

Raiders of the Cutie Mark

By DJLowrider

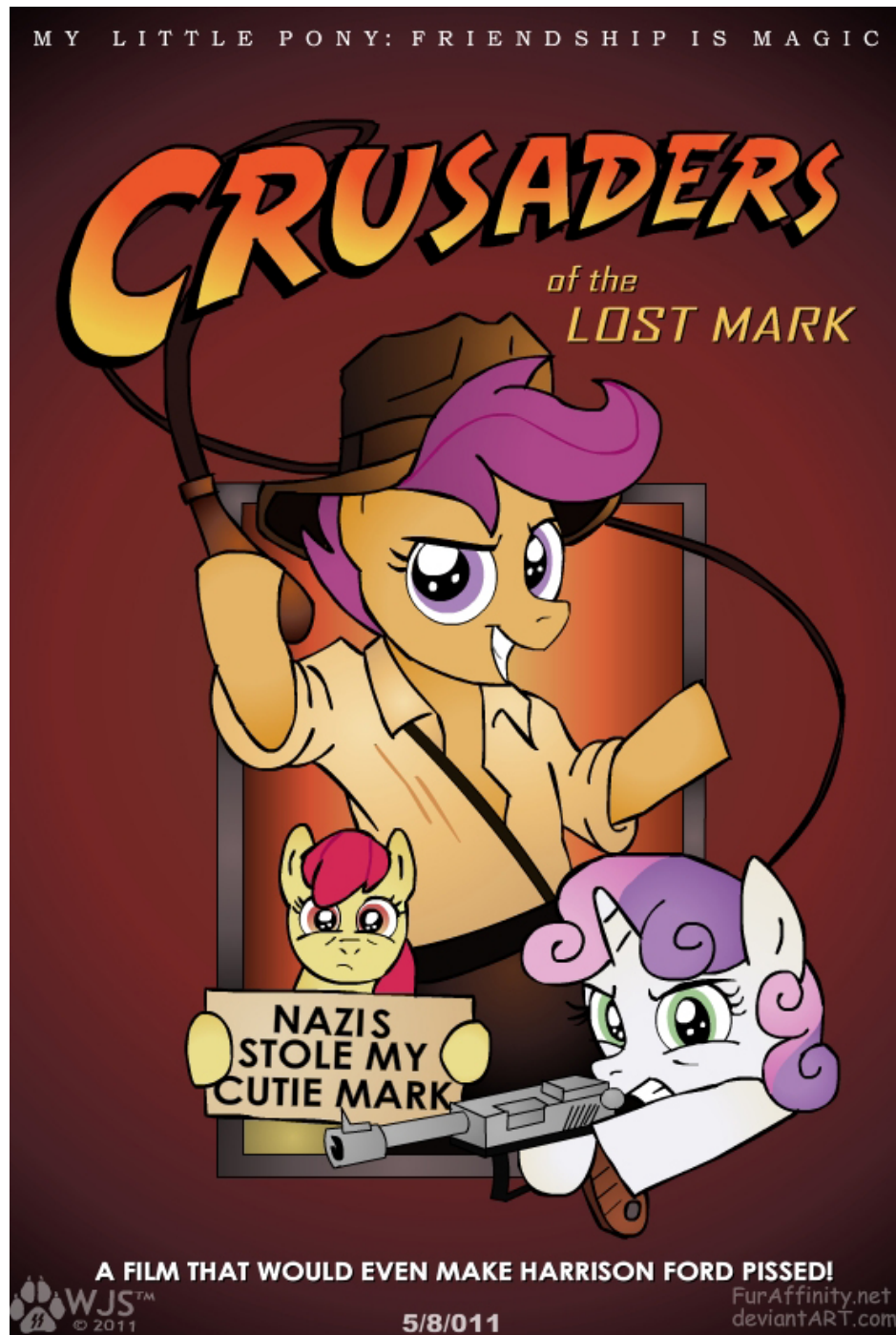


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Chapter One

The Colts Templar

Scootaloo barely registered the nudge she felt at her side as she adjusted her position slightly while dozing. She was having the most wonderful nap she'd had in recent memory, which was coupled with a dream about flying high in the sky along with Rainbow Dash with both of them as members of the Wonderbolts. Another more insistent poke at her side earned an absent wave of her foreleg as she tried to fend off the invader to her dream world. She settled back into her nap, mumbling and murmuring about her adoration for the rainbow-maned mare only to be abruptly ripped from her dream by the sound and feeling of several heavy books landing on the table right in front of her. She startled and fell over backwards onto the floor from where she'd been sitting. Once she got her bearings, she looked up and met the rather perturbed gaze of the white unicorn filly who'd been trying to wake her up.

"Scoot, we came here to see if we could find a way to earn our cutie marks," Sweetie Belle said in a scolding tone. "Not to turn Twilight's library into a site for a slumber party."

"Hey, it's not my fault I can't keep my eyes open for this stuff," Scootaloo said as she got back to her hooves. "Remind me why we're doing something this boring again."

"'Cuz it was Sweetie Belle's turn to pick," Apple Bloom told her without looking up from the book she was still intently reading. "An' we still need some time to lay low after your last idea."

"It totally would've worked!" Scootaloo told Apple Bloom insistently. "Parkour is so in right now, it's got to be our talent!"

"Then maybe we can try it again somewhere that isn't the middle of Ponyville's town square on market day," Sweetie Belle remarked as she sat back down to her book.

"Ponies in this town have no appreciation for self-expression," Scootaloo grumbled as she sat back down and stared with contempt at the stack of books in front of her. "I still don't get why we're doing this, though. We tried the whole librarian thing before."

"We ain't tryin' to be librarians this time," Apple Bloom reminded her. "We're Cutie Mark Crusader Historical Researchers, remember?"

"Just sounds like another fancy way to say 'librarian' to me," Scootaloo commented as she started looking through the books in front of her.

The three fillies had only been back at their "research" for a couple of minutes when Twilight Sparkle and Spike entered the library, having returned from their day's shopping. Spike carried a bag of groceries off to the pantry while Twilight walked over to the trio, her saddlebags bulging with new books.

"How goes the research, girls?" she asked with a smile. She was happy to see the three fillies doing something that wouldn't lead to either a visit to Nurse Redheart or another session of scolding from the Mayor about property damage.

"Slowly," Sweetie Belle said in disappointment. "We really appreciate your letting us use the library, Twilight, but none of these books is giving us any ideas about something historical we could try and discover more about on our own."

"Not to mention..." Scootaloo said, already yawning again from her utter boredom. "This isn't the most exciting thing in the world to do for a living."

"Well, keep at it girls," Twilight told them encouragingly as she levitated her saddlebags over next to her desk. "Books can be quite amazing if you give them a chance. You never know what kind of adventure they might lead you on. I'll be right back, I'm gonna help Spike put stuff away and I'll bring you all some cookies I brought from Sugar Cube Corner."

"Thanks Twilight," the three fillies called out as she left. No sooner was Twilight out of the room than Scootaloo made her way over to the saddlebags she'd just set down.

"Scootaloo, what in tarnation are you doin'?" Apple Bloom said, shocked at the Pegasus filly as she nudged the bags open.

"Hey, she's got new books in here," Scootaloo told her. "Maybe one of them has something in it."

Apple Bloom frowned at her friend's casually nosy attitude. "You're goin' through somepony else's private property! That ain't right, I tell ya!"

"Bloom, they're **books**," Scootaloo told her as she continued rifling through the bags. "She's gonna put 'em on the shelves for everypony to read anyway."

Apple Bloom just shook her head and returned to her book, all the while muttering to herself about proper manners and how she, herself, got yelled at extensively for going through Applejack's things once while attempting to see if she could get an investigative reporter cutie mark.

"Hey, dig this guys," Scootaloo said as she fished a book with a red and gold colored cover out of the bag. She set the book down on the table for the other two to see.

"'The Colts Templar: Ponies of the Crusade'," Sweetie Belle said, reading the title. "Hey, that sounds like us!"

"Let's check it out!" Scootaloo said as she eagerly opened the book. Sweetie Belle quickly joined her, and Apple Bloom finally did a few moments later after finally getting over her indignation at Scootaloo's earlier rudeness.

The three fillies quickly scanned through the book's contents, which covered the history of an ancient society known as The Colts Templar. They were a group dedicated to protecting Equestria from ancient evils, though over the years their methods for doing so became more and more questionable and extreme. The society was disbanded hundreds of years ago, but not before one last act they did to ensure Equestria's safety for all time.

Twilight returned to the main study with a plate of cookies levitating just by her head. She was just in time to see the girls close the book. They all

looked over at her and immediately rushed up to her. Twilight quickly levitated the cookies higher so they wouldn't knock the plate over.

"What do you know about The Holy Oat Pail?" all three girls asked simultaneously and with eyes practically bugging out of their heads.

"The what now?" Twilight asked in response.

"The Holy Oat Pail!" Sweetie Belle said as she rushed back over to the book and opened it to one of the last pages. "It's the last treasure of The Colts Templar!"

"It's an ancient artifact found during one of their crusades," Scootaloo added. "It's supposed to be the very oat pail Princess Celestia ate her first oats from as a filly!"

"And it's s'posed to be magical!" Apple Bloom said in breathless excitement. "Anypony who eats from it will have their heart's desire granted to 'em!"

"Girls, that thing is just a legend," Twilight told them dismissively. "There's never been any proof that The Holy Oat Pail ever actually existed, let alone that it actually did what it was purported to do."

"Well 'o course there ain't no proof," Apple Bloom told her matter-of-factly. "The Templars hid it away so it wouldn't fall into the wrong hooves. Says so in the book."

"There's got to be more information somewhere," Sweetie Belle said, flipping the book closed. "Don't you have any other books on The Templars?"

"Or any research you've done on them?" Scootaloo asked as well.

"Actually, I don't," Twilight said, setting the plate of cookies down on the table amidst the piles of books. "I just happened to find that book at the book fair that's at the market today. I bought it because it sounded like an amusing story, that's all. I'm really not interested in mythical ancient artifacts."

"Who'd ya get the book from, then?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Who else?" Twilight replied simply. "Booker. He always helps me find the most interesting books."

"Maybe he's got some more stuff, then," Scootaloo said. "We'd better get over there and check it out!"

Twilight was about to remind the girls to eat their cookies, but was interrupted as they quickly wolfed down their treats and yelled their thanks back to her on their way out the door. Twilight just laughed and shook her head as Spike emerged from the pantry and looked grumpily at the mess of books they left behind.

"Would it have killed them to clean up before running off?" he complained as he began collecting books to put away.

Twilight held back from commenting on the girls' departure and instead set to helping Spike clean up the books. She quietly wished the girls luck in their endeavor, wherever it ended up leading them.

Fortune smiled on the girls as they quickly located Booker among the stacks of books he'd brought for the Ponyville book fair. Unfortunately, the book Twilight had bought from him was the only one he'd had on The Colts Templar or The Holy Oat Pail. Feeling defeated, the three fillies sat together near the town well trying to figure out what to do next.

"Maybe we could try going back to the library again?" Sweetie Belle asked, though she knew she was grasping at straws now.

"Ain't no point in that," Apple Bloom told her. "Twilight already said she ain't interested in this sorta thing. I doubt we're gonna find any more help there."

"Maybe we should try asking around town," Scootaloo suggested. "I mean, there's gotta be other ponies around who've heard of it."

"That's not a half-bad idea, Scoot," Sweetie Belle said. "Let's get to asking!"

And so began the Cutie Mark Crusader Crusader Inquiry. They asked Applejack.

"What makes ya think I got the kinda time t'be readin' 'bout some silly ol' oat pail? I got apples to sell!"

They asked Rarity.

"I think I heard once that the pail was a lovely silver color. I think it would make a stunning accessory to this ensemble I've been working on. Oh that reminds me, girls, I need to do another sizing with you for your dresses..."

Half an hour after they finally got away from Rarity, they asked Rainbow Dash.

"They're not the Wonderbolts, so what do I care about 'em?"

They asked Fluttershy, or at least they tried to; however, just from hearing the name of The Colts Templar, Fluttershy locked herself in her home and refused to answer the door for an hour.

They asked Ditzzy Doo.

"I dunno anything about a magical oat pail, but I have a fantastic muffin tin at my house. It makes perfect muffins every time! That's pretty magical to me."

They asked Vinyl Scratch.

"Colts Templar? I think I have a couple of their tracks. Aren't they eurobeat? Or was it dubstep? I'm sure I heard a remix recently that had something about an oat pail in the title..."

After an exhausting day of questioning various residents of Ponyville, the Cutie Mark Crusaders finally made their way to Sugar Cube Corner in hopes of at least salvaging the day with some treats of some kind or another.

"Welcome to Sugar Cube Corner!" Pinkie Pie announced from behind the counter as she heard the bell at the door chime when the three fillies

entered. Her expression changed to one of curiosity as she saw the glum looks on the girls' face. "Hey girls, why so sad?" she asked.

"Just another day of wasted effort," Scootaloo said as she took a seat at a table along with Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle.

"Still workin' on those cutie marks, huh?" Pinkie asked as she picked out three cupcakes and placed them on a tray for the girls. The three fillies nodded and said their thanks as Pinkie served the treats to them. "Y'know, life's too short to get all worked up over this kinda stuff. You should really just get out and have some fun while you can. It's not all parties and fun when you're older."

"This coming from a pony who makes her livelihood throwing parties and having fun," Sweetie Belle said under her breath. Scootaloo and Apple Bloom both chuckled at her comment.

"Hey Pinkie," Apple Bloom said, getting the pink pony's attention. "I know ya probably won't even know what I'm talkin' about, but you wouldn't happen to know anythin' 'bout The Colts Templar or The Holy Oat Pail would ya?"

"Hmm...nopey dopey," Pinkie said after a moment of thought. The girls all just nodded as they continued to eat their cupcakes. "But now that you mention it, I do remember hearing somepony talking about something like that recently," she added after another moment.

"You did?" Scootaloo asked, suddenly much more energetic. "Who? When?"

"Zecora was in town again a couple days ago," Pinkie said as she recalled the events of earlier that week. "She stopped by to pick up some sugar cubes since, after all, this is Sugar Cube Corner. It'd be weird if we didn't sell sugar cubes here along with everything else. And as usual I tried to get her to buy some other stuff too since all she ever buys here is sugar cubes which are soooo booring, but she didn't want any. So then I asked her what if I made sugar cube flavored cupcakes, and she just kinda laughed at that but-"

"Can you maybe just skip to the important part?" Sweetie Belle asked,

feeling her head spin a bit from Pinkie's rambling.

"Oh, right!" Pinkie said, remembering the point of the story. "Anyway, she was about to leave when I noticed she'd dropped a small book of some kind. I brought it to her and she thanked me for it. She said it was one of her most important books. I asked her what it was about and she said..."

Pinkie paused to pull her mane up into a mohawk and took on a serious expression. "It is filled with tales from near and far of a society known as The Colts Templar," she said in her best impression of the zebra. Her mane immediately returned to its usual puffiness as soon as she finished her impression.

"Of course!" Apple Bloom exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of it sooner? Zecora's gotta know a bunch 'bout The Colts Templar! We gotta go ask her!"

"Yeah, but it's way too late for heading into the Everfree Forest today," Sweetie Belle noted as she saw the setting sun just outside the window they were sitting near.

"Then we'll go first thing tomorrow morning," Scootaloo said resolutely. "You know the way to Zecora's house, right Apple Bloom?"

"Sure do," Apple Bloom said. "Big sis an' I take apples out to her all the time."

"Then we'll meet up at Sweet Apple Acres tomorrow morning and head out from there," Scootaloo said. The three fillies agreed and, after devouring their cupcakes with their newfound gusto, thanked Pinkie and each headed out for their respective homes for a good night's sleep. Pinkie poked her head out the front door and watched to make sure they were well on their way and then headed back into the shop, stopping by one of the back doors that led to a darkened room.

"Do you think they suspect anything?" a voice asked from the darkness in a whisper.

"Nopey dopey," Pinkie replied with a grin. "They'll head for Zecora's tomorrow for sure. Will the others be ready for them after that?"

"They've all assured me that they are prepared to go through with their parts," the voice replied. "I have full faith in them."

"I'm still not super-duper sure about this plan," Pinkie said, a hint of uncertainty evident in her voice. "Are we sure this is the right thing to do?"

"It'll work," the voice assured her. "And trust me; when all is said and done, they will thank us in the end. Get some rest for now. You have much to prepare for as well, remember? Your part in this is not done just yet."

"You got that right," Pinkie said with a nod. "That goes for you too, though. You need a good night's rest too."

"When this plan comes to fruition, everypony will rest easier," the voice told her.

Pinkie nodded in agreement and began closing the shop down for the night as the voice took its leave of her. Hopes and dreams would either be realized or dashed by this time tomorrow. No matter how it played out, though, it promised to be a day nopony would ever forget.

Zecora was settled into a pleasant bit of meditation when a familiar pattern of knocks came at her front door the next morning. It was the same manner of knocking Apple Bloom always used when she came to visit. Zecora found it funny since she wasn't expecting another delivery of apples for several days, but answered her door anyway. She was quite surprised to see Apple Bloom's Pegasus and unicorn friends standing behind the earth pony filly on the other side.

"Good morning to you, little Apple Bloom," Zecora said in greeting. "Your visit today is not a normal one, I presume."

"Sorry if we're interruptin' your meditations or somethin' Zecora," Apple Bloom said apologetically. "We've got somethin' real important we wanna talk to you 'bout."

"By all means, do come in," Zecora told them. "Then a conversation we

may begin."

"Does she always talk like this?" Scootaloo asked Apple Bloom in a whisper as they all entered the strange house.

"I think it's kinda neat, actually," Sweetie Belle added. "It's giving me some lyric ideas."

"I thought you hated singing?" Scootaloo asked her.

"I hate singing in front of lots of ponies," Sweetie Belle said to correct her friend. "But when it's just you guys or my sister, I kinda like it."

"Hush you two," Apple Bloom told them quietly. Once her friends were seated, she turned to look at Zecora again. "We, uh...we were wonderin' if we could ask you about somethin' we've been readin' about lately."

"Your request is interesting and quite rare," Zecora said, unaccustomed to having ponies actually come to her for help. "If I can be of help, my knowledge I will share."

"Well see, Twilight bought this book at the book fair yesterday," Apple Bloom said, recalling the prior day's events as she tried to think of how to pose her question politely. "We all read through it, an' after askin' 'round town we found out you might know somethin' more 'bout this, so...um...we were wonderin'...if it ain't askin' too much..."

"Oh for the love of Celestia!" Scootaloo cried out as she lost her patience with Apple Bloom. She stood up and looked right at Zecora. "We wanna know what you know about The Colts Templar and The Holy Oat Pail!"

Apple Bloom glared angrily at Scootaloo for being so straightforward and rude while Sweetie Belle shifted away from Scootaloo a bit, just in case her two friends got into a shouting match. Zecora looked over the three fillies carefully and silently. She then went to her windows and unrolled the shades so they were covered. She also ensured her front door was securely locked and then walked to her saddlebags, fishing out the small book that Pinkie had mentioned to the girls the previous evening. She placed the book on the table in front of the girls and sat down, a look of dire seriousness on her face.

"Before I begin, one thing I must know," she said, looking over each of the fillies in turn. "How far are you three willing to go? Will you face up to the perils in my story just for the sake of fortune and glory?"

"If the Holy Oat Pail is real, then we absolutely want to find it," Sweetie Belle said. "Something as amazing as an oat pail that can grant your heart's desire is something all ponies everywhere should be able to use."

"Not to mention maybe it can finally help us find our talents so we can get our cutie marks," Scootaloo added. This time both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle glared at her. "What? That's why we're really after this thing, after all," she said defensively.

Zecora laughed a bit and nudged her book open. "Fear not, my young guests. I will now comply with your requests."

The three fillies fell dead silent as they leaned across the table to look into the book as Zecora spoke to them.

"I have sought the Oat Pail for many a year," the wise zebra told them. "But the ability to find it I lack, I fear. Reaching the pail is something no one pony can do. To be successful, of friends you must have two."

"Hey, there's three of us!" Scootaloo pronounced. "We can totally do this! That oat pail is as good as ours!"

"Not so fast my eager young filly," Zecora told her. "If you think it's that easy, you truly are quite silly."

"You don't know the half of it," Sweetie Belle said, earning her a glare from Scootaloo.

"The temple where the pail resides is on the edge of Everfree," Zecora told them, opening the book to a map that seemed to lead to where the temple was located. "But to enter it you must first assemble a key. The pieces of the key have been hidden far and wide. They must be found before an attempt for the pail is tried."

"What do you mean 'attempt'?" Apple Bloom asked. "I mean, once the

door's open we can just walk on up an' take the pail, right?"

Zecora simply shook her head at Apple Bloom and turned several pages to another section of the book. "The Templars wished for the pail to never be misused, so they placed several tasks to keep would-be thieves confused," she told them. "Inside the temple you'll face trials numbering three. If you fail even one, the pail you'll never see."

"Are these trials...dangerous?" Sweetie Belle asked, swallowing nervously as she spoke.

"Only to those with greed in their heart," Zecora told her with a smile. "Not to mention those who are not quite so smart."

"So we gotta find the pieces of the key, an' then we can get into the temple an' attempt the trials," Apple Bloom said, going over everything. "I don't s'pose we could borrow that book of yours, Zecora?"

Zecora laughed lightly as she closed the book and slid it across the table to Apple Bloom. "I would only ask that you allow me a glimpse of that which I have longed for years to see."

"We'll bring it back no prob!" Scootaloo told her. "C'mon, Crusaders. Destiny awaits!"

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle quickly thanked the wise zebra and then ran off after Scootaloo. Zecora watched them run off and wished them well before deciding to put on a pot of water for some tea.

"My only hope is that those girls will succeed," she said to herself. "They certainly possess all the skills they will need."

Chapter 2

Finding Her Voice

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle pored through Zecora's book in the middle of Ponyville as they waited for Scootaloo to return. Scootaloo had decided to get a few supplies for the day and meet them right where they were absorbing every bit of information the book had to offer. The two fillies looked up as they heard their friend approaching on her scooter. The wagon trailed behind her and contained snacks, refreshments, and three shovels in case they'd need to dig anything up. Scootaloo skidded to a stop and hopped off her ride, a sly smile on her face.

"Are we ready, ladies?" she asked as she sauntered up to her friends.

"Pretty much," Sweetie Belle said, suddenly looking at Scootaloo oddly. "Where'd you get the hat?"

Scootaloo looked up at the beaten-up brown fedora that sat on her head. "Cool, huh? I thought it'd be a nice touch."

"It's, uh..." Sweetie Belle tried to find decently tactful words to describe how ridiculous she thought Scootaloo looked in the hat, but thankfully Apple Bloom stepped between them while putting the book into her saddle bags.

"Daylight's burnin', girls," Bloom told them. "We gotta find the pieces to that key an' get to the temple pronto."

"Right on," Scootaloo said eagerly. "So where do we start?"

"Accordin' to Zecora's book, the pieces of the key were scattered all over Ponyville," Bloom said as she recalled what the book said. "Zecora couldn't figure out exactly where the pieces were, but she did write down a buncha clues she found about 'em."

"What's the first clue?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"There were a buncha drawings of horses an' music notes an' somethin'

spinnin' 'round an' round," Bloom told her.

"Sounds like one of the rides at the Annual Ponyville Harvest Fair," Scootaloo said. "But that's not for months! We can't wait that long."

"A ride at the fair..." Sweetie Belle said, pondering the clue. "That goes around and around with music and horses..."

"A merry-go-round!" Apple Bloom exclaimed, putting it together. "But Ponyville doesn't have a merry-go-round."

"Yes it does!" Sweetie Belle said as her eyes shot wide. "Come with me guys!"

"Where are we going?" Scootaloo asked as she and Apple Bloom quickly followed the unicorn filly.

"Back to my house," Sweetie Belle told them, grinning wildly. "Another word for a merry-go-round is a carousel!"

"Carousel Boutique!" both Apple Bloom and Scootaloo said together as they realized what Sweetie meant.

The run from town square to the boutique didn't take long, but just before the trio went bursting inside Sweetie Belle stopped short of the door and got her friends to skid to a halt as well.

"Sweetie Belle, what's with the hold up?" Scootaloo asked impatiently.

"My sister's hard at work inside and I don't wanna disturb her," Sweetie told her. "Plus, do you really want to try and explain to her what we're doing today?"

"She's got a point, Scoot," Apple Bloom added. "The less folks know 'bout this, the better."

"Alright, I get it," Scootaloo said, rolling her eyes. "Let's just get in there and find this piece of the key."

Sweetie Belle nodded and carefully opened the door for her friends. She

closed it behind them and ushered her friends through the showroom and up the stairs. They stopped again as they peered into Rarity's room and saw the unicorn fashionista staring intently at a dress that she was hemming on one of her dress stands. Sweetie Belle motioned to Apple Bloom and Scootaloo to continue up the stairs to her room. Once her friends were gone upstairs, Sweetie took one more look at her sister before turning to head upstairs.

"Sweetie Belle, is that you dear?" Rarity called out without looking around. Sweetie cringed as she'd been discovered. Rarity always did have rather good hearing.

"I was just stopping back for a couple of things from my room," Sweetie said as she hesitantly entered Rarity's room. "I didn't want to disturb you, sis."

"Thank you for the thought, Sweetie," Rarity said, abandoning her work for the moment to face her sister. "Most days I do appreciate peace and quiet to work, but this is one of those days that the silence is a bit maddening. Do you suppose you could sing a little something for me?"

"Right now?" Sweetie asked nervously as she quickly cast her eyes to the doorway. "I'm kind of in a hurry, sis..."

"Oh just one song, please?" Rarity pleaded. "Then I promise I'll let you get back to your friends."

Sweetie Belle bit her lip as she considered her choices. Running away in a panic was always an option, but while it was usually an attractive one she nonetheless felt compelled to comply with her sister's request. It wasn't often she was actually asked to sing for anyone, especially Rarity. She made a silent and quick wish that Apple Bloom and Scootaloo weren't trashing her room too badly looking for the key fragment as she searched her memory for a song to sing.

She looked at Rarity who watched her hopefully and then looked around the room at all the fabrics, thread, and other tools of the trade her seamstress sister used. For just a moment it made her think of their parents' and grandparents' homeland. While she and Rarity had been born and raised in Ponyville, their parents and grandparents were originally from

an island just north of Equestria called Emerald Isle. The ponies there had a unique culture and a rich tradition of folksongs, many of which Sweetie Belle had learned from one of their grandmothers. Sweetie Belle and Rarity had never actually been there, but through the many stories told and songs sung to them by their grandparents they knew quite a bit about it and were both thoroughly enchanted with it.

All at once she knew which song to sing. It was a song that one of their grandmothers who had long since passed away had sung to them both when they were little. It wasn't a particularly happy song, but it had a special place in their hearts. She set the tempo of the song in her head, took a deep breath, closed her eyes and began to sing a soothing yet bittersweet song of a town in decline.

*"At the east end of our town at the foot of the hill, there's a chimney so tall that reads Bridlefast Mill.
But there's no smoke at all coming out of the stack, 'cause the mill has shut down and it's never coming back.*

*Bridlefast is a city built on factory and mill. Though her heart has been broken, she's a mill town still.
The Lunar, the Celestian, we all could work the flax, and we clothed the world in linen from beneath those old smokestacks.*

And the only tune I hear is the sound of the wind as she moans through the town, 'weave and spin, weave and spin.'"

Rarity found herself already tearing up as the song was one of her favorites. She levitated her glasses off of her face and sat down near Sweetie Belle, closing her eyes to let her imagination take her away as the song continued.

"Clonard, Rosses', Greeveses', the great mills are no more. The Pound and the Milewater have shut down and closed their doors. There are no children playing in our wee, dark narrow street. Now the mills have all closed, it's so quiet I can't sleep.

*I was a hackler in Campbell's 'twas the only job I know. So what will I do now? Tell me, where can I go?
I'm too old to find new work and I'm too young to die. So we'll just live off*

our pensions, my dear stallion and I.

And the only tune I hear is the sound of the wind as she moans through the town, 'weave and spin, weave and spin.'"

For her part, Sweetie Belle felt her own emotions stirring as she sang. She missed their grandmother who had taught her not just this song but many others. She kept her composure, though, knowing that she had to finish it to properly pay her tribute.

"Now the doffers are all gone, no weavers at their looms; the singing of the spinners is an echo in a tomb. No more laughing mares going home with their friends. No more we'll hear the doffing mistress cry 'lay up your ends!'

Hacklers, tanterers, band-tiers – workers from the past. Warpers, winders, reelers, spreaders, nothing ever lasts. Work is here for a day or two, then the next day it is gone. So you do your job as best you can, and the world goes on and on.

And the only tune I hear is the sound of the wind as she moans through the town, 'weave and spin, weave and spin.'

And the only tune I hear is the sound of the wind as she moans through the town, 'weave and spin, weave and spin.'"

With her song finished, Sweetie Belle opened her eyes again to see one of the rarest sights she'd ever seen. Rarity stood back up and smiled at her, but with obvious tears still running down her face.

"That was one of Grandma Aubrieta's songs...wasn't it?" Rarity asked, her voice quivering lightly. Sweetie Belle just nodded quietly. Grandma Aubrieta had been dear to them both, but especially to Rarity. She not only had taught Sweetie Belle the song, but it was also she who'd inspired Rarity to become a seamstress in the first place with her stories of the finest cloth and textiles in the world that once had come from Emerald Isle. Rarity stepped over to her sister, sat down next to her and nuzzled her affectionately.

"She would have loved to hear you sing that song, Sweetie," Rarity told her. "You have an incredible gift in your voice. Don't be afraid to share it

someday. I would hate to think I'm the only one in the world who gets to enjoy your songs."

"I'll, uh, keep it in mind," Sweetie Belle said hesitantly. The very idea of singing in front of anyone other than her sister or her friends scared her to death, but she nonetheless appreciated the praise Rarity had given her.

"Well, I've kept you from your activities for the day for long enough I suppose," Rarity said as she stood back up. "Oh by the way, Sweetie, I found this odd thing as I was going through one of my boxes of gems earlier today. Is it one of your toys?"

Rarity levitated something that looked like a large slice of pie but flat, made of bronze and with part of a symbol on it that Sweetie Belle recognized as being part of the insignia of The Colts Templar. She stifled a gasp and nodded vigorously at her sister.

"Ah, well do try to keep your toys out of my jewels please," Rarity told her as she levitated the piece slowly over to her sister. "That is unless you want one of them to end up as part of somepony ensemble someday. You know how I get when I'm in the zone, after all."

"Yeah, like the time you sewed two of my dolls into that robe you made for Bon Bon," Sweetie commented, recalling the scene that had caused. Lyra had gotten a good laugh out of it, but Bon Bon had been furious at Rarity, which in turn had led to Rarity being furious at Sweetie Belle.

"You had to bring that particular incident up, didn't you?" Rarity said, sounding a bit annoyed. "Anyway, do run along. I imagine Scootaloo and Apple Bloom are simply dying of boredom waiting for you."

Sweetie Belle thanked her sister again quickly before grabbing the floating key fragment in her mouth. She rushed upstairs to find her friends almost ready to begin ripping her pillows apart as they'd already ransacked the rest of it. The state of her room almost didn't matter to her, though. She dropped the key fragment at their feet and smiled brightly as she proudly pronounced,

"One down, two to go!"

Chapter Three

A Blossoming Apple

Scotaloo was transfixed on the key fragment as she sat between Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle who were busily flipping through Zecora's book for clues to the next fragment. She honestly had a hard time believing what she was seeing.

"This is really for real, isn't it?" she asked nopony in particular. "And once we get the other two pieces, we're totally gonna find The Holy Oat Pail! This is the coolest thing in the history of all cool things!"

"We'd probably find it faster if you'd actually do something other than stare at that thing like Fluttershy stared down that cockatrice," Sweetie Belle commented as she nudged Scotaloo with her horn.

"Books and me don't mix," Scotaloo replied matter-of-factly. "If I look at too many words all clumped up together my head starts hurting."

"Wow, try not to sound so proud of yourself for that," Sweetie told her, narrowing her eyes as she spoke.

"If you two're done I could use some help lookin' at this," Apple Bloom told them as she pointed at the book. The page it was open to looked to be nothing more than a list of foodstuff.

"Flour, butter, sugar, milk, cinnamon..." Sweetie Belle said as she began to read the list.

"Did Zecora accidentally leave her shopping list in the book?" Scotaloo asked.

"I don't think so," Apple Bloom said as she thought about the ingredients. "I think it's meant to be another clue, but it don't make much sense."

"I'll say," Sweetie Belle said as she made a face. "Not to mention there's a line missing here," she added, pointing to a blank space between the words

"butter" and "sugar".

"I'm telling you, it's probably just a grocery list," Scootaloo said as she flipped to the previous page. She looked even more curiously at this page. "Okay, what gives? There's a bunch of numbers and stuff on the edge of this page. What kind of weirdo book is this?"

"Lemme see," Apple Bloom said, sliding the book over in front of her. "One and one-half cups, two tablespoons, six, one teaspoon...hey, wait a sec!"

Apple Bloom carefully pulled the page back and folded it a bit. Sure enough, the numbers lined up with the items on the list on the next page. The number "six" lined up with the blank line.

"It ain't a grocery list," Apple Bloom said, her eyes widening. "It's a recipe!"

"A recipe for what, though?" Scootaloo asked.

"Well it calls for flour, so...maybe a cake?" Sweetie Belle said as she tried to figure it out. "Or a pie?"

"Pie..." Apple Bloom repeated as she looked over the recipe again. Then it dawned on her. She'd seen a recipe just like this one before at home. "Not just any pie! Apple pie!" she cried.

"So...Sugar Cube Corner then?" Scootaloo asked, which earned her a scathing look from Apple Bloom. "What? Where else are we gonna go for pie?"

"I think that hat may be cutting off circulation to your brain, Scoot," Sweetie Belle told her. "Apple pie? *Apples?* The next key fragment is at Sweet Apple Acres."

"Oh," Scootaloo said, feeling a bit embarrassed. "Yeah. Right. Apples. Lead the way, Apple Bloom!"

The trek to Sweet Apple Acres was considerably longer than the one to Carousel Boutique. The farm truly lived up to the "acres" part of its name in order to accommodate its sprawling apple orchard. It had belonged to the Apple family for countless generations, originally being a gift bestowed

upon a family ancestor hundreds of years ago by Princess Celestia for his exceptional service to Equestria. To this day it was a point of contention between the Apple family and the descendants of the founders of Ponyville as to which was older: the town or the farm. One thing was certain, and that was that the Apple family took great pride in their home and had always done their level best to take proper care of the land so graciously given to them by the Princess.

It was a sentiment that Apple Bloom most certainly had in common with her siblings, though secretly her attachment to Sweet Apple Acres wasn't tied primarily to the land itself or even the orchard that dominated its landscape. What she valued most were the tools that were used and buildings that dotted the farm's acreage. After all, to her a farm was only as good as the implements that were used to plant and maintain its crops and the structures that protected their harvests and animals from predators, thieves, or even the elements. Big Macintosh and Applejack didn't completely understand their little sister's preoccupation with things over plants, but they weren't about to tell her she was wrong for it. Besides, in their minds there was always the chance that this was merely a phase for Apple Bloom that she would someday grow out of. In the meantime, it did mean that there was at least one pony on the farm working to make sure things stayed in relatively good working order.

As Apple Bloom led her friends along the road towards the farmhouse, she spotted her older brother in a nearby field struggling with his plow once again. She groaned to herself and hopped the fence to go over and check on him.

"You gals wait here a sec," she called back to Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle. "I'll be right back!"

Apple Bloom heard the two call back to her in acknowledgment and continued running up to Big Macintosh as he strained against the straps connecting his yoke to the plow. His hooves were digging so hard into the ground they were turning up almost as much soil as the plow itself.

"What in tarnation are you doin', Big Macintosh?" she asked as she stopped alongside her massive brother.

"Plowin' th' field, what's it look like?" Big Macintosh replied through gritted

teeth.

"Did ya at least sharpen and oil up the plow like I showed you before you started?"

"I've done this job since b'fore y'all were born, Bloom. I don't need no fancy tricks to get it done."

"It's not a trick, it's common sense! A well-kept plow works way better than one that's all dull and crusted with dirt 'n mud."

"My way **works**, I know that for sure. If it ain't broke, don't fix it I say."

"So you'd rather end up a sweaty, tired mess of sore muscles after a long day's work instead of doin' it in a way that'd be easier and take less time."

"Eeyup."

"I will never understand boys," Apple Bloom said, putting a forehoof to her head. "You go ahead an' finish however you want, but next time you're lettin' me prep the plow for ya, got it?"

"I ain't makin' no promises."

"**Got it?**" Apple Bloom said it more insistently this time, glaring up at her brother. Big Macintosh had to admit that for being such a small filly, Bloom had at least as much spirit as Applejack did. He cringed to think what she'd be like when she was her sister's age.

"If it'll get ya to leave me alone to finish this, then alright," he told her, which got her to back down enough that he could continue his trudging forward.

"And you make sure you take a good, long bath tonight too," Apple Bloom said as she began making her way back to her friends. "I don't wanna hear Granny Smith goin' on and on 'bout how you smell worse than Winona does after she goes out playin' in the rain."

"By the way," he called out after her, catching her attention before she was out of earshot. "Applejack was lookin' fer ya earlier. Said somethin' 'bout wantin' yer help in the barn."

"I'm a might busy at the moment, ya know," Apple Bloom said, an irritated look on her face now.

Big Macintosh snorted in her direction. "Yeah, well, I don't wanna hear AJ goin' on an' on' 'bout you shirkin' yer duties on the farm again to go runnin' around gallivantin' with yer filly friends."

"Alright, alright, I'll go check with her."

Once reunited with her friends, Apple Bloom continued leading them along towards the farmhouse, which wasn't much further along. Upon arriving, she heard the sounds of her sister cursing up a storm from inside the barn. This didn't bode well, she thought.

"I gotta go check with Applejack here," Apple Bloom said to her friends. "You two can start lookin' around, but try not to make too big a mess 'o things."

"Hey, we're professionals," Scootaloo told her confidently.

"Right," Apple Bloom said skeptically, not entirely believing her Pegasus friend. "And Sweetie Belle? Don't fall down the well again."

"Hey, I resent that!" Sweetie Belle said defensively. "It's not like I fall in there every time I come over!"

"Yeah, only every other time," Scootaloo added with a chuckle. "And you're about due."

Apple Bloom left the two to their bickering and headed to the barn to see what Applejack was having such a fit over. She entered to see her sister struggling to stack numerous bales of hay against one of the walls. So far she had six bales stacked but was clearly already getting winded, not to mention having a difficult time stacking more than three on top of each other.

"There ya are, Apple Bloom," Applejack said, sounding relieved. "I need yer help to get these hay bales stacked up properly so's we've got room for the next harvest."

"I don't mind helpin' sis, but why aren't you usin' the pulley system I rigged up last week?" Apple Bloom asked as she looked up into the barn's rafters. Above them hung a series of ropes and pulleys that Apple Bloom had spent quite some time getting into place and set. She'd intended for them to be used for just such a job as this.

"Shoot, ya know I ain't no good with machines lil' sis," Applejack told her.

"It's not like I'm askin' ya to learn how to use a cash register," Apple Bloom said flatly. "It's a pulley. It's one o' the simplest machines there is. Look, just watch."

Apple Bloom grabbed one end of the rope that was hanging nearby and tied it to a nearby hay bale. She then ran over and grabbed another rope in her teeth, pulling back on it. The heavy bale rose into the air effortlessly. Bloom then secured her current rope to a hook in a nearby post and grabbed another rope. This one moved the bale across the barn and over so it hung above the current stack of bales. Finally, Bloom went back to the rope that was holding the bale in the air and set it free from its hook. The bale dropped squarely on top of the stack without so much as a little wavering from the now four-bale-high tower.

"See?" Apple Bloom said as she walked back over to Applejack, whose jaw was slack in amazement. "There's nothin' to it at all. If I can get a hay bale up there lickety split like that, anypony can."

"I gotta hand it to ya, lil' sis," Applejack said, giving her sister an affectionate nudge on the shoulder. "You got a knack fer figgerin' stuff out like this. Not to mention fixin' stuff up 'round the farm. I reckon we've saved a buncha bits just from you bein' so dang handy."

"It's nothin' special, really," Apple Bloom said, feeling a bit embarrassed by her sister's praise. "Anypony with a lick 'o sense could do this sorta stuff easy."

"Apple Bloom, you've got more sense in one hoof than most ponyfolk got in their whole body," Applejack told her. "You ain't nothin' like me or Big Macintosh. All we know is how things used to get done here on the farm. Down the line, we're gonna need somepony with the smarts and skills to

make things better 'round here. I reckon I'd rather it be my own lil' sister than some yahoo we hire from in town."

"Well...maybe..." Apple Bloom said, now even more embarrassed. "I still don't think it's all that big a deal, though."

"Give it some thought at least," Applejack said with a smile as she tussled her sister's mane a bit. "Now lemme take a look at this here pulley thing."

"You want me to show you how to do it one more time?"

"Naw, I reckon I gotta figger it out for mah- now what in the hay is this doin' in the hay?"

Applejack dug into the hay bale in front of her and pulled something out of it. Apple Bloom immediately recognized it as another fragment of the key to the temple of The Colts Templar. She struggled to contain her elation as Applejack set the piece down on the ground between them.

"Looks like one 'o Granny Smith's cast iron trivets," Applejack said, looking curiously at the piece. "Only looks like it's broken."

"Why don'tcha let me take it an' I'll see if I can fix it or somethin'?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Fine by me, just get it on outta the barn," Applejack told her.

"Will do. Do ya need me for anythin' else, big sis?"

"Nah, I reckon I can do this just fine thanks to yer pulley system. Thanks a ton, lil' sis."

Apple Bloom blushed once more from the praise from her sister and rushed back to find her friends with the second piece. She found Scootaloo sitting on the front porch of the house and put the key fragment down next to her.

"That makes two pieces," Apple Bloom said excitedly.

"Oh my gosh this is so cool!" Scootaloo said giddily as she looked at the new key fragment.

"Where's Sweetie Belle? She'll wanna see this too."

"Oh...yeah, about that..." Scootaloo was obviously trying to contain her laughter.

"I'm down here..." the two fillies heard Sweetie Belle call out from the nearby water well.

Apple Bloom rolled her eyes and hung her head as she walked over to the well's crank to heft Sweetie Belle out of the well. Scootaloo proceeded to roll around on the porch laughing raucously at how the unicorn managed to get herself into the same predicament yet again despite Apple Bloom's earlier warning. Some things would never change.

Chapter 4

Spreading Her Wings

All the running around that the girls had been doing that day was starting to take its toll on them. Fortunately, the refreshments Scootaloo had brought earlier were hitting the spot as they continued to study Zecora's book. Once again, however, they found themselves at a loss for finding anything that looked like a clue as to the whereabouts of the next – and in this case the last – piece of the key.

"This is gettin' frustratin'," Apple Bloom said as she sipped some apple juice. "I've been back an' forth through this whole book and I ain't seen anythin' that looks like it even refers to the last piece 'o the key or where it might be."

"Maybe we're just missing something really obvious," Sweetie Belle said as she pulled the book back over to her. "Or it could be another one of those page folding puzzles."

"Sweetie, give it a rest," Bloom told her as she closed the book on her. "Maybe we just need a lil' break to sharpen the saw a bit."

"But we're not cutting wood," Sweetie said in confusion.

"It's an expression, Sweetie," Bloom said with a frustrated sigh. "Just cool your jets fer a spell, okay?"

As Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle tried to relax, Scootaloo took a moment to look at the book. She didn't bother flipping through its pages, though. Her friends had already been through it enough as it was. Instead, she just looked at the book's cover and back. It was fairly plain with a pale yellow cover. As she looked it over, her eyes were drawn to something on the back of the book. There were two letters in the upper left corner that read "RO". She then noticed two letters on the book's spine that read "YG". Finally, there were two letters in the upper right corner of the book's front cover that read "BV".

"R – O – Y – G – B – V," Scootaloo repeated to herself, feeling like she knew those letters from somewhere. She slowly looked towards the sky as she thought. It came to her as she happened to see a couple of Pegasus ponies fly overhead.

"I think I've got it!" she exclaimed.

"Is it contagious?" Sweetie Belle asked with a smirk on her face.

"No, seriously guys!" Scootaloo told them, hopping up and down in front of them. "Check out these letters on the cover of the book."

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle looked at the letters, but then looked back at Scootaloo blankly. Clearly they weren't getting it.

"Guys, c'mon!" Scootaloo said insistently. "ROYGBV? Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet?"

"How're a buncha colors s'posed to be a clue?" Apple Bloom asked.

"They're the colors of a rainbow, duh!" Scootaloo told her. "The last key fragment's gotta be somewhere in or around Rainbow Dash's cloud home!"

"Oh great," Sweetie Belle said disappointedly. "Guess that brings this adventure to an end then."

"Why's that?" Scootaloo asked.

"How exactly are we s'posed to get up into Rainbow Dash's home, Scoot?" Apple Bloom asked her, her voice also laced with disappointment. "We can't fly, an' we sure can't walk on clouds either."

Scootaloo cocked an eyebrow at the two as she spread her wings. "Um, hello? Pegasus pony standing right in front of you both."

"Come on, Scoot, we know you can't fly," Sweetie Belle told her. "At least not yet."

"Guys, I totally can fly," Scootaloo said insistently. "I fly all the time. Watch."

Scotaloo's wings flapped so fast they practically buzzed as they lifted her a few inches off of the ground. She smirked at her friends who, regardless of what they were seeing, were still unconvinced.

"Hoverin' a few inches off the ground ain't flyin', Scoot," Apple Bloom told her. Scotaloo grunted as she let herself drop back to the ground.

"Look, the point is I can fly to a degree," she told them. "And it'll be enough to get me into Rainbow Dash's cloud home. I've done it before."

"That's all well and good, but is it such a good idea to just barge into somepony's home like that?" Sweetie Belle asked. "Especially when you don't even know if they'll be there or not?"

"It's what...one thirty now roughly?" Scotaloo asked. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom nodded to her. "Then yeah, she'll totally be there. She naps every day after lunch for at least an hour."

"How do you know that?" Apple Bloom asked. Just as she prepared to explain, Bloom put her hoof over Scotaloo's mouth to silence her. "On second thought, I don't think I wanna know how you know that."

"We're wasting time, girls!" Scotaloo announced as she hopped onto her scooter after detaching it from the wagon. "Let's get a move on!"

Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom traded looks and shrugged at each other as they took off running after Scotaloo. After all, they'd both had a turn leading the way to the previous locations. It was only right that Scotaloo got the opportunity now.

Scotaloo put some distance between her and her friends, but not so much that she'd lose them. The truth of the matter was that this was one of those times when she felt incredibly jealous of both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle. They were great friends and she knew they never meant her ill, but they both had something she never would: a family.

She'd been left in the care of Ponyville's orphanage only days after being born. She had no idea who either of her parents was or why she'd been left. She was old enough now that those who ran the orphanage told her she could try to find out about her parents, but she held absolutely no

interest in doing that. When asked why, her reasoning was simple: they didn't want her when she was born, so why should she want them now that she was older? Besides, she'd found someone she considered family already anyway.

Scotaloo had looked up to Rainbow Dash ever since she'd heard the rumor that as a filly Dash had performed the most legendary flying stunt known to all Pegasus ponies: the sonic rainboom. It had inspired her to believe that if a stunt that was thought to be impossible could actually be done, then anything could be done. She dedicated herself to learning whatever tricks and stunts of her own that she could. She tried her best to emulate Rainbow Dash's own tricks, though she had to modify most of them since her wings weren't strong enough yet for full flight. Any time she happened to catch Rainbow Dash flying through the sky, she dropped whatever she was doing just to watch her fly and maybe study her moves a bit more. Truth be told, though, it didn't matter if she was just doing her job or if she was actually practicing her tricks; to Scotaloo any time she got to see her flying was as good as going to see The Wonderbolts, if not better.

Scotaloo had only actually begun making Rainbow Dash's acquaintance after befriending both Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom, since their sisters were close friends of Dash's. In the short time she'd actually spent with her idol, Scotaloo had come to understand that Rainbow Dash wasn't anything like what she'd imagined her to be. She was far cooler than that. Scotaloo didn't know if Dash was just taking pity on her since she was an orphan, but the rainbow-maned mare never let an opportunity pass to give her some form of encouragement. In return, Scotaloo had resolved to do anything Dash asked her to do. No task was beneath her if it meant pleasing the pony that, for all intents and purposes, was the closest thing to a big sister she would ever have.

Recently, Rainbow Dash had made a small modification to her cloud home. She had added a series of staggered clouds that circled her home and led up to it from the ground. Each cloud had been set within Scotaloo's reach for flying, though as time had passed Dash had adjusted the cloud steps to be further and further apart as Scotaloo's wings grew stronger. The Pegasus filly still had a long way to go before she'd be able to just fly up to Dash's front door, but for now at least she had a way to get there. Most importantly, as far as their present endeavor was concerned, she had a way to go search for the final key fragment.

Scotaloo parked her scooter by the first cloud step and turned to face Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, who joined her moments later.

"You guys just chill out here, but don't get too comfy," Scotaloo told them as she took her hat off and hung it on the handlebars of her scooter. "Once I come back with that piece of the key, it'll be time for the real deal."

"Don't you wanna take your hat with you?" Sweetie Belle asked.

Scotaloo shook her head at the unicorn filly. "The wind gets pretty strong up there. It'd just blow off and I'd lose it for sure."

"We'll keep it safe for ya, Scoot," Apple Bloom told her. "Good luck!"

Scotaloo nodded to the two and began her ascent of the cloud stairs, finding it quite easy to make her way up them that day. She reached Dash's cloud home a few minutes later and began wandering around, looking for her idol.

"Maybe she's still napping," Scotaloo said to herself. "I'll just take a look around and try not to disturb her."

"I'm right here, kid," Scotaloo heard Rainbow Dash speak from right above her. Dash was leaning off of a cloud several feet overhead, grinning down at the orange Pegasus filly. "I was wondering when you'd be stopping by."

"How'd you know I'd be coming here?" Scotaloo asked as she watched Dash drift down to her level.

"You're kidding, right?" Dash asked. "You and your friends are anything but subtle about anything you do. I spotted you earlier in the day running to Rarity's and Applejack's homes while I was flying around Ponyville. I figured eventually you guys would come visiting me too for whatever adventure you're on this time."

"You're not annoyed, are you?" Scotaloo asked worriedly. Dash scoffed a bit and tousled the filly's mane a bit with her forehoof.

"Not hardly," Dash assured her. "Hey, I know you wanna probably finish

your business here quickly and get back to your friends, but wasn't there something the other day you said you wanted to show me?"

"Huh?" was all Scootaloo could think to respond at first. It took her a moment to switch gears from the day's adventure to her last conversation with Rainbow Dash, but once she did she instantly remembered what Dash was referring to. "Oh, it's nothing," she said in embarrassment. "Just a, uh...well...it's something I came up with recently. It's kind of a routine of sorts, I guess, and I wanted your expert opinion on it."

"You came up with a routine?" Dash asked, genuinely surprised. "You're still grounded though, right?"

"Yeah, it's not a flying routine," Scootaloo admitted as she tried to avoid eye contact with her idol. "It's more of a..." she mumbled the last couple of words.

"I didn't catch that," Dash told her, leaning closer.

Scootaloo sighed and swallowed her pride, knowing Dash wouldn't leave her alone until she fessed up. "It's a dance routine," she said.

"Dance, huh?" Dash said as she sat back on her haunches. "I'm not sure how much advice I'll be able to give, but sure. I'll watch ya."

"O-okay," Scootaloo said, suddenly nervous. "I'll just do a little bit of it, then. You know, so I don't waste your time too much. Plus I've gotta get back to Bloom and Sweetie at some point."

"Whenever you're ready, kid. You need some tunes to work with?"

"I've kinda got a specific song in mind for this, so I'd rather just do it without music for now. I doubt you've got the song anyway."

"Suit yourself."

Scootaloo took a few paces away from where Rainbow Dash sat and closed her eyes to try and focus her thoughts on the music as she remembered it and the moves she'd come up with to go with it. She tapped her right back hoof in time to give herself a beat to work with. After counting

out eight beats, she began her dance. She spun around and began moving with quick, deliberate actions using her hind legs for motion while she gestured with her forehooves in various poses and directions. She added partial and full spins as she explored a large area around her in motions so smooth and seemingly effortless it gave the illusion that she was crisscrossing the cloud while hardly moving much at all.

The dance itself was an impressive show, but what made it a real spectacle was the effect it was having on the cloud beneath her feet. Every time she turned it created a spike in the cloud as if it were whipped cream being beaten. Every time one of her hooves stomped with any real force on the cloud it gave a small rumble of thunder. And as she finished the partial routine with a rapid spin, it threatened to create a small tornado around her. She finished the spin and dropped to her knees, bending over backwards to look up at the sky.

Scootaloo let herself catch her breath for a moment and then got back onto her feet. She walked back over towards Rainbow Dash, hoping for her to say anything at all about her performance. What she encountered was an utterly dumbstruck rainbow-maned Pegasus pony whose lower jaw had gone slack.

"It'd be better with the music," Scootaloo told her. She assumed Dash's silence meant she hadn't liked it. "At least then you could just ignore the dancing and-"

"That...was...**AWESOME!**" Rainbow Dash yelled at the top of her lungs, finally coming to her senses. "How the hay did you make the clouds do all that?"

"I, uh...don't know," Scootaloo said honestly. "I don't get to dance on clouds. I had no idea my moves would mess things up so bad. I can clean it up if you-"

"Whoa hold it right there!" Dash told her as she jumped up to her feet. "What're you talking about? Kid- er, I mean, Scootaloo, your dancing is fantastic. It not only looks cool, you can make clouds do stuff that even some seasoned weather ponies have a hard time doing."

Scootaloo studied the clouds beneath her intently as she avoided eye

contact with Dash. "You don't have to say all this just to be nice, Rainbow Dash."

"Man, I really don't get you Scoot," Dash said as she shook her head at the filly. "You're usually bursting with energy and confidence, but you do something really amazing and you do a complete one-eighty in attitude. And for the record, I don't give out empty praise."

Scootaloo felt Rainbow Dash put one forehoof under her chin and lift her head until she was looking her idol in the eyes.

"You've got a gift here, Scootaloo," Dash told her. "You should be embracing it, not trying to hide it or act like it's something bad or wrong."

"I...I just don't know..." Scootaloo said skeptically. Her mind was still full of doubts about her dancing. "But...thanks, Rainbow Dash. I'm glad you liked it."

"Any time you wanna practice on a cloud you just come on by, okay?" Dash told her. "Whether I'm here or not. Though I sure wouldn't mind seeing more of that."

"Maybe another time. I actually came here looking for something, but I'm not sure how to describe it to you..."

"It's a little piece of bronze that looks like a slice of pie, isn't it?" Dash asked. Her knowledge of the key fragment caused Scootaloo no small amount of confusion.

"How'd you know that?" Scootaloo asked.

"Like I said, I saw you and your friends running all over the place earlier. Sweetie Belle had something like that in her mouth when you guys came out of Rarity's earlier, and I remembered I'd found something like it around my house a while back."

"You did?" Scootaloo asked excitedly.

"Yup. Been using it as a plate for nachos, though. Hope you don't mind."

"Mmm, nachos..." both of them said in unison. After a shared laugh, Rainbow Dash headed to her kitchen briefly and returned with the key fragment in her mouth. She flipped it into the air and caught it on one of her outstretched wings, offering it to Scootaloo.

"All yours, kid," Dash told her. "Mind if I ask what it is, though? I'm just curious."

"Uh...it's complicated," Scootaloo said, fibbing as best she could as she took the fragment and tucked it under one of her wings. "Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom understand it way better than me. I'm just along to keep them out of trouble."

"Well maybe I'll ask them later. You'd better get going."

"I will. Thank you so much, Rainbow Dash."

"Hey, it's no big. I've got other plates I can use for nachos."

"I, uh...I wasn't talking about that. I meant...thanks for what you said."

"Oh. You're welcome...Scootaloo. You're a good kid. Don't let anyone ever make you think otherwise for any reason, okay?"

Scootaloo nodded and began hopping down the cloud staircase back to her friends below. Rainbow Dash watched her descend for some time and then, once the three fillies were well on their way, she flew off in the opposite direction, meeting both Applejack and Rarity at a designated rendezvous spot just on the outskirts of the Everfree Forest.

"'Bout time ya showed up," Applejack said as Dash landed nearby.

"Hey, I had to treat this seriously," Dash told her. "Besides, you shoulda seen Scootaloo in action. She's got moves that I wanna figure out now!"

"Whatever moves she had would pale in comparison to the song Sweetie Belle sang for me," Rarity told her, sighing as she recalled the song. "She knows just how to tug at a pony's heartstrings."

"All 'o that don't hold a candle to Apple Bloom's smarts," Applejack said

proudly. "She's gonna be a certified genius someday, I can tell y'all that."

"If you're all done boasting about your respective targets' skills," a voice said from the shadows of the forest, "can we please get on with your reports?"

"Shoot, didn't know y'all were there already," Applejack said, turning in the direction of the voice.

"I'm nothing if not prompt," the voice replied. "I've already been to check with Pinkie Pie again, and she is proceeding as planned. Is everything else in order?"

Rarity nodded. "The girls have all three key fragments now. I suspect they'll be headed for the temple tout suite."

"Then the rest is out of our hooves until they complete the trials," the voice said.

"You sure this is gonna work?" Dash asked. "I mean, we all did our best to encourage the Crusaders, but you know how they are. They might try something unexpected."

"There is always a chance for failure," the voice said. "You girls have done your best to make sure they're on the proper path. The rest is up to them. If they fail then that's that. It would be a shame for all of our hard work to be for nothing, but then perhaps there would be a lesson in that for us all."

"And if they succeed?" Applejack asked.

"If they succeed..." the voice said, pausing to chuckle briefly. "Well, let's just say we're in for one wild night."

Ending 1

The Temple of Goon

The Everfree Forest always seemed to be dark, even in the middle of the afternoon. Combined with the usual cacophony of strange sounds that emanated from the forest, it was enough to fill the three fillies who were now making their way through it with more than a bit of trepidation. The fortunate part was that the Temple of The Colts Templar wasn't very deep inside the forest according to Zecora's notes, but having to enter the forest at all was still a daunting ordeal. Before any of them could wonder how far they would have to trek to find their destination, it came into view.

The temple was in ruins and ivy crept over seemingly every stone that still stood. A massive stone door greeted them with a circular indentation in the middle of it.

"I reckon that's where the key's s'posed to go," Apple Bloom said.

"You guys ready?" Scootaloo asked as she grabbed her key fragment from under her wing with her teeth. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom both fished their pieces out of their saddle bags and nodded to their Pegasus friend.

All three of them approached the door and placed their key fragments in the indentation. With all the pieces reunited in their home, the door shuddered and slowly slid to one side. As soon as it was open enough for them, the trio of fillies hurried inside to see what awaited them. A narrow hallway led them to a vast room devoid of anything of interest except for a tall stone statue of a pony that stood atop a pedestal near the opposite wall. As the fillies neared the statue, a stone slab slid over the entrance they'd just come through.

"Well that can't be good," Sweetie Belle said nervously as she began looking around for another way out of the room.

"Welcome, seekers of the Holy Oat Pail," said a deep, masculine voice emanating from the statue. The girls looked up to see the statue's eyes were now glowing. They wanted to run and hide, but with the room lacking

anything other than the statue they could only cower before it.

"I mean you no harm, adventurers," the statue told them. "If you wish to leave now you are welcome to do so and I will reopen the passage. However, if you seek the Oat Pail, you may not proceed until you have passed the first trial."

"Is it dangerous?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Is it difficult?" Scootaloo asked.

"Is it delicious?" Sweetie Belle asked. Her two companions looked at her oddly. "What? I'm a little munchy. And I needed a word that began with 'd'."

"My trial is one of grace," the statue told them. "I have guarded this hall for centuries, but once my favorite thing was to watch the most skillful dancers in all Equestria. Perform a suitably graceful dance for me, and I shall allow you passage to the next room."

"Shoot, is that all?" Apple Bloom said as she reared up on her hind legs. "I've got some new kung fu moves that'll knock your socks off!"

"But statues don't wear socks..." Sweetie Belle commented as she watched Apple Bloom start jumping and kicking wildly around the area.

"You really don't do well with figures of speech, do you?" Scootaloo noted, passing a forehoof over her face.

Apple Bloom tumbled and cartwheeled around the room, giving shrill battle cries as she punched, kicked and flailed wildly. Her moves may have been flashy to her, but they had all the grace of a mudslide. She attempted to finish her routine with a flying kick but mis-calculated her jump and ended up colliding with the statue. It toppled from the force of the blow and fell over, destroying the door that had been blocking the way forward.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Sweetie Belle asked after the dust had settled.

"Who cares? The door's open!" Apple Bloom said triumphantly. "Let's go, Crusaders!"

As they left the room, Scootaloo felt a small pang of disappointment that she hadn't gotten a chance to try dancing for the statue; however, they were now one step closer to the Holy Oat Pail, and she knew in her heart that once they got it all their dreams would come true.

After only a couple of minutes walking down the hall from the first trial, the faint sound of sobbing started to become audible from further ahead. Cautiously, the three fillies continued their trek until they came to another actual room. This one wasn't nearly as large as the first one, and it was filled with all manner of tools and construction materials. In the center stood another statue almost identical to the first, and the sobbing was emanating from it. On the floor at the base of the statue's podium sat something that had clearly spent a long time in pieces.

"I, uh..." Sweetie Belle said with trepidation. "I didn't think statues could get emotional."

"Oh goodness," the statue said in surprise, its voice unmistakably feminine. "I do apologize; it has been so long since I've had visitors. I was lamenting the loss of my precious birdhouse once again."

"How long has it been broken?" Scootaloo asked, looking over the pieces of the birdhouse.

"I lost track after the first hundred years," the statue admitted. "It used to hang on the wall just opposite of me so I would have something to enjoy watching. There is a hole in the ceiling just above me that birds would come through and make their nest in that house. One year a particularly large bird tried to settle in it and it was too much for the birdhouse to bear. It fell from the wall and shattered into all those pieces. I have been terribly lonesome ever since."

"How awful!" Sweetie Belle said as she felt for the poor statue. "I wish there was something we could do for you."

"Perhaps there is," the statue replied. "I assume you are here seeking the Holy Oat Pail, correct?"

"That's right," Scootaloo said. "Are you gonna give us the next trial?"

"That is indeed why I was placed here," the statue said. "My trial is one of diligence. Originally I was to only allow those pass who presented a suitably expert craft to me, hence why there are so many tools and supplies in this room. However, I believe we can be of service to each other. Build for me a new birdhouse - one as perfect as my old one – and I shall let you pass on to the final trial."

"Oh, oh!" Sweetie Belle said excitedly. "I've got a great idea! Give me a few minutes, guys. I got this."

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo just shrugged and watched as Sweetie Belle feverishly set to her task. The unicorn filly became a blur of activity as she hammered, sawed, and painted. Not five minutes later, she set down a brownish-gray box with a hole in it in front of the statue.

"What, pray tell, is this?" the statue asked, perplexed.

"Duh, it's a bird house," Sweetie Belle told it.

"It's a box."

"It's spacious so the birds can have big families!"

"It's a box."

"And it's got nice neutral tones so it won't be offensive to look at."

"It's a box."

"And it's a classic design that will go just about anywhere."

"It's. A. Box." The statue said emphatically. "And it is hardly the vision of perfection I asked for."

"Hey, beauty is in the eye of the beholder!" Sweetie Belle protested. "And I think it's plenty perfect. Besides, if you wanted something special you should've given us instructions on how to make it."

"She's got a point, you know," Scootaloo added. "I mean, to somepony out there I'll bet this is high art."

"And it is pretty well functional, I reckon," Apple Bloom added, though inwardly she did feel like she could've done quite a bit better at the task.

"Well I...er, I mean...you're supposed to...oh whatever," the statue said, finally opening the way forward as it was clear it wasn't going to win the argument. The three Crusaders cheered at their success and tore off down the hall towards the final task that stood between them and their dreams.

The girls could tell they were now in a part of the temple few, if any, had ever reached. Dust and cobwebs covered everything and the air was very stale. A series of stairs took them down to the floor of a round room that had several rows of stadium-style seats all facing what looked like a small stage in the center. In the middle of the stage stood yet another statue like the previous two they'd encountered. Its eyes glowed as the trio approached it wondering what trial awaited them this time.

"For you to have come this far, you must possess some remarkable talent," the statue told them in an incredibly melodic voice. "I assure you, however, my trial will not be as simple as what you have faced so far."

"Bring it on!" Scootaloo announced. "We're getting that oat pail no matter what we have to do to get it!"

"Unless it's somethin' dangerous, 'o course," Apple Bloom added.

"Or icky," Sweetie Belle added.

"Guys, you're not helping our case here," Scootaloo told them in frustration.

"My trial is not dire, but it is nonetheless daunting," the statue told them. "Mine is the trial of melody. Before my interment here, I listened to the most beautiful of singers sing the most remarkable songs ever heard by ponykind. Only a suitably amazing song will satisfy me and convince me to

allow you passage to the resting place of the Holy Oat Pail."

"A song? That's it?" Scootaloo asked as she cockily began walking up to the stage.

"Did I neglect to mention the spirits of my fellow Crusaders who also wish for a concert?" the statue said. Suddenly the seats in the stadium became occupied with dozens of spectral ponies of all kinds, all eagerly awaiting a performance.

"Heh, no problem," Scootaloo added with a smirk. "I am gonna rock your world!"

Scootaloo belted out with a passionate version of their Cutie Mark Crusader theme song that, as far as Sweetie Belle could tell, was even worse than her performance at the talent show. Not only did it sound horrible, but she was now ad-libbing in extra lines as she went. What was truly amazing was somehow the ghostly audience was also suffering as much as Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom were from the performance.

"Enough! Enough!" the statue cried out, halting Scootaloo's singing.

"Aww, but I was just warming up!" Scootaloo complained. "This is gonna be a full-on rock opera! It'll be epic!"

"That was epic alright," the statue commented. "I simply cannot take anymore. Go, for the love of Celestia, just go!"

The next door slid open and once again the three fillies cheered as they ran off while the statue and its audience breathed a sigh of relief that their torment was over with.

Three pony fillies stood side-by-side as they looked across the final room of the Temple of the Colts Templar. As soon as they'd entered, torches lining the walls magically lit up and shone light into the once darkened room. Several suits of pony armor lined a walkway that led towards an altar. Atop the altar sat a golden pail encrusted with gems of all shapes, sizes and

colors. Finally, behind the altar sat a cloaked pony who huddled behind the pail continuously muttering to themselves.

"This is it, guys," Scootaloo said, swallowing hard as she tried to control her nerves. "We've come this far. No turning back."

"You're right, Scoot," Sweetie Belle said, also fighting her own nerves as they began slowly approaching the altar. "I just want to say, though, that no matter what happens after this you girls will always be my best friends."

"And how," Apple Bloom added in a wavering voice. "If it weren't fer y'all, I mighta just up an' died of embarrassment way back at Diamond Tiara's cute ceañera. You gals are the best friends a filly could ask for."

"That all goes double for me too, guys," Scootaloo added. "I'll never forget either of you...not ever."

The trio stopped just short of the altar as the cloaked pony rose to their feet and slowly walked around to meet them. None of the girls could see much of the mysterious pony, but they all assumed that they were in the presence of a truly ancient and powerful being. As such, they decided silence was their best option for the moment.

"I've been waiting for ones such as yourselves to arrive," the mystery pony said in a soft, raspy voice. "To have come this far, you must have proven yourselves to the guardians. Step forward, then, and claim your reward. Eat from the pail and your heart's desire will be granted to you."

All three fillies looked at each other and then approached the pail, which was filled with simple looking oats. They all looked at it with great apprehension and then, one by one, they each took a mouthful of oats from it and ate. They were all fairly hungry by now, after all, having skimped on lunch because they'd been so preoccupied with gathering the key fragments.

"This tastes good and all," Scootaloo said with her mouth still full of oats, "but I don't feel any different."

"Me either," Apple Bloom said, though only after swallowing her oats. "I thought I'd have some kinda amazin' realization or somethin'."

"Maybe we ate too fast?" Sweetie Belle said, likewise as confused as her friends. "Excuse me, mysterious figure, but um...how's this supposed to work anyway? Does it even still work, for that matter?"

"Well, um...see, it's a little complicated..." the cloaked pony said, now seeming to stumble over their words a bit.

"Complicated how?" Apple Bloom asked. "This thing's supposed to grant our heart's desire, ain't it?"

"I guess so, but...oh my...this isn't going at all like we thought it would..." the cloaked pony's voice began to change from sounding ancient to sounding rather familiar to the three fillies.

"Something's not right here," Scootaloo said as she walked over towards the cloaked pony.

"Oh my...oh dear...oh my goodness..." said the now totally flustered cloaked pony who pulled back her hood to reveal her magnificent pink mane and sky blue eyes.

"Fluttershy?" all three fillies said in unison.

"What're you doing in the Temple of the Colts Templar?" Scootaloo asked.

"Oh, well it's a bit of a long story girls," Fluttershy told them as she shed the cloak entirely now. "But I'm not terribly good at explaining this sort of thing. Maybe you should ask the one who was behind it all along."

Fluttershy and the three fillies looked across the hall as Twilight Sparkle made her way into the room now, shaking her head as she approached them.

"You played your part admirably, Fluttershy," Twilight told her.

"Oh, it wasn't much of a part," Fluttershy admitted. "But I was certainly happy to be of help."

"I'm still confused," Sweetie Belle said, shaking her head. "What's all this

about?"

"Girls, there is no Holy Oat Pail," Twilight told them. "The Colts Templar really did exist, but they never had a secret treasure like this."

"But...where'd all the information come from?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Yeah, and the key fragments!" Scootaloo added.

"Not to mention this whole temple," Sweetie Belle said, looking around the place again.

"Well I did have a lot of help," Twilight said as she figured it was time to explain everything. "I came up with the idea for all of this with Zecora one day over tea. She gladly lent a hoof to me coming up with the whole mythology. Pinkie Pie then agreed to help try and guide you three to Zecora for more information when the book I made with Booker's help didn't give you enough to go on.

"Rarity helped make both the key fragments and the Holy Oat Pail itself, which is really just an ordinary oat pail done up with some gold paint and a few of her gems. Then she, along with Applejack and Rainbow Dash, agreed to help give each of you some encouragement as you sought out the pieces of the key.

"As for the temple, it is actually an old ruin but the Colts Templar never used this place. We had a lot of help from others around Ponyville to make the place up, and between my magic and Vinyl Scratch's, plus some of Scratch's sound equipment, we were able to make it all seem authentic. Scratch even lent her voice to the statues using her voice modulation magic."

"So this was all one big prank y'all played on us, then?" Apple Bloom asked, suddenly feeling very worried.

"Girls, this was no joke," Twilight told them. "We all did this because we wanted to help you."

"Help us?" Scootaloo asked. "With what?"

"Finding your true talents," Twilight said. "We've all known how important it's been to you girls, and we know how hard it is to be patient and wait for your talent to come to light. So we all decided to try and help you out. I guess I just didn't count on you finding other ways past all the trials."

With the full truth of the adventure revealed to them, the Cutie Mark Crusaders couldn't help but hang their heads in disappointment. It wasn't just another failure to them; it was the most elaborate and drawn-out failure of their time so far. Each of the three fillies couldn't help but feel somewhat humiliated by the whole ordeal.

"Girls, I'm so sorry about all this," Twilight told them, desperate to try and cheer them up. "I meddled in something that I now understand I shouldn't have meddled in, and I've hurt all three of you as a result."

"It's okay, Twilight," Sweetie Belle told her. "We don't hold it against you."

"Sweetie Belle's right," Apple Bloom added. "We shoulda known it was too good to be true."

"Yeah, I mean c'mon," Scootaloo said, still sounding dejected. "An oat pail that grants wishes? How silly is that? We must be first-class boneheads to fall for that."

"Oh girls, don't be so hard on yourselves," Fluttershy told them. "I still think it's impressive that you got through all those trials, even if you didn't do things how we wanted you to. You should be proud of yourselves for that much."

"Thanks Fluttershy," the girls said in a unison monotone.

"Why don't we all go to Sugar Cube Corner and have a little party now?" Fluttershy suggested. "Pinkie Pie was getting a party ready for us tonight in case you had succeeded, but she said she could easily change it up if you weren't. I think some cake, punch and dancing will help cheer everyone up. Don't you agree, Twilight?"

"Absolutely, Fluttershy," Twilight agreed with a smile.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders fell in alongside Twilight and Fluttershy as they

left the temple. Perhaps a party would help lift their spirits they all thought, but come the next day they would once again be faced with starting from square one for finding their true talents and earning their cutie marks.

Ending 1 Epilogue

Square One

Three fillies with blank spots on their flanks where their cutie marks would go sat with their heads resting on a table in Sugar Cube Corner while the party went on around them. Despite a number of attempts by Applejack, Rarity, Rainbow Dash and several other ponies to cheer them up, the trio remained despondent over their failure to acquire their cutie marks.

"I truly did not ever expect to see a party with fillies as sad as you three," said Zecora as she approached the Crusaders' table. The three girls looked up at her briefly, then back to the table without saying so much as a word. Zecora pursed her lips and then hung her head a little as well.

"In truth I wanted to apologize to you," she told them. "I went along with Twilight's plan, it's true. I did not like her plan at first and I feared things would turn out for the worst."

"It's like we told Twilight, Zecora," Apple Bloom said without picking her head up. "We don't blame any 'o y'all for tryin' to help us."

"Yeah, we're the ones who screwed up," Sweetie Belle added.

"I must ask: why do you feel so bad?" Zecora asked them. "If it were me, I would instead be quite glad."

"What's to be glad about?" Scootaloo shot back, looking up at the zebra somewhat angrily. "We didn't just fail to get our cutie marks this time; we failed with what was like half of Ponyville trying to help us out! If we couldn't figure it out with that kind of help, what hope do we have of ever getting our cutie marks?"

"You must pardon me for this remark, but I have never understood your fascination with your marks," Zecora replied. "In my native land we value them too, but not nearly as much as the friends we hold true. Of years ahead you all have quite a few and you all have much growing up yet to do."

"But...what about all 'o our classmates who keep laughin' at us an' makin' fun 'o us for bein' blank flanks?" Apple Bloom asked worriedly. "Sometimes it gets hard to just keep takin' everythin' they say 'bout us."

"Steel your heart and remember your friends," Zecora told her. "And know that they will always be with you to the end."

With her peace said, Zecora began to leave the table only to stop after a few steps and look back at the fillies with a smirking grin.

"Of course if that thought is not quite enough, tell them old Zecora will hex them with some truly nasty stuff," she told them with a wink before leaving them.

Silence fell back over the table as the fillies continued to stew over their predicament. It was broken just a few moments later as Sweetie Belle began trying to stifle her giggles.

"What's so funny?" Scootaloo asked her.

"I was just thinking of the look on Silver Spoon's face if I told her Zecora was going to hex her because she wouldn't quit bugging me," Sweetie replied while still giggling. "It'd be priceless."

"That would be pretty funny," Apple Bloom added as she started to laugh as well.

"Not to mention how bad Diamond Tiara would freak out," Scootaloo added with a smile. "I'm liking this idea."

"I'm also likin' what else Zecora said," Apple Bloom said while looking at both of her friends. "Friends 'n family are what really matters, an' like I said back at the temple...you two are the best friends I could ever hope for."

"That goes double for me," Scootaloo said with an emphatic nod. "If I didn't have you girls with me I don't know what I'd do."

"No matter what, we'll always be friends," Sweetie Belle said resolutely. "And we'll always have fun together."

"Still, we should keep at the crusading," Scootaloo told them. "But maybe we shouldn't try so hard at it. I do still want my cutie mark, but I want to have fun getting it."

"Agreed!" Sweetie Belle said. Apple Bloom nodded her agreement as well.

"For now, though, let's stop mopin' and get to partyin'," Apple Bloom said. "All this adventurin' has made me somethin' fiercely hungry."

"Betcha I can eat more pie than you, Bloom!" Scootaloo told her with a challenging look in her eyes.

"Oh it is on!" Sweetie Belle added, trying to sound like her sister as she said it.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS COMPETITIVE EATERS! YAY!" all three fillies cried out as they headed for the buffet. They not only had a renewed zeal for their collective goal, but also a renewed dedication to each other and the friendship they shared and treasured above all else.

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*The End of  
Raiders of the Cutie Mark, Ending One*

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Ending 2

The Last Crusade

The Everfree Forest always seemed to be dark, even in the middle of the afternoon. Combined with the usual cacophony of strange sounds that emanated from the forest, it was enough to fill the three fillies who were now making their way through it with more than a bit of trepidation. The fortunate part was that the Temple of The Colts Templar wasn't very deep inside the forest according to Zecora's notes, but having to enter the forest at all was still a daunting ordeal. Before any of them could wonder how far they would have to trek to find their destination, it came into view.

The temple was in ruins and ivy crept over seemingly every stone that still stood. A massive stone door greeted them with a circular indentation in the middle of it.

"I reckon that's where the key's s'posed to go," Apple Bloom said.

"You guys ready?" Scootaloo asked as she grabbed her key fragment from under her wing with her teeth. Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom both fished their pieces out of their saddle bags and nodded to their Pegasus friend.

All three of them approached the door and placed their key fragments in the indentation. With all the pieces reunited in their home, the door shuddered and slowly slid to one side. As soon as it was open enough for them, the trio of fillies hurried inside to see what awaited them. A narrow hallway led them to a vast room devoid of anything of interest except for a tall stone statue of a pony that stood atop a pedestal near the opposite wall. As the fillies neared the statue, a stone slab slid over the entrance they'd just come through.

"Well that can't be good," Sweetie Belle said nervously as she began looking around for another way out of the room.

"Welcome, seekers of the Holy Oat Pail," said a deep voice emanating from the statue. The girls looked up to see the statue's eyes were now glowing. They wanted to run and hide, but with the room lacking anything other than

the statue they could only cower before it.

"I mean you no harm, adventurers," the statue told them. "If you wish to leave now you are welcome to do so and I will reopen the passage. However, if you seek the Oat Pail, you may not proceed until you have passed the first trial."

"Is it dangerous?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Is it difficult?" Scootaloo asked.

"Is it delicious?" Sweetie Belle asked. Her two companions looked at her oddly. "What? I'm a little munchy. And I needed a word that began with 'd'."

"My trial is one of grace," the statue told them. "I have guarded this hall for centuries, but once my favorite thing was to watch the most skillful dancers in all Equestria. Perform a suitably graceful dance for me, and I shall allow you passage to the next room."

"I guess I could try my kung fu dancin' again," Apple Bloom said as she considered taking a shot at the trail. "I've figured out some new moves, an' I think I've gotten a lot better! So here goes nothin'!"

"Hold it, Bloom," Scootaloo said just as Apple Bloom was about to get started. "The last time you danced you brought the house down. Literally. I think you'd better sit this one out."

"Well don't look at me, I'm no dancer," Sweetie Belle said.

"I've got this one, guys," Scootaloo told them as she walked slowly out to the center of the room.

"You sure about this, Scoot?" Apple Bloom asked.

"To be honest, no I'm not," Scootaloo told her. "But somepony told me very recently that I have a gift for this kind of thing. And that I should be embracing it, not trying to hide it or act like it's dumb or wrong."

"So what're you gonna do?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"I'm gonna embrace it," Scootaloo said as she looked back at her friends with a smile. Then she looked back up at the statue. "Hey, if I'm gonna dance can you at least gimme some music to work with?"

The statue's eyes glowed a little more brightly and classical music filled the room. Scootaloo sighed and shook her head.

"Something from after I was born, maybe?" she complained.

"Very well then," the statue replied, its eyes flashing once again.

The classical music faded away, replaced with a beat that Scootaloo found all too familiar.

It was the song that went with the dance routine she had shown part of to Rainbow Dash earlier that day. She grinned and licked her lips in anticipation as she waited for the right point in the music, and as soon as it came she sprang into action.

Scootaloo threw herself into her dance routine with total abandon. She spun and flipped, popped and locked, moved and grooved; all as the music thumped in the air. She knew she was being watched by her friends and by the statue, but at that moment in time she didn't care if she was being watched by every pony in Ponyville. She let herself revel in the freedom she felt through her dancing. It was a feeling unlike anything she'd ever felt before; and the further into her routine she progressed the more she realized she liked it.

As she neared the halfway point of the routine, Scootaloo noticed that a fogbank had rolled into the room somehow. She didn't know or care about the particulars of it, though. All she did know was that fog was technically a cloud, and she knew exactly what to do next. One large backflip brought her up from the floor onto the cloud and from that point on Scootaloo's dance went from great to amazing. Just like in Rainbow Dash's cloud home, her moves caused changes in the cloud beneath her. Turns and partial spins whipped up spikes of cloud as if it were dessert topping, while stomps and landings from big jumps sent rumbles of thunder through the room that meshed with the heavy bass line of the music.

Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom were awestruck by the spectacle of it all,

and at the center was Scootaloo who was having the time of her life. As the song neared its finale, she dropped down onto her back and started into a windmill with legs and wings extended. The cloud around her swirled into a vortex around her and lifted her further into the air. She kicked out of the windmill into a final backflip and landed on her hind legs with her fore legs extended into the air, a tremendous clap of thunder erupting from the cloud as she landed. She panted and gasped for air, but the surging adrenaline in her veins had her more exhilarated than she'd ever been in her entire life. One coherent thought made it through her head as she caught her breath: She absolutely loved dancing.

"In all my years, never have I seen such a performance," the statue said in a tone of amazement. "Truly you are worthy to continue. The Trial of Grace has been passed. The way forward shall now open."

Scootaloo let herself sink back through the cloud of fog to the floor and rejoined her friends as they watched the stone door slowly slide open in front of them.

"Alright, we did it!" Scootaloo said in celebration.

"We?" Sweetie Belle said. "More like you! That was unbelievable, Scoot!"

"No foolin'!" Apple Bloom added. "I ain't never seen moves like that before!"

Scootaloo nodded and smiled at her friends. "Thanks guys. It means a lot to hear it from you. And I have to admit, that was fun. Like, really fun."

"Well you can dance some more later," Bloom told her. "Let's get goin'. We still have two more trials to face."

The three fillies quickly took off down the hall, though Scootaloo stopped for a moment to look back into the room where she'd just danced. The fog had all but dissipated and the statue had gone dormant once again. She quietly thanked the statue for letting them pass. She also thanked Rainbow Dash for giving her the confidence she needed earlier. As she turned and headed down the hall after her friends, she never noticed a small, brief flash come from her flanks.

After only a couple of minutes walking down the hall from the first trial, the faint sound of sobbing started to become audible from further ahead. Cautiously, the three fillies continued their trek until they came to another actual room. This one wasn't nearly as large as the first one, and it was filled with all manner of tools and construction materials. In the center stood another statue almost identical to the first, and the sobbing was emanating from it. On the floor at the base of the statue's podium sat something that had clearly spent a long time in pieces.

"I, uh..." Sweetie Belle said with trepidation. "I didn't think statues could get emotional."

"Oh goodness," the statue said in surprise, its voice unmistakably feminine. "I do apologize; it has been so long since I've had visitors. I was lamenting the loss of my precious birdhouse once again."

"How long has it been broken?" Scootaloo asked, looking over the pieces of the birdhouse.

"I lost track after the first hundred years," the statue admitted. "It used to hang on the wall just opposite of me so I would have something to enjoy watching. There is a hole in the ceiling just above me that birds would come through and make their nest in that house. One year a particularly large bird tried to settle in it and it was too much for the birdhouse to bear. It fell from the wall and shattered into all those pieces. I have been terribly lonesome ever since."

"How awful!" Sweetie Belle said as she felt for the poor statue. "I wish there was something we could do for you."

"Perhaps there is," the statue replied. "I assume you are here seeking the Holy Oat Pail, correct?"

"That's right," Scootaloo said. "Are you gonna give us the next trial?"

"That is indeed why I was placed here," the statue said. "My trial is one of diligence. Originally I was to only allow those pass who presented a suitably expert craft to me, hence why there are so many tools and supplies in this room. However, I believe we can be of service to each other. Build

for me a new birdhouse - one as perfect as my old one – and I shall let you pass on to the final trial."

"Time to apply my artistic sensibilities again, then," Sweetie Belle said as she began rifling through tools. She felt a tap on her shoulder and looked up to see Apple Bloom shaking her head at her.

"No offense, Sweetie, but I'm still pickin' splinters outta my hair from the last time you tried buildin' somethin'," Apple Bloom told her. "Lemme take a whack at this one."

"Are you sure, Bloom?" Sweetie asked her.

"I put the clubhouse back together, didn't I? You just hang back with Scoot. This might take a bit."

Sweetie Belle hesitantly walked away from the tools and watched as Apple Bloom first walked over to gather up the pieces of the broken birdhouse.

"Is this all the pieces of your old birdhouse, ma'am?" Bloom asked the statue.

"Yes it is, but what do you need them for?" the statue asked.

"Only way I'm gonna make a birdhouse as good as your old one is if I know what the old one looked like first."

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle engaged themselves in a series of games of tic-tac-toe as Apple Bloom threw herself into her work. It didn't take terribly long for her to roughly piece the old birdhouse back together enough that she knew what it had looked like. In the process she also realized what had been the real problem with the birdhouse: the wood on the back had simply rotted around the nail that had been keeping it up on the wall. Any bird's weight would've been enough to send it crashing to the floor. She decided that she needed to ensure her birdhouse wouldn't meet the same fate.

As she began to go about the business of making a new birdhouse, Apple Bloom felt a familiar feeling once again in the back of her head. She'd felt it earlier that day when she took time to explain her new pulley system in the barn to her sister. There was something comforting to her about working

with tools and materials. When she was making something, she was left alone. She wasn't mocked, laughed at, or made fun of. There was just her, her tools and her supplies. Some ponies would think it was a lonely hobby, but Bloom took a great deal of comfort in it.

The more she worked on the birdhouse, though, the more she realized that "comfort" didn't really describe how she felt. Certainly it was relaxing to have something to work on that wasn't zip lining or cupcake baking or any of the other interesting, if not inane, activities she'd undertaken trying to acquire her cutie mark. There was something else about it, though. There was certainty in her as she worked. Every swing of a hammer or sweep of a paintbrush felt right. She also had a sense of pride in her work. Everything she either made or fixed had a flair to it that was uniquely hers. Most of all, though, when she was making something or fixing something or improving something, she felt happy.

She couldn't count the number of times Applejack or Big Macintosh or even her fellow Crusaders had come across her working on something and commented on the smile that had been on her face. She'd always just written it off before or played down its importance. After all, what she was doing wasn't anything anypony else couldn't do. But Applejack's words to her earlier that day had stuck in her head. What she did might seem like common sense to her, but maybe common sense wasn't all that common to begin with. Even if building and fixing things was somewhat of an ordinary thing, that didn't mean she had to be ashamed of liking it. And she did like it quite a lot.

Every so often, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle would look up from their games and see Apple Bloom working away on the birdhouse. They kept quiet as they watched her, partly because they didn't want to break her concentration but also because they had never seen her so happy as she was while working. Finally, after over an hour of work, Apple Bloom carried her finished work over in front of the statue to present it.

"I hope it's to your likin'," Bloom said, wiping some sweat from her brow with one of her fore hooves. "I based the design on the old birdhouse, but I sloped the roof more and added a piece of metal on top of it so any rainwater that falls on it won't just sit 'n warp the wood. I also reinforced it at the base so even if it does fall down again, it ain't likely to break. I painted it usin' colors to make it look more like a tree, figurin' that birds would rather

nest in somethin' that looks like a tree after all."

"It's...absolutely splendid," the statue said in a quivering voice. The birdhouse slowly levitated over to its spot on the wall and sat securely in its place, awaiting new tenants. "Your skill and dedication are second to none, and I can tell that you put much love into this creation. I have met few who would be more worth of proceeding to the final trial."

Just as before, the way ahead opened slowly on the other side of the room. Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo darted down the hall immediately, but Apple Bloom stopped and looked up at the statue again before leaving.

"Do you mind if I ask ya somethin' before I go?" she asked the statue.

"By all means, young one."

"I've had a lotta trouble findin' my true talent, but I was just wonderin'...even if I never find it, is it okay if I just stick to doin' somethin' I like?"

"For most, life is too short to be stuck not doing something you love."

"I reckon that makes a whole lotta sense. Thank ya kindly, ma'am."

Apple Bloom took off down the hall after her friends with a whole new perspective on her knack for building and fixing things. Even if she never did get her cutie mark, she at least had something she knew she would always enjoy doing. No amount of teasing or ridicule could ever take that away from her.

If only she'd seen the brilliant flash that came from her flanks as she raced to rejoin her friends.

The girls could tell they were now in a part of the temple few, if any, had ever reached. Dust and cobwebs covered everything and the air was very stale. A series of stairs took them down to the floor of a round room that had several rows of stadium-style seats all facing what looked like a small stage in the center. In the middle of the stage stood yet another statue like

the previous two they'd encountered. Its eyes glowed as the trio approached it wondering what trial awaited them this time.

"For you to have come this far, you must possess some remarkable talent," the statue told them in an incredibly melodic voice. "I assure you, however, my trial will not be as simple as what you have faced so far."

"Bring it on!" Scootaloo announced. "We're getting that oat pail no matter what we have to do to get it!"

"Unless it's somethin' dangerous, 'o course," Apple Bloom added.

"Or icky," Sweetie Belle added.

"Guys, you're not helping our case here," Scootaloo told them in frustration.

"My trial is not dire, but it is nonetheless daunting," the statue told them. "Mine is the trial of melody. Before my interment here, I listened to the most beautiful of singers sing the most remarkable songs ever heard by ponykind. Only a suitably amazing song will satisfy me and convince me to allow you passage to the resting place of the Holy Oat Pail."

"A song? That's it?" Scootaloo asked as she cockily began walking up to the stage.

"Did I neglect to mention the spirits of my fellow Crusaders who also wish for a concert?" the statue said. Suddenly the seats in the stadium became occupied with dozens of spectral ponies of all kinds, all eagerly awaiting a performance.

"Heh, no problem," Scootaloo added with a smirk. "I've sung in front of way more ponies than this before. You all just sit back and-"

Scootaloo stopped mid-boast as she saw Sweetie Belle walk past her up onto the stage. The unicorn filly looked about ready to panic, but nonetheless stood her ground as she looked out at the spectral audience.

"Bloom, what's she doing?" Scootaloo asked as she turned to look back at her earth pony friend. "I thought Sweetie hated singing, not to mention singing in front of crowds?"

"I think she figgers it's her turn is all," Apple Bloom told her. "I, for one, ain't gonna tell her no. Are you?"

"I guess not, but will she be okay?"

"That's what we're here for, right?"

Scootaloo nodded emphatically and joined Apple Bloom just off of the stage to watch their friend. Sweetie Belle stood before the statue fidgeting nervously.

"Do you mean to sing for us, little one?" the statue asked her.

"Y-yeah...I mean, yes. I'll try, at least," Sweetie Belle replied.

"A 'try' will not appease me, child. I require a truly magnificent performance."

"I don't know if I can give a magnificent performance, but I'll do my best. It's just...I'm really not used to singing in front of so many ponies. Even if they are ghosts...well, especially since they're ghosts."

"I suppose I can appreciate your misgivings, but nonetheless this is the trial. Will you rise to the challenge, or leave in defeat?"

Feeling like her heart might explode twice, Sweetie Belle forced herself to look out at the audience again. Each of the ghosts looked down at her patiently, all of them hopeful for a beautiful performance. She then looked down at her friends, who smiled as best they could at her. She sighed and looked back over the crowd, but did a double-take this time. For a fleeting moment she swore she'd seen Rarity sitting among those in attendance. She shook her head, knowing there was no way her sister could actually be there, but that one moment of thought about her sister reminded her of what Rarity had told her that morning.

"You have an incredible gift in your voice," she had said, her words echoing in Sweetie Belle's head. "Don't be afraid to share it someday. I would hate to think I'm the only one in the world who gets to enjoy your songs."

"My sister prides herself on her generosity," Sweetie Belle said to the audience. "She really is one of the nicest ponies you could ever meet. I sing songs for her all the time at home and she tells me that I should share my songs with everypony else as well. I've always been afraid that I would be laughed off stage or something, but I guess the worst that could happen here is my friends and I might go home empty-hooved."

"We want to reach the Holy Oat Pail for our own reasons, that much is true, but we also want to share its wonders with all of Equestria. For that goal...and for the sake of our dreams... I'll do my very best here and sing for all of you."

Sweetie Belle closed her eyes and took several deep breaths as she sought out a song in her memory to go with. It came to her in an instant; another song bestowed upon her by her and Rarity's late Grandma Aubrieta. It was a traditional lament from Emerald Isle, and it was perfect for the moment.

She slowly opened her eyes to meet the audience as her incredibly beautiful voice began to fill the room.

*"Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From glen to glen, and down the mountain side
The summer's gone, and all the flowers are dying
'Tis you, 'tis you must go and I must bide."*

As Sweetie Belle sang, her horn began to glow of its own accord. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo looked on in surprise as they'd never seen their unicorn friend even so much as attempt a spell before. The magic permeated the room and an illusionary landscape came into view, one of rolling hills coated in many shades of green. Atop one hill, underneath a massive tree, stood Sweetie Belle as she continued to sing.

*"But come ye back when summer's in the meadow
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow..."*

As soon as she sang of snow, the illusory landscape changed to meet the lyrics, now being a series of rolling hills blanketed in white. The tree Sweetie Belle stood underneath was barren of leaves and coated with snow on all of its branches.

*"Tis I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow
Oh Danny boy, oh Danny boy, I love you so."*

For her part, Sweetie didn't know where the magic was coming from and she almost didn't care. She was lost in the song, which had long been a favorite of hers that she had begged Grandma Aubrieta to teach her. She reveled in the feeling that singing gave her. The audience didn't matter, nor did her friends who were so dear to her. All that mattered was the song and she intended to do it justice.

*"And if you come, when all the flowers are dying
And I am dead, as dead I well may be
You'll come and find the place where I am lying
And kneel and say an 'Ave' there for me."*

The scene had changed to an Autumnal one on the prior verse, the hills now covered with multi-colored leaves and the sky a cold, slate gray. The tree above Sweetie Belle was mostly barren save a few leaves that clung to their branches desperately. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo swore they could feel a chill in the air of the room just from seeing the scene. They were completely entranced by the song, eager to hear more.

*"And I shall hear, tho' soft you tread above me
And all my dreams will warm and sweeter be
If you'll not fail to tell me that you love me
I'll simply sleep in peace... until you come to me."*

Sweetie Belle drew out the final notes of the song, letting her voice fade gradually away to silence as her horn's glow dissipated and the illusionary scene vanished. Silently she thanked her grandmother once again for teaching her the song and said a silent prayer that she had at least sung it decently. It was then that a new sound began to fill the room. All around the stage, the spectral pony audience rose to their feet and began stomping their applause. Sweetie suddenly realized she was being given a standing ovation and she quickly and graciously bowed to the audience. She tried to contain her emotions, but the smile on her face showed her utter joy at the whole scene.

"Never have I heard such a stirring rendition of that song," the statue told

her, its voice quivering with emotion. "That was simply beautiful, child. I could not be more pleased. You have all earned the right to your ultimate reward. The way to the Holy Oat Pail shall open to you."

"Ohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh guys!" Scootaloo said ecstatically. "We did it! We totally did it!"

"Thanks to Sweetie Belle an' her crazy awesome singin' voice!" Apple Bloom added.

"Guys, c'mon," Sweetie Belle said bashfully. "You're gonna embarrass me here. But thanks."

"Time's a'wastin' Crusaders!" Apple Bloom said triumphantly. "We got a Holy Oat Pail to claim!"

Sweetie Belle immediately fell in running behind her two friends, though truth be told her excitement over her singing performance easily eclipsed her excitement over their imminent success. She had sung for a crowd and they had liked it. More importantly, she had sung for a crowd and she had liked it. She even found herself daring to hope that she'd have another such opportunity sometime soon as she now began to crave the feeling that singing gave her.

As she raced on behind her two friends, just as had happened twice earlier a brief and bright flash from Sweetie Belle's flanks went completely unnoticed by the trio of Cutie Mark Crusaders who now bore down on their final goal and the end of their crusade.

Three pony fillies stood side-by-side as they looked across the final room of the Temple of the Colts Templar. As soon as they'd entered, torches lining the walls magically lit up and shone light into the once darkened room. Several suits of pony armor lined a walkway that led towards an altar. Atop the altar sat a golden pail encrusted with gems of all shapes, sizes and colors. Finally, behind the altar sat a cloaked pony who huddled behind the pail continuously muttering to themselves.

"This is it, guys," Scootaloo said, swallowing hard as she tried to control her

nerves. "We've come this far. No turning back."

"You're right, Scoot," Sweetie Belle said, also fighting her own nerves as they began slowly approaching the altar. "I just want to say, though, that no matter what happens after this you girls will always be my best friends."

"And how," Apple Bloom added in a wavering voice. "If it weren't fer y'all, I mighta just up an' died of embarrassment way back at Diamond Tiara's cute ceañera. You gals are the best friends a filly could ask for."

"That all goes double for me too, guys," Scootaloo added. "I'll never forget either of you...not ever."

The trio stopped just short of the altar as the cloaked pony rose to their feet and slowly walked around to meet them. None of the girls could see much of the mysterious pony, but they all assumed that they were in the presence of a truly ancient and powerful being. As such, they decided silence was their best option for the moment.

"I've been waiting for ones such as yourselves to arrive," the mystery pony said in a soft, raspy voice. "To have come this far, you must have proven yourselves to the guardians. Step forward, then, and claim your reward. Eat from the pail and your heart's desire will be granted to you."

All three fillies looked at each other and then approached the pail, which was filled with simple looking oats. They all looked at it with great apprehension and then, one by one, they each took a mouthful of oats from it and ate. They were all fairly hungry by now, after all, having skimped on lunch because they'd been so preoccupied with gathering the key fragments.

"This tastes good and all," Scootaloo said with her mouth still full of oats, "but I don't feel any different."

"Me either," Apple Bloom said, though only after swallowing her oats. "I thought I'd have some kinda amazin' realization or somethin'."

"Maybe we ate too fast?" Sweetie Belle said, likewise as confused as her friends. "Excuse me, mysterious figure, but um...how's this supposed to work anyway? Does it even still work, for that matter?"

"Oh girls..." the pony said in a much clearer yet still soft tone. "I don't know about magical oat pails, but I think you all found your heart's desires all the same."

"Wait, I know that voice..." Apple Bloom said, suddenly recognizing the voice. The pony reached a pale yellow hoof up and pulled her hood back, revealing a magnificent pink mane and sky blue eyes.

"Fluttershy?" all three fillies said in unison.

"What're you doing in the Temple of the Colts Templar?" Scootaloo asked.

"Oh, well it's a bit of a long story girls," Fluttershy told them as she shed the cloak entirely now. "But I'm not terribly good at explaining this sort of thing. Maybe you should ask the one who was behind it all along."

Fluttershy and the three fillies looked across the hall as Twilight Sparkle made her way into the room now, a proud smile on her face as she looked at them.

"You played your part perfectly, Fluttershy," Twilight told her.

"Oh, it wasn't much of a part," Fluttershy admitted. "But I was certainly happy to be of help."

"I'm still confused," Sweetie Belle said, shaking her head. "What's all this about?"

"Girls, there is no Holy Oat Pail," Twilight told them. "The Colts Templar really did exist, but they never had a secret treasure like this."

"But...where'd all the information come from?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Yeah, and the key fragments!" Scootaloo added.

"Not to mention this whole temple," Sweetie Belle said, looking around the place again.

"Well I did have a lot of help," Twilight said as she figured it was time to

explain everything. "I came up with the idea for all of this with Zecora one day over tea. She gladly lent a hoof to me coming up with the whole mythology. Pinkie Pie then agreed to help try and guide you three to Zecora for more information when the book I made with Booker's help didn't give you enough to go on.

"Rarity helped make both the key fragments and the Holy Oat Pail itself, which is really just an ordinary oat pail done up with some gold paint and a few of her gems. Then she, along with Applejack and Rainbow Dash, agreed to help give each of you some encouragement as you sought out the pieces of the key.

"As for the temple, it is actually an old ruin but the Colts Templar never used this place. We had a lot of help from others around Ponyville to make the place up, and between my magic and Vinyl Scratch's, plus some of Scratch's sound equipment, we were able to make it all seem authentic. Scratch even lent her voice to the statues using her voice modulation magic."

"So this was all one big prank y'all played on us, then?" Apple Bloom asked, suddenly feeling very worried.

"Girls, this was no joke," Twilight told them. "We all did this because we wanted to help you."

"Help us?" Scootaloo asked. "With what?"

"Finding your true talents," Twilight said. "We've all known how important it's been to you girls, and we know how hard it is to be patient and wait for your talent to come to light. So we all decided to try and help you out. And if I may be so bold, it looks like it paid off."

"How? We still don't have our cutie marks!" Sweetie Belle said in frustration.

"Girls, take another look," Fluttershy told them gently.

All three fillies looked over and were suddenly shocked. Scootaloo's flank was adorned with a pair of winged dancing shoes sitting atop a cloud. Apple Bloom had a picture of an unrolled blueprint with a heart-shaped

design on it on her flank. As for Sweetie Belle, a spotlight shining on a heart-shaped musical note decorated her flank.

"We...we did it..." Apple Bloom said in disbelief.

"We found our talents..." Scootaloo added similarly.

"And we...we got our...our..." Sweetie Belle said, tears welling in her eyes.

The emotion of the moment overcame the trio and all three of them embraced each other as they began crying tears of joy. After all their failures and all the ridicule they'd endured, they finally had accomplished their goal. Fluttershy found herself weeping slightly for them as well, though she kept her composure and smiled warmly at the trio who continued their joyous sobbing for some time before finally calming down.

"Thank you, Twilight," Sweetie Belle said, rubbing her eyes to try and wipe away her tears. "This means more to us than we can tell you."

"Don't just thank me, Sweetie," Twilight told her. "Rarity will be delighted to see you and your cutie mark at the party."

"What party?" Scootaloo asked after she sniffled a little.

"That would be the cute ceañera Pinkie Pie has been working on for most of the day," Fluttershy told her. "We wanted to give you girls a real reward after all was said and done, and Pinkie insisted on throwing you all a party."

"A cute ceañera?" Apple Bloom repeated. "For...for us?"

"Rainbow Dash and Applejack will be there waiting to see you as well," Twilight told them. "As will most of Ponyville, I think. Pinkie was pretty indiscriminate about who she invited."

The three fillies now bore wide smiles on their faces. They looked between each other, nodded to one another, and inhaled a deep breath. Twilight and Fluttershy just managed to cover their ears as the trio cried out,

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS CUTE CEAÑERA! YAAAAAAAAY!"

With a speed that could possibly have set off a sonic rainboom, the three fillies sped out of the room and back through the ruins towards the exit. Twilight and Fluttershy couldn't help but laugh as they gave the girls chase en route to a party no pony in Ponyville was likely to ever forget.

Ending 2 Epilogue

Pay it Forward

Though she'd made the trip to the clubhouse countless times before, there was something truly special about Scootaloo's journey there that day. She no longer felt like she was merely riding her scooter. Usually she'd just been worried or hopeful about her activities for the day with Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, but now she simply felt exhilarated. She always had added a few tricks here and there along her ride, but that day the whole trip was one long series of intricate maneuvers and tricks. To her it was like she was dancing all the way there, just at high speed.

She hadn't seen either of her fellow Cutie Mark Crusaders for quite some time. It had been a week since the adventure Twilight Sparkle had concocted for them that had ended with all three of them earning their cutie marks. The ensuing cute ceañera had been attended by dozens of ponies and had lasted deep into the night. After taking time to recover from it all, Scootaloo had found herself accompanying Rainbow Dash for something that had gone from exciting to downright momentous for her. She was now speeding to the clubhouse to tell her friends about it. As the clubhouse came into view, she slowed down and parked her scooter easily at the base of the tree before heading up the ramp and inside. As usual, she found Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle already inside and both also looking particularly excited as well.

"Guys, I've got something amazing I gotta tell you about!" Scootaloo said excitedly.

"So do I!" Sweetie Belle added, grinning like mad.

"Me too!" Apple Bloom also added, bouncing up and down in place. "Who should go first?"

"You go first, Bloom," Scootaloo told her. "The Cutie Mark Crusaders was the name you came up with for us after all."

"Scoot's right, it's only fitting," Sweetie said in agreement.

"Alright, well..." Apple Bloom said, taking a deep breath to calm herself before sharing her news. "Y'all know Ty Quillington, right?"

"Of course we do, he's that celebrity home renovator right?" Sweetie Belle said with Scootaloo nodding as well.

"Apparently he's an old buddy of Big Macintosh's, an' the two of 'em got to talkin' during and after the cute ceañera," Bloom told them giddily. "He said he'd take me on as his apprentice! I'm gonna learn all 'bout fixin' and buildin' stuff from a real expert!"

"Wow, Bloom! That's awesome!" Scootaloo told her. "Okay, you next Sweetie!"

"Okay," Sweetie said, fidgeting a bit as her turn now came. "Well, my big sis brought me along to meet Sapphire Shores since she was filling an order for her yesterday. She told Sapphire about my singing and I ended up singing something for her. She wants me to sing with her as a backup singer, and she said she'd even introduce me to a vocal coach!"

"Holy moly, that's incredible Sweetie!" Bloom said in surprise. "Guess that leaves you, Scoot. What's yer news?"

"Oh nothing," Scootaloo said, trying to play cool. "Just that Rainbow Dash took me to get signed up for Flight School and we happened to meet Spitfire of the Wonderbolts there. Oh, and Rainbow Dash let it slide to Spitfire about my dancing and they're gonna let me take some extra lessons from their own choreographer. So yeah, nothing major there."

"Are you kidding?" Sweetie Belle said with eyes wide. "That's incredible, Scoot!"

"How cool is this?" Apple Bloom said as she and her two best friends gathered close. "We all got our cutie marks on the same day, and now we're all gonna get to chase our dreams like we never imagined!"

"I know!" Scootaloo added. "It's gonna be off the hook!"

"Our futures are so bright, we're all going to need shades," Sweetie also

added slyly.

The three girls took a moment to come down off of their excitement, their gazes slowly falling to the floor of their beloved clubhouse.

"I leave for Flight School in two days," Scootaloo said. "And I won't be back in Ponyville for a while. Plus, I'm gonna be practicing dance pretty much every day that I'm not in school from now on."

"Rarity's got another order for Sapphire she's working on now," Sweetie Belle said. "As soon as she's done with it, I'm going with her to deliver it. I probably won't be around for a couple of months, and even when I'm back all my free time is going to be spent in singing lessons."

"My apprenticeship starts tomorrow," Apple Bloom said. "And there's a lot of stuff around the farm that needs fixin' up too. I'm gonna be a might busy for quite a while."

"Looks like we're all going to be busy from now on, then," Sweetie said darkly.

"But hey, I'm sure we won't always be so busy," Scootaloo said hopefully. "We're bound to have days off here or there. We'll get together on those days and we'll totally go crusading and-"

"Scootaloo, we don't need to crusade anymore," Apple Bloom told her. "We all have our cutie marks now. The whole point of bein' the Cutie Mark Crusaders was so we'd find our true talents and earn our cutie marks. We did just that. So what'd we be crusading for?"

"Apple Bloom is right," Sweetie Belle added. "We had a good, long run, but...it's over now. We aren't Cutie Mark Crusaders anymore."

"I guess you guys are right," Scootaloo said, both sounding and feeling defeated. "I just...I don't wanna lose you guys is all. I don't have a family of my own, and...well...you two..."

It was a rare sight to see Scootaloo showing an emotion that wasn't excitement or sarcasm, so Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle were surprised to see tears beginning to form in their Pegasus friend's eyes.

"You're not just friends to me..." she said, her voice quivering. "We've all been through so much together. All the adventures, the hardships, the teasing...you guys are like sisters to me. I just...I love you both so much and...and I don't want to lose you..."

"Oh Scoot..." Sweetie Belle said as she nuzzled her friend. Apple Bloom immediately joined them, poking her head up between them both.

"Just 'cause we can't be together all the time doesn't mean we'll stop bein' friends," Apple Bloom said. "I meant what I said that day we were walkin' up to the Holy Oat Pail. You gals will always be my best friends. Nothin's gonna ever change that."

"Best friends forever," Sweetie Belle added. "I'll always care about you both."

"Ditto for me," Scootaloo also added. "And then some."

After a good, long session of nuzzles and hugs, the three fillies then turned their attention to taking down many of the various things they'd set up in the treehouse for their time as crusaders.

"Still, it is a shame to see all this stuff go to waste," Apple Bloom said as she looked around. "I did a lotta work on this place to get it this nice."

"Yeah, not to mention the awesome cloaks you made for us Sweetie Belle," Scootaloo told her. "As well as the theme song. It's too bad there's no use for this stuff anymore."

Sweetie Belle nodded as she continued cleaning up, but as she did a thought occurred to her. As the thought stuck in her head and grew, so too did a smile on her face.

"Maybe," she said thoughtfully, "just maybe it doesn't have to go to waste after all."

"What're you on about, Sweetie?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Hear me out here, girls," Sweetie told them as they huddled up. "I just had a crazy but kind of neat idea..."

Many years later...

School was out once again that day and colts and fillies alike poured out of Cheerilee's schoolhouse as usual. A fair number of them already had their cutie marks, but two fillies in particular – one unicorn and one earth pony - who were still without their cutie marks were taking some extra time that afternoon to prepare before they headed out.

"Moonshine! Summer Breeze!" a young earth pony filly called out to the two. She was dark brown in color with a two-tone green mane and tail. "You guys wanna come to Sugar Cube Corner? A bunch of us are going to try out Twist's latest candy canes."

"Thanks, Gardenia," said Moonshine, who was a dark blue earth pony filly with a light blue mane and tail. "But we've got something else to go do today."

"Moonie's right," added Summer Breeze, who was a light orange unicorn filly with a strawberry blonde mane and tail. "We've got somewhere to go to sign up for some summertime activities."

"Oh," Gardenia said, a bit disappointed. "Well, I'll be sure to pick up some candy canes for you then. I'll give 'em to you at school tomorrow."

The two fillies thanked Gardenia again and set off on a trail away from the school and out of Ponyville. It was a well-worn path that led through some light forested area into a secluded section of the renown Sweet Apple Acres farm. They crested one last hill and saw their destination: a magnificent treehouse that stood above a field that had several cabins, a barn and a flagpole. Atop the flagpole flew a maroon-colored pennant that bore a gold and blue crest.

"You nervous, Summer?" Moonshine asked her friend.

"Uh huh," Summer Breeze said with a gulp. "How about you, Moonie?"

"You think? I mean, we're gonna be meeting three superstar ponies for crying out loud."

"I'm sure they're all really nice once you get to know them."

"And how're we gonna do that? We can't just walk right up to them and say 'hi' or something lame like that."

"Actually, it's pretty refreshing to not have ponies gushing when they meet us," a more mature-sounding voice said from behind the two fillies. They both froze as they turned and looked up behind them to see an adult white unicorn with a lavishly styled pink and lavender mane and tail smiling warmly at them. The two fillies both froze as they came face-to-face with one of the singers from their favorite musical group, Celtic Mare.

"Y-y-y-y-you're..." Summer Breeze stammered, dumbstruck at who she and her friend were now meeting.

"Welcome to Crusader's Base Camp," the unicorn mare told them pleasantly. "I'm Sweetie Belle. Are you both here to join the Cutie Mark Crusaders?"

"...yes..." both fillies said weakly.

"Well come on and let's get you signed up," Sweetie Belle told them as she walked ahead to lead them onwards. The two fillies looked at each other nervously but quickly fell in behind her and followed as she walked up the ramp to the clubhouse.

"Hey Bloom," Sweetie Belle said as she poked her head inside. "It looks like we've got two more to sign up for this summer here."

"Hot dang," Apple Bloom said, looking up from her desk. Like Sweetie Belle she was now a full-grown mare as well and had long since traded her pink hair bow for a pink bandana that sat atop her head to keep her unruly red mane out of her eyes. "This is gonna be the biggest troop we've had yet!"

"No doubt," Sweetie replied. "Can you get these girls all signed up? I need

to check on the cabin amenities again to make sure we've got enough supplies. I wasn't counting on as big of a turnout as we've had and if we need more stuff I'll need to make arrangements soon."

"Will do," Bloom told her. "Oh and if'n ya see Scoot, remind her that I don't rightly appreciate it when she decides to buzz the clubhouse. This place ain't gettin' any younger after all. While I may be plannin' to rebuild it eventually, I'd still like to get a year or two's more use outta it."

"I'll do my best, but you know how she is," Sweetie said with a giggle as she left the fillies in Bloom's care.

"Yes, unfortunately I do," Bloom said with a sigh. She rose from behind her desk and approached the two fillies. "Hey, don't I know you girls from around town?"

"Yes, ma'am," Moonshine said, still feeling uneasy but not as nervous as before. "We're in Miss Cheerilee's class."

Apple Bloom nodded as she recalled them both now. "Ah, that's right. I thought I recognized y'all from the last time I was out fixin' the windows there. School goin' okay for you both?"

"Yeah, Miss Cheerilee is a fun teacher," Summer Breeze told her. "A lot of our classmates have gotten their cutie marks, but those of us who don't have ours yet don't get teased about it. Well...at least not much."

"Believe me, girls, I know exactly how you feel," Apple Bloom told them. "But you've come to the right place, and I think you're gonna have a blast with us over the summer. So let's get you girls all signed up and get you fitted for Crusader capes."

Signing Moonshine and Summer Breeze up for the Crusaders took only a few moments and afterwards Apple Bloom set to taking a few measurements of them to make sure their capes would fit them properly.

"Miss Bloom?" Summer Breeze said uneasily. "Can I ask you something?"

"You sure can," Apple Bloom told her as she continued her measuring. "And please, just call me Apple Bloom."

"I was just wondering...why do you three do this?" Summer Breeze asked. "I mean, you're three of the most famous and successful ponies to ever come from Ponyville. Why come back here just to help a bunch of blank flanks?"

"First off, don't you ever call yourself that again," Bloom told her emphatically. "It's not somethin' y'all should ever be okay with bein' called. You're all wonderful fillies and colts filled with potential and with futures brighter than any 'o you can even imagine. As for why we do this-"

"Call it 'continuing a tradition'." A new voice said from the doorway, cutting Apple Bloom off mid-sentence. Apple Bloom and the two fillies looked over to see an orange Pegasus with a reddish-purple mane and tail leaning against the door frame. She had a cocky smile on her face as she nodded at Apple Bloom.

"What the hay have you been up to, Scoot?" Bloom asked, looking mildly annoyed.

"Had to check in with the forecasters on upcoming weather conditions," Scootaloo told her. "There's some rain scheduled a few days from now but it'll be in the evening so it won't interfere with things too much."

"All well 'n good, but did ya need to cut so close to the clubhouse when ya left? Ya shook the windows so hard I thought they were gonna shatter."

"Oh, heh, sorry about that. I've been working on my takeoffs lately. Gotta keep my performances fresh, after all. Rainbow Dash keeps bugging me to try out for the Wonderbolts so we can perform together, but I still like doing my own thing. You know how it goes, right Bloom?"

"Boy do I ever. I got another offer to work for an architectural firm in Manehattan, ya know."

"Are they ever gonna leave you alone?"

"One 'o these days I'm gonna have to actually take 'em up on it, but there's just too much still to do around Ponyville, not to mention Sweet Apple Acres. I ain't 'bout to leave my family an' the people here high and dry."

"I hear you there. So, who're the new recruits?"

"Oh geez, where are my manners? This here's Moonshine an' Summer Breeze. Girls, I'd like you to meet..."

"Scootaloo?" Moonshine said in awe. "THE Scootaloo who opens for the Wonderbolts whenever they perform?"

"Yeah, that's me," Scootaloo said a bit bashfully. Despite having had her present gig for a couple of years now, she still wasn't totally used to the attention she received from it. "But when I'm here I'm just Scootaloo, and what happens here isn't about me or Sweetie Belle or Apple Bloom. This place is all about you guys and helping you find your true talents."

"Thank you Miss Scootaloo," both fillies said in unison.

"I think we're about done for today, girls," Apple Bloom told them. "We'll get your capes ordered from Rarity an' bring 'em to the school once they're in. Summer camp starts in two weeks, but once y'all got your capes you're welcome to participate in any Crusader activities."

"You girls need an escort back to Ponyville?" Scootaloo asked, stretching her wings a bit.

"No thank you, ma'am, we'll be fine," Moonshine told her with Summer Breeze nodding in agreement.

The two fillies took off running back towards town, yelling back their thanks again as they passed Sweetie Belle who was just coming back to the clubhouse.

"Such a cute pair those two are," Sweetie Belle said to her friends as she joined them.

"This is gonna be one full summer," Scootaloo added. "I gotta hand it to you, Sweetie, this has turned out to be one awesome idea you came up with."

"After what everypony did to help us get our cutie marks, I figured it'd be a

way we could try and do the same for other fillies and colts who had similar problems as we did," Sweetie replied. "Plus it has the side effect of giving us all a chance to get back together for at least one season out of the year for the summer camp. I just didn't expect things to get this big is all."

"It's gettin' bigger than you think," Apple Bloom told her. "My cousin Braeburn's tryin' to get me to come out to Appleloosa to set up a troop of Crusaders out on the frontier."

"And I've had more than a few high profile Pegasi asking me to make a specialized troop just for Pegasus colts and fillies in Cloudsdale," Scootaloo added.

"I guess I'll just hope Canterlot doesn't come calling for a unicorn troop then," Sweetie Belle said, rolling her eyes.

"Let's worry about that if and when we have to," Scootaloo said, playfully bumping her unicorn friend as she passed her. "Right now I think I wanna hit Sugar Cube Corner for some treats with my sisters here."

"Last one there buys?" Sweetie asked, smiling slyly at Scootaloo.

"You're challenging **me** to a race?" Scootaloo asked in disbelief.

"What's the matter?" Sweetie Belle replied somewhat mockingly. "You gonna chicken out on me, dodo?"

Before either of them could continue with their tit-for-tat exchange, Apple Bloom shot past them and out the door, laughing madly as she left the two in the dust. Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo immediately took off after her, both of them laughing as they caught up to her and ran alongside her towards Ponyville. Though many years had passed since their time adventuring together, the bonds between the former Cutie Mark Crusaders were as strong as they had ever been; and each of them was determined to make sure their friendship persisted for the rest of their days.

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*The End of  
Raiders of the Cutie Mark, Ending Two*

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