

Apple Bloom almost leaped back up onto the sofa as the door slammed open, and two fillies galloped into the room.

“HEY APPLE BLOOM!” Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle chorused, stopping with a little sway like an apple tree just after her sister’s hooves had given it a good seeing to. Both beamed at her, and Scootaloo bounced from hoof to hoof.

“Hey girls,” Apple Bloom replied, glancing over at the old rocking chair in the corner. Granny Smith opened one cloudy eye. She lifted a wrinkly foreleg towards them all, shaking like she was trying to lift a whole barrel of apples on her own, before it fell back to her blanket and she let out a snore.

Apple Bloom matched her friends’ smiles, hoping to Celestia that they couldn’t see the slight strain she felt tugging at her cheeks. “What’re you two doin’ here?” she whispered.

Scootaloo’s grin levelled out. “Don’t you know what time it is?”

“No. Why’s it important?”

“Because the town meeting’s about to start!” Scootaloo buzzed her wings, her smile back to showing all of her teeth.

“Town meeting?” Apple Bloom’s eyes grew, and she stole a glance at the cuckoo clock above the fireplace. If it was possible, she felt her eyes go even wider. *Whoa! Ah didn’t think Ah was readin’ for that long...*

“Yeah,” put in Sweetie Belle, pulling Apple Bloom back to face her. “Since we couldn’t come up with any other ideas for our cutie marks, I thought we might be able to find out more about that Grand Prix stuff together.” She looked at the two of them with a smile. “Plus, it’d be something we could do without falling off of something, or crashing into a wall, or... or anything like that. So I went to find

Scoot...”

“And *I* was thinking that if we went to the meeting we might be able to meet some of the *racers!*” Scootaloo yelled, this time taking off with her burst of excitement.

“I dunno, Scoot,” said Apple Bloom as Scootaloo came back down. “That poster I saw said that this meetin’d be somethin’ along the lines o’ plannin’. It didn’ look like somethin’ the whole paddock’d show up to.”

Sweetie Belle raised an eyebrow at her, while Scootaloo just stood there, her jaw slack and with eyes wide as plates, **(like the time Apple Bloom had told her about when Rainbow Dash had helped her find her cutie mark)**. “Wow... you really *did* want to become a racing historian,” she said, her voice pillow-soft but coming out of a smirking mouth. Apple Bloom nodded, smiling in the same way.

Scootaloo let out a little snort. “Still.” She planted a hoof. “None of the magazines have said anything other than rumours about a race in Ponyville yet. I bet if we go to that meeting, we might be able to get *tickets* before anypony else!” The shine was back in her eyes now, and her hooves had started hopping again.

“Wow...” That fluttery feeling tingled across Apple Bloom’s belly as her imagination took over...

...Standing by the barriers, she leaned forwards, just hoping to catch a glimpse of the racers as they approached. She had to push her muzzle out extra-far to see around Scootaloo’s cap as she bounced around by her side. The little orange blur was covered in just about every racing-themed shirt, hat, sock, ribbon and cape she could get herself into, even a weird foam-thing that made her hoof narrow to a point, which she raised high above her head. The three Crusaders whooped and cheered as the foals buzzed nearer, but they were soon drowned out by a great swell of noise from the crowd around them...

“So that’s when we came to get *you*, Apple Bloom,” said Sweetie Belle, bursting the bubble in her mind’s eye.

“Really?” Apple Bloom felt that yoke start to lose its grip on her cheek.

“Yeah! We weren’t gonna let a fellow Crusader miss *that* by reading a book in some stuffy old farmhouse, no matter how awesome that book is!” Scootaloo declared, raising a hoof with a proud smile. It only held for a moment, though, and soon fell into a toothy grin and a nervous chuckle that Apple Bloom had to smile along with.

She could feel the unease starting to dribble out of her chest, and the hole left being filled with the warmth that just shone from her friends’ eyes. She felt like she was back at that sleepover they’d had one long winter’s night, when they’d curled up together by the fire with cocoa and marshmallows, all cosy and warm. They’d whiled away the night talking about how they could find their cutie marks in the snow while huge piles of the stuff grew up outside the windows.

Before she could get too wrapped up in that snug-as-a-bug feeling, though, a more pressing matter tore her away from the warmth.

“Well... shouldn’t we get goin’, then?” she asked, glancing at the clock. The other two followed her eyes.

Scootaloo’s jaw almost hit the floor. Without even a gasp, she dashed out the door with her wings buzzing away. After staring at the open doorway for a moment, Sweetie Belle turned back to Apple Bloom. She lifted a hoof and looked like she was about to ask something, only for Scootaloo to poke her head back around the door.

“Come on, Crusaders!” She waved them over with her hoof, staring and unable to hold back her massive grin. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle matched it as they all

shared a look.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS MEETING ATTENDERS!”

The walls shook and ornaments juddered towards the edges of their shelves, and something made a dull thud as they rushed out of the room. Apple Bloom was sure she could hear Granny Smith grumbling at the disturbance and mumbling things about soup, but they covered it with their own giggles and cheers. They scampered into the yard, and Scootaloo made a flying leap to land on her scooter, followed closely by the other two diving into the wagon just moments after she cleared it. After taking a second to right themselves and make sure their helmets were good and tight, they buzzed back to Ponyville.

As the cluster of buildings grew bigger and bigger ahead of them, Sweetie Belle turned to Apple Bloom. “So I guess that ‘paddock’-thingy was in that book, right?”

Apple Bloom nodded. Sweetie Belle’s smile grew, and her eyes twinkled with curiosity.

“What else *was* in there? Scoot didn’t say much about it... apart from *everything!*” Her voice cracked and she jumped up a little on the last word. Apple Bloom’s hoof shot out to try and grab Sweetie Belle’s, but she landed back in the wagon. They shared a giggle as the lasso that had gripped Apple Bloom’s middle and took her breath away went slack.

The ideas rushed through her as quick as the trees did on either side of them. **(There was so much to tell Sweetie about! All the rules like how they used to send all but the fastest thirty-five home after first practice, or how they had to ban magic at the races after a little blue colt with a unicorn as his team-manager mysteriously won a race while glowing as red as Snips on Hearts and Hooves Day.**

It felt like bees were buzzing their way around her tummy. There was just so much to say!) She took in a deep breath, heavy with the sweet scent of apples

“Apple Bloom!”

She had to actually hold her shoulders up. Apple Bloom turned to face the fuchsia mane that danced and weaved in the breeze. “Yeah?”

“Where did that poster say the meeting’s being held?”

“Hey!”

“Pardon me.”

“Excuse me.”

“Sorry...”

The three of them gave their widest, most innocent smiles to the mare they had accidentally nudged. After she shook her head, sent back a half-smile and turned away, they breathed one big sigh of relief and spread out into the little space they had found. They’d spent what felt like *hours* buzzing around town and tip-hoofing through the crowd to find a spot where they could see the stage that always seemed to just appear for this sort of event. Fortunately, there was always one thing they could count on to stop them missing anything really important.

“...and so, without further ado, I would like to welcome our esteemed guest for this afternoon,” said The Mayor, raising a foreleg over her podium. She beamed that same reassuring smile that had been plastered all over Ponyville during that

election that Applejack talked about last year. “The pony who made all of this possible, leader of the ESRA since its inception, mister Silver Lining!”

Apple Bloom’s ears perked as a great rumble spread through the mass of ponies, everyone stamping their hooves in greeting. The shaking soon began to die down and her eyes stopped blurring, giving her the chance to get a better look at the greyish-white pegasus walking along the platform. His hooves caught against the wood once or twice, but his bony shoulders never allowed him to slip too far. His sides looked as withered and dry as Granny Smith’s, though they were masked by strong, sleek wings. The slight breeze lifted what was left of his mane as if it were dark-brown hay.

But beneath it blazed the yellow fires of his eyes, which cast a great silence over the sea of ponies as he reached the podium. He smiled.

“Thank you, Mayor Elderflower,” he said, glancing at the mare, “and thank you all for such a warm welcome.”

He spoke with a soft voice, barely above a whisper, reminding Apple Bloom of a certain yellow pegasus. Unlike with Fluttershy, though, she couldn’t help but feel something cold trickle its way down her back. **(She could easily see him standing behind a huge desk that he could see his face in, talking about an accident happening to somepony who had upset his arrangements, like Gold Leaf from those Agent Suave books that Twilight had let her read.)** “Though yours is a rather young town when compared to others where we already hold races, it has nonetheless become a nexus for events in Equestria. After all, Princess Luna made her first public appearance since her return in this very square.”

A couple of uneasy murmurs passed through the crowd at this, and Apple Bloom could see one or two ponies nearby look at the ground. Sweetie Belle shifted a foreleg through the dirt, ears pressed flat against her head.

If Silver Lining noticed this, his face didn't show it. He didn't he react to a bright flash, either, which came thanks to a purple pegasus hovering around the podium who had one camera on her flank and another between her hooves.

"There's also your history to consider. The Running of the Leaves ceremony has its start and finish in nearby woods."

The ponies around them stood up a little straighter at this. The mutterings faded away.

"There's also the Equestria-famous zap-apples, grown right here in Ponyville."

Apple Bloom noticed one of the pegasi hovering near the stage. They were scribbling furiously into a notepad, probably getting more ink on their face than on the paper. She nudged the other two as their teeth dug further into their quill. She and Sweetie Belle shared a little giggle; Scootaloo kept staring at the stage, totally silent.

"And, of course, there's the small matter of those six ponies who saved the world *twice* calling this town home."

A little dash of pink near the front of the crowd disappeared.

"So, with all of that in mind, plus the fact that several competitors and a former Champion have come from Ponyville, we at the ESRA have decided that it's about time a race was held here! Therefore, I can confirm that we will be bringing an S1 Grand Prix to Ponyville in the coming weeks!"

He was almost talking directly to the scribbling pegasus with that last part. Not that it did anything to stop another wave of thundering hooves.

“Although,” he continued through a wry smile, “I must say that *somepony* rather ruined that surprise.” He threw The Mayor a look like he had just caught her with her hooves in the cookie jar. She flashed back a winning grin.

“Right, onto the details.” He cleared his throat. Somehow, it was louder than his actual speech. “We are planning to build the circuit a little way out from the village, in a field which was generously leased to us by town hall. For the moment, the circuit is going to be temporary, though if it proves popular enough outside of the main event it may become a permanent structure.”

A couple of hooves rose above the mass of manes and ears, and Silver Lining raised his own foreleg over the podium. Apple Bloom felt her eyebrows almost join the hooves as his leg didn’t even creak.

“Now, I know what some of you are wondering about the amount of construction involved with such a project, and I ask you to have faith in us. Our builders are experts in using their magic to make sure that a temporary circuit leaves no impact on the land after it has been tidied away, and most of the structures besides the circuit will be tents.”

The hooves fell back into the crowd.

“Thank you.” He smiled. “And, incidentally, some of you may be interested to know that Silky Smooth will *not* be part of the design team for this track.”

“Yes!”

“Huh?” Apple Bloom’s eyes were pulled to her left, where Scootaloo was raising a hoof, grinning with her eyes screwed shut as if she’d just been allowed to have ice cream for dinner. “Why d’yah say that, Scoot?”

Scootaloo opened her mouth, but all that came out was a nervous chuckle. Apple

Bloom looked around. Some of the ponies near them were giving her friend funny looks.

“I’ll tell you later,” mumbled Scootaloo, before returning to stare at the stage **(as if it held the answer to every one of her problems.) (T)**

“and so I’m sure you can appreciate that, as Ponyville is a rather short-notice addition to the calendar, we are still negotiating with the major teams as to whether this race will count as a Championship round. However, I can guarantee that, providing that there are no mishaps in construction, the race *will* be taking place in four weeks’ time.”

A small amount of stamps followed this, before a wrinkled hoof was raised again.

“Now, there isn’t much left for me to say at this point, other than that tickets will be made available from town hall soon.”

Apple Bloom felt something softly poke her side. She didn’t even have to look to know what it was. A quick glance did tell her that Scootaloo’s massive, shiny-eyed, Pinkie Pie-after-several-mounds-of-cake smile was back. She and Sweetie Belle looked at each other, smiling knowingly.

“course we will keep you updated with any important news as and when it occurs. So...” His yellow eyes ran all over the crowd as the word hung in the silence. “Do any of you have any questions?” he finished, smiling.

“Come on, let’s go,” came a brash whisper next to Apple Bloom.

“What?” She looked at Scootaloo. Her smile hadn’t gone away completely, but Apple Bloom nearly jumped as she saw how small it was compared to just moments before.

“Why?” added Sweetie Belle, stepping around her to face Scootaloo.

“Well... why not?” asked Scootaloo, whispering again. “We’ve heard all we need to know. Besides, these questions aren’t gonna be very interesting.”

“How d’yah know that?” asked Apple Bloom, her eyebrow rising.

“Yeah,” said Sweetie Belle, “there might be somepony out here who’s just as big a fan as you are. Maybe they’ll ask a good question.”

Scootaloo snorted, with the slightest hint of a smirk. “Doubt that.”

“So?” Sweetie Belle put a hoof around Scootaloo’s shoulder, smiling the same gentle smile that Applejack used to get Apple Bloom to eat the occasional floret of broccoli that dared to sit on her plate. “You should at least give it a try.”

At that moment, their attention was drawn back to the stage.

“Yes, the unicorn mare about three rows back,” said Silver Lining, aiming a hoof at a purple one sticking out near the front of the crowd.

“Silver Lining,” said a voice that rang some bells in Apple Bloom’s head.

Great. Twilight’s the smartest pony in town. If anypony can find somethin’ interestin’ t’say, it’ll be

“What would the implications on the incomes for local businesses be if the race *were* to be non-Championship?”

This. Was. AWESOME!

She had already lost count of how many times she had buzzed her wings today, but they blurred at her sides again. She couldn't believe it. They really were bringing a race to Ponyville!

All of the riders would be there, too. Haybale. Storm Cloud. Leeroy Wingkins. Sunny Smiles! Something made her mouth open and made a little squeaky noise, but she didn't care. The most awesome ponies in Equestria after Rainbow Dash were coming to Ponyville! *That* was what she should care about.

Maybe she'd get a chance to talk to them. Hay, just *meeting* them and being allowed to bask in their awesomeness would be the *best thing ever!* Maybe they'd even give her tips for riding her scooter.

Not that she'd need them, obviously... oh, who was she kidding!

"Say, Scoot?"

Scootaloo was pulled from her daydreams, and looked over at her friends. They were lying on the rug, playing with one of the board games that she and Sweetie Belle had brought in when Apple Bloom had renovated the place.

"I was wonderin'..." continued Apple Bloom, peering over the frilly curls of Sweetie Belle's mane. "What were ya gonna say about that 'Silky Smooth', anyhow?"

"Huh?"

"Silky Smooth," affirmed Sweetie Belle, shifting to face her. "I think he's a track designer?"

Scootaloo's memory took a moment to jog itself, but when it did a smirk spread

across her muzzle. “He is... if you’re feeling generous.”

“Really?” Apple Bloom tilted her head, stepping around the board. “But Ah read all about the racetracks in yer book, and it never mentioned ‘em once”

“Well, no wonder!” cut in Scootaloo, shaking her head as quick as her wings. “All his tracks are the same namby-pamby, boring mess! I don’t think he’d be able to make a good circuit if Fluttershy used her Stare on him!”

“Wow, *that* bad?”

Scootaloo nodded at Sweetie Belle, but Apple Bloom was raising a hoof at her.

“Wait. How do *you* know that, Scoot?”

Scootaloo blinked. “Know what?”

(There were just a few hints of pride) (T) in Apple Bloom’s smirk. “How do ya know all of his tracks are boring? Ya know, since ya’ve never been to a race before.”

“I... uh...” Scootaloo brought a hoof to her chin, swallowing the groan **(she would have made had anypony else punctured her with logic like that)(T)**. Wasn’t it twice that she’d done that in the last hour or so? “Well... all of the magazines say there’s less overtaking at his tracks. And... um...” She tapped her hoof, as if physically trying to shake her thoughts from where they had been shelved in her head. **(Okay, she was right about all of Cloudy Dale’s race reports. According to him, the Maredrid race last year didn’t feature a single recorded pass in over an hour’s racing. That might have been the only grand prix she *didn’t* once think about going to. Okay, maybe she *did* want to go to that one. For only a little while, though.**

Great. Now she was getting off-topic.

Silky Smooth. How else *did* she know how awful his tracks were? She tapped her head again, and a thought about Silver Lining's speech popped up so suddenly that she almost leaped into that lamp above her. It was so *obvious!*

"And why else would Silver Lining mention that he's not involved with our track, huh?" she finished, beaming proudly.

But, as other memories of the meeting made themselves known, that smile melted from her muzzle. Her ears flattened themselves as she remembered the little snippets of her friends' conversation, battling their way into her ears over the buzzing roar of her wings. And how they'd been giggling and laughing throughout the meeting in a way that didn't make her stomach turn for once. And that now they were playing a game together.

And that she hadn't joined in with *any* of it.

"Something wrong, Scootaloo?" asked Sweetie Belle.

Scootaloo held back the sigh, and pushed aside her slouch along with it. "Guys," she began, looking into their eyes as they smiled in a way that she was sure they *knew* made her guts calm from raging hurricane to gentle breeze, "I'm sorry that I kinda zoned out on you earlier..."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Scootaloo," replied Sweetie Belle.

"Yeah, we know just how big a thing this race is for you," added Apple Bloom, before they shared a look.

"Besides," continued Sweetie Belle, her smile growing into a grin, "we're just as excited as you are!" Her eyes sparkled.

“Really?” asked Scootaloo. Any of those little wobbles that had been in her voice were gone, and her own smile returned in earnest. Not that there had been any wobbles in the first place. No.

“Why wouldn’t we be?” asked Apple Bloom, walking back to lie down beside the game. “You made it sound like a ton o’fun to go watch, even if you haven’t actually done that before.”

A small wave of what Scootaloo hesitated to call giggles passed through them, before Sweetie Belle piped up again.

“Yeah, so like we said, don’t worry about that, Scoot,” she said, shifting the game-set so that it was between her and Apple Bloom. “We’ll all go get tickets when they come out. Together,” she finished with a smile.

Something about Sweetie Belle seemed a little blurry. Scootaloo could feel her own smile go soft.

As awesome as that race’ll be, it isn’t nearly as awesome as you guys are...

Whoa.

She blinked. Okay, brain, where did *that* come from?

She snorted. “Still true, though,” she muttered.

“Whassat, Scoot?” asked Apple Bloom, an eyebrow raised, and a smirk toying with her lips.

“Uh...” She put on a massive grin, and everything got so much clearer. “I mean, thanks for all this, guys...”

“Aw, it’s nothing, Scootaloo,” said Sweetie Belle, waving a hoof dismissively, before pointing it at the board. “Want to play winner?”

Scootaloo smirked. “Yeah, I could do that.”

None of them left the clubhouse until long after the Princess had put the sun to rest.