

## **Apple Bloom and the Magical Rubious Crystal of Bellemare Sands**

Summer had come once again to Ponyville. Over Sweet Apple Acres the air hung hot and humid, as the rays of the sun beat down relentlessly. Any sensible pony would be inside, drinking a glass of cold juice as she lay in the shade. Yet out beneath the blue sky and the shade of the blossoming apple trees, the rolling green hills of the sprawling orchard rang with the high laughter of fillies at play. Three young friends – a pegasus, a unicorn, and an earth pony – frolicked in fields of summer flowers and butterflies, with only the cares of youth in their hearts. Oh, to be young and a pony.

Together the little ponies were playing a rousing game of tag. Apple Bloom, a filly with a bright yellow coat and scarlet mane, was in the midst of being chased by Scootaloo, an orange pegasus with a fiery temper.

“I’ve got you, Apple Bloom!” cried Scootaloo. “You can’t keep running forever!”

She lunged forward, but Apple Bloom cantered just out of reach. The yellow filly stuck out her tongue.

“Nah-uh! You’re never gonna catch me!” she said. “And when ya don’t, I’ll get a Tag Dodger cutie mark!”

“Tag Dodger!” Scootaloo shouted. “What would that even look like?”

“A pegasus pony crashing into a tree!” declared Sweetie Belle, the unicorn. “With her eyes going both ways and everything. It’ll be real funny!”

Scootaloo growled. “Why you!” She switched her tack, barreling through the trees toward Sweetie Belle. The two ran off, giggling.

Apple Bloom, however, did not notice, and believing herself still to be Scootaloo's target, she continued to gallop in the opposite direction.

“Good one, Sweetie Belle!” she said. “She'll look all cross-eyed an' people'll think that she's – er – girls? Scootaloo? Sweetie Belle?”

She turned her head to look behind her, continuing to run, and so did not see the sudden obstacle that loomed in the path ahead. She slammed into it with a heavy thud, the impact throwing her onto her back.

“Ow!” She rubbed at her head with a hoof. As her vision came back into focus, she saw a large, red pony standing there, chewing solemnly on a stalk of wheat. “Big Macintosh?” She stared at him, confused. “What're ya doin' jes' standin' there?”

“You got to come back to th' house, Apple Bloom,” Big Macintosh said. “Applejack's real sick and she needs to see yeh.”

Worry settling into her stomach, she followed her brother back to the Sweet Apple Acres farmhouse and clamored up the steps to her sister's bedchamber.

The room was filled with ponies. Granny Smith was there, looking greener than usual, and next to her stood three of Applejack's closest friends: Rainbow Dash, a blue pegasus with a rainbow mane; Pinkie Pie, a pink and excitable pony; and Twilight Sparkle, a bookish purple unicorn with short-hanging bangs. Together they gathered around the room's single bed. Applejack lay under the sheets, shivering, a hot water bottle resting on her forehead. Her orange coat was covered with large, irregular black splotches.

“I'm sorry, Applejack,” Twilight was saying, “but Fluttershy and Rarity are away in Canterlot! I had Spike send them a letter as soon as I heard what happened. They'll be here

tomorrow, I promise.”

With a beleaguered, half-lidded expression, Applejack shook her head.

“That’s all righ’, Twi’,” she said. “Ya’ll don’t have ta be so worried ‘bout me. I’ll be up an’ runnin’ in a jiff, don’t you worry ‘bout that.”

In seeing her sister in such a state, Apple Bloom’s mouth fell agape. She rushed over to the side of the bed. “Applejack!” she cried. “Applejack! What’s happened to ya? Are you gonna be all right?”

“Oh, hey there, Apple Bloom.” Applejack smiled weakly. “Don’t ya worry ‘bout me for one minute, I’ll be jes’ fine. This ain’t nothin’ that cain’t be fixed by good ol’ fashioned apples an’ bed-rest.”

Twilight frowned. “You’re brave, Applejack, but it’s going to take a lot more than that! The Piebald Fever is a very serious disease!”

“Piebald?” asked Pinkie Pie. “But she’s not a pie, OR bald. What gives?”

“No, Pinkie Pie. The Piebald Fever attacks a pony’s epidermis, causing spots to appear all over her coat! If the infection is allowed to run its course, Applejack might just stay spotted forever!”

Over in the corner, Big Macintosh shuffled his hooves. “Then what d’we do?” he asked.

“There’s only one cure.” Twilight looked grim. “The magical Rubious Crystal of Bellemare Sands!”

Her declaration was met by blank stares from everypony. Granny Smith broke the silence with her tremulous voice.

“Th’ magical rubya-what-now?” she asked.

“The Rubious Crystal of Bellemare Sands!” Twilight repeated. “It’s said that in all of Equestria it can be found in just one place: the Cursed Valley of Eternal Torment. But it’s too dangerous – not even Princess Celestia will go there!”

Rainbow Dash laughed. “The Valley of Eternal Torment, huh? Sounds like a piece of cake!”

“Cake! Great idea, Rainbow,” exclaimed Pinkie Pie. “That’ll fix Applejack up right away! Whenever I get sick I just eat one piece of cake, and then another, and another –”

Twilight shook her head. “No, Rainbow Dash! The Valley is a wellspring of ancient and terrible magic. It gets into your mind and makes all your fears a reality. It will sear your brain and burn the flesh from your psychic bones! Who knows what would happen if we went inside?”

A somber melancholy overtook the group as Twilight’s words settled over the room like a funeral pall.

“I’m sorry, everpony,” Twilight continued. “I want to help Applejack as much as anypony else. But we can’t go after the Crystal. It’s just too dangerous! We’ll just have to stay here and help Applejack through this as best as we can.”

Apple Bloom, who until then had remained silent, suddenly piped up.

“She’s my sister,” the filly said. “If nopony’ll go, then I just gotta. I just gotta!”

To everypony’s surprise, Applejack bolted upright in her bed.

“Apple Bloom, no! Ya cain’t do that! No way, no how, is my sister gonna –”

Her scolding degenerated into a fit of coughing. The other ponies looked on with dismay, but Apple Bloom refused to give up.

“It won’t be hard at all, sis! I ain’t scared of nothin’ or no pony,” she said. “I’ll go to that Valley and get that rubya-thing and bring it back and maybe even get my cutie mark –”

Applejack had recovered enough to interrupt. “Apple Bloom, I said no, consarn it!”

“But – but –”

Applejack’s wan, splotchy face was drawn tight with anger, but as she saw the tears welling up in her sister’s eyes, her expression softened.

“I jes’ cain’t have ya runnin’ off on my account, Apple Bloom,” she said softly. “Why don’t ya go out an’ play with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle? I’ll be fixed up right quick, I promise ya. I’m jes’ a mite sick right now, but that don’t mean I won’t be back an’ buckin’ sooner’n you can say ‘Appaloosa!’” She smiled. “All righ’, Apple Bloom?”

Apple Bloom lowered her head.

“Okay, Applejack...” she said, and with that, she slunk from the room.

But in truth, her determination did not wane. That night, once all the other ponies had left, and Sweet Apple Acres had fallen silent once again, Apple Bloom crept stealthily back into her sister’s room. She tip-hooved up to the bed, where Applejack was now sleeping soundly.

“I’ll get that crystal thingy for ya, sis,” Apple Bloom whispered. “Just you wait!”

Quietly and carefully she trotted over to the dresser. In the bottom drawer she found Granny Smith’s old six-shooter revolver. Still polished to a silver sheen, still loaded. The inscription on the barrel read ANNIE OATLEY APPLE. She grabbed it and two moon-shaped clips of ammunition, gave her sleeping sister one last look, and left the room.

Into a pack Apple Bloom threw some provisions, a map of Equestria, and a small radio. With these slung over her back, she pulled on her red windbreaker – for even in summer, the

nights could be cold – and set out into the gathering darkness.

Overhead the moon was floating high and ponderous when Apple Bloom reached the edge of the Great Southwestern Desert. Light from the countless stars above painted the dry expanse a deep spectral blue. She knew that somewhere in that sea of dirt and sand her Appleoosan cousins lived in peace with the native buffalo – but they were miles and miles away from where she was going. Her whole body went tense as she realized the enormity of her solitude – no friends, no family, no pony around. There would be no one to run to if she got into trouble. She was completely and entirely alone, and this terrified her to no end. But it was too late to turn back now. Holding her head high, she put one hoof in front of the other, and bravely embarked toward the distant Valley of Eternal Torment.

The whisper of the valley beckoned across the desert, and the gunslinger followed. Over the cracked dark earth echoed the staccato guitar of Dire Stirrups' [\*Cutie for Nothing\*](#), blasting from the radio's speakers. As she walked, she had only the silver shine of her revolver and her thoughts for company. She thought of Scootaloo, and of Sweetie Belle, and of their endless quest for their cutie marks, and of their perpetual blank flanks. And she thought of her cousins, and of Granny Smith, and of Big Macintosh, and most of all – of Applejack, her sister, lying spotted and sick in her bed back home. Apple Bloom may have wanted a chance at a cutie mark more than anything – but she would have given that chance up in a heartbeat if it meant she could save her sister.

“I can do it, sis,” she whispered again. “Just you wait.”

And so Apple Bloom strode with confidence over the sandy bluffs, through the deep ravines, and past the skulls bleached by time. She trotted under ancient bridges of rock and over

fallen monoliths of sandstone. She walked where no pony dared ever tread. Tirelessly she pushed on through the night, never once stopping to rest. Coyotes howled and lizards scuttled underhoof. The night breathed in wind and sand. The moon and stars spun in their eternal orbits. Around this one little pony turned the whole of creation – and so walked Apple Bloom, gun in her mouth, her orange eyes blazing with determination.

The sun was just beginning to rise to the east when she reached the mouth of the Valley. It was bitten into a dead rocky mountain, digging into the earth like the jagged maw of a sleeping leviathan. Heavy fog had settled into the valley's recesses, obscuring whatever lay within from sight. It was into those wispy, roiling depths that Apple Bloom descended – and so entered oblivion.

She made her way through the fog, climbing down the steep incline that led into the valley basin. She had no idea how long it took to pick her way down that slope – her sense of time had been distorted by the hours spent trudging through the desert. She knew only that her hooves ached, and that she had not yet achieved her goal.

After what seemed an eternity of walking, the slope leveled out, and shortly Apple Bloom discovered a road that snaked deeper into the Valley. As she followed it, through the fog she began to see the slow rise and fall of hills to either side – and seeing these, she felt an odd twinge in her gut. Somehow this all seemed very familiar – yet she didn't quite know why. She pulled her windbreaker tighter and kept moving.

The radio, meanwhile, was still playing. *“I want my – I want my – I want my cu-u-tie,”* it sang. *“I want my – I want my –”*

And then it suddenly cut off. Confused, Apple Bloom fiddled with the knobs, to no avail.

The thing was dead. She tossed the device back into her pack and continued on in silence.

A lump rose in her throat as the outlines of buildings formed ahead out of the omnipresent haze. There was a well, and a silo, and a barn, and a farmhouse.

Apple Bloom stared at them, frozen and unblinking, until finally she managed to shake herself and snap out of her reverie.

“No way – it can’t be!” she said. “It’s like what Twilight is always sayin’ – there’s gotta be a rational explanation!”

A signpost stood up ahead. She ran over to give it a look. It read simply: “APPLE St.”. She stood in wide-eyed shock.

“What the hay is goin’ on here?” she cried. “It’s like I’m back in Ponyville!”

Bewildered, Apple Bloom approached the farmhouse and knocked on the door.

“Hello?” she called. “Is anypony home? It’s me, Apple Bloom! Open up!”

There was no response. She tried the door – it was unlocked. She stepped inside.

Immediately she realized that something was very wrong. The foyer was dark and musty, nearly unrecognizable. Gone were the Apple Family heirlooms and knick-knacks that usually crowded the walls and floor. Instead there was only rust, and grime, and a pervading stench of mold.

“Hello?” Apple Bloom cautiously trotted down the first interior hall. “Is anypony there?”

She emerged out into the parlor, a room in even greater disarray than the foyer. The card table had been overturned, the chairs were all broken into little pieces, and near the far wall the floor had begun to collapse, sinking into the dark chasm of the cellar below.

Unsettled, Apple Bloom decided to go back outside. But when she turned to leave, from



her pack came a sudden burst of static. She screamed and jumped in surprise, and after recovering she noticed something that she hadn't before. In the room's far corner, masked by shadows, there stood a lone, mute figure.

Apple Bloom felt sweat beading on her forehead. She swallowed nervously.

"Uh, hi there," she said. "I'm Apple Bloom. Who're you?"

At her voice, the figure stirred. It stepped out slowly into one of the dusty shafts of light pouring in through the room's shattered windows.

Apple Bloom gasped. It was Twilight Sparkle – but she had no face. There was instead only smooth skin. She stood alone in the half-darkness, disturbingly silent.

Apple Bloom backed nervously toward the door. "Twilight, is - is that you? What happened to yer face?" she asked.

With a low moan, Twilight Sparkle began to shamle toward her.

"T-Twilight? What's th' matter? Are you okay?"

A seam ran along the smooth purple flesh of Twilight Sparkle's featureless face. As Apple Bloom watched in horror, it split open to reveal twin rows of razor-sharp teeth.

"Wha – what's goin' on? You ain't Twilight – you ain't no pony at all!"

Saliva fell in streams from the abomination's jaws as it came down with a deadly bite, missing Apple Bloom's left flank by inches. The little filly yelped and ran screaming from the room. She galloped out of the farmhouse and onto Apple Street, and she didn't stop until she was again standing beneath the signpost at its end.

The sign was now blank.

"Consarn it!" Apple Bloom stamped her hoof. "This place is jes' playin' tricks on me!"

This is no time ta be foolin' around. I jes' gotta keep focused and find that crystally thing and get back home – to my real home!”

She composed herself and set off down the road, heading into “Ponyville” proper. She shuddered as she looked at all of the houses. They stood in varying states of disrepair, paint peeling, windows covered in dirt, some even without doors. Rarity would have fainted if she had seen her boutique, covered as it was in garish, mismatched colors long-faded by the light of the sun.

As Apple Bloom neared Sugarcube Corner, she stopped dead in her tracks when the radio again crackled to life, spitting static. Over this she heard a faint, distant scratching, and then out of the corner of her eye she saw movement in the yellowed grass. She turned toward it.

Apple Bloom felt the bottom drop out from her stomach. From behind Sugarcube Corner crawled Pinkie Pie – or rather, a cruel warp of Pinkie Pie. Bent, clawed limbs dragged the misshapen pony forward, its blank-faced head twisted at an impossible angle. The creature giggled low and hideous, brandishing an enormous knife with its right front hoof. Its mouth was curved upward in a horrible toothy grin.

“Let’s – PARTY!” Pinkie Pie rasped. “Let’s – PARTY!!”

This time, Apple Bloom did not run away. Though all four of her legs trembled with fear, she brought the revolver up and held it level, just as Applejack had shown her. And when the monster was in her sights, she squeezed the trigger.

*BLAMBLAMBLAM! BLAMBLAMBLAM!*

Six blazes of gunpowder set the fog into manic whorls. Six chambers emptied into Pinkie Pie’s malefic visage. The creature staggered forward a few steps, its knife raised high,

before with a whispered gasp it fell heavily to the ground.

Smoke drifted from the gun's barrel as Apple Bloom stood stock still, chest heaving. She realized, after the fact, that she needed to conserve her ammunition. With two clips in her pack, she now had only twelve shots left. She ejected the spent casings and reloaded, throwing the depleted moonclip back into her pack.

Apple Bloom felt sick. Her hooves shook. Even if it had been some kind of monster, she had killed it – and that was something she couldn't take back.

She shook herself. The Valley was just trying to trick her again, she realized. It was trying to get into her head! Apple Bloom knew she couldn't let this place get to her, or it would swallow her up. She had to remember what she was doing – she had to remember that she was here for Applejack. For Applejack.

The radio had fallen silent after Pinkie Pie's demise. It began to emit another low drone of static. Fearing what she would see, Apple Bloom turned around to face the next threat. What she saw made her gasp aloud.

There, in the middle of the street, stood Applejack. She looked completely normal, without a single spot or scrape anywhere to be seen.

“Well howdy, Apple Bloom!” she said. “I've been lookin' all over for ya!”

“A-Applejack?” Unsure of herself, Apple Bloom lowered her head and scraped unconsciously at the dirt. “Is that really you?”

“What, am I me? ‘Course I am!” Applejack said. “Don't I look like me?”

“Well, yeah, ya do –”

“That's righ', I do! Now get on over here, I've been worried right sick! Ya know how

long I been walkin' to get ta yeh?"

"But – how did you get better from your Fever? Twilight said we needed the magical crystalabob!"

Applejack snorted. "Feh! Twilight's got 'er head in the clouds. All I needed was a bushel a' apples an' a good night's sleep, an' I was good as new!" She held out her front legs for a hug. "Had me enough energy to follow yer trail and come all the way here! Ain't that somethin'? I'm real impressed ya got 'ere all by your lonesome. Ya must be real tired! Come 'ere and rest a spell, yer big sister'll take care of ya!"

For a brief moment, Apple Bloom hesitated – but then she approached, cautiously at first, before closing her eyes tight and throwing herself wholly into Applejack's waiting embrace.

"Oh Applejack – it's been right horrible! I had ta walk all the way through th' desert, an' then when I got here I got 'tacked by Twilight, she's a biter, and then Pinkie Pie came around an' I had ta shoot 'er, and I know they ain't real or nothin' but I've jes' been so *scared* – "

"There, there, hush now," Applejack said soothingly, patting the back of her head. "It's all righ'. Ya needn't a' come here in th' first place. Ya know, they say that th' Rubious Crystal is inside each a' us!"

Apple Bloom sniffled. "Really? Inside a' us? Where is it?"

"Ya know," Applejack repeated. "They say that th' Rubious Crystal is inside each a' us."

Apple Bloom felt a familiar twinge in her stomach. "Uh, Applejack, ya already said that!"

Applejack's embrace tightened.

"Ya know. They say that th' Rubious Crystal is inside each a' us."

“A-Applejack...?”

Apple Bloom opened her eyes, looked up at her sister, and screamed.

Applejack had transformed into another blank-faced abomination, this one with six legs like a spider. It opened its mouth and extended its jaws, the flesh of its lips peeling back to accommodate the outward movement of its fangs. A guttural rattle escaped from its throat.

Using all her might Apple Bloom tore herself from the monster’s grip and ran down the street, looking wildly for a place to hide. She found it in an overturned crate sitting behind a crude facsimile of the Mayor’s House.

Inside the crate she curled up into a shivering ball, holding herself tightly as she tried to draw her whole body into her windbreaker. Thoughts of being trapped forever in this place attacked her young mind, driving her nearly to terror. Though she did her best to fight them, she could not stop the hot tears as they rolled down her cheeks. She wanted to be back home. She wanted her friends – her family. She didn't want to be alone in this terrible place anymore. And it was out of those desires that suddenly within her there arose a great, bubbling fury.

“No!” she shouted, her voice quaking as she blinked away the tears. “I cain’t do this! I cain’t! I don’t have time to wallow around. Applejack is my only sister, and I cain’t let her down! Everythin’ here is just a ‘llusion. And, dang it, I ain’t scared a’ no ‘llusions! If anythin’, those ‘llusions should be scared a’ me!”

Apple Bloom nodded furiously, wiped her eyes, checked her gun, and crawled out. With newfound resolve, she resumed her quest.

The street was now thankfully empty. There was only the low keen of the wind and the faint yellow of the sun filtering through the shifting fog. She headed for the town square.

The familiar clearing was strewn with garbage and debris – old streamers, signs, rotting pies, the bones of unidentifiable creatures. But Apple Bloom noticed none of this, for her attentions were fixed elsewhere. In the center of it all, there it stood: The Rubious Crystal of Bellemare Sands. It sat upon a golden stand and scintillated red in the morning light.

Apple Bloom quickly gazed around, trying to spot any hidden dangers. Satisfied, she trotted up to the Crystal. It was a beautiful faceted jewel of the deepest scarlet blush. She felt she could stare into it for hours, such was the glamour that surrounded it. But she had a job to do – and so she approached to remove it from its golden fixture.

She then noticed an inscription upon the stand. She read it aloud.

“‘The blood of the Master is priced in servitude eternal’? Ye – yedrep – ‘Ye’Drep Ov Hsov’? What the hay does that mean?” She shrugged. “Ain’t none a’ my concern! Come on now, ya crystal-a-thing. Yer comin’ home ta Applejack!”

With a combination of wrenching and pulling, she managed to wrest the Crystal free. She slipped it into her pack and set off back down the street.

Exhaustion was setting in. Every hoof-fall now seemed heavier, every distance magnified. But Apple Bloom had no intention of stopping. Her focus was placed entirely on escaping from the depths of the Valley and this mockery of Ponyville. Yet as she walked, it seemed like she was going nowhere at all, and that the light around her was slowly fading. Before she even knew what was happening, the light continued to dim – yellow, to orange, to deep red – until finally it blinked out completely, and she was plunged into darkness.

Apple Bloom’s heart thumped in her chest. “Hey –,” she cried. “Hey! What’s goin’ on? What happened to th’ light?”

A brazier nearby flickered to life. The wavering illumination of the burning coals cast a faint glow on her surroundings, and she realized that she was now somehow standing within a gargantuan chamber of stone. Strange rounded symbols were carved into the walls, the meanings of which she could not discern. She shivered involuntarily as low bass static began to sound at intervals from the radio, echoing ominously around the room. Doing her best to swallow her fear, Apple Bloom readied her gun, and waited.

From the circling darkness there came a dry rattle, like the rushing breath of a dying thing. Apple Bloom whirled around, trying to find its source.

“Who’s there?” she shouted. “Show yerself!”

She stared into the abyss, and something looked back. A dark shapeless mass, obscured by shadow, lay just outside the full range of her vision. It gurgled and hissed, and as she watched, two enormous golden eyes opened and rolled obscenely in their sockets.

“**HEEELLLLLOO-OO-OOO,**” howled the creature.

Apple Bloom stamped her hoof. “Hello yerself! Where’s th’ dang door? You let me outta here right now!”

“**NOOO-OOO-OO.**” There came a loud rustling as the creature shifted its massive bulk. “**YOU’LL STAAAAY!**”

“I ain’t gonna say it again!” Apple Bloom raised the gun. “You let me outta this dang Valley, or I’m gonna – I’m gonna buck you up!”

The creature laughed, high and piercing. “**FUUUUUN!**” In a series of jerky movements, it flicked out a pair of skeletal wings. Strips of mottled gray flesh hung from splintered bones. Its eyes bounced around, continually crossing and uncrossing.

Apple Bloom growled. “I ain’t playin’ – not no more!”

With a savage cry, she unloaded the six chambers of the revolver. She set every shot perfectly, firing directly between the monster’s eyes. When she was done, and the echoing roar of the gun had faded to nothing, she smiled.

“Heh! Gotcha, ya big ol’ ‘llusion!” Her grin lingered for but a moment, for as she looked upon the wriggling mass of flesh, she realized that her bullets had done nothing at all.

The creature laughed again. “**BLAAAAAANKS!**” it screamed. And then it lurched forward.

Apple Bloom stood paralyzed by shock, staring at the gun. “How th’ – OOF!”

A tendril of gray flesh rocketed from the shadows to collide with the side of her head. The filly was knocked to the ground, and she gasped as she hit the hard stone. The gun skittered across the floor.

Groggily she looked up to see the monster looming over her, its eyes narrowing into a terminal crux of malice.

“**OH, WE’LL PLAAAAAY!**” it gurgled. “**HERE’S MYYYY MOVE!**”

It reared back its head, threw open its jaws, and vomited a torrent of caustic fluid. Apple Bloom leapt away just in time, the tip of her tail bubbling and hissing as it caught the spray. She skidded against the wall, blood pulsing in her ears.

“**TAAAAAG! YOU’RE IT!**”

Time slowed to a crawl. Apple Bloom stared up at the leering monster, with its great crossed yellow eyes and rubbery gray flesh, and knew true fear. But her courage did not fade – for while she may have lost her gun, she was not unhoofed. She was a pony, and she had her



friends and her family in her heart. The current of memory took her back to the morning of the day before, and her eyes narrowed with resolve. Her yellow form tensed as the monster came at her again, screaming with manic delight.

With all her strength Apple Bloom batted away its first arcing attack with a hoof-chop, before galloping straight at her adversary. Fleshy tendrils slammed into the floor with deadly force, but she raced past each one like it was just a tree back home on the farm. Ducking beneath one last swinging arm, she jumped forward and delivered a powerful kick to the main body.

**“HEE-EE-EY!”** the creature roared, and with a great sweeping maneuver it slammed into Apple Bloom’s side. She was sent flying through the air, her legs scrabbling at nothing. With a thud she landed some distance away, sprawled out on the floor. Wincing, she staggered to her hooves – then noticed a silvery shine just a few feet away. The gun! She lunged for it.

**“NOPE!”**

Apple Bloom fell flat on her face as something caught her back leg. She twisted around to see a grey tendril wrapped around her hoof. It slowly began to drag her away.

“D-Dang it!” she gasped. “Get offa me righ’ now! Get off, consarn it!”

**“I HOOOOPE YOU KNOOOOW HOW TO BAAAAAKE!”** the creature sang, as with a sinewy arm it lashed out and grabbed Apple Bloom by the neck. Jagged claws dug into her flesh, choking her.

Stars danced across her vision. Flashes of home appeared before her eyes – Granny Smith outside on a crisp autumn morning; Big Macintosh pulling the plow in spring; Scootaloo and Sweetie Bell, laughing and playing – and Applejack, strong Applejack, standing atop the highest hill and bucking hard and proud. And here Apple Bloom was, her little sister, getting

strangled in who-knows-where by who-knows-what. No...it couldn't end like this – it couldn't!

Apple Bloom's eyes flashed with rage. She brought her head swinging down, and foul ichor exploded into her mouth as she bit down hard on the monster's wrist.

The creature screamed and recoiled, releasing her from its grasp. Apple Bloom fell and rolled, leaping to her hooves, then diving for the gun as she pulled the final clip from her pack. With lightning speed she flipped open the cylinder, expelling the still-smoking cases. They clattered on the ground like rolling thunder. Deftly she jammed the moonclip into place, slamming the six bullets home. She pounded the cylinder and gave it a spin, setting the slugs into their chambers.

From the shadows, the great amorphous monster seethed with fury.

**“FOAAAAAL!”** it shrieked. **“HERE YOU ARE MIIIIINE TO DO WITH AS I PLEEEAAASE!”**

Using one leg to stabilize the revolver, and the other to hold it, Apple Bloom squeezed one eye shut, and aimed.

“I ain't no Shetland!” she shouted. “I'm th' pharmacist. Take two a' these... an' see me in HELL!!”

She channeled all of her will, all of her love, into those two shots. The muzzle flared twice, and from the barrel shot two lances of blazing light. They twisted into a bright helix, surging toward the creature.

Crackling waves of electric energy blasted in all directions as the spinning missile struck its target. Bursting chrysanthemums of flame erupted, volcanic, from the monster's head as it roared and staggered back. From the dual perforations poured streams of metallic slag, glowing

red as molten rock.

There came a bright flash – and the creature withdrew into the shadows. The symbols on the walls began to glow, burning with an intensity that grew until it consumed the walls with ethereal light. Soon this too faded, and all that remained was an all-consuming nebulous mass – the fog, rolling back over the grass and the road of the Valley. The illusion had dissipated. The nightmare was over.

Apple Bloom stood quietly in a patch of dirt. The sun was high overhead – it was nearly noon, and yet it was cold. She shivered in her windbreaker, but smiled nonetheless. She felt light. The old cares were already creeping back into her heart.

Casting one last look about her, the filly slipped the revolver into her pack and headed for home.

\* \* \*

“Consarn it, I told ‘er not to go!”

Applejack’s bedchamber was once more filled with well-wishing ponies. Those from the day before were there again – Granny Smith, Big Macintosh, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Twilight Sparkle – and they were now joined by Fluttershy, a pegasus, and Rarity, a unicorn, both fresh from Canterlot. Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo were there too, along with Spike, Twilight Sparkle’s pet baby dragon.

“I’m sure she’ll turn up soon,” Twilight Sparkle said. “There’s no way that she would have walked all the way to the Cursed Valley of Eternal Torment. She probably just got tired on

the way and camped out for the night! She'll be coming back any minute now, I'm sure of it."

Applejack shook her head violently. "No! Yew don't know my sister. She's got th' famous Apple Family stubbornness. Once she gets on somethin' she don't stop 'till she's got it done! If she got it in 'er head to go on ta that dang Valley, then she's – ahuk –"

Her body was racked by a sudden spasm of coughing. Everypony winced.

"Applejack, you have to calm down!" Twilight Sparkle said. "There's no use in getting all worked up in your condition. You're just going to make the Fever worse!"

After a moment, the coughing spell had passed, and Applejack settled into her pillow. "I'm sorry, Twi'," she said quietly. "It's jes' – she's my only sister, an' I know what she'll do. She's gonna go up ta that Valley come hay or high water, and there ain't nothin' gonna stop 'er."

Twilight bit her lower lip. "Then... we'll just have to wait for her to come back," she said.

Grim silence descended over the room, as everypony knew what she meant. Granny Smith's lip trembled. Big Macintosh closed his eyes in solemnity. Rarity and Rainbow Dash shuffled their hooves. Pinkie Pie contained herself. Spike looked downcast upon the floor and rubbed at his arm. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle huddled in the corner, sobbing, as Fluttershy tried in vain to comfort them. Each of them tried to think of just how long they would have to wait before they would be forced to confront the inevitable truth.

Just then, the door slammed open, and in walked Apple Bloom.

"Hey there, everypony!" she said. "I see th' rumares a' my death have been greatly 'xaggerated!"

Around the room, jaws dropped and eyes went wide. Applejack started up in her bed.

“A-Apple Bloom!” she cried. “Why I – you – where’ve ya been – we’ve been so worried ‘bout you!”

Apple Bloom preened in the attention. “I’m sorry everypony, fer runnin’ off like I did,” she said, “but I had ta help Applejack, no matter what!” She turned to Twilight Sparkle. “So, Twilight, now that I got this chrysalis thingy, what do I do with it?”

From her pack she withdrew the Rubious Crystal. She held it over her head, where it caught the light and glimmered like a fallen red star. Everypony gasped in awe.

Twilight blinked. “Wow! Wasn’t expecting that!” She pulled out a dusty tome and flipped through its pages. “Hmm,” she said. “Interesting! According to this book, you’ve got to smack her with it!”

Nodding, Apple Bloom proceeded to Applejack’s bedside and did as instructed. The Crystal struck Applejack’s forehead with a hefty thwack, and shattered into hundreds of pieces.

As everypony looked on, Applejack was bathed in a wash of radiant light. It infused her entire being before dissipating. When it had gone, every single spot upon her coat had disappeared.

“Yee-HAW!” Applejack shouted, leaping from her bed to buck furiously in the room’s center. “I cain’t believe it! Fit as a filly! No spots from hoof to halter!”

She swept up Apple Bloom in a close embrace, squeezing the little pony tightly.

“Oh Apple Bloom!” she cried. “Ya’ve made me the proudest sister in all a’ Equestria! I cain’t never thank yeh enough!”

“That’s okay, Applejack,” Apple Bloom said, her voice muffled. “You’d a’ done the same thing fer me!”

Applejack tried to put on a stern smile.

“Yeah, but that don’t make what yeh did right!” she scolded. “Why’d ya go off without tellin’ nopony? You coulda been hurt out there, or worse!”

“That’s true, sis, but I learnt that as long as ya keep your friends in yer heart, you’ll never be alone!” Apple Bloom replied. “An’ friendship is bullets!”

Everypony agreed that this was a sage truth, and they all clustered happily around the two sisters as Apple Bloom regaled them with the tale of her adventure. Twilight Sparkle and Spike had to excuse themselves, however.

“Congratulations, Applejack, on your swift recovery!” Twilight said. “But now I’ve got to go. There’s a pegasus in town complaining of severe headaches, and Nurse Redheart thinks the symptoms are psychosomatic. I’ve got to investigate! See you all later!”

Later that afternoon, once Apple Bloom had been given a warm meal and a chance to finish her story, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle drew up beside her.

“Hey Apple Bloom, you did some pretty crazy things in that Valley!” Scootaloo said.

“I sure did!” Apple Bloom replied. “I don’t think I’ll ever look at Pinkie Pie the same way again!”

“Aw, that’s okay, Apple Bloom!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, materializing behind the huddle. “I don’t mind that you shot me in the face. In fact, I think that it’s something we should all celebrate! Woo! Let’s party! Let’s party!”

She hopped excitedly around the room. Apple Bloom shivered.

“But as I was saying,” Scootaloo continued, “I bet you got your cutie mark, huh? Did ya? Did ya?!”

“I dunno! Let’s see!”

Scotaloo and Sweetie Belle looked on in unconcealed anticipation as Apple Bloom pulled off her windbreaker.

All three fillies sighed when they saw that her flank was still yet blank.

“Dang it!” Apple Bloom cried. “Jes’ what the hay do I gotta do ta get my mark?!”

“I guess you just still haven’t found your special talent...,” Sweetie Belle said.

“Eh, oh well.” Scotaloo shrugged. “Hey, I’m tired of just sittin’ here and talking. Let’s go out and play!”

“Yeah!”

“Okay!”

And so the three fillies ran out into the warm summer afternoon, and played among the trees of Sweet Apple Acres until sundown.

THE END