bruises, but these healed quickly. Spitfire had broken her wings in the fight, and would be grounded for a few months.

Applejack had been exhausted from her ordeal, both physically and emotionally. She spent a week in the hospital before the doctors released her. Although Rainbow Dash had visited her often, Applejack was either half asleep or surrounded by ponies, making any meaningful discussion impossible.

When it was clear that the four of them would be okay, the mayor announced that there would be a celebration in honor of Applejack, the hero of Ponyville. Everypony had cheered at this news.

Rainbow Dash had gone back to the cave once since her rescue. She spent a long time looking at the black dragon's enormous head, which jutted out of the mountain. His dark laughter still echoed in her mind.

Working diligently, she dug out the rocks from the collapsed mouth of the cave. It was hard work, but eventually, she made it through to the cave behind the rubble.

She had fumbled around in the dark for longer than she cared to admit before she found it. She would have missed it if it wasn't for that familiar smell.

Applejack's hat.

The celebration, thrown by Pinkie Pie, of course, had attracted ponies from all over Equestria. The tale had spread like wildfire. The story of the apple farmer who became a hero.

Since so many different versions of the story had been created as it was spread, the celebration began with Twilight telling the true tale of Applejack's triumph. Twilight had filled the night air with enormous illusions, using cartoonish images of ponies and dragons to tell her tale. Foals and adults alike enjoyed the show. She had started with Rainbow Dash flying to the mountains, running into the dragon. Spitfire had chuckled nervously when it was revealed how quickly she was dispatched, but the crowd laughed warmly and cheered for her. Applejack had blushed as they gasped at her challenges, wailed at her choices, and cheered at her triumphs.

As the illusion had displayed her collapsing the cave on the dragon's body, the crowd stomped in enthusiastic applause.

Spitfire had also made an announcement. Since she would be grounded for a while, she needed somepony to take over as team captain for the Wonderbolts. She happily announced that this would be Ponyville's very own Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash had of course been ecstatic, even though the position would be temporary.

However, as she sat on this hill, overlooking the party, Applejack's hat sitting on her head, she was not thinking of the Wonderbolts, or the dragon, or the party.

She was only thinking of Applejack.

Rainbow Dash still did not know Applejack's feelings towards her, and this was filling her with dread. Sure, Applejack had kissed her, but that was an extreme situation. She did not know if Applejack was simply giving a dying pony her wish, or if Applejack had discovered feelings of her own. Between that kiss and the horrible one in the barn, Rainbow Dash could make no assumptions on Applejack's feelings at all.

"I guess," she said to no one, "I guess I'll just have to talk to her."

"Talk to who?" asked a loud voice.

Rainbow Dash, surprised by the voice behind her, yelped. She tripped over her own hooves trying to get up and found herself on her side, the hat falling beside her.

She blushed for too many reasons to count as she spotted Applejack, in a beautiful dress which Rarity had made for the event, snickering at her.

Rainbow Dash blew her mane out of her eyes. "Oh, very funny."

Applejack smiled as she sat next to Rainbow Dash. "An eye for an eye, after all."

"Enjoying your party?" asked Rainbow Dash casually, sitting up, still feeling the heat in her cheeks.

"It was very nice of the town to do this for me," she replied, looking out over Ponyville.

Rainbow Dash chuckled. "You did save the whole town." She looked at Applejack seriously. "You did save me. Applejack... I don't know how I'll ever –"

Applejack's huff interrupted her. "It wasn't anything, Rainbow. You would have done the same for me."

Rainbow smiled. "I might have tried, but I don't know if I could have done that. You defeated a black dragon! You kicked a whole mountain down!"

"Just the mouth of the cave," Applejack mumbled with a smile. She looked down, suddenly ashamed. "Rainbow Dash... when I made that choice... when I chose to go back to town, instead of saving you... I don't know if I can ever forgive myself for that. I..."

Rainbow Dash shook her head and spoke seriously. "Applejack, you can't think like that. You did what you knew was right. And you managed to save me in the end, too."

Applejack demeanor turned right around. "Yeah, I did, didn't I?"

Rainbow Dash smiled slyly at her friend. "So, do you still feel like you're just an average, run of the mill farmer?"

Applejack chuckled, looking down at the enormous party thrown in her honor. "No... no, Ah guess not." Her worry that she was the least special of her friends had evaporated these last two weeks. She had defeated a creature that very few ponies in Equestria would dare face. She had saved her friends, the town, maybe even Equestria itself. If any other ponies had been in her place, they might not have come out alive. But she came out victorious.

Her eyes, moving back towards Rainbow Dash, suddenly snapped to the hat on the ground. "Hey, that's my hat!"

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Yes, it is."

"How did you get it back?"

"I dug it up," she said simply, with a smile.

There was a pause as Applejack took in the implications. "You dug it up?"

"Yep."

"You didn't have to do that, Rainbow... it's just a hat!"

"No, it's not," she said seriously, "it's *your* hat." She chuckled sweetly, biting the rim of the hat and placing it gently on Applejack's head. "Besides, isn't this the hat that nopony in Equestria looks as good in as you do?" she asked, adjusting it carefully with a hoof.

They both froze as the line brought them back to the embarrassing kiss in the barn. They blushed and looked away from each other as Rainbow Dash awkwardly pulled her hoof off of Applejack's head.

This was it, thought Rainbow Dash. They had to talk about it now or never. She opened her mouth to talk, but to her surprise, Applejack spoke first.

"Rainbow? I gotta ask you a question, and then... I gotta a few things to get off my chest."

Rainbow Dash just nodded, her heart pounding, looking at Applejack, who gazed out over the town. Would this be good news? Or heartbreak?

"Rainbow... in the barn... why did you kiss me?" Applejack's head turned after she asked the question, and her green eyes pierced into Rainbow Dash's.

Rainbow Dash paused thoughtfully, not knowing what the right thing to say was. "Applejack... I kissed you because..." The words 'I love you' felt like they were on the tip of her tongue. She feared that saying them would scare Applejack off and put an irremovable wedge in their friendship. She decided against saying it. "Well, look... I don't want you to get the idea I just kissed you because I think you're hot. I mean, I think you're very hot, don't get me wrong!" Rainbow Dash laughed nervously. "Wow, okay, I mean... I didn't kiss you *only* because I've got the hots for you. I kissed you because I realised that day that I... that you mean so much to me, and..."

Rainbow Dash looked once more into Applejack's curious eyes, and suddenly had a revelation. This was Applejack... she deserved to know the whole truth. Rainbow Dash's cheeks were more red than they had ever been in her life as she made her admission.

"Aw, shoot, AJ... I kissed you because I'm in love with you."

There was a long pause as Applejack collected her thoughts. Rainbow Dash felt like her heart would explode, it was pounding so hard.

Please don't run, thought Rainbow Dash. *Please.*

"That day," said Applejack carefully, looking over the town. "On the mountain. When I thought you were dead, ah... Ah didn't know what I would do without you. Ah was so heartbroken that you were gone, Ah felt so sad, so broken... Granny Smith sometimes says, 'You don't know how special something truly is until it's gone.' And for those few moments, you were gone, Rainbow Dash. Gone.

"But because you were gone I finally realized how much you mean to me... how much you're a part of my life, of who I am... how Ah wouldn't know what to do with myself if I ever lost you."

Rainbow Dash stared at Applejack hopefully.

"For a while after the kiss, Ah was trying to figure out if I was attracted to mares. And Ah guess I still don't really know the answer." Rainbow Dash's heart dropped. "But then Ah asked myself: Am I attracted to you?"

Applejack's blush told all.

Rainbow Dash could not help herself, and the words flew out of her mouth. "You *are* attracted to me!"

Rainbow Dash's sudden response caught Applejack off guard. "Well, ah, uh –"

Rainbow Dash's huge grin was half joyous, half wicked. "You're attracted to me! You think I'm sexy!"

"Uhm –"

"You do, don't you?!"

Applejack looked at Rainbow Dash and shyly nodded with a sly smile.

"YES!" yelled Rainbow Dash to the night sky. Applejack could not help but laugh at her unbridled joy. "Did you like the kisses?"

"Rainbow, wha–"

"The kisses, when we kissed, did you like those?!"

Applejack chuckled. "Well the first one Ah wasn't ready for. And the next one was pretty sad, but... yes. Yes, I liked kissin' you." Her blush deepened. "Kissin' you's like... kissin' electricity."

Rainbow Dash's wicked grin returned. "You taste like apples."

"No surprise there."

They both looked at each other before laughing.

"So," said Rainbow Dash, confidence in her sultry voice, "we're two ponies who are very special to one another." She stood up and walked closer to Applejack. "I seem to have fallen in love with you, and you seem to be awful fond of me. And of kissing me." She was only inches away from Applejack now. "What should we do about it?"

Rainbow Dash's seductive tone had its desired effect. "Ah think Ah have an idea," said Applejack. She leaned in and kissed Rainbow Dash.

This kiss was completely different than the other two, and was more enjoyable for both of them. Gone was the one-sidedness of the first kiss, and the tragedy of the second. This was a kiss of wholehearted passion. They both enjoyed every second of it.

The kiss broke, and they looked deeply into each other's eyes.

"If we start dating, there's one condition," said Rainbow Dash, with humor in her voice.

"What's that?" asked Applejack.

"You gotta wear your hair down more often."

Applejack laughed, and kissed Rainbow Dash again, enjoying the kiss she had no idea she had wanted for so long.

And as she kissed Rainbow Dash, the word that had been stuck in her mind on the hill in the orchard floated in again. But it floated in for an entirely different reason. It floated in because she had finally shown herself the truth. The insecure fears which developed on the hill in the apple orchard that night were gone. As she kissed Rainbow Dash, the mare she cared for so much, the one she saved from near death, she knew she hadn't been left behind. She finally saw what she was.

Special.