

THE GATOR, THE GIRL, AND THE TANUKI

By BLAMEYOURFATE

Gummy the alligator had to be the most boring pet ever. It was a beautiful day, sunny with not a cloud in sight, and what was he doing? Standing there, staring blankly at absolutely nothing.

"And why exactly are we here again?" asked Scootaloo, who was leaning against her trademark scooter, looking quite bored. The pegasus filly entertained herself by performing some cool tricks earlier. Now she and her friends, the Cutie Mark Crusaders, had nothing to do but watch Gummy do nothing.

"I thought if we took care of Gummy, we could get some kind a' cutie mark." replied Apple Bloom. "Like an animal caretaker, or a alligator tamer, or-"

"A sitting-in-the-park-doing-nothing cutie mark?" said Scootaloo, rolling her eyes. This would usually be the part where Apple Bloom said something back, and they would argue. It was kind of their thing. But Apple Bloom was too bored to care. Plus, Scootaloo was right. It had been a whole hour since they left Sugarcube Corner (because they got bored of watching Gummy do nothing there), and set out for the park. The hope was that the alligator would be stimulated by the weather and the playing ponies and do...something. No such luck.

"Can we do something else now?" groaned Sweetie Belle from her lying position on the bench next to Apple Bloom.

"Yeah, let's dump this lame pet back at Pinkie Pie's and do that hang-gliding thing I was talking about." Scootaloo grinned, probably picturing living out her flying fantasies.

"Ya'll know we can't do that! Pinkie Pie's out of town at that Confe....Festi...cake thingy!" Apple Bloom said strongly.

"The Confestival?" asked Sweetie Belle, perking up. "I've heard there's cakes from all over Equestria there!"

"Yeah, that. She's comin' back tonight, so I promised to look after Gummy." Apple Bloom remembered how Applejack, her big sister, was asked first. But she was too busy with the harvest, so the filly volunteered. "And a Cutie Mark Crusader never breaks a promise!"

The others were silent. Apple Bloom knew that if she brought up their honor as Crusaders, they'd stop complaining. Truth is she wanted out of this job, too. But after all the trouble she went through to convince her sister that she was responsible enough to handle it, she couldn't just quit. And if she had to suffer through it, she'd rather have her

two best friends at her side. But Scootaloo's narrowed eyes and smirk were a sign that she was having other thoughts.

"You're right, a Crusader should never break a promise." she said. "But we didn't make the promise, *you* did!"

"Hey, yeah, you're right!" said a wide-eyed Sweetie Belle.

"Well, yeah...but...ya'll can't just leave me!" was all Apple Bloom could manage to get out.

"Like hay I can't! No offense Apple Bloom, but if it really is my destiny to get a cutie mark for being bored out of my mind, then I'd rather be a blank flank for life." And with that she put on her helmet and attached her scooter to the Crusader's makeshift passenger wagon. "You coming, Sweetie Belle?"

Sweetie Belle got off of the bench and into the wagon without a second of delay. As she strapped on her helmet, Apple Bloom caught her eye. "Sorry." said the unicorn with a guilty expression. "See you later?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, let's do this. Later, Apple Bloom!" Scootaloo called out as she flapped her tiny wings. The force may have not been enough for the young pegasus to fly, but it was more than adequate to propel the scooter. Apple Bloom watched as her friends sped off, Sweetie Belle waving in the back. She continued to watch until they rounded a corner, disappearing into town. With them gone, that left Apple Bloom alone with-

"Gummy?" The alligator was gone. Apple Bloom jumped to her feet, looking all around. That lame pet had been still the whole time, and the one moment she takes her eyes off of him he moves? "Gummy!"

"CAW!" came a strange call from somewhere. It didn't matter, it wasn't Gummy.

"Gummy!" Apple Bloom started galloping. To where, she didn't know, but she had to-

"CAW!" There it was again. No time for that, Apple-

"CAAAY!"

"Shut up, ya stupid bird!" Apple Bloom shouted up to the sky. She saw the culprit, one of those big hunter birds that eats smaller animals. It was brown, with a white head and yellow beak, and some weird green part on it's tail. Even weirder, that green part had purple eyes.

Apple Bloom stared at this oddity for a few seconds before realizing. "Gummy!" The alligator had bitten the bird, and was hanging on. The bird didn't even seem to notice that it had a passenger. Apple Bloom followed as it flew along, straight towards...

"The Everfree Forest!" The filly's eyes widened as the bird descended towards the dreadful place. "Gummy, ya'll better get down here right now!"

Gummy either wasn't listening, or didn't care. He stayed latched on to the bird as it disappeared into the trees. Apple Bloom came to a halt at the edge of the forest. She had gone in there before, and would've never come out if it wasn't for her babysitter Fluttershy. She turned around, and started to walk away from the forest. As much as she hated to admit it, she needed a big pony for this. She needed to ask Applejack for help.

This thought made her stop. The whole point of pet-sitting was to prove that she was a big pony, a responsible grown up. She'd never hear the end of it if she went crying to her big sister for help. Not to mention that she made a promise to take care of Gummy, and a Cutie Mark Crusader never breaks a promise.

The lone filly closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Then, without giving herself enough time to reconsider, she dashed into the forest.

Gummy found that bird didn't taste very good. Lucky for the alligator, the bird was nice enough to land in her nest, which was full of tasty eggs. Of course, Gummy had never had eggs before, so his conclusion that they were tasty was completely based on the fact that they were within biting range.

Gummy's ride stopped at her nest just long enough to drop off some twigs, and then flew off again, leaving Gummy all alone with the eggs. Even that loud yellow one who never had any idea what Gummy was thinking would have been able to read his expression. It was lunchtime!

CHOMP.

He bit the nearest egg...only to find that it wasn't very good either. He held it in his mouth, sucking on the shell. Still nothing. After a few more moments of trying to draw out some kind of flavor, something clicked in his little alligator brain. Memories of eggs, of the pink one using them to make food. But she always did something first. What was it...she broke them! She broke the shell and then the tasty stuff came out!

With this knowledge at the forefront of his thoughts, the hungry gator chomped down with renewed vigor. Soon it would crack. Soon the yummy part would come out. Almost...almost...gah! He spit out the egg. It didn't have a single crack. Gummy's stomach started to make a growling noise. He stared longingly at the egg. No lunchtime...

“Having some trouble there, little one?”

Even though he was startled, Gummy didn't actually move. He only shifted his eyes up to look at the owner of the voice. Staring back at him were a pair of beady black eyes.

Fortunately for Apple Bloom, the Everfree Forest wasn't so scary in the daytime. That's because the more dangerous creatures came out at night, which was still about two hours away. The other fortunate thing was that it didn't take her too long to find the tree in which Gummy was trapped. The *un*fortunate thing was what was that she wasn't the only one who found the tree.

“You know you have to break the eggs to eat them, right?” said the creature to Gummy. The creature was big, or at least bigger than Apple Bloom and Gummy. It had fairly thick brown fur, with patches of black on it's four legs and on it's face. The patch on it's face was all around it's eyes, so that it looked sort of like a little mask.

“A raccoon?” Apple Bloom said, mostly to herself. But in the quiet of the forest, it was loud enough to catch the creature's attention. It looked down from where it hung near the bird's nest.

“Excuse me? Did you just say raccoon?” The low, gruff voice made Apple Bloom guess it was male. His beady, black eyes were fixed on the filly, and not in any way that could be considered friendly.

“Um, yes sir. You are a raccoon, right?” she replied in her best attempted at a brave voice.

“Raccoon. I am no simple raccoon!” He bounded down the tree, and at about halfway he leapt off, did a flip, and landed in front of Apple Bloom. “I am the legendary Tanuki!” He emphasized this announcement by standing on his hind legs and throwing his two front into the air. This made him about twice her height, but also ridiculous enough to erase her fear of him.

“Ta-what-y?” she asked.

“Tanuki!” He said again, with the pose. Upon seeing her confused look remain unchanged, he sighed and got back on all fours. “I'm a legendary creature from another land. Your people would think of me as something like a mix of your dog and raccoon.”

“So you are a raccoon!” exclaimed the filly.

"No!" roared the Tanuki, "As you can see I am much bigger, much smarter, and much awesome-er! I am the legendary Tanuki! Understand?" He sneered, which made him scary again. Apple Bloom thought it best to agree.

"Yes sir."

"Good." He turned and hopped back up the tree to the nest. "Now if you'll excuse me, it's lunchtime. It's hard to be legendary on an empty stomach." He grabbed an egg from the nest and looked it over. Apple Bloom remembered her sister explaining how raccoons steal eggs from bird's nests to eat. She always felt bad for the birds, but she wasn't about to tell the Tanuki that.

"This'll do." He was about to head back down when he noticed Gummy, who was again trying to break an egg by biting it with his toothless mouth. "Good luck, little one."

This made Apple Bloom remember why she was there in the first place. "Oh, hey Mr. Tanuki!" she called out. "Could you do me a favor? That gator's with me, could'ja bring him down here?"

"Of course! Come little one." He scooped up Gummy, who as usual didn't react at all, and bounded down the tree once again. He even did another flip, and landed safely, placing Gummy on the ground.

"Thank you kindly!" exclaimed Apple Bloom.

"Ha! A simple feat for the legendary Tanuki. And now, I take my leave, good day!" He raced away purposefully, and Apple Bloom watched him go. The Tanuki was a bit...weird, but overall he was pretty cool.

There must be tons of amazing creatures just like that in this here forest, she thought, and here I am stuck with this guy. She looked down at where Gummy was placed and saw...nothing.

"Not again!" she exclaimed. Her eyes darted around until they found the gator attached to, of all things, the Tanuki. "Gummy!" she yelled more out of frustration than actually calling out to the pet. She took off as fast as her little legs would carry her, barely keeping up with the athletic Tanuki. With all of her energy spent on sprinting to keep up with the creature, she could only spare one thought.

Gummy really was the worst pet ever.

The brown thing had the worst taste ever.

Gummy had spit out his egg to take a break before trying to open it again. But before he could get another shot, the brown thing grabbed him and took him away from

the eggs. When he was put down, there was no food in sight. Just the yellow one (and Gummy had bitten the pink one enough times to know that their kind isn't a good lunch) and the brown thing. So Gummy took a chance on the brown thing. It was a mistake.

Gummy was about to let go when he spied something that the brown thing was holding. White, round....an egg! Gummy's eyes widened. There was still hope for a good lunch after all...

Apple Bloom's lungs felt like they were on fire when the Tanuki finally slowed down. She kept running, trying her best just to breathe. The trees thinned out until they gave way to a river, making it easier for the exhausted filly to keep her target in sight. Luckily, and before she collapsed, the Tanuki stopped at the river and hunched over. This gave her time to catch her breath and approach the Tanuki at an even pace.

"Pardon me, Mr. Tanuki?" she said as she came up beside him. She could see that he was dipping the egg into the river. Gummy had detached himself and was now heading toward the water as well.

"Oh, young one? What brings you here?" he asked.

"My gator hitched a ride with you. I ran after so I could get him back." she explained as she put out a hoof to stop Gummy from going in the river. She learned her lesson about leaving the little rascal unattended.

"Is that so little one? Have we become friends?" the Tanuki said with laugh. Gummy replied by staring blankly at the egg in the river.

"If you don't mind me asking, what're you doing?" asked Apple Bloom, eyeing the egg as well.

"Ah, this? I am washing my food. The legendary Tanuki cannot dine on something dirty found in the wild." He lifted the egg and inspected it. "See, shiny, spotless. A meal worthy of one such as I!"

Apple Bloom looked at the egg uneasily. She still didn't like the idea that it would be food.

"Um, Mr. Tanuki sir? Why do you eat eggs? Can't you find something else?" she asked.

"Of course I could! But this is my favorite meal. And is the legendary Tanuki not entitled to eat his favorite thing?" He was on his hind legs again, towering over the filly.

"But, raccoons steal and eat eggs."

“Tanuki did it first! We deserve it!” he growled. “Do you question the ways of the Tanuki?” He loomed over the girl, showing his teeth.

“Uh, I...” She backed away. “No sir, go ahead and have the egg!”

The Tanuki’s expression went back to friendly in an instant. “I’m glad you see it my way.”

Apple Bloom hung her head. She didn’t see it his way, but she also wasn’t going to be the egg’s replacement. Maybe it was like Applejack said, that nature works like it’s supposed to. Some animals hunt other animals, and nopony could stop that.

“My egg!”

The Tanuki’s shout brought Apple Bloom out of her thoughts. She saw the creature shaking a fist at the river. “Return my lunch this instant, you fiend!”

That fiend was Gummy, who had taken advantage of that moment of neglect to grab the egg and jump in the river. He was now floating downstream with his prize. The Tanuki jumped in after him.

“You are mine, little one. You hear me? Mine!” he shouted as he swiftly swam after Gummy, coming dangerously close to catching the little gator. Apple Bloom, who couldn’t swim without her filly flippers, could only run alongside the river and watch.

As she galloped, she felt a mix of things: worry that she might not get to Gummy first, awe at the Tanuki’s swimming abilities, exasperation at Gummy’s third escape, and, just a little, relief that Gummy got the egg away from the Tanuki. Maybe the little guy wasn’t so bad, after all.

Gummy liked the water. He liked it in all of its ways: The bubbly kind that the pink one went in, the purple kind that was yummy, and the kind in the big bowl that the pink one was always telling him to stay out of. But this kind, the kind that kept pushing him and his lunch, he didn’t like.

“I am Tanuki! That egg is rightfully mine!” yelled the brown thing from behind. As Gummy continued to be pushed along, he tumbled so that he was underwater, and could see behind him. The brown thing was moving his legs in a weird way, and it made him get closer. Gummy tried wagging his legs. All that did was make him tumble again and be above the water.

“Gummy!” he heard the yellow one shout.

“Get back here!” The brown thing was really close now.

“Stay away from him!” The yellow one’s voice was far away.

“It has what belongs to me!” The brown thing sounded more growly than before.

“It’s not yours! It’s the bird’s!” The yellow one sounded less squeaky than before.

“I stole it, it’s mine!”

“Stealing doesn’t make it yours you stupid raccoon!”

“You dare insult the Tanuki?” It sounded the growliest it’s ever sounded.

“Yeah, I do!” said the yellow one stronger than Gummy ever heard her speak. In that moment she reminded the gator of the orange one with the brown on her head. “Why don’t you git up here and do something about it?”

“Nice try, young one. But I know of a better way to punish you.” Gummy tumbled again and was face to face with those beady eyes. “I’ll make this one part of my lunch!”

The brown one moved all four of its legs and did a jump. In the water! Gummy thought that was pretty cool. Even though that meant that the brown thing was coming straight at him.

It was hard to keep up with the floating gator. The area beside the river was sometimes clear, sometimes thick with trees. This left Apple Bloom having to be very aware, weaving around trunks and branches. All while keeping an eye on Gummy to make sure he didn’t end up Tanuki food.

The filly watched as the Tanuki sprung out of the water, diving at Gummy. Then...leaves. Another patch of trees blocked the scene from view. Apple Bloom’s eyes darted ahead. The patch went on awhile. She sprinted her fastest sprint. She had to get to Gummy.

But then what? She couldn’t jump in after him. And even if she could, the Tanuki wouldn’t let go without a fight. Gummy was doomed, all because she had to go and talk tough to the Tanuki. So much for being a big pony...

No, it wasn’t about that. It was about saving a life, maybe even two. She had to do whatever she could.

The trees cleared, and the river was visible again. She could see that the Tanuki had bitten into something.

“YEEEOOW!”

That scream wasn't Gummy. Gummy was safe, floating along next to the Tanuki. It seemed that the so called "legendary" creature had missed his lunge by a few inches. Instead, the Tanuki had bitten into something purple. And scaly. Something long enough that as it rose up from the water it was even taller than the trees.

"My tail! My lovely tail! Oh what misfortune has befallen me?" It had long mouth and pointed teeth like a dragon, but was thin and long like a snake. This would have been terrifying, were it not for the creature carrying on like a crybaby. It looked down at its tail, and squealed when it saw the Tanuki. "Oh, what a disgusting creature! Getitoffgetitoffgetitoff!" It shook its tail crazily, causing large splashes. It wasn't long before the Tanuki was shaken off, and was sent flying somewhere into the forest. The same happened to Gummy who, still clamped onto his egg, was absentmindedly launched to a place ahead of Apple Bloom.

The filly wasted no time in dashing forward with all of her speed. Through another patch of trees, weaving around more branches, avoiding more roots. She came to a clearing, a grassy field, just as Gummy was about to land. Without thinking, she performed a feat that would have impressed even Scootaloo. At full speed, she jumped, turned in midair, and caught both gator and egg safely in her hooves. Holding the precious cargo close to her chest, she landed on her back hard.

"Oof."

She lay there for a while breathing, waiting for her back to stop hurting, before she picked her head up to check on Gummy. The pet looked back, blankly as usual, and chomped on the egg, which was still intact. She took him off of her chest and set him down, then got up slowly.

"You sure are a troublesome rascal, you know that?" she said to the gator, who replied by blinking. "But I guess you're alright."

"He won't be alright for long."

Apple Bloom turned toward the voice. Standing there, dripping wet and looking very angry was the Tanuki. He walked slowly toward Apple Bloom like a tiger stalking its prey.

"Give me the little one." There were no traces of the good-spirited, odd Tanuki the filly had met earlier. He was breathing heavy, and his eyes were wild.

Apple Bloom stood in front of Gummy, shielding him from the Tanuki. "I can't do that. It's my responsibility to take care of him."

"I'm not playing! You want me to eat you as well?" he snarled.

"You-you wouldn't." Apple Bloom did her best to stand tall, even though her heart was beating like a drum.

"The Tanuki does as he pleases." He got down, preparing to pounce.

"I never heard nothing about Tanuki eating ponies." She didn't. Then again she never heard anything about Tanuki. But she stood fast, hoping her bluff would work.

"There's a first time for everything." he snarled. "Last chance, give me the little one and the egg!"

"I can't." She planted herself firmly on the ground. She would protect Gummy *and* the egg, even if it meant becoming Tanuki food.

"Then you will pay for your foolishness. And remember, you met your end by the teeth of the Tanuki!"

This was it. The Tanuki leaned into its rear legs. Apple Bloom closed her eyes. Just because she was brave enough to stand up to the Tanuki, that didn't mean that she was going to watch as he attacked her. But even though it was the end, there was a strange...peace. She felt that she had done the right thing, and she didn't even have Applejack around to tell her what that was. Applejack...Apple Bloom felt a tear go down her cheek as she thought of her sister. If only she could see her big sis one more time. If only she had a big pony to save her....

Nothing happened. Was it supposed to take this long? Apple Bloom slowly opened her eyes. Before her stood the Tanuki, but his expression had changed. His beady eyes had become wide with fear.

"What are you?" He gazed in fear at Apple Bloom...no, behind her. The filly noticed a shadow over her, and turned to see what cast it. Behind her was a spooky face, which seemed eternally stuck in a ghastly grin.

"Speak!" the Tanuki shouted. But the thing was silent. "T-The Tanuki is unafraid of you. Speak!"

"BEGONE!" Bellowed a voice from behind the face. The mouth didn't move, but the voice was commanding, and mysterious.

"YAA!" the Tanuki screamed and darted off, leaving Apple Bloom alone with the face. She stared into its empty eyes.

"What-what are you?" she asked.

"When times are rough,
And you are at your end.

Look behind you,
And find a friend." A hoof came and moved the face, revealing a familiar pony.

"Zecora!" The filly ran to the zebra, and embraced her. "What are you doing here? What is that?" She pointed with her hoof at the face.

"A mask, one believed to ward off danger." She held it up, letting Apple Bloom get a closer look. The scary face was only a carving, just another mask Zecora kept in her home. "I came because I heard a stranger."

"But, how did you know I was in trouble?" asked the filly as she looked back to check up on Gummy. He chewed on the egg, unaware of how close he had come to meeting his end.

"I happened to pass by,
Gathering herbs for stew.
That I happened upon here
Was lucky, for you." Zecora walked, and Apple Bloom picked up Gummy and followed. She wasn't even sure where they were going, but it was comforting to have an adult to follow.

"Thanks Zecora. I was in big trouble. I really did something stupid back there." They went back into the cover of the trees, Zecora with the mask on her back, and Apple Bloom with Gummy on hers. Zecora chuckled. "What?"

"To think for oneself
Is like a child ill behaved.
But to stand up for others,
Now that, is brave." Zecora kept her eyes forward, towards their destination.

"So I did the right thing?" Apple Bloom walked next to Zecora.

"Right, wrong.
That is not for me to say.
But someone was saved
At the end of this day." Above the trees, the sky was orange. The sun was going down.

"I don't get it." said the confused filly, going over the days events in her head. "I mean, I saved Gummy, but I took food from a wild animal. But that animal's food was another animal's baby. And all this wouldn't have happened if I was more responsible in the first place. So what does it mean?" She continued to look up at Zecora for answers, but none were given. They walked until it was almost entirely dark, and they stood at the foot of a familiar tree. Apple Bloom looked up. "The nest!"

Gummy had still made no progress on the egg, and appeared to have given up, being content to hold it in his mouth. Zecora looked at him, then up at the nest.

“If meaning is what you always seek,
Disappointed you will be.
What is right for you is right for you
And right for me, is for me.
But one thing is true, just one thing
If happiness is your goal
Be kind to others and listen well,
to every creature, tall dragon to tiny foal.” Zecora looked at Apple Bloom, and smiled. The filly often had trouble understanding the zebra’s rhymes. But somehow, she felt like she understood this time. “Now, young pony, I trust you know the way?”

“Yep, I can take it from here.” said the filly as she nodded. “Bye Zecora, and thanks!”

“Then I bid you a good night, and an even better day.” And with those words, Zecora disappeared into the trees. Apple Bloom looked back up at the nest. Looking down at her was the bird from earlier, the mother. The young pony sighed, and turned to the gator on her back.

“Alright, you. time to give it up.” Apple Bloom carefully bit the egg, and Gummy let go. Did he understand? Apple Bloom paused for a moment as the thought hit, then put the egg down carefully. “Here you go, ma’am, safe and sound.” The bird just stared. But Apple Bloom didn’t have time to wait for a reaction, she had another baby to bring home.

“Let’s git you home Gummy. If I know my gators, I’d say your hungry.” She left the forest. As she got to the edge, she could swear she heard flapping, and a “Caw!” behind her.

Gummy liked the yellow one now. She saved him, and his lunch, from the brown thing. Then she carried him. Then she made him give up his lunch. This confused Gummy, but something made him feel that he was supposed to do that. Besides, now he was home, which meant a very tasty dinner!

“Welcome home Gummy!” as soon as they entered, the pink one was in Gummy’s face. “Look what I brought home!”

Sitting on the table, was a giant sweet bread. Sweet bread was one of Gummy’s favorites, as the pink one had it at all of her “parties”. Basically, a party was when the pink one and others would move around and be loud. Gummy would drink the purple water and eat the sweet bread.

“Wow, what a cake!” exclaimed the yellow one. “Did you get that at the Confestival?”

“Sure did! It’s a surprise for Gummy’s one and a half year birthday party!” she screamed. “Surprise!” And then came all of the pink one’s friends. They talked loud at Gummy for a while, but then they left him alone. With the sweet bread! He chewed happily on his favorite treat, when he caught a glimpse of the yellow one. She was talking to an orange one and a white one, and they were looking excited. The yellow one looked happier than she had the whole day. Then, the pink one went to the yellow one.

“So, how was Gummy? Did you have fun?” she asked the yellow one.

“It was...exciting.” replied the yellow one.

“Exciting?” exclaimed the orange one, “We were bored all day!”

“After ya’ll left, me and Gummy got to know each other. He’s a cool little guy.” said the yellow one.

“I know right! He’s so fun, he’s like the best pet ever!” the pink one said in her usual fast way.

The yellow one looked at Gummy, smiled and said to the pink one: “I learned a lot from him. Yeah, he really is the best pet ever.” She blinked one eye at Gummy, and he stared back. Then, she started laughing. Gummy didn’t know why, but then the pink one joined her. These pony things sure were weird.

THE END