

School Reunion

By Blueshift



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Chapter 1

"Once upon a time, many years ago but not too many mind, there were three little ponies who were the best of friends a pony could be. None of them had found their cutie marks, so were determined to find their destiny in the world – they were the one and only Cutie Mark Crusaders! Now, this particular day, they decided to go ziplinin'. Scootaloo said..."

"Boring!"

Orange Pippin clamped a pillow over his ears and pulled a face in protest. From the corner of his eye he was sure he saw his sister joining in with his defiance, both glaring up at their mother with big, round open eyes. "C'mon mum! Tell us a good story! One with dragons and monsters! Tell us about Krastos! Or when Ponyville was attacked by the Smooze! Or Princess Celestia's last stand against Tirek! Or..."

"Stop it Pippin!" whined out his sister, half huddled under her sheets. Pippin could see a slight beam of pride across their mother's face in reaction to this sudden act of defence. "Mamma only tells us the really dull stories so that the exciting ones are even more exciting!" Summerfree nodded confidently at her assertion, looking upwards for confirmation.

It didn't come. Apple Bloom just glared down disapprovingly at the two little foals and then with a heavy sigh, sank to her haunches beside Pippin's bed. "Y'all gonna realise one day that these things are important!" she finally replied, softly ruffling her son's mane as he sat glowering at her. "One day ya'll be findin' your own destiny in the world and makin' your dear ol' mum proud, but you gotta know it ain't easy!"

"But it's so... boring!" Pippin slowly repeated, as if he hadn't been heard the first time. "I mean there're no dragons or monsters or villains, just you doin' stuff. Why don't you ever tell us about your travelling or how you got your cutie mark? Why's it always this old filly stuff!"

Apple Bloom slowly looked between the two. Summerfree was scrunched up under her bedsheets, her little head poking out, listening intently at the

debate wide-eyed. "Pippin!" she hissed urgently. "Let mamma tell her story. It's just like the doctors; you gotta get the nasty injection before you get the lollypop!"

"Yeah, it's... No! No!" Apple Bloom shook her head in exasperation. "It's a good story kids, an' it's a true story an' there's lots'a excitin' bits. So just rest your lil' heads and listen fer once." She pulled the covers over a wriggling Pippin and kissed the little pony gently on the forehead. "Now, Scootaloo, she was a little winged Pegasus pony, an' she had this great idea..."

Apple Bloom crept down the stairs, dragging the large chest behind her, being careful to muffle the thumps as it descended. The kids had got off to sleep quickly. Suspiciously quickly in fact. Whilst she loved those two little rascals with all her heart, there was a slight bitterness that for them, her most treasured childhood memories were no more than a quick cure for insomnia.

With a grunt, she finally hefted the heavy wooden chest down the final stair and pushed it through the kitchen. The sun had started to set outside, playing a soft orange light across the cluttered surfaces. With a soft smile of satisfaction, she carefully undid the ornate metal clasp that kept the chest locked.

"Kids asleep?"

Apple Bloom jerked around almost guiltily, about to slam the chest shut as she saw she wasn't alone. Sitting outside on the porch surrounded by a swath of parchments and quills sat Blueberry Burst, diligently sketching away using his good hoof in the rays of the setting sun. He turned round, resting his chin on the window ledge as he stared inwards at Apple Bloom, a grin on his face, his faded scruffy blue mane dappled with orange light. "They better be asleep if you've got that old thing out, they think the family treasure chest is full of gold!"

Apple Bloom slowly opened the lid fully, rummaging carefully through the contents, carefully placing aside a singed brown hat as she pulled out three bundles of burgundy fabric and held them up to the light. Each of the

bundles resembled an outfit for a small filly, crudely stitched together with a blue shield proudly emblazoned on them, and the awkwardly cut out image of a golden pony outlined in the centre of each shield. She raised one to her face, hugging it for a moment in the dying evening light. To any other pony, it would have smelt of old mothballs, but for Apple Bloom, it was the scent of an infinite, happy summer. "Better than gold" she said finally. "Stuff like this, y'all can't put a price on it."

Placing the outfits to one side, she picked out a tattered and worn pink bow, which she carefully affixed to her mane. Patting her hair neatly down, Apple Bloom peered across the room into the mirror that sat on the far wall. "How do ah look?" she asked out loud, bobbing her head from side to side as she positioned the oversized ribbon.

"Just like the day I met you" Blueberry smiled. "You've not changed a bit."

It was a lie of course. Apple Bloom barely even recognised the middle-aged pony that looked back at her in the mirror. There was none of the glow of youth in that face, but one worn through experience and age, a lifetime of memories and regrets. But that little filly she had once been was still in there somewhere, and for a moment as she adjusted her bow, she thought she saw herself in the mirror as she had been; bright eyed, young and full of boundless optimism.

She turned back to Blueberry Burst, trotting slowly through the open doorway to join him outside. The summer air was warm and muggy, specks of pollen dancing lazily in the fading light. "You were s'posed to be sortin' the town celebrations like ah told ya, not lazin' about!" she accused, fixing him with a half-hearted glare.

Blueberry sat back in his chair, sweeping a hoof out in front of him with a soft smile. "Your wish, Mrs Mayor, was my command!"

Ponyville stood before them decked out in bunting and streamers and balloons of all shapes and sizes carefully tied to each building. Ponies still milled around, finishing the preparations and going about their day to day lives. Everything was how it should be, from the resplendent pavilion to the sparkling fountain that sat at the centre, a smorgasbord of colour and energy, standing proud as it had for hundreds of years.

Of course, it hadn't. The banner in the town centre put paid to any such thoughts. "PONYVILLE CELEBRATES ITS TWENTY YEAR RESTORATION." There was barely anything left of the old Ponyville; but it had all been reconstructed carefully and lovingly under her watchful eye with attention paid to the tiniest detail. Every effort had been paid to ensuring everything was built to resemble how it had been, but still deep in her heart Apple Bloom knew that the old town was gone forever, burnt to ashes in a terrible night of fire and chaos.

She let her eyes fall for a moment upon the only new addition to the town plan since her childhood. Whilst the ponies of the town had been happy to follow her restoration plans to the letter, she had been unable to convince the Council not to build... *that thing*. That *statue*, taking pride of place next to the pavilion in the town centre, mocking her with its presence. And there was also Dragon's Run.

In the fields to the south of Ponyville, the land curved sharply into a deep valley which currently bloomed with over five hundred varieties of flower to create an explosion of colour. It had taken six years to convince the barren scorched earth to blossom again, and once more the town had refused to listen to Apple Bloom.

They had wanted to keep it as it was, to remember. But all Apple Bloom wanted back was those beautiful rolling hills that had once stood in place of that blasted furrow. They were once hills covered in apple trees, a magnificent patchwork of red and green stretching for miles. And at the centre, at the top of the tallest hill had stood her family home, Sweet Apple Acres, as it had for generations.

All gone now of course. All that remained was a solitary apple tree that she had planted herself in that accursed valley, her own tribute to the years of toil and effort that had been wiped out. Some nights though, if she wished hard enough, she could still see those emerald hills, and those apple trees standing tall and proud and immortal, as they should be.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Blueberry had moved closer to Apple Bloom as she had been gazing into the distance, wrapping a hoof around her. He didn't understand. He never could. "It's been a while, but Princess Luna's really getting the hang of the evenings now, isn't she?"

"Yeah..." Apple Bloom mumbled back, seeing those beautiful hills in the distance as they slowly vanished with a wistful shimmer into the evening air.

"You should be proud of yourself!" Blueberry moved over to his paperwork, awkwardly spreading some of the sheets. "Twenty years as mayor, making sure everything's been put back exactly as it was. Not even Hoofington can boast that. And tomorrow ponies from all over Equestria are coming for the celebration, and I just thought..."

He held up one of the plans for Apple Bloom to see, angling it to get the full benefit of the sun's rays. "...Well, I thought maybe you could use it as a chance to announce some new buildings. I mean, Ponyville's getting crowded recently, so I've been drawing up some plans – all tasteful and in keeping of course – and maybe it's time to think about expanding again..."

Blueberry trailed off as Apple Bloom's gaze hardened and she took a step towards him, swiping the plans aside with one hoof and crumpling them against the table. "How... how DARE ya!" she exclaimed slowly and loudly, voice trembling with a barely restrained fire. "Now of all times? When we've finally got the place back to how it SHOULD be, you wanna go messin' it up?"

Blueberry attempted a sheepish grin. It usually disarmed her, but not tonight. "It's just... think about it this way. Ponyville didn't just spring up one night hundreds of years ago as it is now... it grew gradually bit by bit according to everypony's needs. It's wonderful that we brought it all back, but we can't just keep it as it used to be, we've gotta keep going or we'll be stuck in the past!"

"Used to be? Used to be?" Apple Bloom glanced about her again. "It ain't as it used to be Blue, it ain't and it never will! That there valley is like a chunk's been ripped outta my lil' heart. And those ponies and their dumb statue, it just ain't right." She paused, breathing heavily, letting herself calm down again. "We gotta keep it proper, keep it how it used to be. How it was when it was all *good*. An' now you've gone and got me in a right bad mood, tonight of all nights!"

Blueberry quickly used his good hoof to scrunch up his work, hastily bundling it into a crumpled pile. "I'm sorry Apple, really, I just thought... well

I didn't. It was stupid. You relax and have a great time tonight, if any pony deserves to, it's you."

"Yeah..." Apple Bloom leant against the porch railing, letting the last dying rays of the setting sun play against her face. She started to perk up. "Yeah. It's been too long y'know, nearly twenty-five long years. Some of the best ponies ah even knew are gonna be there, ah've got a lot of catchin' up to do." She let herself smile again. The town celebrations had been the excuse she'd needed to do this, to gather back the best friends she'd ever have and relive the best days of her life and nothing would stop her from having a wonderful time.

In one hour, it would be time for the school reunion.

And she was going to have the best night ever.

"It ain't fair!" Apple Bloom had stopped crying again, though her little cheeks were still flushed red and stained with tears, her eyes blotchy and quivering. She rounded on Sweetie Belle, causing her friend to shrink back. "Why've you gotta go? Ah don' care 'bout your parents, you can jus' stay with my on the farm. And you too Scoots!"

Scootaloo just sat in the corner of the clubhouse, her usually bright and energetic frame deflated like a balloon as she sighed. "I know it sucks Apple Bloom, but I've gotta move back to Whinnysota and Sweetie Belle's family's doing their own thing. You can't expect your family to look after her!"

"Y'all just give up too easily!" Apple Bloom hissed pacing about in a circle until she felt dizzy and collapsed to the wooden floor with a thump. "How can we be the Cutie Mark Crusaders an' find our destiny if we're apart? That's all kinds of crazy! An'..." She looked up at the two. "An' you're the two bestest friends ah've ever had! Ah don' wanna go back to it bein' jus' me!"

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle gathered round their friend in an awkward hug. "Don't worry!" Sweetie Belle whispered. "We'll stay in touch. We can write every day and visit for holidays and stuff! It'll be... Cutie Mark

Crusader Pen Pals!"

Apple Bloom wiped another tear from her face, and looked back and forth between her friends. "Y'all promise?"

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle smiled warmly back. "We promise Apple Bloom. Cutie Mark Crusader Promise!"

And they did write. Every day, Apple Bloom would sit down and write about her day to Scootaloo, and then carefully copy the letter for Sweetie Belle. And every day, her friends would do the same so even though they were miles away, it still felt like they were there together.

As days turned to weeks turned to months, Apple Bloom found herself getting caught up in the daily rigmarole of life. The letters she sent got shorter and less frequent, and so did the ones that came in the post. As the months turned to years, letters became short sentences hastily jotted down in cards on birthdays and festivals, and Apple Bloom couldn't honestly say when it had happened.

But that's how life was; it wasn't a bad thing, just another aspect of growing up.

And Apple Bloom knew that no matter what, she still had two of the best friends in the whole of Equestria, with a bond that went deeper than mere letters or words could provide.

It would be twenty-five full years before she saw them again.

Chapter 2

Apple Bloom stood in the schoolroom, her heart racing with anticipation, the full wash of nostalgia hitting her. She'd been back before of course, as part of her Mayoral duty to give speeches and guidance to the little foals, but this was different. This was for *her*.

It wasn't exactly the same, but it was good enough. The modern whiteboard (she had never been a fan of that, but Canterlot's education board had been firm on classroom upgrades) had been taken down for the evening, and a traditional blackboard erected in its place. On the board was scrawled in chalk "PONYVILLE WELCOMES ITS ELUMINI –ALUMENY - FORMER CLASSMATES"

One of her earliest ideas had been to arrange the desks and chairs in the shape of the traditional schoolroom, but Blueberry had talked her down from this, and she had later grudgingly admitted that sitting in rows on tiny chairs designed for foals wouldn't have been conducive to an entertaining evening of socialising. Instead the desks had been pushed to one end, and an impressive spread of nibbles laid out.

Apple Bloom had arrived first of course, and as the appointed hour approached, more and more of her former classmates started to filter in. The room was full of the babble of small talk and she started to circulate, exchanging pleasantries with ponies whose names she half-remembered. She was sure the yellow pony she had just spoken to was Sunny Days, thought it might have been Lemon Showers. Still, it didn't really matter, the star attractions had yet to arrive.

She gave a furtive glance up at the clock. Ten minutes past the hour and no sign of her friends. They had got the invitations; she made sure they'd been sent special delivery. Perhaps something had happened, perhaps –

"Oh, don't worry Apple Bloom, they'll be here!" Apple Bloom gave a warm smile at the old pony next to her, her withered frame resting heavily in a wheelchair. Time had marched on uncompromisingly for Cheerilee, and the teacher who had once seemed so full of life and energy had slowed

right down. There was still a part of Apple Bloom that still instinctively looked to Cheerilee as the ultimate font of wisdom and knowledge, though she knew deep that was just a childish notion. Young foals always looked up to their parents and teachers as awe-inspiring figures of myth and it wasn't something that went away easily.

"Besides, I don't recall Scootaloo ever getting to class on time." Cheerilee trailed off, eyes glazing over slightly. "In fact, I don't remember her ever making it to class much, too busy flying about with that good for nothing Rainbow Dash I'll bet. One more time and I'll give her detention..."

Apple Bloom gave Cheerilee's frail frame a comforting hug, and passed her a sandwich. It broke her heart to see her so old and confused. That wasn't right, that wasn't how it should be. "They'll be here Miss Cheerilee" she replied politely, softly removing her hoof as she noticed Cheerilee had slumped forward in her chair slightly and begun to snooze. Something about her old teacher reminded her of her own Granny Smith, though she couldn't ever imagine Granny Smith being as young as Cheerilee once was.

A familiar head bobbed through the door and made its way into the now busy room. Apple Bloom's eyes opened wide, half-scolding herself for not being eager to see this particular pony too. "Wait here Miss!" she nodded at the slumbering Cheerilee. "Jus' seen an old friend. The oldest in fact."

With that, she started to excitedly push her way through the throng of chatting ponies, towards the red bob of mane that danced through the crowd like a buoy bobbing at sea.

"Twist!" she shouted eagerly. "Twist!"

Twist had been Apple Bloom's first friend, mostly due to the fact that their mothers had met each other at the maternity ward and would take tea every afternoon leaving the two little fillies to play with each other.

Every pony said they were a mismatched pair – Apple Bloom, boldly venturing out into the fields in search of snakes and bugs to battle, dragging along a timid and nervous Twist in her wake. Twist was as quiet

as Apple Bloom was brash, and as they grew and their personalities developed, they found fewer and fewer mutual interests until the only thing they had in common was the fact that they had been friends since the start. Spending time with each other became more a duty to this part of their past than to have fun and they drifted apart. But sometimes that's just how life was.

As the years passed, Apple Bloom had let her thoughts drift to her friendship with Twist, and realised that the turning point was when Twist had got her Cutie Mark. At the time it felt as if Twist had abandoned and betrayed her, and so Apple Bloom had found new and better friends. But looking back there was that gnawing feeling that it had been her that had abandoned Twist.

But still, they had history, and that was something to cherish. You never forgot your first friend.

Twist's eyes grew wide and her face broke into a grin as Apple Bloom approached. She had changed, but was still recognisable – her red hair was no longer a frizzy explosion, but a neatly coiffured mane, and her glasses were now stylish rather than geeky.

"Apple Blossom!" Twist chirped happily. "It's so good to see you again!"

Apple Bloom froze, in wide-eyed confusion as a pit opened up beneath her heart. "I-it's A-apple Bloom you daft mare. You've not been on the punch already have you?"

"Apple Bloom!" Twist smiled again and reached around Apple Bloom's neck for a polite but friendly hug, grinning apologetically. "Sorry, it's been so long, gets hard to remember stuff from back then, don't you find that?"

'No ah don't!' Apple Bloom thought darkly. But instead she just nodded her head. "Yeah... yeah it sure does..." she trailed off, unsure of what to say next. "So uh, you lost that lisp eh?"

Twist giggled. "I had a lisp? Really? Oh Apple Bloom, honestly, the things you come up with!" She shrugged her hooves and bobbed her head. "Well,

uh, I better go say hi to everypony, good to see you again!" With that, she trotted off, and Apple Bloom was left alone in the middle of a crowd.

"What the... hay..." Apple Bloom whispered to herself, her brow furrowed as she raced to think over the implications of what had just happened. "That was... horrid! How can she forget a pony like me? After everythin' we'd been through!"

Was that all she was worth, just a smile and a polite hello? She pushed her way through to the buffet table and with both hoofs, grasped a glass and took a long sip of punch. Twist hadn't been a *proper* friend anyway, not where it counted. Once Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle got there, then the night would get better. Nothing else could possibly go wrong.

At the exact moment she thought this, the schoolhouse door flew open with a crash to reveal a hooded figure standing in the doorway, silhouetted in the moonlight. The babble of voices from the assembled ponies died down almost immediately as all heads turned to see the newcomer. Apple Bloom craned her neck forwards, letting out a small gasp. The pony was covered from head to hoof in a white robe, that swam with patterns of stars and suns that moved magically over the fabric.

It could only be a Celestial Guard.

The Celestial Guards were the brightest and best of the unicorn elite, those whose magical prowess surpassed all others. They had been formed after the war, charged with protecting the peace to ensure such terrible events could never happen again, and also with hunting down the remaining number of Tirek's lieutenants who remained at large.

Most ponies never saw them. They were constantly working in their quest for justice, never stopping to rest. Some ponies said the reason they covered their faces was not to help focus their abilities, but because they were creatures of pure magic, conjured into existence by Princess Luna because no mortal pony could hope to be as dedicated, powerful and pure as they were.

Apple Bloom had seen them though. Just once, three years ago when word

had spread that Krastos himself had been seen hiding out in the Everfree Forest. It had made her ill to think that a creature so evil and dangerous could have been living so close to Ponyville all that time, so much so that she didn't want to believe it could be true. She had sent word to the palace and was informed that the matter would be dealt with.

The town bells had rang out that evening, and the already nervous inhabitants of Ponyville fled into their homes, locking and barring the doors and windows in case Krastos had decided to head for the town in a final act of vengeance instead of fleeing.

Apple Bloom hadn't been frightened though. Whilst the other ponies of the town still remembered those terrible events of twenty years past, she had been absent. She had felt that pain and loss only from a distance, and never got to see justice done with her own eyes.

Blueberry had argued with her that night not to go out, but she knew he could be a bit of a useless coward at times. After putting the newly born foals to bed, she crept out of the house and made her way to the nearest hill overlooking the forest to wait. It was a crisp, clear moonlit night, and the only sound to be heard was the constant deep tolling of the town bells. She'd sat in the cold grass waiting for what seemed like an eternity, finally doubting that anything would happen, that perhaps Canterlot had not taken the sightings seriously.

But then she saw them, moving slowly through Ponyville like ghosts as they strode purposefully towards the woods. There were only six ponies, clad entirely in robes, even their faces were concealed; the only concession being a hole cut in the top of the hood to reveal their unicorn horns.

It had been eerie watching them slowly march through the deserted town, their outfits illuminated by the bright silver moonlight. Apple Bloom hadn't been sure what to expect – perhaps a scout, perhaps an army, but somehow these six ponies gave the feeling of being able to handle whatever came their way as they calmly spread out and wordlessly entered the forest in which one of the most terrible beings imaginable was said to be hiding.

After they had entered the woods, everything went quiet, even the bells in Ponyville stopped ringing. Apple Bloom had felt her heart racing, half

tempted to race down the hill and into the forest herself, to see what was happening or even join in the fight. There was a part of her, deep down, which knew such an action would have been foolhardy, if not fatal. Inaction gnawed at her.

As she was considering this, the forest exploded into light. Brilliant beams leapt up into the night sky, dazzling multicoloured sparks danced amongst the treetops with all the vigour and ferocity of a fireworks display. The silent night air was suddenly rent asunder with explosions and bangs, the trees alight with an eldritch fire, with Apple Bloom as the sole witness.

From the commotion, a cry began to bellow. It was a low, primal utterance, full of rage and pain, that seemed to last forever, growing in volume as the trees themselves swayed and were broken, until without warning, a pillar of light erupted at the centre of the forest, and the cry was cut short.

Apple Bloom had known what was going to happen, and indeed it was reported widely afterwards. Krastos had been found and after a short struggle, had been banished to the furthest, coldest star. Princess Luna was not one for vengeance, indeed it was said that at the end of that final terrible battle, when the archdemon Tirek, killer of her father and sister had lain broken at her hooves and at her mercy, she had simply forgiven him.

That was one strike against Luna, Apple Bloom had always thought. Sometimes justice had to be carried out properly. That night, even though she knew what was happening, and that Krastos had not even been present at the battle of Dragon's Run, she had fantasised that every cry and scream she heard was him being torn apart in agony. It made her feel better, for a while.

She had stayed on that hill until the Celestial Guard had emerged from the woods. They weren't whooping or hollering or clamouring, they just simply and modestly left as quietly as they had arrived.

As Apple Bloom stood to go back home, she could have sworn that despite the distance between them, despite the fact that they were wearing face-encompassing hoods, one of the Guards had turned to stare directly at her and wink.

The Celestial Guard slowly trotted into the room, looking back and forth at the assembled ponies until finally it fixed its gaze in the direction of Apple Bloom. Apple Bloom felt an involuntary intake of breath – had it come back to punish her for daring to witness what she saw three years before? Was she being sought out in her role of Mayor to uncover some terrible danger to Ponyville? Perhaps Twist wasn't really Twist, and was instead a doppelganger! That *would* explain a lot.

"Sorry everypony!" The cloaked figure voice was definitely feminine, but rich, warm and authoritative, instantly enrapturing the entire room, the partygoers silent with all eyes on the newcomer. Apple Bloom felt a slight twinge of jealousy at the ease in which this new arrival could so easily grab the spotlight, it was a technique as Mayor she had been trying to perfect for years.

The figure continued. "Didn't have time to change from work, the Embodiment of Gris wouldn't banish itself to the dungeon dimensions! Ha!" With one swish of a hoof, the guard pulled back her hood, to reveal the face of a strangely familiar lilac pony, topped with a yellow, spikey mane. With the other hoof, she revealed a basket from underneath her cloak. "But don't worry, I brought muffins!" With that, she made a beeline for the buffet table.

Apple Bloom simply stared as her mind raced to catch up with what her eyes were seeing. Finally, she scraped her jaw off the floor and regained the power of speech.

"*Dinky?*"

"Are you sure about this Apple Bloom? If I wish really hard and run at the wall I'll go through it with my magic and then mummy will love me?"

Dinky stood stock still in the middle of the playground, staring about in confusion as Apple Bloom continued to smear the paste over Dinky's horn. Apple Bloom dropped the brush so she could speak and nodded. "Yup Dinky, jus' close your lil' eyes and wish real hard! Off you go!"

Apple Bloom gave Dinky a friendly slap and Dinky screwed up her face as tightly as she could, her little legs beginning to gallop as she raced towards the schoolroom wall. "I wish I wish I wish!" she repeated to herself like a mantra.

Sweetie Belle had watched this in stoic silence, until she finally leant over to Apple Bloom with a conspiratorial whisper. "Um, Apple Bloom..." she started. "You don't think that's a bit..." she bobbed her head side to side to get the words out "...mean?"

Apple Bloom rolled her eyes. "Don' be silly Sweetie Belle! It ain't mean if it's funny. Side's, you never know, Dinky might do it!"

At that point there was a loud 'DINK' and a tiny spark flew out of Dinky's horn, fading away as quickly as it came. Dinky paid this no heed, and leapt with all her might at the wall. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle both closed their eyes as Dinky barrelled into the wall with an almighty crash.

Dinky hung impaled on the wall by her horn, the paste firmly affixing her head to the wooden planks that lined the schoolhouse. "I did it!" she squeaked out in joy, wide eyed, waving her tiny hooves in the air. "I'm flying! I'm magic!"

Apple Bloom started a guilty snigger that soon turned into an uproarious laugh, every pony in the playground starting to join in until the air was filled by a crescendo of little ponies laughing at Dinky, who was still obviously flailing about.

"Okay..." Sweetie Belle bit her lip hard to stop laughing any more. "Okay, that was good, but we'd better – "

"APPLE BLOOM!"

At once the laughter stopped, and all eyes turned to the schoolhouse doorway. Miss Cheerilee had stepped outside, her usually kind face turned into a mask of anger and disappointment. "Apple Bloom" she scolded loudly, striding towards Apple Bloom. The other ponies quickly scurried out of the way, leaving Apple Bloom alone. "I saw that! How DARE you bully Dinky in such away!"

Apple Bloom stared frantically around herself in panic. Even Sweetie Belle had slinked away, trembling slightly. A pit opened in the bottom of her stomach as she looked towards Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara who were taking the opportunity to have a good snigger at her. They were the bullies, not her! She wasn't like them! This was different, just a silly joke!

She tried to open her mouth to defend herself, but another pony spoke up first.

"Hey! Leave her alone!"

It was Dinky. She had pulled herself off the wall, a large wooden plank still stuck to her horn and staggered across the schoolyard to place herself in between the teacher and Apple Bloom. The little filly, eyes blocked by the plank, raised her hoofs in defiance. "You're wrong Miss! Apple Bloom's my best friend ever! She'd never ever do anything mean!"

Miss Cheerilee looked like she was about to snap a reply, but then sighed and led Dinky away by the hoof. "Let's get you cleaned up Dinky, and we can have a little talk about what friendship actually means."

Apple Bloom had felt awful for the rest of the day.

"Dinky?" Apple Bloom repeated in disbelief for what seemed the tenth time. The other ponies in the room had started talking again, at first a nervous chatter and then the noise levels slowly returned to their previous position as if nothing had happened.

Dinky placed the basket of muffins on the table and turned to smile warmly at Apple Bloom, pulling her forward in a friendly yet professional hug. "It's so good to see you again Apple Bloom!" Dinky rolled her eyes. "I keep meaning to visit you, but it's just work work work at the moment, you know how it is!"

Apple Bloom just silently nodded, still staring at Dinky, tall and confident in that magnificent cloak which extruded an aura of power and mystique. Dinky, whom Apple Bloom was sure would have grown up living in sheltered accommodation eating paste all day.

Dinky waved a hoof. "I'm supposed to be meditating tonight, we're doing a deep dive into Space-B tomorrow." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Luna thinks she's got a lead on Celestia. Keep it hush hush."

Apple Bloom blinked dumbly, and then finally croaked out a reply. "G-good to see you doin' so well for yourself Dinky..."

Dinky just winked in return. "I owe it all to you Apple Bloom, you were the best friend a pony could have! You made me believe in myself, push myself hard, I've never forgotten that, and I just want to say - oh by Luna, raspberry marshmallows!"

With a squeak, Apple Bloom jumped back as Dinky leapt for the bowl of marshmallows that sat on the buffet table, pushing her head into it with a furious snacking sound. "Uh..." She began, gently prodding Dinky's side. "Uh, those are a bit alcoholic, you might wanna – "

But it didn't look like Dinky was going to come up for breath. Apple Bloom took a step back and sighed. "Dinky!" she repeated again to herself in disbelief.

"I *know*! Turns out that the dinking noise that came from her horn wasn't her magic misfiring but a rare form of powerful quantum magic!"

Apple Bloom turned with a start as a strange yet familiar voice piped up in her ear. Standing behind her, blinking slowly, was a white unicorn with a straight-pressed pink and purple mane. Despite the difference age and appearance, Apple Bloom knew instantly who it was.

"Sweetie Belle!" Apple Bloom screamed out in joy, her heart racing again as she launched herself forwards, both hooves wrapping tightly around Sweetie Belle's neck. "It's been so so long! Too long ! Way too long! How are ya!" She rested her head for a moment on Sweetie Belle's neck, savouring the moment.

Sweetie Belle just stood rock-still, looking slightly bemused. "Ok, I'm okay thanks" she replied softly. "Sorry to hear about everything, I kept meaning to come back, just..."

Apple Bloom grimaced. "Ah understand. But you're back now, ya'll back, that's what matters!" She felt herself hopping up and down slightly in excitement as that old energy returned. "When Scootaloo gets here, we're gonna be together again and have a big adventure, jus' like the ol' days!"

"Yeah." Sweetie Belle nodded rather unenthusiastically. "Scootaloo said she might be late..."

Her face feeling as if it might break from the size of her smile, Apple Bloom took Sweetie Belle's appearance in. She was no longer the cute-but-scruffy filly of her youth, instead looking rather sombre, her frizzy mane now carefully flattened, and a small grey tie pinned around her neck.

"So Scootaloo *is* comin'! Fantastic!" Apple Bloom replied. "An' good to see you've got here safe and sound, what's your excuse for bein' late?" She grinned, giving Sweetie Belle a friendly poke in the ribs.

Sweetie Belle looked confused. "Oh no, I've been here ages. I've just been sat in the corner doing some work. I didn't want to disturb you; you looked like you were having fun." Sweetie Belle pointed to a darkened corner of the room where a school desk had been dragged, covered in bits of paper.

Apple Bloom frowned. "Ah'd been standin' about like a lemon waitin' for you, Sweetie!" she snapped in annoyance. But then her face softened, and she peered round at Sweetie Belle's flank where a cutie mark was now proudly displayed, the image of a yellow bell. "Good to see you got your cutie mark! So what're you doin' with your life? You're a singer now, right?"

Sweetie Belle just shrugged. "Nah. I mean, I liked that and all, but I didn't think I'd be good at it. I'm an accountant."

"...And I bet you... what?" Apple Bloom twitched slightly, peering at Sweetie Belle suspiciously. "No, seriously, what?"

"I just... fell into it. It's not bad actually. I mean the hours are long and the pay's rubbish, but you know... once I found my cutie mark, it just didn't seem important anymore..." Sweetie Belle trailed off again, leaving the two standing in uncomfortable silence.

Apple Bloom found herself breathing heavily, eyes fixed on Sweetie Belle

as her words filtered through. "Sweetie Belle, you wrote to me an' said you got your cutie mark for singin' and bein' loud, and now I see y'all quiet and meek an' a number cruncher! That ain't you!" Her voice rose slightly in pitch, feeling an agitated twitch at the betrayal. "You found yourself an' you chucked it clean away! There's no worse crime'n that!"

Sweetie Belle took a step backwards at this sudden outburst, mouth flapping open and closed silently. Finally she worked up the will to reply. "I-I'm sorry Apple Bloom, but I grew up! I'm still that little filly you knew, just one who knows when not to follow a silly dream." She gave a little smile, hoping to win Apple Bloom back with some humour. "Besides, I never knew that being a mayor had much to do with an apple cutie mark!" She pointed a hoof at the apple that was depicted on Apple Bloom's flank.

She wasn't prepared for what happened next. In an instant, Apple Bloom's face hardened, turning bright red, and she raised a hoof as if to strike Sweetie Belle. Sweetie Belle quickly raised her own hooves in front of her face to protect herself, shrinking backwards. "Apple Bloom, what?"

Apple Bloom stepped closer to Sweetie Belle, breathing heavily now in an attempt to get the sudden flush of rage under control. "You don' understand Sweetie Belle!" she gasped out, slowly dropping her hoof ashamedly, and again, with a whisper. "You don' understand..."

Sweetie Belle moved to awkwardly hug Apple Bloom, but Apple Bloom had tensed up again, her eyes now fixed across the room. "What. The. Hay..." she hissed, teeth clenched.

Across the room, merrily chatting to Strawberry Surprise, was none other than Silver Spoon.

Apple Bloom started to forcefully push her way through the throng of ponies, a look of angry determination fixed on her face, the only thing she could see being the pony that had bullied her so mercilessly throughout her formative years. Silver Spoon was standing there, happy and laughing, and every moment of joy on her face felt like a malicious stab aimed straight at her.

Sweetie Belle had realised what Apple Bloom was doing, and started to trail along behind her, her face wide with panic, desperately whispering "oh

no Apple Bloom no!" in hushed tones.

Apple Bloom's head was spinning with a mixture of anger and confusion as she thrust her way up to Silver Spoon, dislodging a shocked Strawberry Surprise. "So Silver Spoon..." she muttered darkly, advancing on the grey and rather rotund pony. "It's so good to see you made it."

Silver Spoon just gave a polite but genuine smile back. "Oh, Apple Bloom isn't it?" she trilled. "Good to see you again! I almost didn't come, I think my invitation got lost in the post, luckily Diamond Tiara let me know what was happening; do you remember her? She's coming down too later!"

"Yeah. ah *think* ah might remember her..." Apple Bloom snapped back sarcastically, overwhelmed by confusion, as Silver Spoon started to try to make small talk. Silver Spoon hadn't received an invitation because *she hadn't been invited*. Neither had Diamond Tiara. Some pony had *betrayed* her and invited them both. Now she had turned up and was pretending that those years of constant teasing and mocking about her lack of a cutie mark hadn't happened, didn't matter. It had to be a trick of some kind, some final cruel windup. How *dare she*?

Silver Spoon was wittering on about some vapid charity work. Apple Bloom wasn't fooled though. She pushed her face closer to Silver Spoon, her hoof twitching as she tried to restrain herself. "Ah'll tell you what Silver Spoon..." she begun, feeling the anger welling up in her again, deep in the pit of her stomach, threatening to overwhelm her. "Ah'll tell you what ah remember..."

"Oh no..." Sweetie Belle covered her eyes, unable to move, as Apple Bloom stood shaking in front of Silver Spoon, looking for all the world like she was about to explode.

Apple Bloom felt herself about to lose control and strike down the smarmy, self-centred, selfish Silver Spoon when a quivering voice cut through the crowd.

"Apple Bloom. It's late and I'm tired. I want to go home."

It was Cheerilee. She had woken up and was sitting, blinking softly in her wheelchair. Apple Bloom paused, uncertain which way to go, frozen

between Silver Spoon and Cheerilee.

Finally, and with regret, she moved towards Cheerilee, but not before flashing a glance back to the confused Silver Spoon. "Ah'll be back" she hissed darkly, taking hold of Cheerilee's wheelchair and pushing the elderly pony out into the cool night. Scootaloo would be here soon. She'd help her make sense of all this craziness and make it all better.

As Apple Bloom left the party, Silver Spoon turned to Sweetie Belle and shrugged. "Now what the hay was all *that* about?"

Chapter 3

"Well well well, what have we here? Goin' out for a lil' stroll Apple Bloom?"

Apple Bloom recoiled at the voice behind her, slowly turning with a look of guilt on her face. She had risen as dawn was breaking; her bundle neatly packed and ready to leave, but had stalled at the gates of Sweet Apple Acres for too long. She wasn't sure how long she'd stood, staring at the threshold, afraid to cross that invisible line that would take her away from home. The entrance to the farm had turned from a welcoming, happy place to an invisible barrier which she could not bring herself to cross. There would be no going back once she had left.

And now it was too late.

Applejack stood behind her, eyes narrowed as she glared at her sister, shaking her head slowly. "Ah'd never have thought it. Sneakin' off like a selfish lil' filly! Ah said no you can't go, an' you do it anyway! Where's the loyalty?"

Apple Bloom's shock at being caught out slowly dissipated into anger as she squared up to Applejack, looking her straight in the eye. She was almost the spitting image of her sister now - the same height, similar colourations. It was only Apple Bloom's fiery red hair that set her apart. It felt wrong to Apple Bloom, being able to look her sister in the eyes. Applejack had always seemed a tall, imposing pony, an authority on everything and a comforting shoulder to cry on. But now, she was just another pony. One who was wrong.

"Loyalty?" Apple Bloom snapped back incredulously, her earlier cowed stance all but forgotten. "Loyalty? What about loyalty to me, your sister! What about every day you keep me trapped on this here farm, wastin' time when ah could be findin' my purpose in life! What about this?" She swung her side out to display her hind quarters accusingly in Applejack's face. There was just smooth yellow fur, as there had always been since the day she was born. "Ah'm an adult, Applejack! An' ah ain't got mah Cutie Mark! You said it'd come but it ain't, and ah see them all in Ponyville starin' and

laughing at me like a freak! Blank flank for life!" Her face crumpled as she started to plead, mouth quivering at the sides as she struggled to maintain her dignity. "Ah've gotta go! Ah've gotta go an' find myself or ah'm never gonna do anything with mah life! Ah'm incomplete, nothin'!"

Applejack sighed. "Ah understand, ah really do. But we need you on the farm. Family comes first Apple Bloom. You can go after harvest season, ah promise."

"Later? It's always later!" Apple Bloom felt the rage building in her again, shaking as she tried to restrain herself. "Y-ya'll a hypocrite! A dirty stinkin' hypocrite! Ah know you left home an' you found yourself an' your Cutie Mark, an' now you're tryin' to hold me back! It ain't fair! It ain't right!"

"It don't matter, not really!" Applejack trotted closer to her sister, holding out a hoof in an attempt to defuse the situation. "It's just a thing Apple Bloom, it don't mean nothin'. Not havin' a Cutie Mark don't stop you doing things normal ponies do."

She froze, clamping her mouth shut as she realised too late what she'd said. But the damage was done. Apple Bloom's face widened in horror and she skidded backwards as fast as she could away from her sister, over the threshold of the farm entrance and onto the dusty dirt track that led away.

"Ah knew it! Y'all think ah'm a freak!" she whimpered, biting her lip hard. "Ah hate you, more'n ah ever hated any pony! Ah'll show you! Ah'll show you all!" Apple Bloom ran. She ran as hard and as fast as she could, away from her home, away from Sweet Apple Acres, and away from her family. If she heard Applejack crying after her, begging her to come back, to not leave it like this, then she dismissed it as just noise on the breeze. She knew she'd find herself, return home and finally be equal and loved and respected and everything would be okay again.

She would never see home again.

"Ah can't believe Sweetie Belle! She's let me down, she's let everypony down, an' most of all, she's let herself down!" Apple Bloom fell silent, waiting for affirmation from Cheerilee as she pushed her wheelchair down

the dark pathway. The lights that filled the windows of Ponyville flittered like trapped fireflies, lending a warm glow to the crisp night. Cheerilee was silent though, choosing instead to listen as Apple Bloom continued to talk.

"Ah mean she's denyin' herself! Livin' a lie! There's no way the Sweetie Belle ah knew would grow up to be like that. She ain't the pony ah knew! She went an' changed Miss Cheerilee!" Apple Bloom paused again, waiting for a response, even a grunt of agreement. It didn't come; the only noise that night was the squeaking of the wheels as the wheelchair bumped along the ground.

Finally, with a sigh, Cheerilee lifted her wizened head. "Apple Bloom, stop here. I want to rest."

Apple Bloom released her grip on the handles of the chair and then looked about with a start. In the darkness she hadn't realised exactly where they were, but they had reached the town square. Right next to *that* statue.

"Ah don't think this is a good place to-" she began, but Cheerilee cut her off, and she fell silent, the old schoolroom instincts falling into place.

"I'm an old pony, and if I want to rest then you let me rest, got that? Even the mayor of Ponyville has to show the elderly some respect." Cheerilee's voice was oddly assertive, and Apple Bloom could only mumble a 'yes miss' in reply. "Apple Bloom" she continued, more softly than before. "Take a seat. Please."

Apple Bloom slowly sunk to her haunches, resting on one of the benches that had been erected under the statue, shifting uncomfortably. "Can't we do this in the warm?" she began, worried about the old mare's health, and feeling slightly guilty for the pause. But Cheerilee took no notice.

"Ponies change Apple Bloom. They grow up. That's what getting old is all about, you of all ponies should know that. You can't expect the world to stop turning while you-"

This time it was Apple Bloom's turn to cut off Cheerilee. "But ah *ain't* changed! Ah'm still the same, ah stayed true to who ah am an' what ah was. Ah never forgot the important things!" She delivered the last line almost pleadingly, begging for reassurance.

Cheerilee sighed, leaning back in her chair, pulling up the blanket that covered her to protect against the crisp night air. "You know Apple Bloom, I remember a young filly who bounded about with endless energy. All she could think about was the future: about what she would be and what she would do. And now I see a mare who can only look backwards. *You changed* Apple Bloom. I changed. We all changed."

Apple Bloom took this in, blinking in the darkness. Was that all Cheerilee thought of her, a pony stuck in the past? "Ah've done lots for Ponyville!" she retorted. "Ah built it back up, ah made it all right again. An' if ah think too much about the past, well, that's just 'cause ah was happy then. Everything was perfect, now it's all one big screwed up mess!"

"I don't remember a happy little filly, not *all* the time." Cheerilee wheeled herself closer to Apple Bloom, her old bones creaking with the effort as she laid a hoof on Apple Bloom's. "I remember a filly who cried, who was scared of the future, that she wouldn't get her Cutie Mark, silly things like that."

Apple Bloom's eyes narrowed and she knocked Cheerilee's hoof away in disgust. "Well, you're rememberin' it *wrong*. It was perfect, back then. Me an' Scoots and Sweetie Belle. Ah'd sit in the orchards an' play with mah sister. Sunny skies all day long." Her voices quivered and she looked guiltily up at Cheerilee. "Ah miss her, you know. Ah should have stayed. This ain't how it was meant to be, you know. Ah had it all worked out. Ah was gonna come back to Ponyville with mah Cutie Mark, an' ah could finally settle down an' help Applejack run the farm. We'd go on adventures, proper adventures, an..."

She sunk lower into the cold bench. "... an' it didn't happen, did it? Ah thought there was some big destiny waitin' for everypony ah knew, but it didn't happen, an' they just went in the blink of an eye, an' ah wasn't even there. That's the worst thing, knowin' that she ain't with us, an' it ain't because of some noble cause or heroic sacrifice, just that she went to bed one night, an' the next mornin' half Equestria was ablaze! It ain't fair, there's *gotta* be meanin' in stuff otherwise what's the point?"

"Oh Apple Bloom." Cheerilee's face fell as Apple Bloom started getting more and more agitated. "You can't keep it bottled up. Lots of ponies felt

the same. We all want our lives to have meaning, but the world is random and-"

"No!" Apple Bloom sprang to her feet and started to prowl back and forth, swinging her tail wildly. "No it's *different* 'cos ah wasn't there! Mah sister died and ah wasn't there! She thought ah hated her and ah wasn't there, ah was off bein' selfish and thinkin' about mahself!" She shut her eyes, shuddering slightly, attempting to control her breathing which had started to get faster and faster, dangerously out of control. She lowered her voice to a whimper. "If ah think of the past too much, then it's 'cos ah can look out across Ponyville an' still see it as it was, an' ah can pretend it ain't too late an' it's all still okay, an' for one moment ah' can be happy."

Silence reigned between the two ponies again. Apple Bloom couldn't even look Cheerilee in the eyes as she leant against the statue, craning her neck to gaze forlornly up at it, as it towered above her, rising into the night sky. A bronze statue of a unicorn that glared defiantly up at some unseen foe, a tattered pointed hat perched on its head. On the plinth beneath was etched proudly the legend 'Their finest hour'.

"Mah sister didn't get a statue," Apple Bloom sighed. "She didn't get no big moment, no chance to be a hero. It ain't fair miss. It ain't. Ah think if ah sit down an' really think about it, ah'd start cryin' and never stop. And that ain't the worst thing." She quivered slightly, slouching against the cold stone. "That ain't the *worst* thing. You see..."

Apple Bloom trailed off. Cheerilee's silence had turned into ragged, rasping snores, the old pony swaddled in her blanket, sleeping happy as a filly. With a heavy heart, Apple Bloom once more took up the burden and carefully pushed her teacher and dear friend back home.

Apple Bloom had never thought through where she wanted to go. All she knew was that she had a desperate, pulling urge to leave home. It was as the farm was suffocating her, holding her back, and that morning as she ran as fast as she could away from her sister, she finally felt a twang of happiness.

Within weeks she had reached the borders of Equestria and crossed into

the barren, rocky lands of Griffonia that bordered the pony kingdom. The country was a maze of craggy mountains, over which hovered the most elaborate cloud architecture she'd ever seen. She was a pony though, and could not visit the cities; instead she gazed up at them with wonderment as she struggled through that unforgiving land.

After days of trekking, Apple Bloom reached the border of the country, and into the wide open expanse of Goatlandia. She pushed onwards, the first pony in centuries to see the ruby gyroscope that kept the land of Dis from tipping into the azure seas upon which it balanced. She saw cities made entirely of song, lakes of grass next to fields of the finest water. There were counties populated by the strangest and most bizarre of creatures; one land didn't have the colour red and she was hailed as a god for her vividly scarlet mane. Another country was made entirely of sound, and she had to tread slowly and carefully lest even the softest tap of her hooves on the ground cause a resonance wave that would collapse the capital of C Minor. All these places and more she visited, moving ever forwards. But still, despite all those wonders, her Cutie Mark refused to appear. Her rump remained frustratingly bare.

Finally on a rocky outcrop that stretched beyond the material world into the bright white light of creation from which all matter was formed, she reached the end of her long journey. She had walked the breadth of the known world and found so much, but she had never found herself.

On the edge of this vast precipice, where matter churned against uncreation sat a strange, spindly creature, who gazed at her with shock and alarm. The creature had found her fascinating and told her that it didn't think ponies existed. Apple Bloom had laughed at this and replied that there was a whole land of ponies who were just like her, who played in the sun and laughed and farmed the land.

The creature had shook its large black head and replied that it knew of Equestria, but had thought that ponies were extinct after the return of the arch demon Tirek. He showed the wide-eyed pony a selection of images captured on magical plates taken by an eagle outrider some months before, of Equestria aflame, those beautiful fields of green burning scarlet as dragons rampaged over them.

Apple Bloom ran.

She ran for one hundred days and one hundred nights all the way back home. Legends in countless countries spread of a mysterious pony that raced across the land for an unknown reason, never stopping to eat or rest. Tales sprung up of how she was a messenger of the gods, a stranger on a desperate mission of mercy, or even a pony that had been cursed to run lest she be struck down from on high.

She had travelled the world and discovered too late that her perfect place was where she had begun her journey. All she could think of as she ran was that beautiful farm and her loving family, and it spurred her on, desperate to return to her family before it was too late.

She never made it.

Apple Bloom's heart was thudding in her chest, and her stomach was twisting with anxiety as she slowly trotted back to the schoolhouse. From the distance she could hear merry laughter and the clatter of glasses from the partygoers who were obviously enjoying themselves. But what would she find when she returned? More bitter disappointment?

For a moment, Apple Bloom considered whether to forget the party and slink off back home. As she wavered by the schoolroom door, unsure of whether to commit herself to yet more anguish, there was a loud smashing of glass and a lavender pony tumbled out of a window to land in a heap at Apple Bloom's feet.

"I'm a pixie in my pretty hat! Hic!" Dinky giddily looked up from the ground at Apple Bloom. Somehow she had found a large orange cone and was wearing it on her head instead of a hat. She pony hiccupped again and stared at the window in alarm. "Oh no," she muttered, starting to slur her words. "H-hang on." Her horn glowed and the broken glass shimmered and in a puff of eldritch energy turned into a statue of a flamingo.

Apple Bloom stared at Dinky in shock. "Uh..." she stuttered. "Ah... ah hope y'all gonna be all right for that mission tomorrow... Ah don't want anypony getting in trouble..."

Dinky simply rose to her hind hooves and attempted a salute. She then toppled to the ground, hiccupping again. "It'sh all good!" she smiled contentedly. "S-shootaloo wash showin' me pear cider..."

"Scootaloo?" Apple Bloom almost shrieked in delight in a giddy, girlish way as she gave a little leap into the air. "She's here? She didn't forget?" With a new-found burst of optimism, she left the drunken Dinky to sleep off her intoxication on the cold ground and stepped inside back into the noise and heat of the party.

There were ponies everywhere, crammed into that small room. Apple Bloom barely recognised half of them as she bobbed her head above the throng, trying to push through and find her friend. Just as she thought Dinky must have been mistaken, an orange hoof snatched her through the crowd.

"Apple Bloom! It's been too long!" The pony in front of her grinned a wide, goofy grin and Apple Bloom's eyes widened in shock. It was Scootaloo, *her* Scootaloo, standing there in the flesh without a care in the world. She looked... magnificent, a strong pegasus standing proud, powerful wings folded at her sides carefully and a lightning bolt emblazoned on her rear.

"Scootaloo!" Apple Bloom forgot all decorum and threw her hooves around her friend in delight, hugging her tight. Scootaloo gave a start at this rather friendly onslaught, but smiled and returned the gesture. Apple Bloom felt herself start to calm down again as everything became right with the world. "It's you! It's really you! An' you remember me, an' you're not fat or..." she glared over Scootaloo's shoulder at Sweetie Belle, who sat with a notepad and pen at the buffet table, carefully scribbling away "...or *borin*!"

"Me? I'm *never* boring!" Scootaloo grinned from ear to ear. "You know me, zooming everywhere, saving ponies left right and centre! A rescue pony's work is never done!"

"Rescue pony!" Apple Bloom beamed, sparing Sweetie Bloom a quick withering glance. "Ah'm so proud of you Scoots! You're still the coolest pony ever! An' look!" She angled her hindquarters at Scootaloo to show off the large apple proudly emblazoned there. Scootaloo simply smiled wryly. Apple Bloom felt her heart racing with joy as she remembered what she'd

brought. "Hey Scoots, ah've got somethin' for you!"

Nudging Sweetie Belle out of the way, she pulled a carefully wrapped package from its safe place under the buffet table. Under the watchful gaze of Scootaloo and a mildly curious Sweetie Belle, she unveiled three small maroon and blue cloaks. "Ah kept them!" she smiled, looping one around her neck, comically small on her adult frame. "Ah never forgot, after all these years!" She looked at Scootaloo hopefully. "Ah thought maybe..."

"Oh, cool! I remember these!" Scootaloo took the offered cloak and examined it, Apple Bloom's face beaming with glee. It fell just as fast as Scootaloo threw the fabric to Sweetie Belle. "Here, Sweetie, check it out!" She leaned against the table as Sweetie Belle peered curiously at the garment. "So Apple Bloom, I hear you've got some little foals now. I hope you told them all about their auntie Scootaloo!"

Apple Bloom blinked in confusion, suddenly feeling very self-conscious with the little cloak draped around her neck. Was that *it*? The moment she had waited for after so long dismissed in an instant. She shook her head. "No, no Scootaloo, that ain't important. *This* is what's important, here!" She snatched the cloak back from Sweetie Belle, who reacted with a squeak. "Put it on Scoots, you too Sweetie." She looked at her two friends imploringly. "One last adventure. For me."

Scootaloo broke into a laugh and gave Apple Bloom a friendly tap on the shoulder. "Good one Apple Bloom! Don't tell me you've got a zip line set up outside! Hey Di, take a look!" Scootaloo eagerly waved the cloak in her mouth like a rag, and a pale pink pony trotted over to the trio.

"Hah, brilliant!" The pink pony trotted over to Scootaloo, giving the pegasus a slightly too-familiar nuzzle as she took the cloak from her and smirked at it. Apple Bloom furrowed her brow as she stared at the newcomer, mind racing. That pink coat. That purple and white striped hair. It *couldn't* be. It wasn't possible. It was.

"Oh hey Apple Bloom!" The pony smiled sweetly if vacantly at Apple Bloom. Apple Bloom didn't return the smile, instead remaining frozen to the spot feeling beads of sweat pricking at her forehead and an icy chill claw at her chest.

"You remember Diamond Tiara don't you Apple Bloom?" Scootaloo chirped merrily. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Sweetie Belle starting to attempt to shrink back into the crowd.

Remember? Of *course* she remembered. Apple Bloom attempted to reply but felt her mouth going dry. How could she not remember the pony that had bullied her so mercilessly during her school days, ruined those happy carefree days with her spiteful teasing and vile remarks over her lack of Cutie Mark? Suddenly she realised who had invited Silver Spoon. Who had invited Diamond Tiara. Who had betrayed her.

"S-scootaloo?" Apple Bloom ignored Diamond Tiara and swung her gaze to her friend, her eyes brimming with hurt. "Wha? Ah don't..."

Scootaloo blushed slightly, scratching the back of her head. "Oh, you know how it happens Apple Bloom! We met each other the other year at Eagles Peak, got talking about old times, and hey presto!" She gave a wink. "Wedding in the spring, of course you're invited!"

Apple Bloom took a step back, her rear jabbing into the table. The babble of noise in the room faded in her ears and she suddenly and terribly felt very alone in that room full of ponies. Her legs trembled as she looked between the pair. "B-but Scoots, that's Diamond Tiara! She's a bully! Don't you remember? Ah don't get it, its outta nowhere, it ain't right! This is crazy!"

Scootaloo seemed to miss Apple Bloom's panicked expression and just rolled her eyes. "Sheesh Apple Bloom. Ponies change! If everypony went around holding everypony else to everything they ever did when they were a foal, then we'd get nowhere!"

Diamond Tiara stepped forwards, a genuine smile on her face. "Look, Apple Bloom, I don't really remember, but if I was ever mean to you at school I'm sorry." She held out a hoof. "That was years ago. It's ancient history!"

All Apple Bloom could see now was Diamond Tiara standing before her, mocking her. She had made her life a hell as a filly and now had everything, even Scootaloo, while Apple Bloom was left with nothing. It wasn't fair. Her features twisted into a scowl and with one smooth but

powerful motion lifted her own hoof and swung it. With the crashing of thunder, her hoof connected with Diamond Tiara's face and the pony fell hard into the buffet table, cracking it in half and sending broken crockery and glass everywhere.

"Well it ain't ancient history to me!" Apple Bloom hissed as the room suddenly and terribly fell into a stunned silence, all the ponies, even Scootaloo looking on, mouths agape.

Like a frenzied animal Apple Bloom dived onto the dazed Diamond Tiara, feeling the rush of blood to her head, her hooves shaking as she struck the pony as hard as she could again and again, biting and scratching in a whirlwind of frenzied motion. If Diamond Tiara tried to fight her off or cry out, she could not hear, so caught up was she.

It felt *right*, this outpouring of emotions and repression in a burst of violence, the chance to finally strike back at the untouchable and unperceivable events that haunted her life. With the first punch, it was Diamond Tiara she hit. With the second, it was Tirek himself. The next was Krastos, and Trixie, and Silver Spoon and Sweetie Belle, and every other pony who had ever let her down. Every pony and every thing who had dared to hold her back or ruin her life or humiliate her. As she continued to pummel the defenceless pony beneath her she could hear a guttural, sobbing scream. It was coming from her own throat.

With a violent shove, a gaggle of strong hooves shoved Apple Bloom off her victim, and she fell hard into the remains of the table. It couldn't have been more than ten seconds since she had leapt on Diamond Tiara, but the cathartic release had felt like an eternity. Now she found herself lying on her back staring up at a room full of ponies who looked on her with a mixture of concern and shock and disgust.

As she continued to shake, Apple Bloom felt something wet on her face. She dabbed her hoof against her cheek and stared hard. They were tears. She realised she was crying, her breath getting louder and louder in guttural sobs as her peers looked down on her muttering their disapproval. At the head was Scootaloo, who was comforting a quivering, shaking Diamond Tiara and scowling at Apple Bloom with a barely disguised rage.

Before any of the other ponies could recover from the shock and regain

their voices, Apple Bloom, sprawled on the broken table half wrapped in a food-smeared table cloth, raised an accusing hoof at Diamond Tiara. "W-what're you all doin' on her side?" she hissed, choking back a sob, her vision blurring through the treacherous tears that flooded her eyes. "It's all her fault!"

"*How?*" Scootaloo snapped, darting forwards to press her angry face close to the fallen Apple Bloom. "How the hay do you work that one out? What gives you the right? How *dare* you?"

Apple Bloom looked up at Scootaloo, her heart sinking at the hateful reaction of her friend. The first time she opened her mouth all she could hear was a string of sob-wracked gibberish. She gulped and tried again. "Ah... ah got older Scoots an' ah didn't get mah Cutie Mark, an' ah couldn't forget the teasin' so ah left an' when ah came back it was all gone. It's her fault Scoots, ah could'a been happy an' stayed home an' ah'd still be with Applejack!" She blurted the words out, hoping against hope that Scootaloo would understand.

Scootaloo didn't. She stared at Apple Bloom in confusion, recoiling from the snivelling pony. "*That's* what this is all about? You're hung up on getting teased in school? That's what little fillies do, they say stupid things. Cutie Marks are something you obsess over as a filly; it's not worth all this! You're a grown pony, it's pathetic! *Who cares?*"

Apple Bloom quivered wide-eyed under Scootaloo. "Ah care" she croaked out, her face scrunched up more than she thought possible, one hoof rubbing her eyes to try to hide the shameful tears. "Ah care. Every day ah try to forget but ah can't an' it's crushin' me!" She wrapped herself up in the smeared tablecloth as if it were a blanket in a comfy bed, trying to shut out the sight of the room full of ponies staring at her and judging her. She felt a great weight lift from her. It was time.

"Ah'm livin' a lie!" she finally wailed, causing Scootaloo to jump backwards and several other ponies to start with shock. "Ah'm a fake! A fraud! Ah'm a useless pony who never found her purpose! Ah don't deserve nothin'!"

A gasp rose around the room as Apple Bloom scabbled at her haunch and tugged. The fur on it seemed to scrunch and tear and lift off, taking part of her Cutie Mark with it. It wasn't fur, it was an expertly crafted piece of

material, which Apple Bloom now held bitterly, looking across at the ponies who stared at her as she wallowed in her shame. "Ah never found mah Cutie Mark! Ah never found mahself! Ah thought tonight we could make it all as it was, go on one last adventure, give me one last chance!" Her eyes flitted over to the battered and scuffed Diamond Tiara. "Ah'm just a useless blank flank, a freak! Ah put this on one day an' never told anypony. Not even mah kids or husband. But ah can't take it no more, ah can't!"

She collapsed into the ruins of the table and sobbed; a pitiful sight as she clutched the remains of her fake Cutie Mark to her chest, no longer caring at the ponies that stared and muttered amongst themselves.

To her shock, she felt a pair of hooves wrap themselves around her shoulders and gently haul her up. Scootaloo's face looked down at her, the rage of earlier softened with a look of compassion. "Oh Apple Bloom" she sighed, holding the pony close to her in a hug. "Oh you silly, silly mare. It doesn't *matter*."

Apple Bloom tried to blink away the tears as she let herself be hugged like a rag doll. "N-no, you heard what ah said..."

Scootaloo simply held Apple Bloom. "You define your Cutie Mark Apple Bloom, it doesn't define you. Look at yourself; you've done so much for Ponyville! You rebuilt it from nothing! You're mayor, you have respect! Cutie Marks don't do that, you do it!"

Sweetie Belle stepped forwards from her hiding place amongst the crowd of gawping onlookers. "You're married!" she squeaked. "You've got little foals! That's more than nothing, that's *huge*!"

Apple Bloom gulped hard, shaking her head. "B-but..."

Ponies started to call out one after another. Voices she recognised. Voices she didn't. Not mocking or teasing but words of encouragement. About how she had helped or inspired them, though the babble became too much and she could no longer pick out individual words. All she could feel was Scootaloo holding her as she shook.

Diamond Tiara slowly moved closer. "I'm sorry if I ever hurt you Apple Bloom" she whispered softly. "You're a good pony."

Scootaloo took the scrap of fake Cutie Mark from Apple Bloom, examining it and slowly shaking her head. "You should have said Apple Bloom. No pony's had it easy. We could have helped. That's what friends are for." She looked down. "Did you *never* take it off?"

"Never" Apple Bloom shook her head. "Ah put it on one day an' ah never looked back. That way ah could pretend an' maybe forget, if only for a moment..." she trailed off. "Ah've been so stupid, haven't I?"

Scootaloo just hugged Apple Bloom. "Oh Apple Bloom" she whispered. "You're not nothing. You've achieved so much, travelled so far. You've got ponies who love you and respect you. You had it all along Apple Bloom, you just never realised." She gave a sharp tug and ripped off the remainder of the fake mark from Apple Bloom's haunch. "You've *a/ways* had your Cutie Mark."

Apple Bloom instinctively turned her face away in humiliation from her blank flank. Slowly, determined to face her demons, she twisted her head to stare at it. She froze in shock. There, beneath the tatters of the fake symbol was emblazoned a mark that stood proudly upon her fur.

And it was beautiful.