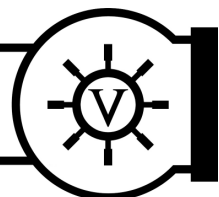


La Poulain de Rue

Doctor Dapples

PONY FICTION VAULT



"...one hundred and two, one hundred and three, one hundred and four..."

"And that's it!"

"That doesn't seem like a lot. Especially if we're splitting them three ways."

Sweetie Belle took what she assumed to be her third of the rubber bands and looked at the diminutive pile. She imagined the jump from the top of Carousel Boutique, followed by the snapping of the elastic, the fall, and the gruesome crash. She winced. "Maybe sis has some more lying around. I can bring them by tomorrow morning."

Apple Bloom split the remaining pile in half, and made a face. She was little, but she was still an earth pony, and a growing one, at that. She was going to need more than this. "Ah can check the barn tonight. There's all kinds of supplies lyin' around in there. I'm sure I can figure out something!"

Scotaloo looked at what was left. She was a lot lighter than the others, and was honestly convinced that she might have enough. Still, she spoke up. "Yeah, I'll do some hunting around the house to see if there's not some secret rubber band storage that I don't know about. It's pretty big, so there's a lot of places that I haven't looked yet!"

"Is your house really that big?"

Scotaloo's eyes opened wide. *Oh Celestia, why did I say that?* "Well, it's not that big," she said, laughing nervously. "It just seems big because I'm... small?"

Apple Bloom raised her hooves in triumph. "We could be Cutie Mark Crusader House Explorers!" Sweetie Belle joined her in an enthusiastic "Yay!"

"...Yay..." responded Scotaloo, a little too quietly for the other excited fillies to catch.

Thankfully, by the time the Cutie Mark Crusader Planning Session had ended for the day, Scotaloo had made so many other, more exciting suggestions that the House Explorer option was forgotten. Who wanted to search a boring old house when there was hang-gliding? Or pie throwing? Or vampire hunting? As their discussion of good hiding places for undead ponies took itself outside, Scotaloo interrupted them to excuse herself. She wished both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle "good night" and sped off towards Ponyville on her blue scooter. The unicorn and earth pony followed her lead, and made their way into town, laughing and talking all the way.

A few minutes later, after the other fillies were out of sight, the orange pegasus parked her scooter behind the wide trunk of the apple tree that held the clubhouse. She hated having to make that wide circle through the orchard whenever her and her friends called it a day, but it still beat a straight trip to nothing.

She climbed up the ramp to the clubhouse, the tan color muted by the slowly setting sun. When she had first set eyes on the structure, introduced by an excited Applejack, she had seen it much the same way as her friends. It was an abandoned building which, had it been in town, would have been condemned long ago. But that night, as she huddled underneath the merry-go-round next to the red school house, she reconsidered its possibilities.

Imagine her surprise the next day to discover the ramshackle shed had been repaired from top to bottom. As Apple Bloom rattled off the various renovations she had made, Scootaloo couldn't help noticing just how much it looked like a tiny house. No, not a house. A home. She wanted to hug her yellow-furred friend, to thank her, but instead she remained her usual aloof self: "That's so cool! What's Sweetie Belle up to?"

Before she had met Sweetie Belle, she had kept pretty much to herself in school. Aside from her resounding appetite at lunch, which she blamed on her athletic metabolism, she didn't particularly stand out. By this point in the school year, she had resolved to keep her grades strictly mediocre. She was a capable reader, and was particularly confident in math, but doing either too well or too poorly risked bringing attention to herself. If she failed, Miss Cheerilee would want to have a parent-teacher conference. If she did particularly well, she might want to congratulate them on how well they raised their foal.

"This is my daughter, Scootaloo." The dark red earth pony tousled her pink mane with his hoof as the two of them stood in front of the schoolteacher at the beginning of the school year. "Make sure she behaves herself. She can be a real handful sometimes!"

"She's in good hands, sir," Cheerilee said, smiling at the tiny filly. Scootaloo and her father embraced, and he was off until the end of the day. After that, it was off to wherever they were staying. They had tried the orchards of Sweet Apple Acres for a while, but the workers there covered a lot of ground. They risked being chased off of the property, and he wanted to protect his daughter from that shame, at least. Most nights, they crouched against apple crates stacked between houses and other buildings. They stole the occasional apple from poorly sealed boxes, and cuddled together for warmth.

There was another memorable embrace, which came later that autumn, before Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle. One night, her father woke her up from a sound sleep, talking

about a job he had to look into. He'd be gone for a little while, but he'd be back for her soon. She was half awake for most of his speech, but at the end, he squeezed her, and the hug seemed to last a little longer than usual. As he pulled away, she felt a drop of moisture that had fallen onto her muzzle. For some reason, he was crying.

The clubhouse on its own was a hollow and isolated affair, but she had scored a small victory when she was able to secure something she considered a luxury. Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle had initially balked at the idea. "What the hay we need a mattress for?" had been the earth pony's incredulous and somewhat vulgar response. But it didn't take much for them to appreciate Scootaloo's gift to herself. After a day of zip-lining and climbing small mountains, the prospect of curling up at headquarters and taking a short nap was particularly appealing. And the thought of spending the next winter with a roof over her head, doors and windows closed, usually caused her to fall asleep with a smile on her face.

Sweetie Belle was the one to provide her first real smile in months. When they became friends, she found herself invited to sleepovers at the Carousel Boutique. She'd fall asleep wrapped in expertly sewn quilts after filling her tummy with hot chocolate and marshmallows. When Apple Bloom joined the group, there were nights spent at the farmhouse, telling ghost stories and enjoying second helpings of apple pie. All she had to do to take part in these outings was obtain "permission" from her dad, wherever he was. After a couple of forged letters which described how busy he was with his work at home, Rarity and Applejack stopped asking. Scootaloo's father was obviously a very busy stallion.

The downside was that she always left these sleepovers with a pang of jealousy. She loved her friends, but she hated that they had so many things she didn't. They slept in warm beds every night, they never wondered where their next meal would come from, and they had someone to come home to at night. She wanted a big sister of her own, but she wasn't interested in a sophisticated unicorn seamstress, or a hard-talking earth pony applebucker. She needed an athlete who would take her under her wing, not just metaphorically, but literally. She wanted Rainbow Dash beside her at night, when the wind felt like it would rip the flesh from her bones. She wanted to wrap those feathers around her body, and feel not just warm, but safe.

Ponyville wasn't particularly unsafe, but Scootaloo had never been able to fully shake her memory of "him." One day, while her father was scouring for something to eat, a yellow unicorn asked her where she was going. They began having a conversation, which ended with him offering her a warm meal. Before she could accept the friendly pony's outstretched hoof, her father reappeared, and a heated argument ensued, ending with the

unicorn storming off into his house. Months later, when she was on her own, the unicorn made a second appearance, this time inviting her into his house, with the promise of a warm and comfortable bed. She briefly considered it, but the memory of the argument and a nagging voice in the back of her head made her politely refuse. Weeks later, there was a stir in town as that same unicorn was hauled away by the Royal Guard. The word "foal" was on everypony's lips, and while she didn't know exactly what they were talking about, she could tell by the way the words dripped out of their mouths that the implications were sinister.

More than anything, she wondered what her friends would think of her real name. She barely remembered it herself. Her mother, whom was either a beautiful and tender white pegasus with a mane like a sunset or a cruel and vengeful witch (depending on her father's mood), had picked it out before she was even born. But as far back as she could remember, her father's phrase was "it's time to scoot along!" and it was always followed by a packing up of their meager belongings, and a move to another town.

Right before their third escape, her father rolled out his motto: "It's time to scoot along!", and the tiny orange foal looked up with her wide purple eyes and shouted "scoot aloo!" From that day forward, though her father occasionally used her real name, the nickname was the one he used right before he kissed her goodnight.

She remembered those kisses with a sad sigh. She still missed her father. Possibly always would. She snuggled her body into the mattress. Ultimately, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom couldn't understand what she'd been through. Their lives were much simpler, much happier. They hadn't gotten their cutie marks because they were still trying to decide what to do with their lives. Until recently, Scootaloo hadn't thought much about her special talents. She was more focused on day-to-day survival.

The bad news was that life remained difficult, and she suspected that her father wouldn't be returning for her. The good news was that even though he was gone, she was surviving. She had a roof over her head, and she had met a lot of ponies who did care for her. She had friends whom she could trust with anything. Maybe one day, even this. Things were getting better, even if that progress seemed almost agonizingly slow at times. She grabbed her Cutie Mark Crusader cloak, clutched it tightly against her chest, and fell asleep.