

The Discarded Son
By: Gabriel LaVedier

Night at Sweet Apple Acres, a calm and quiet time. Work was done, and the denizens thereof were tucked away in their various places. Big Macintosh was squared away in his bedroom, as was Applejack. Applebloom was out at a sleepover with the Cutie Mark Crusaders, trying to earn cutie marks for roughing it, as much as they could without entering the Everfree Forest. And Granny Smith was in her kitchen, sitting at the table with a bottle of milk. She needed to settle her stomach after accidentally eating a hot sauce cupcake. She should have known that pink one would do something odd with the confections. She should never have gone to that party, even if it was on her property.

After a long swig of the milk she noticed a noise. As much as she played at being a helpless old mare, she had all her faculties in place, and looked into the darkness. “Who’s there? Don’t think yer gonna get the best of me. Show yerself.”

A figure slowly approached, silently crossing the floor into the reach of the low light in the kitchen. It was a caramel stallion, with a slicked back shiny-black mane and tail. On his upper body was a ruffled white shirt secured with lace at his throat, a black waistcoat over that and an open black coat over that. On his back, a simple, well-traveled set of saddlebags. On his flank, a cut-open apple, red outer skin and a mix of greens within. “Come now, mamma, surely you remember me. I only got banished, not erased.”

Granny Smith looked with wide-eyed disbelief at the sight of the stallion. She stood up slowly, on shaky hocks, slowly stepping around the table in the direction of the new arrival. “Yew... Yer not here. Ah sent yew off. An’ iff’n ah did that, yew ain’t here. Cain’t be here. Mah word is law in this family.”

“And yet, here I am. You’re surprised? I flout laws somewhat freely. And you always knew that. This should not be such a surprise. I’m your son, your eldest child, the first of your line and your pride and joy. Or I would be if you didn’t think I was worthless, and worthy only of being thrown to the winds. I almost feel inclined to thank you, mamma. I’ve had quite a few experiences in that great big world. Some good ones, even. But I’m back, because there’s something that I need to do.”

“How dare yew? Ah have a mind to call Big Macintosh down here! He’ll send yew off mighty quick.”

“I’d be long gone before Big Macintosh even made it half way down the stairs. Be civil, mamma. This is an important issue we need to resolve.”

“Hmph! T’aint no issues between us. We settled it all the day ah tossed yew out to never return. That’s done and settled as far as ah’m concerned.”

Bad Apple motioned towards the far wall, just within the reach of the light at the table. The wall that held two photos: His own and Braeburn’s. “We’ve got one issue left. And you know it. Time to end this.”

Granny Smith looked over at the wall and then back to her son. “Ah shoulda knowed yew’d be around fer that. Why should ah let yew stay even another minute?”

Bad Apple took on a big, bright smile, fluttering his eyes at his mother. “Like the song says, *Ain’t I your prodigal boy? Ain’t I your pride and joy?* Besides, I’ve got an offer you can’t refuse.” He reached into his saddlebags and deposited two items onto table. A large container of three-colored chips, and a well-used deck of cards.

Granny Smith glared hotly at the deck of cards, while Bad Apple extracted the chips and got to

dividing them equally. "Ah wish yew'd never seen a deck o' cards."

"Can't be helped. If it hadn't been cards it would have been dice. Or the wheel. Or flipping bits. But, no... The whole county tutted over Pappy Adam teaching me the way of the cards. They all did that because it's what was expected. Shake their heads and make noises over Pappy teaching me cards. When they all knew the truth." Half of the chips smoothly slid across the table, to Granny Smith's side. "They knew who taught me how to play."

Old, steely eyes fell to the pile of chips, then darted up to Bad Apple. "What's yer stakes, boy? What do ah get when I whup yer hide and send yew packin' again?"

"You certainly have a way with words, momma. But, well, you know my stakes for winning. For you, though... I will leave and never return. On my word, rather than on your demand, so you know I will honor that. And... I will stop all contact with Applejack. All of it. No more secret contacts or anything of the sort. I'll leave this place clean of my presence. What do you say? Is it a wager?"

Granny Smith gritted her gums as she thought of Applejack, calmly living under her roof and lying to her about never talking to Bad Apple. But, rather than say anything on the subject, she quickly flicked a white chip to the middle of the table. "Ante in and deal them out, boy. Ah'm an old mare and ah ain't got time tew fool around."

Bad Apple smiled and tossed in his own white chip, quickly dealing out cards alternately and slapping the deck in the middle of the table. "Always to the point, momma. That was one of your big selling points, wasn't it? You knew how to get things done. The business side of things, I mean. Pappy Adam was perfectly happy to work hard. You managed the papers."

Granny Smith looked at her cards and quickly threw in a blue chip. "Don't yew sass yer mother, now. Ah did whut ah had tew dew. Adam understood that. Tweren't interestin' or sensible, but ah got all them papers signed and got us our nice, big acreage and then some."

Bad Apple looked at his own cards and tossed in his own blue chip. Then took two cards and slid them beside the deck, replacing them with two off the top. "Indeed. I remember those days. I remember a lot of tears and screaming. We surely did get nice, big acreage and plenty more besides. All watered in weeping."

Granny Smith tsked and slid one card out, having it replaced with another. She also tossed another red chip into the center pile. "Never yew mind that, boy. Ah did what was needed tew make Adam's dream come true. He wanted lotsa land, more than we had. Yes, we were sittin' pretty. But more was always better. We had tew dew it to preserve our place and keep us strong."

"Of course, momma. Of course. Didn't matter he was happy with what we had." Bad Apple threw on a red chip and turned over his cards. Three of a kind, sevens. "You wanted more and more. Bought up orchards all around or the water that kept them alive. How many families did we displace? How much sadness are my niece and nephew looking to inherit?"

"None. It's all over and done with. In Ponyville and elsewhere." Granny Smith scowled, turning over her own cards. Two pairs, aces and eights, and a Jack of spades.

"Did you really try to finish a dead stallion's hand, momma? By the way, did you know that in some places they call me the Jack of spades? Not hearts, I'm not enough of a Casanova for that." Bad Apple collected his chips and pushed the cards over to his mother.

Granny Smith hmphed loudly, gathering the cards up for a few quick shuffles. "Ah don't need tew hear 'bout yer Lothario ways. T'aint none o' mah business whut yew dew in th' bedroom. Less'n yer one a

them Colt Cuddlers. And then ah'll get Big Macintosh down here, cards 'r no cards."

"No, momma. I've had some nice mares coming around to me. I never settled with any of them. I can't settle down. Not just because I'm a wandering stallion, but eventually things will catch up to me. Not that it matters so much." A chip flew into the center of the table and clattered softly. "But that's not the point. You're just old and backwards. Colt Cuddlers are just as normal and respectable as Filly Foolers and Populators."

"Ah told yew not tew sass me, boy." Cards whipped across the table, to rest lightly before Bad Apple, along with a chip for the center of the table. "'Old 'n backward' indeed! Ah'm thinking' 'bout traditional family values. Mah darlin' Applejack is th' picher 'a value. Not that yew care, but she's been seein' a fine filly name a Rainbow Dash. Oh she lacks polish, she's one a them fact'ry city folk, yew know, but she's got herself a respectable job clearin' clouds and ain't had nuthin' but good love and respect fer AJ."

"I know, momma. News travels. And I've been to Canterlot more than a few times. She also told me herself." Bad Apple threw down two white chips. "Yes, it's good that she found Rainbow Dash. I hope she stays happy, and I hope someday she or Rainbow Dash have a child as mares have before, though magical telekinetic means, which I'm sure you've been discussing with her. But, how would being a Colt Cuddler be wrong, just because they can't give birth? They can donate. No need to be a dam, they can be a sire."

"That ain't th' nat'ral order a things. Ah don't know what weird lands yew been tew, but here in Equestria, under our wonderful Princess Celestia, we've had Populators and Filly Foolers. We need all the menfolk we can get fer populatin'. Ain't no place fer Colt Cuddlers." Granny Smith lifted her cards and tossed a red chip into the center. "Raise."

Bad Apple checked his cards and tossed a red chip into the pile. He then took three cards and slid them over. "Call. That doesn't sound like the Princess Celestia the rest of us in Equestria know and love. She has always been loving, tolerant and accepting of all ponies. Are you sure you're talking about Princess Celestia and not just something you made up to keep being angry and hurtful?" Bad Apple put down two white chips with a slow, even motion.

Granny Smith slid across three cards, taking two for herself. "It ain't what she says, no. But we gotta have standards. Gotta have our traditions. Like Winter Wrap-Up with no magic. That's the way it always was. And it's the way it's gonna be." She threw in a red ship and nodded her head curtly. "Raise again."

"Fold." Bad Apple turned his cards. Garbage with a high Ace. "Forever?"

Granny Smith showed off a pair of Kings and took her winnings with a toothless smile. "Forever."

Bad Apple took the cards back for a quick shuffle, nodding a bit. He distributed the cards again and clicked down his ante. "Forever's a long time. Will you be here to enforce forever? Someday all the 'forevers' are going to be gone, replaced by ponies with new ideas. Like how we have electricity now."

"Never happen." Granny Smith anted in and checked her cards. She tossed out four white chips and nodded her head. "We never get rid of everything. Ah've still got mah hoof-cranked record player, but that crazy filly on th' radio with her nice young co-host have all them gizmos and gadgets in the studio. Ah swears, ah wish Applejack wouldn't listen tew them in th' mornin's."

"Yes. You have it. But they don't sell them at the front of the shop anymore." Bad Apple called her bet, and exchanged one card. "They're in the back, if they are anywhere. And don't try getting them serviced in every store with electronics. It takes a specialist in mechanical gear and costs more."

“But they’re still there. I can get the parts, I can get the thing fixed. T’aint gonna just lie in a lump if’n it don’t keep movin’.” Granny Smith slid along three cards, and took her three in return. “We’ve got our values and our ways. We’ve always had that. We’re always gonna. Never gonna change it.” She checked her cards again and threw in a red chip.

Bad Apple tossed in his own red chip and four white chips on top of it. “Raise. Never say never, momma. That’s what they said about leisure suits and flapper skirts. And abuse for Colt Cuddlers. That didn’t last long. Wasn’t it Princess Celestia that stopped that? I don’t recall.”

Granny Smith threw on two red chips and scowled. “Don’t mean a thing. Jes a sign she wasn’t interested in beatin’ ponies. Don’t mean she liked Colt Cuddlers.” Granny Smith flipped her hand over. A pair of eights. “Fold.”

Bad Apple slowly slid his takings over to his own pile, dutifully turning over cards to show nothing. Garbage, with a ten high. He gathered the cards up and slid them across the table with a grin. “Whatever you say, momma.”

There next came a period of largely-silent hands, marked only by notes of “raise”, “call” or “fold” as needed. Bad Apple slipped into a neutrally-set face, which contrasted with Granny Smith’s hard-set features, as they traded turns dealing, and seemed to trade chips, neither having any clear advantage. However, it became clear soon enough that while Granny Smith took some bold moves that were often rebuffed and unmatched, Bad Apple took the slow and steady route, bleeding chips out a white at a time. The death of a thousand cuts.

Granny Smith finally deigned to noticed that her pile of chips was minus a few blues, and that her stock of others was also dwindling. “Consarn it, boy, ah never took yew fer the type. Ah ain’t seen anypony grind down slow and steady so well. Ah didn’t think younguns had the patience tew chip away. T’aint gonna work, mind. But ah’m surprised yew even tried.”

“I told you, momma, I learned a lot. I’ve had many an encounter out there, trotting the plains and byways or riding the rivers with the other vagabonds. By the way, someone out on the river says, thanks for the flask of Icejack, it’s even better after time wore the bitterness out of a mouthful.” Bad Apple dealt and grinned. “Lots and lots of vagabonds and travelers, displaced folk of the open road.”

Granny Smith practically paled, almost toppling the clips she had left and nearly fumbling her cards. “Yew didn’t. Yer lyin’ tew me. T’aint no way in tarnation yew saw what yew said yew saw. Not on the river and not nowheres.”

“With my own. Two. Eyes. I had a lot of good teachers. Ponies that taught me to be good, ponies that taught me to play well, ponies aplenty that taught me that life is for living, happy and safe. My life is helping to give a life you never let me have. I’m the Apple family’s best face, but you don’t even admit I’m one of you. I have a dozen names in more towns than I can think of. Saint or scoundrel, depending on which one you ask.”

Visibly shaken, Granny Smith tossed in several of her blue chips and waited, silently, for a response.

Bad Apple casually matched the motion, and took two cards for himself.

Granny Smith took two as well then shoved her entire pile forward, with all the violence her old limbs could muster. “All of it, boy. All of it! Do yew think yew can beat yer own momma?”

Bad Apple slowly arranged what was necessary to cover the bet, and slid it slowly forward.

With a triumphant grin, Granny Smith showed off her hand. Three aces. “Now we play fer keeps. Ah got myself in position.”

“If only it were so, momma, if only it were so...” Bad Apple turned over his hand. The fourth ace. And all four sevens. “That’s the end, momma.”

Granny Smith stared at the five cards an dumb disbelief. It was over. She had lost. “No... It cain’t... Cain’t be true. Ah cain’t lose this. Not this...”

“Never bet what you can’t afford to lose. Don’t feel bad. You might have won ages ago. But you tripped yourself up. You played angry. I was playing for honor. So, to the wager...”

“Ah said don’t sass me, boy! Fine. Yew want it so bad, yew got it.” The old green mare rose creakily from her chair and hobbled over to the wall. With a slow and hesitant motion she reached for Bad Apple’s photograph.

“Not that one, momma. And I think you sorta knew it.”

Granny Smith’s head whipped around to deliver an angry glare, gums grinding harshly at the instruction. It galled her to the core. But she moved just slightly and, even more reluctantly, took down Braeburn’s photograph from the wall.

“Time to grow up and move on, momma. No more living in the past. You WILL tell the family and you WILL make Little Strongheart a loved and appreciated member of it. No going back.” While the motion had been underway, Bad Apple had packed up and gotten to his hooves. “Like I told you, never bet what you can’t afford to lose.”

Granny Smith sat down at the table with the photograph, looking at the bright, smiling face, full of hope and promise. “But... But she’s a buffalo...”

“You wagered the wall, and you lost. You were happy enough to play when you thought you’d be entirely rid of me. So much for that.” Bad Apple turned to leave, but thought of it and turned back around. “And one more thing. Remember Applejack’s trip to the Grand Galloping Gala, selling treats for the glory and enrichment of the Apple family? Remember how she went there? With the Snake-Oil Cart? A huckster’s best friend.” A smile danced on Bad Apple’s lips before he turned away to melt into the darkness. “Guess who taught her how to make one...”

With her son gone, Granny Smith was left at the table, holding the picture of Braeburn. She wanted to put it back on the wall. It was her law! It was her will! She was absolute leader of the family! She wouldn’t be sassed and harassed by her own son, forced to let a... A BUFFALO into her family. Not even someone with a Cutie Mark. She nearly rose, but remembered her wager. She had lost. And she was ruthless, but honorable. She couldn’t let her scoundrel son hold the moral high ground over her. So she sat there, petulance fighting with her honor.

She sat there all night, until Big Macintosh and Applejack found her in the morning, raw, red eyes looking down on Braeburn’s picture. The decision was made for her. “Ah’ve had a... Change of heart. Tell the kinfolk. We can talk to Braeburn again. We... Will allow his new bride tew be one a’ us. No... No restrictions.”

Big Macintosh went to his grandmother, to help lead her to bed. Applejack, meanwhile, looked at the opposite end of the table from where she had been, and found a small, white chip. She suddenly understood what had happened, and smiled as she picked up the little disk of plastic. Sometimes, the right thing takes the wrong sort.