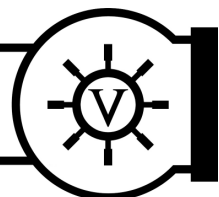


Five Should Be Enough

Arcaium

PONY FICTION VAULT



Applejack woke up.

Blinking away the pain that even the faint rays of the sunrise poking through her curtains caused her, she rubbed at her eyes in a vain effort to rouse herself further.

Heck, I feel like I've been up all night.

She rolled out of bed, shaking her head free of the cloud that persisted in fugging her mind, and staggered over to the window, yanking the curtains aside. The sudden burst of light made her recoil, but the spots in her eyes soon died and she looked out, a smile creeping onto her face as she took in the sight.

Sweet Apple Acres lay before her, drenched in early morning warmth. The well-cut grass waved in the lazy breeze, matching the slow dance of the leaves adorning the apple trees that stretched as far as the eye could see. Shadows stubbornly clung beneath the eaves of the larger buildings as the sun continued its relentless march skywards. The sky itself was cloudless, bar an errant cumulus already being shunted clear by a team of Weather Patrol pegasi.

Applejack nodded to herself, all tiredness forgotten.

It's a beautiful day in Ponyville. A good day for working.

She grabbed her hat, flipped it onto her head, and headed downstairs.

Granny Smith was, as usual, already up; the sound of her eccentric methods of cooking clattering and sizzling from the kitchen. Applejack had always puzzled at how Granny, who spent so much of the average day asleep she had once “forgotten what midday looked like,” was always wide-awake before dawn, preparing breakfast and setting the farm’s financial affairs in order. A cantankerous voice joined the racket.

“If you’re gonna stand outside my kitchen, you can help me out *in* my kitchen!”

Applejack laughed and trotted in, joining her elderly relative at the stove.

“Sorry, Granny, but I just couldn’t help but be stunned by them delicious smells you’re creating.”

“None of your lip, young’un! Come and give your Granny a helping hoof!”

Despite Granny's insistence that the making of toast and eggs required multiple pans, both stoves, a broken ladle and, at one point, a large hedgehog, breakfast was prepared in good time. As they sat down to eat, Apple Bloom entered, preceded by an enormous yawn.

"M... M... Morning."

"Hey there, Lil' Sis! You're up bright and early. You ain't helping out today, remember?"

Apple Bloom plonked herself into a chair and began nibbling at a slice of toast.

"Sweetie Belle's with her sister in the afternoon, so we're crusading early."

Applejack smiled at her sister's dedication to her friends. A thought struck her.

"Hey, speaking of siblings, where's Mac?"

Granny rolled her eyes.

"Already out working the fields! I say to him, 'Listen here, Little Mac—you keep working so hard, you're gonna get yourself in trouble one day!' 'Course, you can guess what he told me."

"Eeeyup."

Apple Bloom's giggle seemed to break Granny's momentary irritation and the three ponies laughed together. Applejack gulped down the last of her meal and stood up, tipping her hat to her family.

"Welp, I'm off to start the day! I'll see you later, Granny, and... Apple Bloom?"

Her sister glanced up at her apprehensively, fearing the usual lecture on safety.

"Why not help Rarity out with your friend? Maybe you'll get your dressmakin' cutie mark!"

Winking, Applejack left the kitchen, chuckling at Apple Bloom's faux gag.

• • •

Applejack wiped the sweat from her forehead, breathing heavily in the bright midday sun.

“Phew! We all done here?”

Big Macintosh nodded and nudged the large bushel of apples at his hooves.

“Eeeyup.” He then turned and wryly nodded at the hundreds of trees yet to be bucked.
“Aaand nope.”

Applejack sighed. The applebuck season was turning out to be almost as difficult as last year’s, even with the help of her brother. Still, there was no need in begrudging success.

“We still gotta work on that barn... You reckon we could get in a few more trees before the day is done?”

Big Mac stood thoughtfully for a moment, weighing the tasks of the day ahead in his mind, then nodded.

“Eeeyup.”

“Alright, let’s get to it.”

Big Mac hoisted the bushel onto his back and together they strolled purposefully to the nearest tree, an enormous specimen that towered over its brethren. It was one of the first normal apple trees the Apples had planted after settling in the area, and was still producing a fine crop year after year. Applejack looked up and whistled. Big Mac began to move, but Applejack help up a hoof.

“Don’t worry, I can handle this one myself. Can’t have you hurting yourself like last year!”

Big Mac gave a short chuckle and stepped aside. Applejack eyed the large tree and briefly regretted her adavance. Then she tutted, turned around and squared herself, ready for the blow.

Come on, AJ, this ain’t the playground. If there’s one thing you’ve learned from your friends it’s that it ain’t a crime to get help when you need it.

She took a deep breath, bunched her muscles, then let the kick fly.

She had expected the usual strong-yet-springy resistance—for the trunk to absorb the impact, vibrating with enough force to knock its delicious crop free. She had expected a kick, a rustle, and a series of thumps.

What she had not expected was her hooves to tear through the bark like a rock through thin glass, or to lose her balance and tumble to the ground as her kick's uninterrupted momentum took her legs out from under her. She had not expected a series of jagged cracks to rapidly form around the trunk before splitting violently, or for the entire tree to come crashing down towards her with a sound like the creaking of a thousand doors.

She certainly did not expect, as the falling trunk loomed over her and filled her vision with oncoming doom, for Big Mac to push her out of the way.

Her brother's weight slammed into her, sending her rolling across the grass as tree met ground with a thunderous crash behind her. For a few moments, Applejack's world was nothing but spiralling confusion and pain, until she slid to a halt several feet from the base of the toppled tree.

She slowly pulled herself to her hooves and winced as she felt the distinctive prangs in her chest that signified a broken rib, maybe two, where Big Mac had collided with her. She slowly turned around, gritting her teeth.

"Darnit, Macintosh! I appreciate the help, but did you have to hit me so darn... so..."

Her voice trailed off as she faced the corpse of the tree. The great trunk, seeping heart-rot within now exposed, lay like a fallen giant; more than a hundred years of growth and harvest cut short by nothing more than a lucky fungus.

Applejack's eyes followed the trunk. Her gaze moved from the vital crack at its base, along the twisted bark, past the second crack where the trunk had snapped as it landed... to the limp form below it.

A red coat, tainting the green grass around it with a pool of spreading colour. A heaving chest, struggling to draw a breath. A smiling face, secure in the knowledge of a job well done.

Applejack galloped to her brother, the searing pain in her chest causing her to stumble, falling to her knees at his side.

"Macintosh! You alright?! C'mon, Macintosh, use your words!"

Sucking in a deep, rattling breath, her brother smiled his wry smile.

"I reckon... nope."

“This ain’t no time for jokes, Mac! This surely...” Applejack forced herself to stand and braced herself against the fallen trunk, thrusting all her weight against it. “This... surely... ain’t... no time... to be making... jokes!”

Her nerves screamed at her as she threw herself at the tree over and over again. It shifted, but only slightly. Even hollowed by the creeping fungus within, the trunk was still too heavy for her to move by herself, hindered as she was by her injuries.

She felt a gentle hoof touch her leg, compelling her to cease her fruitless efforts. She looked down at her brother, his calm expression blurred by the tears that threatened to blind her.

“Can’t have you hurting yourself, now.”

Applejack fell to her knees again, no longer able to withstand the pain. She lay next to her brother as the breath left him, resting her head on his unmoving neck. She gritted her teeth as her tears mingled with the blood matted in his mane, cursing her own weakness and the world that would kill a good, strong pony just for saving another’s life.

“Ain’t me you should be worrying about, you big dummy... Ain’t me you should be worrying about...”

She cried until her eyes burned, choking back the tears every step of the way.

At last, she stood up, ignoring her creaking ribs. She took one last look at her departed brother through red-rimmed eyes, his blood glinting in the midday sun, then turned to face the road to Ponyville. The tangled ball of sorrow in her mind was replaced with a single thread of white-hot determination.

I ain’t gonna stand for this.

Then everything went black.

• • •

“Applejack? I thought you were working today. Wait, are you okay? You look hur—”

“Big Mac’s dead.”

• • •

Applejack woke up.

Blinking away the pain that even the faint rays of the sunrise poking through her curtains caused her, she rubbed at her eyes in a vain effort to rouse herself further.

Heck, I feel like I've been up all night.

She lay still for a moment, staring at the ceiling. The cold claws of the dream pricked at the edges of her mind, and she shivered.

I hope I don't have no more dreams like that for a long time.

She rolled out of bed, shaking her head free of the cloud that persisted in fugging her mind, and staggered over to the window, yanking the curtains aside. The sudden burst of light made her recoil, but the spots in her eyes soon died and she looked out, a smile creeping onto her face as she took in the sight.

Sweet Apple Acres lay before her, drenched in morning warmth. The well-cut grass waved in the lazy breeze, matching the slow dance of the leaves adorning the apple trees that stretched as far as the eye could see. Shadows stubbornly clung beneath the eaves of the larger buildings as the sun continued its relentless march skywards. The sky itself was cloudless, bar an errant cumulus already being shunted clear by a team of Weather Patrol pegasi.

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“If you’re gonna stand outside my kitchen, you can help me out *in* my kitchen!”

Applejack laughed and trotted in, joining her elderly relative at the stove.

“Sorry, Granny, but I just couldn’t help but be stunned by them delicious smells you’re creating.”

“None of your lip, young’un! Come and give your Granny a helping hoof!”

Applejack stopped for a moment, lost in thought.

“What’s taking you so long, young’un?”

Applejack shook her head.

Huh. Must be one of them déjà vus.

“Coming, Granny!”

Despite Granny’s insistence that the making of toast and eggs required multiple pans, both stoves, a broken ladle and, at one point, a large hedgehog, breakfast was prepared in good time. As they sat down to eat, Apple Bloom entered, preceded by an enormous yawn.

“M... M... Morning.”

“Hey there, Lil’ Sis! You’re up bright and early. You ain’t helping out today, remember?”

Apple Bloom plonked herself into a chair and began nibbling at a slice of toast.

“Sweetie Belle’s with her sister in the afternoon, so we’re crusading early.”

Applejack smiled at her sister’s dedication to her friends. A thought struck her.

“Hey, speaking of siblings, where’s Mac?”

Granny rolled her eyes.

“Already out working the fields! I say to him, ‘Listen here, Little Mac—you keep working so hard, you’re gonna get yourself in trouble one day!’ ‘Course, you can guess what he told me.”

“Eeeyup.”

Apple Bloom's giggle seemed to break Granny's momentary irritation and the three ponies laughed together. Applejack gulped down the last of her meal and stood up, tipping her hat to her family.

"Welp, I'm off to start the day! I'll see you later, Granny, and... Apple Bloom?"

Her sister glanced up at her apprehensively, fearing the usual lecture on safety. There was a moment's pause.

"Stay safe, huh?"

Apple Bloom rolled her eyes and replied with a dutiful "Yes, ma'am" as Applejack left the room.

• • •

Applejack wiped the sweat from her forehead, breathing heavily in the bright midday sun.

"Phew! We all done here?"

Big Macintosh nudged the large bushel of apples at his hooves.

"Eeeyup." He then turned and wryly nodded at the hundreds of trees yet to be bucked. "Aaand nope."

Applejack sighed. The applebuck season was turning out to be almost as difficult as last year's, even with the help of her brother. Still, there was no need in begrudging success.

"We still gotta work on that barn... You reckon we could get in a few more trees before the day is done?"

Big Mac stood thoughtfully for a moment, weighing the tasks of the day ahead in his mind, then nodded.

"Eeeyup."

"Alright, let's..."

For the third time that day, she stared into space for a few moments. Try as she might, she could not stop her thoughts returning to her awful dream. It was silly, and foalish, but...

“You know what? They’ll keep. Can’t let the rest of the farm go to ruin just because we want to get the apples in early! Ain’t that right, Mac?”

Her brother shrugged and hoisted the bushel of apples onto his back. The two Apples trotted to the nearby cart and deposited their cargo. Macintosh slotted his yoke into place and, blinking in the midday sun, they set off for the barn.

• • •

Tilting her head as she peered closer, Applejack squinted at the peeling red surface of the barn’s inside wall. She tapped a hoof at it thoughtfully, recoiling as a puff of moist dust burst free. Coughing and waving her hat about her to clear the cloying red cloud, she called down to Big Mac.

“Yup, that’s...” She hacked her way through a fresh bout of coughing. “That’s definitely rotten!”

Big Mac rolled his eyes. Applejack could understand the lapse in his usual unflappable demeanour.

“Seems like we spend more time fixing up this barn than using it, huh?”

“Eeeyup.”

Applejack stood up, stretching out a crick in her back as she did so. She trotted across the creaking loft, kicking up dust and hay on her way to the ladder leading down. Climbing nimbly down, she clapped her brother on the shoulder as she came to a halt beside him.

“Welp, you’re up, Mac.”

Big Mac took a step towards the ladder, but stopped at the sound of a familiar voice lilting into the barn.

“Sis? Big Brother? You in there?”

Apple Bloom poked her head around the door, breaking into a grin as she caught sight of her siblings. Applejack trotted over and ruffled her sister's mane, to Apple Bloom's consternation.

"Hey there, Apple Bloom. How'd your crusading go?"

Apple Bloom knocked her sister's hoof from her head and began to gesticulate wildly as she recounted the events of the day.

"It was *amazing!* We went down to the river like we planned, but then Scootaloo was late, so we kinda threw stones for a bit, but then Scootaloo arrived, and she was riding in this enormous..."

As Apple Bloom continued, thoroughly absorbed in her tale, Applejack grinned at Big Mac over her shoulder. She cocked her head up at the loft, and Big Mac nodded.

"...and then the *whole room* turned into jelly, only it was way bouncier and smelled kinda like fish..."

Applejack turned back to her sister, desperately trying to conceal a smile. She felt bad for laughing at the Crusaders' antics, but every story Apple Bloom brought home sounded crazier than the last. She would sometimes joke that her sister was surely soon to receive her tall tales cutie mark, to which Apple Bloom would pout and declare that "any pony with a lying cutie mark wouldn't be no sister to the Element of Honesty."

"...but then Sweetie Belle had to leave, so we rounded up the manticore cubs and headed home. So... what are you doing? Looking for that ticking sound?"

Applejack was immediately jolted out of her pleasant reflection. She heard Big Mac's hoof-falls on the ladder stop dead.

"...Ticking sound?"

Apple Bloom nodded happily.

"Yup! Remember a couple weeks back, when we was having our Cutie Mark Crusader Barn Fortress Slumber Party? We kept hearing this weird ticking sound coming from the walls! Scootaloo reckoned it might have been a bomb, but Sweetie Belle said that was..."

Ticking on a summer night, and for weeks now. Oh no.

The barn groaned.

Applejack picked Apple Bloom up by the scruff of her neck and tossed her as far as she could outside. She whirled around to face her brother.

“Big Mac! Clicksinging beetles!”

Big Mac had already leapt from the ladder. He landed with a thud, and the barn shook. The groaning became a hissing roar of shattering wood, and the roof sagged. As Big Mac galloped toward her, lowering his head, Applejack was gripped by a vision of a falling tree blocking out the midday sun and a pool of red in a sea of green.

No! Wait!

The barn collapsed inwards, the voracious larvae of the clicksong beetle having finally finished their deadly work. Her brother slammed into her, throwing her to the dirt road outside. She cried out in pain as she felt a rib, maybe two, crack. Coughing away the plume of dust her landing had created, she watched in horror as the barn crumbled like a paper cup, crushed beneath the uncaring hoof of some great pony in the sky.

She and Apple Bloom looked on as Big Mac smiled warmly before vanishing beneath the tumbling structure.

The dust settled.

The moment passed. Both ponies leapt to their hooves and galloped to the wreckage and began desperately pulling at fallen timber, clawing hoof and tooth at the decrepit but heavy beams.

Applejack got through first. She gasped, her hoof rising to her mouth in shock. Apple Bloom slowly walked to her side, eyes wide and shining in fear.

“Sis? Did... Have you found him?”

Applejack turned away from the barn and took a deep breath, clenching her teeth. Apple Bloom stepped closer, lip trembling.

“...Sis?”

Applejack knelt before her sister, tears glinting in the midday sun.

“Just... don’t go looking, Apple Bloom. Ain’t no thing for fillies to be looking at.”

Apple Bloom came to the only conclusion she could come to and began to cry, letting loose great wracking sobs that shook her small body as Applejack clutched her tightly.

Then everything went black.

• • •

“Dangit, Twilight, what’s taking so long?!”

“I don’t... It’s this spell! It makes no sense! Star Swirl wrote it in code, for goodness’ sake! It doesn’t even explain why it does what it does; it just says, ‘So that lines may be drawn, the wheel turns.’”

• • •

Applejack woke up, sweating and gasping for breath.

Closing her eyes against the faint rays of sunrise poking through the curtains, she rubbed at her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

Just another dream, AJ. Dreaming in a dream. Ain’t unheard of.

She rolled out of bed, shaking her head free of the cloud that persisted in fugging her mind, and staggered over to the window, yanking the curtains aside. The sudden burst of light made her recoil, but the spots in her eyes soon died and she looked out.

Sweet Apple Acres lay before her, drenched in morning warmth. The well-cut grass waved in the lazy breeze, matching the slow dance of the leaves adorning the apple trees that stretched as far as the eye could see. Shadows stubbornly clung beneath the eaves of the larger buildings as the sun continued its relentless march skywards. The sky itself was cloudless, bar an errant cumulus already being shunted clear by a team of Weather Patrol pegasi.

Applejack bit her lip, eyes darting across the vista, searching for discrepancies.

Exactly the same. It’s all exactly the same.

She grabbed her hat and, taking comfort in the practiced gesture, flipped it onto her head. She trotted downstairs.

Granny Smith was, as usual, already up; the sound of her eccentric methods of cooking clattering and sizzling from the kitchen. Applejack walked cautiously to the kitchen door, fearful of what she might hear. And, sure enough, a cantankerous voice joined the racket.

“If you’re gonna stand outside my kitchen, you can help me out *in* my kitchen!”

Applejack froze.

It is the same. All of it.

Granny’s head poked out of the kitchen, peering askew at her granddaughter.

“You okay there, young’un? You got the look about you like a windigo been running through your bedroom!”

Applejack opened and closed her mouth, trying to form words.

“Just a... bad dream, Granny. Hit me harder than I’d like.”

No farm work. Can’t let Mac near anything dangerous.

“In fact, I’m feeling pretty under the weather all round. Might have to sit this one out... Maybe get Mac to help me with the books?”

Granny wobbled into the hallway and frowned.

“Now, you was fine yesterday...”

Applejack looked at Granny hopefully, trying her hardest to look terribly ill. Whether Granny accepted the subterfuge or saw the pleading behind her gaze, she shrugged and smiled.

“Never let it be said Apples don’t go looking out for each other! But you ain’t looking bed-ridden. How ‘bout you and Little Mac go into town and pick up my shopping?”

Even as the fear pressed down on her, Applejack found herself rolling her eyes.

“More pans, Granny?”

Granny gently clapped her about the ear with a wrinkled hoof.

“I’ll stop buying pans when we stop selling zap apples! I just spent all last season teaching your sister what’s needed, I don’t want to have to do it a fourth time!”

Applejack raised a hoof to her stinging ear and smiled wanly.

“Sorry. I’ll be off right now.”

Granny turned on her heels and trotted back into the kitchen, muttering about uppity granddaughters and the lack of respect in the youth of today and how in her time they didn’t have none of these high-faluting cooking appliances...

• • •

Applejack found herself smiling, despite the uncertainty that dogged her every thought. Ponyville’s main street was on fine form, full to the brim with yelling marketeers, gamboling foals, and ponies just plain relaxing. As used as she was to living apart from the bustle of the town, the presence of so many good ponies always made her feel welcome.

Surely ain’t nothing bad gonna happen around here.

She glanced to her side. Big Mac strolled purposefully alongside her. She caught herself sighing in relief at his continued presence and frowned.

Come on, now, silly filly. Big Mac ain’t going anywhere. No point getting all worked up over a bad dream.

Even as she admonished herself, she spotted their destination. The two siblings trotted into the town square, weaving through the crowds until they reached Granny’s favoured pot stand. The green-maned earth pony’s eyes became slightly wild as she caught sight of them, placing her forelegs on the counter and scanning the crowd fearfully. As Applejack and Big Mac stepped up to her stall, she cast a conspiratorial glance about her and whispered.

“Your, uh, Granny isn’t around... is she? Only, I’ve got merchandise to protect...”

The Apples chuckled. Granny’s reputation preceded her.

“That’s alright, Daisy, none of your pans are gonna get nibbled today.”

Daisy slumped back to all fours and let out a deep breath.

“Phew. I’m starting to run low on kitchenware that couldn’t be used to identify her in an emergency.”

Applejack stiffened.

It’s just an off-colour joke, AJ. If it weren’t for those dreams, it’d be funny. Calm down, for pity’s sake!

Daisy rummaged in the space beneath the counter and pulled a form free, dropping it on the counter. Grabbing an ink-slathered stamp in her mouth, she decisively signed the paper with a practiced dart of her head.

“Fere, it’f all pai—” She spat out the stamp irritably. “There. All paid for. It’s round the back in the market warehouse, Bay 15. You know the way, right?”

“Eeeyup.”

Daisy smiled warmly.

“Okay! It’s great doing business with you again. I just wish I knew why you Apples needed so many. Not that I’m complaining!” Her smile faded slightly. “Oh, and don’t worry, they’ve all been...” she massaged her jaw absentmindedly, “... tested.”

Minutes later, the Apples stood at the entrance to the market warehouse. Any pony with a regular market stall was granted space in the commonly-held building and the Apples had dealings with most of them. Applejack turned to her brother and cocked her head toward the nearby door marked “Office.”

“You want to get the stuff while I handle the paperwork? I know you prefer lifting things to writing them.”

Big Mac nodded as emphatically as his laconic demeanour would allow and nudged the warehouse’s main door open, striding into the musty interior. Applejack trotted over to the office door and knocked, opening the door and poking her head in without waiting for an answer.

“Yoohoo! Anypony in here?”

“Gah!”

A young beetroot-coloured earth pony was inside, scribbling her signature at the uninhabited desk. She dropped the pen in her mouth with a shriek at Applejack's unexpected entrance, but after seeing who had surprised her she sighed with relief, clutching at her chest with a hoof and breathing heavily.

"Oh, it's just you, Applejack. Don't do that!"

Applejack chuckled and walked into the office proper.

"Sorry if I scared you, Sweetfire! Wasn't expecting anypony to be in here with the market in full swing and all!"

Sweetfire shook her head, looking grim.

"Actually, there shouldn't be. I'm only here to help lock up."

Applejack raised an eyebrow.

"Shouldn't be? There something wrong with the place?"

"Apparently. I only came to pick up my usual order of greens, but Squared Away told me that the warehouse itself has some kind of structural issue that nopony's noticed 'til now and it's way too dangerous to go in. He left me here to—"

Applejack cut her off incisively, voice as cold as the fear that enveloped her.

"Did you say... structural issues?"

Sweetfire blinked at the interruption.

"Uh, yeah. Like I said, he left me here to lock up while he went to inform the M—Hey, where are you going?! It's dangerous, I said!"

Ignoring her, Applejack reared and kicked down the interior door of the office with a single, desperate blow. Galloping into the warehouse without a thought for Sweetfire's warning cries, she began to search for her brother in the echoing gloom with barely-concealed panic.

"Mac?! Where are you, Mac?!"

It's gonna happen again.

She raced through the warehouse, surrounded by tall crates, looming beams... creaking wood. There was a crash from deeper within the cavernous building, and Applejack cried out in fear.

“Mac, why ain’t you answering me?!”

She galloped on, hooves kicking up clouds of dust as they pounded the hard floor. She rounded a corner, turning into the aisle that held Daisy’s bay. As the dim light of the warehouse’s lamps flickered over the wreckage of the heavy crate, Applejack saw him.

In the gloom, her brother had stumbled into a heavy wardrobe, which now lay in the wreckage of a load-bearing beam. Applejack skidded to a halt at Big Mac’s side, even as he waved her away.

“You alright, Mac?!”

There was a low rumble, and the high wooden frame of the shelves began to shift unnervingly in the shadows. Applejack glanced up nervously, black certainty taking hold of her.

“We gotta get outta here befo—”

The shelves snapped with a loud crack. Crates of pans tumbled towards them in a landslide of wood and metal. Applejack felt a familiar impact, thrown to the floor beyond the reach of the falling debris. A pain in her side, a sickening thud amidst a storm of splinters, and a terrible silence.

She didn’t look up. She already knew what she would see. The only sound was the faint chiming of the office clock.

Everything went black.

• • •

“Okay, I think we’re all set. But... are you sure you still want to do this, AJ? After everything I just told you?”

“Yes, I’m darn sure! I ain’t gonna live in a world where my brother died saving my life.”

• • •

Applejack sat bolt upright.

She leapt out of bed and galloped downstairs, pausing only to jam her hat onto her head, like a helmet against the horror.

Granny Smith was, as usual, already up; the sound of her eccentric methods of cooking clattering and sizzling from the kitchen. Applejack waited, ears pricked.

“If you’re gonna stand outside my kitchen, you can help me out *in* my kitchen!”

Applejack galloped on.

• • •

She found him in the fields, where she had found him three times before.

“Oh mercy, you’re alive! No, wait, ‘course you are—it ain’t midday yet and there’s no wood around.”

Her brother raised an eyebrow as Applejack ranted and gasped for breath.

“You okay there, AJ?”

Applejack forced herself to calm down through deep, wobbling breaths.

“I’m... I’m fine. But you gotta listen, brother. Something terrible is happening.”

She explained as best she could, gesturing wildly at the sunrise she had seen three times now, marred only by an errant cumulus already being shunted clear by a team of Weather Patrol pegasi.

Her brother listened, eyes widening at the frantic tales of his own repeated death. He looked down at his sister, the pony who had stood up to Nightmare Moon herself, as she glanced fearfully about an open field as if death itself were about to swoop down and claim him there.

She finished her frenzied tale and looked him in the eye as if daring him to disbelieve her.

“You understand, Mac? I know it sounds crazy, but... You hear what I’m saying?”

Big Mac’s strong hoof on her shoulder was all the answer she needed.

“Eeyup. Wouldn’t be much of an Element of Honesty if you were lying, now would you?”

Applejack let out the breath she had been holding, resting her head tenderly on her brother’s hoof. The moment passed, and they looked out across the fields.

“So... you got any ideas, Mac?”

Big Mac’s expression was unreadable as he gazed into the vast orchard.

“I reckon we take this thing head on.”

“Say what?”

He turned to her, all confidence.

“You said it yourself. You know what’s coming and, from what you’re telling me, if I make it past midday I reckon I’m in the clear.”

Applejack bit her lip.

“Just run the day as it was, keeping clear of what took you down? I ain’t sure about this... What if something goes wrong?”

Big Mac shrugged.

“Then maybe it was meant to go wrong.”

• • •

Applejack wiped the sweat from her forehead, breathing heavily in the bright midday sun, and thought carefully. She turned to her brother as he hoisted the heavy bushel of apples onto his back.

“Mac... This is it. This is where we were the first time.”

He raised an eyebrow and she pointed to the tree that had set her on her nightmare path.

“I insisted on bucking that tree, but it was sick with the rot and came crashing down. You pushed me out of the way, and... well... That left you *in* the way.”

Big Mac stepped up to the tree and examined it closely.

“Eeyup. That’s one unhealthy tree, alright. Be sad to see her go.”

“So... we moving on?”

Big Mac nodded, smiling.

“Eeyup.”

Marking the tree to be dealt with later, they strolled on under the midday sun.

• • •

The next few hours were spent bucking apples safely, checking every tree for signs of the disease that had claimed the first. Applejack found her mood lifting as the day went on. Nothing was going wrong. The day was nearly over, blissful sunset giving way to twilight. Midday was long past.

Her brother was safe.

“Hey now, what’s that noise?”

Applejack surfaced from her reverie. A low, crackling roar trembled faintly across the hills. Their eyes followed their ears to the red haze hanging over the orchard in the distance, a haze that Applejack had taken for the last rays of sunset.

Fire.

Big Mac wordlessly dropped the apples he carried and began to gallop toward the fire. Applejack cried out after him.

“Mac! No! You can’t!”

Her brother slowed, and turned to face her sternly. She shrunk away from his gaze, sunk in sudden shame. He spoke, voice low and steady.

“I ain’t gonna live in a world where my family died saving my life.”

With that, he galloped back into the shadows. Gritting her teeth and biting back tears, Applejack followed.

• • •

She ran through the burning orchard, almost blinded by the smoke and flames. She and her brother had intended to find the firefighting group that would have inevitably have formed, but a sudden breeze had spread the blaze rapidly in their direction. In the confusion, they had been separated.

Gotta find him. Burning wood everywhere—something's gotta fall!

Her lungs burned as the ashen air rasped at her throat, and her legs ached as she tripped over fallen branches and dodged sudden goutts of flame caused by the perilous wind. But even as her body slowly failed her, her mind stayed sharp and determined. He had survived. The pattern had been broken. The pattern *could* be broken.

A stray root clipped her forehoof unexpectedly, invisible in the dancing shadows of the burning orchard. She stumbled, unable to find her footing as her legs refused to respond fast enough. Tripping over herself, she slammed into the blackened trunk of a burning tree.

Cursing, she slumped to her knees, hurriedly checking her bruised flank. No major damage. All she had to do was get up and she could—

She heard a crack.

Slowly, almost unable to bring herself to look, she lifted her gaze to the tree she had collided with. A jagged line ran across its circumference where she had hit it, slowly widening. She tried to stand, to pull herself clear, but somehow could not tear her attention from the crackling innards of the tree, or the boiling sap that bubbled free like golden blood. A rhythmic pounding crept into the edge of hearing, and she tore her gaze away just as gravity tore the tree's top half free.

The pieces clicked together, and Applejack pulled herself up, ready to leap free. The heavy trunk fell towards her. The pounding grew louder. She bunched the muscles in her legs... but she was too late.

Big Mac crashed into her. She felt her ribs snap, heard the tree collapse, heard her brother's grunt of pain. And she knew it had happened again.

Everything went black.

• • •

"Well... if you're sure. You understand the rules?"

“I got it. Five should be enough.”

• • •

Applejack woke up.

I remember now. That’s why this is happening. I made it happen.

She lay there, staring at the ceiling and into herself.

But the wheel’s turned, and I reckon I’ve drawn the right line.

She swung herself out of bed and strode purposefully to her door, flipping her hat onto her head on the way. Down the stairs she went, ignoring the clatter of pans from the kitchen and walking past before Granny could call her. She left the house, blinking in the bright sunrise. Shading her eyes, she looked out over the fields to where her brother toiled.

I got a plan, Big Mac. Today I save your life.

• • •

Big Mac stared at her.

“You want me to what?”

“I want you to sit here. All day. Do nothing.”

Big Mac scratched his head.

“Listen, AJ... I believe what you’re saying, but I ain’t sure how that’s gonna help.”

Gritting her teeth in frustration, Applejack waved a hoof at the expanse of orange-tinged grassland that surrounded them.

“Because there’s no danger, don’t you get it? Four times now, I’ve seen this! Something wooden falls, you save me and take the hit. This is the one place in Ponyville you’re safe! Ain’t no trees or buildings around to collapse, ain’t no danger for me to get into!”

“I just reckon we should take this thing hea—”

“That’s what you said the last time and it didn’t do a lick of good!”

Big Mac held up a hoof placatingly.

“Easy there, Sis.”

Applejack looked away, ashamed at her outburst.

“I’m sorry, Mac, I just... I’ve killed you four times, and I ain’t gonna do it again.”

• • •

The two Apples sat in the heat of the midday sun, looking out over the fields. They sat in silence, watching the day go by.

“Mac?”

“Eeyup?”

“In the last loop, you said something to me. I was worried your plan of just bulldozing through this thing would go wrong, and you said ‘Maybe it was meant to go wrong.’ What in the hay does that mean?”

Big Mac chewed his strand of hay thoughtfully, staring into space. Applejack glanced at him as he thought. The faint sounds of Ponyville could be heard on the breeze, mingling with the shouts of farm ponies and the calls of birds. Big Mac’s deaths seemed nothing more than distant nightmares, far detached from the peaceful moment they shared. At last, her brother spoke.

“Everypony dies sometime. You can try to wrestle them back from the brink, or keep them safe from anything that could hurt them... But everypony dies. I ain’t saying it’s written in the stars, but there comes a time when fighting just doesn’t work no more. Remember when old Rusty went?”

Applejack nodded, thinking back to the day in her youth when the ancient pony had collapsed in the sun. Big Mac continued.

“We were all running around like pigs in a fire trying to get help, or give him some water, or anything. But he just lay there smiling, even when the doctor finally showed and told us he wasn’t gonna make it.”

Big Mac met his sister’s gaze, silently urging her to take his words to heart.

“He knew it was time. That him going out working was the way he wanted to go, not kicking and screaming. There was no more fighting to be done.”

Applejack swallowed. She had never heard her brother speak so much at once, nor with such heavy tone.

“If that’s what you think... why’re you sitting in this field with me?”

Big Mac laughed.

“Maybe I’m just as stubborn as you are. And I reckon if all the fighting that needs doing is a nice lie down on a good day...”

He ruffled his sister’s mane as if she were a foal again.

“Well, it’s been a busy season.”

• • •

Everything went black.

• • •

“Applejack? I thought you were working today. Wait, are you okay? You look hur—”

“Five wasn’t enough.”

“What are you talking about, AJ? Five what?”

“...Nothing’s happened yet, has it? That dang spell reset you too... I got some explaining to do.”

• • •

“So you’re saying you’ve already been through these loops? And nothing changed?”

“Happened just like you said it would. Five times I saw my brother die. After the first, I knew it was coming, but no matter what I tried I couldn’t stop it. Fifth time round, I remembered you casting the spell but... it didn’t help. I couldn’t draw the lines. I thought I had.”

• • •

“There’s a little more. You said I was rushed the first time? Well, I missed something. It’s not much, but...”

— “To my eternal shame, I am unable to perform that which destiny demands of me, and I am sorry. To those who would follow in my hoofsteps, know this. Destiny will have its way. It simply does not care with whom.” —

...AJ? Are you okay?”

“I’m just dandy, Twilight. I’m gonna need you to cast that spell again.”

• • •

“Applejack... don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“I’ll have had enough when I can go to sleep knowing my brother’s alive.”

Everything went black.

• • •

Applejack woke up, a single revelation gripping her above all else.

That’s it. It ain’t enough just to keep him safe.

Blinking away the pain that even the faint rays of the sunrise poking through her curtains caused her, she rubbed at her eyes in a vain effort to rouse herself further.

No time for sleeping, AJ. You’ve got a job to do.

She rolled out of bed, shaking her head free of the cloud that persisted in fugging her mind, and staggered over to the window, yanking the curtains aside. The sudden burst of light made her recoil, but the spots in her eyes soon died and she looked out, a smile creeping onto her face as she took in the sight.

Sweet Apple Acres lay before her, drenched in morning warmth. The well-cut grass waved in the lazy breeze, matching the slow dance of the leaves adorning the apple trees that stretched as far as the eye could see. Shadows stubbornly clung beneath the eaves of the larger buildings as the sun continued its relentless march skywards. The sky itself was cloudless, bar an errant cumulus already being shunted clear by a team of Weather Patrol pegasi.

Applejack nodded to herself, all tiredness forgotten.

It's a beautiful day in Ponyville. Won't be the last.

She grabbed her hat, flipped it onto her head, and headed downstairs.

Granny Smith was, as usual, already up; the sound of her eccentric methods of cooking clattering and sizzling from the kitchen. A cantankerous voice joined the racket.

“If you’re gonna stand outside my kitchen, you can help me out *in* my kitchen!”

Applejack laughed and trotted in, joining her elderly relative at the stove.

“Sorry, Granny, but I just couldn’t help but be stunned by them delicious smells you’re creating.”

“None of your lip, young’un! Come and give your Granny a helping hoof!”

Despite Granny’s insistence that the making of toast and eggs required multiple pans, both stoves, a broken ladle and, at one point, a large hedgehog, breakfast was prepared in good time. Applejack savoured every moment of the calamitous concoction, laughing joyfully at every mishap. As they sat down to eat, Apple Bloom entered, preceded by an enormous yawn.

“M... M... Morning.”

“Hey there, Lil’ Sis! You’re up bright and early. You ain’t helping out today, remember?”

Apple Bloom plonked herself into a chair and began nibbling at a slice of toast.

“Sweetie Belle’s with her sister in the afternoon, so we’re crusading early.”

Applejack smiled at her sister’s dedication to her friends. She was glad that Apple Bloom had such good friends as Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo.

“Mac’s in the fields, right?”

Granny rolled her eyes.

“Already out working! I say to him, ‘Listen here, Little Mac—you keep working so hard, you’re gonna get yourself in trouble one day!’ ‘Course, you can guess what he told me.”

“Eeeyup.”

Apple Bloom’s giggle seemed to break Granny’s momentary irritation and the three ponies laughed together. Applejack gulped down the last of her meal, as much as she wished to linger, and stood up, tipping her hat to her family.

“Welp... I’m off. Goodbye, Granny. Thanks for everything. And... Apple Bloom?”

Her sister glanced up at her apprehensively, fearing the usual lecture on safety.

“I’m proud of you. Ain’t never seen a pony so devoted to a cause as you. You enjoy your time with your friends.”

As Apple Bloom stared at her in a mixture of surprise and pride, Applejack left.

• • •

Applejack wiped the sweat from her forehead, breathing heavily in the bright midday sun.

“Phew! We’re all done.”

Big Macintosh nodded and nudged the large bushel of apples at his hooves.

“Eeeyup.” He then turned and wryly nodded at the hundreds of trees yet to be bucked. “Aaand nope.”

“Alright, let’s get to it.”

Big Mac hoisted the bushel onto his back and together they strolled purposefully to the nearest tree, an enormous specimen that towered over its brethren. It was one of the first normal apple trees the Apples had planted after settling in the area, and was still producing a fine crop year after year.

Applejack looked it up and down. There was barely any sign of the rot that lay within, and she marvelled at how her brother had been able to detect it, even on close examination. She swallowed. This was the moment.

Big Mac began to move, and Applejack stood aside to let him take position. He eyed the tree, calculating. He turned away from the tree, squaring himself for the kick. He bunched his thick muscles, readying the blow. He glanced in her direction.

She nodded, smiling warmly.

“Do it, Mac.”

Destiny'll have its way. It just don't care with who.

Big Mac kicked. Under his powerful hooves, the rotten trunk shattered into sodden splinters, and the great tree toppled toward him. He stared up at the incoming doom, unable to move in his surprise.

Applejack galloped forward on cue and threw herself into his side. She felt his ribs crack, and he stumbled out of the path of the falling tree. The trunk hit her, slamming her to the ground. She cried out in pain as she was crushed beneath the immense weight.

Her brother pulled himself to his hooves and ran to her side, wincing at his broken bones.

“You okay, AJ?!”

Applejack struggled to look into his eyes, vision blurring as her life ebbed away.

“Can't have you hurting yourself now.”

Her head slumped back to the ground, and the world began to fade away. She could still hear Big Mac crying her name, feel him trying to pull her free. She smiled into the cool grass, content. A life ended, a life defended.

I ain't gonna live in a world where my brother died to save my life...

But I reckon I can die in one where I saved his.

Everything went black.