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“Throughout Equestria, Relics of the past lay forgotten and alone...

Never truly resting, awaiting recognition...”

The evening sun hung low in the sky, drenching the rolling hills of Ponyville's countryside in its light. The trees and grass all lay still and calm near the dirt path towards town. A small, cream colored shape peeked over the horizon, bouncing along merrily. Little Apple Bloom's pink bow bobbed up and down as she trotted home, humming a tune and thinking about today's activities. She and the other Cutie-Mark Crusaders had been taken to the park that day by Sweetie Belle's older sister Rarity, but now it was time for Apple Bloom to return home to Sweet Apple Acres.

The tiny earth pony slowed as she neared a fork in the road. An old looking sign-post was stuck in the ground. She stopped to look at both signs adorning it:

[Ponyville→]
[← Ever Free Forest 🦴]

Apple Bloom shrugged and turned in the direction of Ponyville. Before she could start trotting, the filly noticed another pony approaching from town. It was her friend, Twilight Sparkle. The purple unicorn wore a pair of saddle bags on her side and she smiled as she approached Apple Bloom standing there in the road.

"Good evening Apple Bloom. What's a little filly like you doing out here all alone?" Twilight asked the little earth pony.

"Hi Twilight," Apple Bloom squeaked happily, "Ah' was just on ma' way home. You wouldn't believe what happened at the park today. We were all hangin' out ya' see..."

"That's quite alright Apple Bloom, I was just-" Twilight tried to interrupt Apple Bloom's story, but she wasn't fast enough.

"...And so Sweetie Belle thought we got lost..."

"Uh huh."

"...So Scootaloo yells, 'Cutie-Mark Crusader Park Rangers!' ..."

"I'm sure that was very fun."

"...And she's all like, 'That's not what a bear sounds like Apple Bloom!' ..."

"Well Apple Bloom that all sounds very interesting, but I really need to get going," Twilight stated bluntly as she turned to leave. Apple Bloom continued her story even as she lost Twilight's attention.

"...Every. Last. One! Can you believe that!?" Apple Bloom finished with a chuckle before she realized Twilight had walked away. She quickly trotted after her. "Hey, where're ya' goin' Twilight?"

"I'm heading to Zecora's to deliver some books on natural herbs in the area. But I need to hurry. I really don't want to be out after dark." Twilight looked up as she trotted. The sun was just beginning to touch the tree tops as it sank lower in the sky.

“Ooooooh, can I come with you?” Apple Bloom asked excitedly, bounding with each step as she followed the unicorn. Twilight stopped at the request, turning to look at the filly.

“I’m sorry Apple Bloom, but the Ever Free Forest is really no place for such a little filly like you. It’s dangerous,” Twilight said sternly, Apple Bloom frowned as she heard this.

“But I’m not that small, and I can be super careful. Please please please please please?!” Apple Bloom hopped up and down in place as she bombarded her friend. Twilight shook her head despite the barrage.

“Sorry Apple Bloom but I really don’t think—” Before Twilight could finish, Apple Bloom plopped down on her haunches and inhaled deeply. Her eyes grew adorably wide as she let loose:

“PLLLLLLUUUUUUUUEEEEE—”

“...It’s just too...”

“—EEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAA—”

“...There’s just too many...”

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

“Alright, alright! Enough, you can come with me,” Twilight shouted, trying to halt the filly’s never-ending whine. Apple Bloom stopped immediately and hopped to her hooves, ready to go with a smile. “But, you have to promise to stay right by my side the whole time okay?”

“Ah’ promise! Thank you Twilight, let’s go,” Apple Bloom said cheerfully, staying right beside Twilight as the pair trotted toward the entrance to the Ever Free Forest. The trees loomed over the two ponies as they approached. Shadows danced with the evening glow from the sun shining through the canopy. Apple Bloom marveled at the sight as she followed Twilight through a gap in the tree line.

Everypony was always saying so many horrible things about the Ever Free forest, but Apple Bloom never let any of those stories scare her much. She had been here before, during the whole confusion between Zecora and her sister’s friends, and she never felt like the forest was menacing or scary. Rather, she always felt it was a beautiful mystery, like a treasure chest awaiting a young heroine to open it and plumb its secrets.

Twilight and Apple Bloom had traveled a ways before turning down a new branching path. Apple Bloom already knew the way to Zecora’s, but nonetheless let Twilight lead. The leaves of the trees rustled and swayed as a gust of wind blew by, stirring some of the creatures above. Apple Bloom couldn’t take it all in fast enough, her eyes and head darting from one side to the other as she tried to see every detail. Chirping birds, small critters skittering between bushes, exotic flowers and plants she’d never even seen before. The magic of discovery and adventure was everywhere in her little mind.

Apple Bloom had become so enamored by the Ever Free Forest that she hadn't noticed they had reached the final land mark before Zecora's home. They were swiftly approaching a large field of blue flowers known as "Poison-Joak." Just one touch of the luscious lilies would afflict the unfortunate pony in question with a cruel magical prank. Twilight warned Apple Bloom not to touch them and to stay on the path between. Apple Bloom rolled her eyes at the unnecessary reminder.

After passing through the Joak, Zecora's home was finally coming into view: a large, gnarled old tree that had been hollowed into a hut. It sat alone amidst a clearing in the trees. A small fire was blowing puffs of smoke out of her chimney. Tied up on many of the hut's branches were glass bottles of various shapes, sizes and colors. Some contained mysterious liquids and potions, but most were empty. Along with the bottles, numerous wooden masks pockmarked Zecora's yard. They were carved and painted in the fashion of Zecora's homeland. To someone not in-the-know the masks might have seemed menacing, but Apple Bloom knew they only meant to welcome travelers. Twilight knocked a hoof on the door while Apple Bloom stood behind her admiring one of the masks closest to the door step. She reached out a hoof to touch it only to be stopped by the sound of a turning door knob. The Zebra enchantress only cracked the door at first and then swung it wide after seeing her friend.

"Hello and welcome my pony friends, what brings you here so close to day's end?" Zecora greeted the pair in her usual rhyming.

"Hey there Zecora, I'm just here to drop off those books you wanted," Twilight explained as her horn began to glow. Out of her saddlebags levitated two books, one with a green cover and the other blue. The books floated inside the hut and placed themselves on a table as Zecora nodded and continued to smile.

"Kind ponies, thank you for delivering what told," Zecora spoke softly. Twilight opened her mouth to reply, but was cut off suddenly by an immediate shift in Zecora's demeanor. "But you should not stay for what will unfold." The zebra looked down at Apple Bloom, her smile turning into a grim stare. "Hurry back to Ponyville you must, the darkness this night you cannot trust."

Ker-SLAM!

Zecora had shut the door on them. Inside, they could hear locks being set.

"Okay, that was weird," Twilight said aloud, raising an eye brow. She shrugged off her curiosity and turned, heading back into the forest. Apple Bloom hadn't moved from her spot on the stairs yet. "Apple Bloom, let's go!"

"What the hay did that mean though? Ah ain't never seen Zecora act like that. Something bad might be happening," Apple Bloom said, unmoving.

"I don't know. Zecora probably just doesn't want us staying in the woods after dark. C'mon," Twilight urged the filly. Apple Bloom sighed and followed, staring at the ground in

thought. A cool, insistent breeze had picked up after the two had left Zecora's home. It blew gently though Apple Bloom's red mane and tail as the Poison Joak came into view. The little filly once again took to scanning the forest and taking in the sights.

Apple Bloom stopped suddenly, swearing she had just seen something amongst the Joak staring at her. She paused for a long time, Twilight turning around and tapping a hoof impatiently at the little pony.

"Apple Bloom, it's getting dark. What in Celestia's name are you waiting for?" Twilight grumbled.

"Ah' thought ah saw somepony, right out there." Apple Bloom pointed a hoof to the other side of the Joak fields.

"It was probably just a squirrel or bird. C'mon."

Twilight began trotting again, Apple Bloom following suit. She was forced to stop though as she collided with Twilight's rump, whinnying in frustration.

"Now why are *you* stopping?" Apple Bloom asked, but needed no response. There, in front of the two ponies, lay a massive fallen tree. It was far too big to climb over, and it was so long it completely blocked what little path there was. Twilight was dumbstruck.

"Now how in the name of Equestria did this get here? It wasn't here when we came this way before," Twilight wondered aloud. Apple Bloom glanced around the area nervously.

"You don't think it was...Ghosts?!" Apple Bloom asked, leaning down low and looking over the Joak fields with a shiver.

"Oh Apple Bloom, don't be silly. There's no such thing as ghosts," Twilight assured her, bracing herself as her horn began to glow a pale purple light. The fallen tree was enveloped in the glow, levitating into the air slowly. With a flick of her head Twilight sent the large tree hurtling off into the forest with a loud crash. She stopped for a moment, breathing heavily. "Ugh, that was a lot harder than it seemed. Okay Apple Bloom, let's keep—"

No sooner had Twilight begun to trot again was she forced to stop. Many more trees had been piled directly behind the first larger one, and all blocked the path again. Twilight stomped the ground with a hoof, muttering under her breath. She glanced behind herself to see Apple Bloom just sitting there, waiting.

"This is probably going to take a while. Don't wander off, okay Apple Bloom?" Twilight pleaded as she tried to compose herself for another run with the trees. Apple Bloom nodded and stood, then hopped as she was struck with an idea.

"Hey wait, can't ya just teleport us *around* the trees rather than takin' all this time to move 'em?" Apple Bloom asked.

"Well, yes, I could just teleport both of us out of here but then what will the next pony that needs to visit Zecora's do with all these trees blocking the path?" Twilight explained as she levitated a tree off the pile. Apple Bloom shrugged as Twilight continued, "I know it's getting late but I just can't in good conscience leave the path blocked like this. There's Joak all around

this part of the trail and I'd feel awful if somepony got pranked because I couldn't take the time to move a couple logs..." Twilight seemed to be working herself into quite a guilt trip as she braced to move another tree trunk.

"Okay, okay! It's fine Twilight, ah'm sorry ah didn't take all that into account," Apple Bloom apologized.

"...and what about Zecora? With the path blocked like this her only way to Ponyville is completely cut off."

"Now ah'd bet Zecora has more than just one way out of this 'ere forest."

"Maybe so but I'm not willing to take that chance. I'd feel awful if I didn't do something to help, and this shouldn't take too long. Granted I could go get help first but it'll be dark by time we get back and I don't know how many ponies I'd be able to convince to come here after hours..."

"Alright Twilight, alright...Ah'm just gonna go over here then and let you take care of them logs."

Apple Bloom removed herself from the conversation as Twilight continued to talk about all the ways the blocked path could cause trouble for travelers. She sighed with a light hearted chuckle. Twilight was always concerned with everypony's well being, it made Apple Bloom respect her all the more. Deciding she was perfectly content to mill about the path, Apple Bloom wandered back the way they came from Zecora's while looking at the flowers.

... ... ~Teeheehee~

Apple Bloom's ears twitched as something giggled at her. She turned, spotting a face peering at her over the other side of the Poison Joak. Apple Bloom said nothing, taking the chance to get a look at the grey pony. She had a beautiful mane of blonde hair with golden streaks and her eyes, something was strange about her eyes. They glowed in a gorgeous golden light. Apple Bloom took a step toward the pony, her hooves stopping just short of the Joak. The glow from those eyes was dragging Apple Bloom in, both in body and suddenly, soul. She felt her world begin to melt around her, with only the sight of those lucid orbs filling her entire vision. Darkness swirled and blended with the light, painting together a new world only Apple Bloom could see.

"Omph!"

A little grey filly coughed as she tripped, her chin smacking into the ground. She had been running so fast her gold and blonde mane fell in her eyes, making her trip over a rock. A voice called out to her through the bushes.

"Ready or not, here I come! I'm gonna find you!"

The grey filly was off again, giggling as she ducked and weaved through the brush. She skidded to a halt as her trail rounded into a massive field of blue lilies.

Forgetting her game, the little filly approached the flowers. She sniffed them, but was careful not to touch. They smelled sickly sweet, almost like a cupcake. Wandering down a ways she managed to spot a thin pathway leading into the field. A crunching of twigs and branches caused her to turn around.

"Ha Ha finally caught you, now you're it!" A different grey filly with a maroon colored mane had emerged from the bushes, laughing and prancing about in victory. It took her a moment to realize their game had ended. "Hey...what are you looking at?"

"Mitta, come over here, I found a little path. It looks like it's just big enough that we can walk through it."

"Ohh no." The red-haired filly waved both hooves disapprovingly, "You know the rules...We aren't supposed to go anywhere past the Joak. We'll get into serious trouble if we do."

"Why aren't we allowed though? What's out there?"

"The village leaders say the outside is filled with all sorts of mean ponies and nasty creatures. We are only able to live here because the flowers repel them. C'mon, let's go back home."

Vertigo and nausea overtook Apple Bloom as she was peeled away from the vision. Just as she was regaining her composure she saw the mystery pony duck her head behind the flowers, disappearing. Apple Bloom leaned forward, almost coming in contact with the Joak. She stamped her hooves in frustration, wanting desperately to pursue her quarry. It was only as she turned to go did she see that the entire Joak field had parted to reveal a path just big enough for Apple Bloom to walk through. Apple Bloom hesitated at first, her curiosity starting to get the better of her.

"Hey Twilight..." Apple Bloom called out to her companion.

“...Not now Apple Bloom,” Twilight yelled back as she started levitating another hefty tree away. Apple Bloom looked to the path again, then back to Twilight. With a deep breath, she stepped onto the path and crossed deeper into the woods.

The Ever Free Forest began to take on a much darker appearance once Apple Bloom had passed through the Joak. The light from the setting sun had been blocked out by the thick canopy of this new area, and Apple Bloom could barely see five feet in front of her. She looked around this new thicket for her mystery pony.

“Hello? Who are you?”

No answer...Apple Bloom looked back the way she came; shocked to see the path had been enveloped by thorn bushes and briars. The only other way out now was through a new path she spotted to the south. Apple Bloom steeled her nerves and pressed on, the new trail bending and curving through the forest. The deeper Apple Bloom traveled the darker the forest became. Soon all of the trees were shrouded in shadow and only her path was left with increasingly sparse illumination. She paused again, listening.

.... *Heh heh heh* ...

“Hello!?! Are you out there?”

Still no answer... Now Apple Bloom was getting worried. She contemplated turning back as she walked deeper, but something kept driving her forward. Apple Bloom’s entire world was plunged into darkness as her path wound through another thick patch of underbrush. She could hardly see her own front hooves as she stumbled over some outreaching roots. Something to her side stirred, rustling the bushes. In a panic she galloped forward, tripping over briars and branches. She yelped as she barreled through a particularly nasty patch of thorns, only to find herself barreling into a large clearing. Everything was dark save for one spot. There, right in front of her, was a light on the edge of the forest. It was bright, so bright it illuminated the area around it. Apple Bloom ran forward expecting an exit. She jumped through the light with glee.

The little earth pony did, in fact, exit the forest, but not into the rolling fields of Ponyville like she had expected. Instead, to her surprise, she had stumbled directly into a new town; one that was completely surrounded by the borders of the Ever Free forest. Apple Bloom stood there, dumbstruck by what she was seeing. The entire town was illuminated by large pink party lanterns strung all over. To her left were multiple garden plots filled with vegetables and wheat. On the right was a long line of tables overflowing with all sorts of confections and drinks. Right in front of her stood a stallion. He was colored grey with black mane and tail. Apple Bloom trotted up to him, immediately noticing his eager smile at her approach.

"Hah ha, well hello there little filly. Welcome to Sunny Town!" The stallion greeted her cheerfully; Apple Bloom forced a confused smile.

"Umm, thank you but, just who are you anyways?" Apple Bloom asked, thinking she should at least learn the pony's name before continuing.

"Ah, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Grey Hoof, party planner extraordinaire! You've arrived just in time actually, the party just started. Feel free to help yourself to anything and make yourself right at home," Grey Hoof replied.

"A party?"

"Why yes! Today we're celebrating the town's founding anniversary. You're more than welcome to join us too. Have some food and drink; enjoy yourself." Grey Hoof never broke his smile the entire conversation and it disturbed Apple Bloom slightly. She wished to ask more questions but Grey Hoof turned away, cutting her off. He trotted over to a stool by a pole to tie up more lanterns. Apple Bloom's eyes went wide as she got a look at his flanks; he had no cutie mark! Hundreds of questions started buzzing in Apple Bloom's mind as she took a step back.

"Why doesn't he have a cutie mark? Is that even possible? This guy looks almost as old as Big Macintosh, there's no way he could have gone all that time without finding his special talent, could he? And look, he's really good at parties...shouldn't he have a mark for that like Pinkie Pie?"

Apple Bloom shook her head, deciding to ask Grey Hoof more after she figured out just where in the woods she was. She turned to the tables, looking at the cupcakes as her stomach growled loudly. She hadn't had anything to eat since the park. Not being one to snub hospitality, Apple Bloom nabbed a cake from one of the plates and took a big bite.

"ACK!! Ttthhhhbbbbtth!"

Apple Bloom sputtered as she spit the pastry out. It may have looked decadent, but it tasted like mold and dust. She quickly gulped a glass of punch, trying to wash away the awful taste.

"Uagghhh!"

The punch was bitter and flat, like it had sat for years. She threw the cup to the ground in disgust. Out of the corner of her eye, Apple Bloom noticed another pony sitting on the ground near her table. She was looking off toward one of the houses with a longing expression; her orange mane shadowing her white face and giving her a mournful appearance. At first Apple Bloom thought she had upset her with her commotion, but was soon corrected.

"He hasn't said a word to me all night," the pony sighed, looking longingly to the side. Apple Bloom said nothing, what could she say? She didn't know who "He" was. Apple Bloom

followed the new pony's line of sight, spotting a home where a cream-colored colt with a blue mane was sitting on a stoop. *"Ah, that must be 'He',"* she thought.

"Why don't ya' go talk to him then?" Apple Bloom offered. The mare looked up at her.

"Oh no no no, it wouldn't be proper," The mare responded with a hint of distress in her voice, almost as if doing that would break some law. She reminded Apple Bloom of Rarity.

"What do you mean? Can't ya just go say 'hi' like a normal pony?"

The white mare shook her head, drooping back down. "You're too young to understand."

Apple Bloom stamped a hoof in annoyance. She hated being told that. If this one wasn't going to talk, maybe the stallion would. Curiosity forced Apple Bloom to peek at the white pony's flank nonchalantly before moving on

"No mark again...strange."

Apple Bloom approached the cream colored pony. He gazed up at her with the same longing look as the last one.

"Oh, hello," The stallion said with deflated demeanor.

"Hi, who are you, and what's wrong?" Apple Bloom got right to the point.

"My name is Roneo, and...ugh...see that mare over there?" He pointed a hoof toward the white pony from a moment ago. "Her name is Starlet, and I was planning to give her a gift tonight, but somehow I lost track of it! Now it's lost somewhere in the town and I won't be able to give it to her. It was so pretty too," Roneo trailed off, sighing and hanging his head. Apple Bloom rolled her eyes at the pathetic stallion.

"She really seems to want to talk to ya. Why don't you just go say 'hi'?"

"Oh no, I couldn't do that, not without my gift."

"But she just told me she wanted ya to talk to her. Ah'm sure she doesn't care about a crummy old gift."

"Please, don't toy with me. Starlet is the classiest mare in town; a plain pony like me doesn't stand a chance with her unless I bring a trump card. Please, leave me alone."

Apple Bloom wanted to press further, but the stallion wouldn't respond. With a huff she walked off deeper into town, leaving the love-sick and mark-less pony to wallow in his grief. Perhaps she'd come back later if she felt like it, but for now she wanted to see more of the town.

Apple Bloom passed by a few more groups of ponies, all of them enjoying their party. Something wasn't right though. Every single pony in this town appeared to have no cutie mark. Apple Bloom wanted desperately to know why. She spotted another stallion standing alone near the town's well. He was light brown with a tan colored mane. She galloped up to him. He wore a smile on his face similar to Grey Hoof's.

"Excuse me," Apple Bloom tried to ask nicely, "Why don't any of y'all have any cutie marks? This whole town is full of blank flanks!" The stallion chuckled to himself as he regarded the little pony.

"Cutie-whats-its? Heheh, I really don't know what you're talking about little one. My name is Gladstone by the way...Nice to meet you," Gladstone spoke with the same weirdly happy tone as Grey Hoof, it made Apple Bloom uncomfortable. It almost felt like this happiness was forced, as if the stallion was trying to hide his real emotions. Apple Bloom stared him down, stretching her little legs to try and seem tougher and bigger.

"Oh come on, you know what a cutie mark is! It's the mark everypony receives when they find out what makes 'em special. Don't none of ya' have 'em here?" Apple Bloom's prying was starting to get the better of Gladstone. Beads of sweat were forming on his brow as his eyes darted away from her for a moment.

"Aanope, can't say I've ever seen anypony here with a 'cutie mark'," The cheerfulness in Gladstone's voice cracked at this last statement. "Why does that even matter anyway? C'mon, have some fun! It's a party after all."

With that, Gladstone turned tail and galloped away, ending Apple Bloom's interrogation. She watched as he ran for the safety of a herd of ponies by a table. Before he could slip away completely Apple Bloom noticed something strange on his flanks. It wasn't a cutie mark though; it looked more like a nasty burn or gash. Apple Bloom's brow furrowed with a mix of frustration and contemplation. She moved on, new questions now needing answers as she spotted another lone pony. This one was colored green with dark green hair and was sitting by the edge of the forest. She looked earthy. Apple Bloom decided this time she'd be less direct as she trotted up for questions.

"Hello, Ah'm Apple Bloom, and ah' didn't know there was an entire town of ponies living in the middle of the Ever Free Forest." She forced a smile, trying her best to seem as innocent as she could. The green mare giggled and patted Apple Bloom on the head with a hoof.

"Well, you're not the first visitor to say that little one. My name's Three Leaf. We've got just about everything we need here in our town, so we rarely ever leave. Visitors are so nice when they manage to come by though, and they too rarely leave once they arrive. How are you enjoying it here?" Three Leaf seemed to be really nice, so Apple Bloom continued.

"Oh, you guys are all so nice, and the food was delicious," She lied, "but ah' was wondering...Ah' couldn't help but notice none of y'all have any cutie marks...why is that?"

"Cutie marks, what are those?" Three Leaf tilted her head, smiling quizzically. Apple Bloom sighed, her efforts wasted.

"Oh...never mind." Apple Bloom decided to drop the question, expecting to receive the same response as before. Instead she moved to a new one, "How about that feller," She pointed to Gladstone, "What happened to his flanks?" Three Leaf's happy demeanor held, but Apple Bloom noticed her eye twitch ever so slightly.

“Ooh...Gladstone? Well, you know, he’s very clumsy,” Three Leaf’s ditzzy air had faltered into an anxious stammer. Apple Bloom scowled at her as she stumbled on. “And...and...oh, yes, he was fixing the old well on the outer rim of the town. He’s probably the best repair stallion we have. But he slipped and cut himself on a jagged rock in the wall of the well. He bled quite a bit but thankfully somepony found him. He couldn’t walk for a month,” Three Leaf finished, her face returning to a goofy grin.

“He’s a good repair pony huh, then why hasn’t he gotten a cutie mark for that?” Apple Bloom didn’t miss a beat. Three Leaf seemed to shrink from the question as Apple Bloom gave her a penetrating glare. “An’ what about those visitors ya mentioned earlier, did they all arrive here without any marks? Ah’ highly doubt it.” Through the barrage of questions Three Leaf had been continually backing away from Apple Bloom, the little filly stepping forward each time to close the distance. Now Three Leaf had been pushed to the forest’s edge, her back pressed firmly against a trunk with all remaining air of silliness completely gone. The green mare’s eyes darted back and forth, taking a moment to look around. With a hefty sigh Three Leaf motioned Apple Bloom closer and spoke to her almost at a whisper.

“Look, you won’t like what might happen if you keep digging. The curse marks are evil, and no one in the town is allowed to discuss them. I could get in trouble for even mentioning them to you—“

“Oh, Three Leaf, would you mind giving me a hoof with these party lanterns please?”

Grey Hoof had appeared out of nowhere carrying some more pink lanterns on his back. His face held a smile his eyes didn’t share. Three Leaf immediately stood, backing away from Apple Bloom.

“Of course Grey Hoof, think nothing of it. I was just talking with our little visitor here, but we can always continue the conversation later,” Three Leaf mumbled weakly, following Grey Hoof away. Before they got out of sight Apple Bloom clearly saw Grey Hoof shooting daggers at Three Leaf. She hoped she hadn’t just gotten her into too much trouble. Sighing, Apple Bloom wandered over to the well in the middle of town. Hopping onto a rock near its base, Apple Bloom slumped onto the well’s edge in despair, having even more questions than she knew what to do with now.

What the hay were curse marks? Is that what this town thought a cutie mark was, a curse? Apple Bloom was sure that had to be the correlation. “Curse mark,” “cutie mark,” the two sounded far too similar. There was also no way this town could have been inhabited by only blank flanks; somepony in the town had to have gotten a cutie mark at some point, but what became of them? She began to wonder what the town might have done with ponies who found their marks. Seeing as they called them “curse marks,” she couldn’t imagine the reaction

was good. Maybe they sent them away; forced them to roam the Ever Free Forest forever and not let them come home?

As more and more questions continued to churn in Apple Bloom's little mind, her eyes wandered to the water of the well. Even at its great depth, the water sparkled with the light from the party. Glistening rays struck the well's walls from the pool below and danced for the little filly. It soothed her and her mind quieted. A stray beam of light made something red flash at Apple Bloom. It was close to the top, glinting again as Apple Bloom leaned down. She reached out a hoof, stretching out her foreleg as far as it could go without slipping. She just barely managed to snatch the small object, giving it a tug. It broke loose, and Apple Bloom went tumbling off her perch to the ground.

"...Huh, a ruby?" Apple Bloom marveled at her prize as she sat up. The small gemstone immediately began to sparkle and shine in the light. It felt rough and huge in Apple Bloom's little hooves. Had this just been growing in the side of the well? As Apple Bloom rubbed off some of the damp dirt on the stone, she felt a twinge course through her spine. Suddenly she felt dizzy, her vision beginning to spin as shadows and light enveloped her.

A grey pony with a blonde and gold mane sat in front of a small vanity. She brushed her hair, looking down at a little box. Putting down her comb she reached for the box, lifting its lid to reveal its contents. A couple of marbles, random rusty coins, a large metal bolt, and a tarnished bobbin...the box was full of junk.

Only to her, it wasn't junk. These were her treasures. All the things in this box she had found, hidden and stashed around town in the most unusual of places. Now, she had one more to add. She reached a hoof into her tail, tugging out a large red gem. The jewel sparkled in the candlelight as she smiled at it. Her friends always told her she had a knack for finding the most bizarre objects and noticing things no-pony else would have even bothered with. A knock came on the door; the mare quickly stuffed the gem in her box and closed it, turning.

"H-h-hello, can I come in?"

"Come on in, Roneo."

The cream colored stallion opened the door and stepped meekly in. The mare greeted him and he returned it with a jerky nod.

"So, what's going on?"

"Oh, um, well...I...I wanted to say thanks for the other day. You telling me to say 'hi' to Starlet...er...that is..." Roneo turned his gaze to the floor; the mare chuckled.

"So it went well? What happened?"

Roneo's nervous manner changed dramatically at the question.

*"Oh it was so nice. I said 'hi' and she said 'hi' back. We walked a little bit down the street and she mentioned she was going to the town anniversary party. I said I was thinking about going too, so she said she'd **love** to see me there. She said 'love,' do you think she likes me?"*

The mare had to laugh further at Roneo's sudden rush of words. "Well, maybe. You like her don't you?"

"Yes," Roneo spoke longingly, his eyes lovesick.

"Then all you gotta do is spend a little more time with her. If she likes you back, it should show." She paused, looking at her box. She smirked and popped the lid open, grabbing out the red stone she had just put in it. "And this will give you a little boost." Hopping off her chair, the mare walked over to Roneo and placed the gemstone in his hooves. Roneo looked at the gift, stunned.

"You're just going to give this to me, to give to Starlet?"

"Sure! It's just something I found laying around town. It's no big deal. Give it to her at the party, she'll never expect it."

Roneo's eyes lit up with joy. He thanked her and lavished her with praise as he exited. He took one final bow before leaving, renewed pep in his step as he prepared for his next encounter. She giggled again, sitting back down at her mirror and taking up her brush.

"Good at finding treasures, now good at finding friendships..."

Apple Bloom was staring up into the night sky over Sunny Town. That vision had taken a lot longer than the last one and she wasn't sure how long she had been out of it. No pony seemed to care that the little filly had just been lying there on her back in the grass. As she sat

up, Apple Bloom lifted the ruby up again turning it over. Three Leaf had warned her to stop meddling, but now she had a clear path to take. So what was she going to do? Apple Bloom imagined how her friends Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo would react if they had been in her place. In her mind she heard them scream out,

“Cutie Mark Crusader Detectives! Yay!”

Apple Bloom smiled to herself, that’s just what she’d do! She’d dig deeper and unravel this mystery. Surely somepony in this town would give her a straight answer eventually, and how much trouble would she honestly get into?

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“Oh my goodness, you found it! You found my gem stone!” Roneo leapt to his hooves as he spotted the ruby in Apple Bloom’s mouth. She placed it by his outstretched hooves.

“Yea, here, ya can have it back.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Roneo praised Apple Bloom, grabbed the gemstone in his mouth and galloped over to Starlet immediately. The white mare looked overjoyed just to be in the stallion’s presence. Apple Bloom clearly heard her shout of joy even from this distance as Roneo presented his gift to her. The pair crossed their necks against one another, embracing. Apple Bloom smiled at the two knowingly. Now that she had successfully delivered the lost gift, she wondered what she should do next. Apple Bloom was just about to leave when a sound caught her attention. A weak sobbing noise was coming from inside the house Roneo had been sitting in front of. Apple Bloom looked around to make sure nopony was watching and slipped inside without a second thought.

The door clicked shut as Apple Bloom stepped into her new surroundings. This new place, unlike the party outside, was dimly lit and was very unkempt. Boxes of various sizes were stacked up around the walls, sheets were draped over most of the furnishings and the whole house lay still. Apple Bloom took a few more steps inside, straining to hear anything.

“Hello?” She called out to the empty house.

...      *sniff*      ...      *uuhhh mmmhhh*      ...      ...      *sniff*      ...

In the utter silence of the house Apple Bloom could clearly hear the weak whimpering coming from above. Spotting some stairs near the back wall she made her way up to the next floor. As Apple Bloom peeked over the stairs she found the upper floor held only one long hallway. At the end sat a single door, a shadow moved behind the threshold. Apple Bloom trotted down the hall, leaving small hoof prints in the dust on the floor. Grime covered picture

frames and paintings were the only décor of the hallway as Apple Bloom reached the end. She wasn't scared but her heart rate was rising, the spirit of discovery driving her forward. She knocked on the door, the shadow behind it suddenly freezing up at the sound. She listened and waited, and waited, and waited. No response from the other side. Apple Bloom knocked again, and was startled by the sudden yell that came from the other side.

"GO AWAY!"

Apple Bloom recovered from her shock and faced the door again. "No! Ah' ain't leavin' till you talk to me," Apple Bloom yelled back.

"I don't have anything to say to monsters like you! Leave me alone, you're all cursed and evil ponies!"

"AH HA! I knew somethin' bad must have happened here," Apple Bloom announced this more to herself rather than the stranger behind the door. She beamed in triumph as all her snooping was validated. The thing behind the door had fallen deathly quiet, but judging by its shadow it had pressed itself against the door.

"You don't sound like anypony from outside." The voice sounded much calmer than before.

"That's cause ah ain't," Apple Bloom called back.

The door swung open lightning fast as a pair of grey hooves snatched Apple Bloom up. Before she could even comprehend what happened, Apple Bloom was dragged inside the room and the door shut behind her. The sudden and unexpected shift scared the little filly and she opened her mouth to scream. She was swiftly silenced by the same hoof that had pulled her in. Through muffled protest Apple Bloom beheld her captor: A grey mare with a deep maroon mane. Her eyes held a look of both surprise and worry, but were swollen and sagged. It made her look utterly exhausted. Though Apple Bloom had never met this pony before, she couldn't shake a sense of familiarity about her. The room they were in was a bedroom holding only a twin bed and a bench before a vanity. The mare leaned in close and looked Apple Bloom square in the eyes. The two sat there for what seemed like an eternity before the grey pony broke the silence.

"What do you think you're doing here?" The grey mare's eyes narrowed as she released Apple Bloom from her grip.

"Ah, um...wait, what?" The question threw Apple Bloom's train of thought leaving her to babble an incoherent response. The grey mare clutched Apple Bloom by her shoulders.

"What...Are...You...Doing here?" her voice was growing stern and angry.

"Ah'm lookin' fer answers about this town. Ah' came here followin' somepony out there in the woods. Who are you anyway?" Apple Bloom barked out her answers, throwing questions right back at the mare. This caused her to release again, shock now the only emotion on her face.



"You...followed somepony?" The mare trailed off, a strange look on her face. She sat there in silence for a moment, her eyes scanning Apple Bloom up and down then darting to the window and back. Apple Bloom was watching her, trying to figure out where she knew this pony from. The mare spoke again cautiously, "Who exactly did you follow here?"

"Some pony with a golden blonde mane. She had a grey coat like yours but her eyes were all golden and glowey too," Apple Bloom blurted out the answer, not thinking about it.

"So, she's the one who led you here." The mare stood up and walked toward the window. She didn't speak further, simply staring outside. Apple Bloom wasn't sure how to react and was still trying to nail down just who this pony was. She starting thinking about the memories, recalling the past she'd already glimpsed. The mare spoke again to her, this time with a quiver in her voice "S-so, do you know who I am?" Apple Bloom thought back to the first encounter in the Joak fields, and then it hit her.

"Yer Mitta aren't ya?"

The mare crumpled at this, her legs quivering as her shoulders shrank forward. In one fluid motion Mitta collapsed to the floor in a torrent of sobs. This took Apple Bloom completely by surprise as she ran forward to Mitta's side.

"Oh ma'h gosh, please stop cryin'! Ah' didn't mean ta' upset you," Apple Bloom pleaded with Mitta through her blubbering, rushing to her side.

"It's not fair! It's just not fair," Mitta managed to speak through her sobs.

"What ain't fair?"

"All of this! The same thing happening again and again and again, it never ends!"

Apple Bloom had no idea what to do. Mitta continued to lie there and cry, each sob making Apple Bloom's heart ache for her more and more. With no other options available Apple Bloom did the only thing she could think of. She wrapped her fore-legs around Mitta's neck and hugged her. Mitta took a deep breath, surprised at the sudden embrace. Apple Bloom felt Mitta try to push her off but she couldn't muster the strength. It was strange, though Mitta looked like any normal pony to Apple Bloom her coat and skin felt icy cold and oddly soft. Finally Mitta's sobs slowed to a weak whimper as Apple Bloom released her.

"Why," Mitta asked through her tears, "Why would you even come here?"

"Ah' don't know, I guess it was just curiosity," Apple Bloom admitted. Mitta's eyes had finally dried and she stared at Apple Bloom. She just sat there and stared, like she was looking into her very soul. "What the hay happened to this place? Why are you locked up in here, an' why did you start cryin' just then?" Apple Bloom never broke eye contact with Mitta as she asked the questions. Mitta remained quiet, a sliver of a tear dripping from her eye again.

"Please...please don't make me. It's too hard to tell, this whole ordeal is my burden just as much as those monsters outside." Mitta's voice was weak.

"Please Mitta, ya can tell me. I want to know."

"No, you shouldn't, I can't..."

"You don't have to be alone in all this. Ah' know others outside these woods, ah' can bring 'em here and we can help ya," Apple Bloom tried to offer her comfort.

"NO!" Mitta practically leapt onto the little filly, pressing her face against Apple Bloom's in utter terror. "Whatever you do, don't lead anypony else here. They'll be lost to this town just as we are!" Mitta suddenly shrunk back from her own warning, acting like she had just said something taboo. Apple Bloom countered by getting right back in her face.

"Y'all keep sayin' stuff like *monsters* an' *curses* an' *losing ponies to the town*. What does all that mean? Why can't ah' have an explanation?"

Mitta regarded the little filly and took a moment to think. To Apple Bloom it looked like the very thought of explaining things hurt her. With a heavy sigh Mitta took a seat once more.

"First, before I tell you what I can, why did she bring you here?" Mitta asked.

"Do ya' mean the other pony with the blonde mane?"

"Yes. Why you? Why now? She knows bringing anypony here puts them at risk, so why?"

"I dunno," Apple Bloom shrugged; if this was some kind of trick question she wasn't doing a good job figuring it out. Mitta took another deep breath.

"This whole problem started with her, on that horrible night," Mitta began to explain.

"What night?"

"This night, the night of the town's founding anniversary. This town's been here much longer than you could imagine, and it's all from the curse."

"Ok, so what's that?" Apple Bloom's question made Mitta stop talking. She took a deep breath and looked to be fighting back a few tears. Apple Bloom tried to keep her going, "Did something bad happen?"

"Yes, something bad. Something very very bad and the forest didn't like it." Mitta stopped again and closed her eyes, her face drooping.

"Hold yer horses, the *forest* didn't like it? Ah' don't get it." Apple Bloom looked puzzled.

"It's always been an old legend that the Ever Free Forest exists as it does because it has its own special kind of magic, right? Even when our town was founded near its edge we couldn't have possibly known how far its influence stretched."

"Whoa, are you telling me this town wasn't originally in Ever Free?" Apple Bloom asked excitedly. Mitta nodded.

"We weren't the only town either. We had a sister settlement about a few day's trot to the north as well."

"Is that town still there too? Did they believe in curse marks?" Mitta took another deep breath as Apple Bloom asked more questions.

"Curse marks...Yes, that's where the whole rumor started. The ponies of this town were scared, something awful happened to that neighboring town. It all had to do with the curse marks."

"But they ain't curses, they ain't even called curse marks, they're *cutie marks*," Apple Bloom protested.

"Cutie marks? Hmm, I've never heard them called that before, but I'd be inclined to believe it. Those marks seemed no more a curse than the bow on your head to me. But you see, our town used to trade and interact quite a bit with our sister village, and then one day that all just stopped. No pony came or went from there anymore, and the villagers here started getting worried. The council sent a small group to investigate, but all they found were ruins. The scouts asked outside travelers if they had heard what happened, and each time they got nearly the same story.

It always starts with somepony in town getting a mark on their flanks. They started performing amazing feats and skills related to the picture. Then they got another, and another and another. Each mark made them do more crazy and death-defying feats but caused great damage to the town and its residents. Worse of all, the marks started spreading to other ponies and soon everyone was covered head to hoof in the terrible things. As the story goes, they worked and performed themselves all to death, completely destroying the town in the process." Mitta halted her explanation, rubbing her eyes again with a hoof. Apple Bloom simply sat there wide-eyed at the story.

"Our council members were horrified by the tales, so they made sure everyone in town knew about the curse marks. They made everypony fear them greatly, made sure no pony would end up with a mark on them, lest they be punished."

"But so, what happened when somepony did get a mark?"

"That really doesn't matter," Mitta dodged Apple Bloom's question, staring at the floor somberly. "Just, because of what happened and because of our digressions, because of our stupidity and fear...we angered the magics of nature itself. The forest came alive with rage and destructive forces, and her fate that night was the flame that sparked it all."

"So then what kind of curse do y'all have now?" Apple Bloom was having trouble following all this at once. The question made Mitta raise her head and open her eyes, this time pointing Apple Bloom toward the window as she got to her own hooves.

"Surely you can take some guesses little one. You've been amongst the...*others* out there, the ones who brought this all on us. Can't you see the patterns?" Mitta waited as Apple Bloom looked outside. She saw all the party ponies eating and drinking and having fun. Starlet and Roneo were nuzzling near the well and she also spotted Grey Hoof dancing near an old record player. As far as she could tell nothing looked to out of the ordinary.

"Ah'm sorry but, what am I lookin' fer exactly?" Apple Bloom asked for a hint.

"Time," Mitta raised her voice in frustration, "Time is non-existent in this town. This party has been going on for hours right? Ponies have been eating and drinking all night right, so how come the tables are still as they were when you arrived? All the candles on the cakes haven't lost a drop of wax. You surely have talked with some of them haven't you?"

"Well yeah," Apple Bloom responded.

"And what did you think about them?" Mitta pried.

"Well, most of their answers felt kind of rehearsed. Like they knew what ah' was gonna ask before ah' asked it."

"Almost like they're empty inside?"

"Yeah, kind of like that!"

"That's because they *are*! Those ponies out there, they've all had their souls stolen, taken by the curse of the Ever Free Forest. This party never ends because this curse has snatched the life of this town. We are all cursed into everlasting limbo here, reliving our last night again and again and again. Your hours pass by to us like seconds, whole years merely days; a never ending torture."

"But how can everything in the town look so normal then? If y'all have been here for so long shouldn't everthin' be crumbling and rotten? And if this is all true, how do you know about all this?" Mitta froze up at Apple Bloom's question, her face looking scared. She bit her lower lip and turned her gaze toward the door.

"There's something else at work that keeps this town untouched by time little one, an evil working in the darkness. I simply can't...tell you," Mitta choked up on her words near the end, almost as if trying to explain further would hurt her.

"Wait, you still haven't told me why you're different from them," Apple Bloom pried further. Mitta looked like she turned paler than she already was.

"I...I...I really don't know." Tears began to well in Mitta's eyes as she talked, "I don't know why I still have my memory. For some reason the curse didn't take my mind like it did the others. Maybe it's my own personal hell, my punishment for failing to protect her." Mitta looked like she was about to start sobbing again, but Apple Bloom kept pressing.

"Please, can't ya tell me more?"

"No, I can't. I simply can't. Please, for the sake of your friends and family, just *leave*." Mitta stood and pushed Apple Bloom toward the door, tears beginning to fall from her eyes.

"HEY! Wait a minute, Ah'm not done here ah' still got more questions," Apple Bloom protested as she was pushed out into the hallway.

"No little filly, no more questions. You don't want to know the truth lurking behind this town's façade. Just leave. Run home, never look back, and leave us to our well deserved fates." With that, Mitta slammed the door shut in Apple Bloom's face. Apple Bloom could hear a loud slump behind the door as Mitta's sobs began again. She angrily stopped a hoof on the floor in protest sending a cloud of dust floating into the air.

"*Achoaguh caught augh!*" Apple Bloom coughed and wheezed for air as she stepped out of the dust cloud. She stopped near an old photo frame just as her nose began to tingle.

"ACHOOO!"

In one massive sneeze Apple Bloom blew every bit of dust clean off the frame. Sniffing and wiping her nose with her hoof she looked up at the picture she'd revealed. It was a photograph of two fillies, maybe only a few years older than Apple Bloom herself. Both were grey, but each had a different mane color, one red and one golden blonde. Apple Bloom immediately recognized the pair; it was Mitta and her mystery pony friend. They looked so happy in the picture, clearly they had been best friends. Apple Bloom stood on tippy-hooves to try and get a better look at the photo. Without warning the blonde mare's eyes suddenly lit up with light, sending Apple Bloom falling to the floor.

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*"Come quick, something happened to Gladstone!"*

*The familiar grey pony with blonde mane galloped down the stairs, almost tripping in her haste as she skidded to a halt by the open door. Mitta was standing there, motioning for her to look outside. Gladstone was being led away through the town square in shackles. The grey mare looked like she wanted to run out to meet him, but Mitta held her back.*

*"No! You can't interfere; they'll try you just like him if you do."*

*"What are they doing to him though? What has he done?"*

*"I don't know all the details, but somepony told me he was in the clinic and that the nurse went to dress his wounds and then there was a loud scream."*

*The filly grabbed Mitta on the shoulder, pointing her other hoof at Gladstone's tail end.*

*"Look at his flank! What is that?"*

*"Oh no, I think I heard about these from somepony once. The elders call them 'curse marks.' Gladstone, he must have gotten cursed!"*

*The grey pony frowned, taking another good look at Gladstone before he was out of sight.*

*"I dunno...I think it looks kinda cute on him."*

*"What? You can't be serious. Who cares what it looks like, It's a curse!"*

*"I'm just saying, I don't think I buy it. Why would something that looks so innocent be cursed? I'm going to go find out what is going on here."*

*"No! You can't do that! If they catch you I'm not going to stop them."*

*"Then that's your decision. But I'm still going regardless. I have to find out."*

*With that the mare shrugged off her friend and trotted out into the street. Many ponies littered the path, all trying to get a glimpse of what was going on. The grey mare used this to her advantage and weaved back and forth through the crowd. She felt it necessary to be discrete; the ponies pulling Gladstone might not like having some pony following them. A nearby colt bumped into her, making her stumble, her golden mane falling into her eyes.*

*"Hey, watch where you're going!"*

*No response, no apology, her mind was focused on more important things. All around her she heard the rising voices of on-lookers as the procession pushed through town.*

*"They say it all happened at the old well last night..."*

*"...I heard it happened after he went to the clinic."*

*"What's wrong with that pony mommy?"*

*"Don't look he's cursed, you'll be cursed too!"*

*The mare snorted as she trotted by the last gossip, she didn't believe in any of these rumors or claims. The crowds began to thin as Gladstone was led to the cabin near the edge of town. The captors and prisoner entered and locked the door, leaving the grey pony outside in the dark of the night. A moment of doubt passed her as she contemplated spying on them, but something in her gut pressed her on. The mare snuck behind the house and climbed up onto a box to peer through the window.*

*The mare saw many ponies standing inside the cabin. She tried to listen against the glass but they spoke in hushed voices. Gladstone was still chained near the fire while six others stared at him in the shadows. They talked amongst themselves then asked something to Gladstone. He seemed distressed and confused.*

*A moment later another grey pony, a colt, struck Gladstone across the face with his hoof. He was yelling something but the ruckus garbled it. She strained to see what was happening inside, the burning fire the only light source in the whole house.*

*A drop of light rose from the fireplace, bouncing along in the air. She thought she saw metal in the grey colt's mouth, deducing he was holding a fire-poker.*

***"AHHhhhhhhhhhh!!!"***

*Gladstone wailed in pain as the hot poker pressed against his flank. The mare gasped as smoke rose off the charred flesh of the poor colt's flanks. Gladstone buckled to the floor from the pain. The mare shrank away from the mirror, horrified at this gruesome display. Her thoughts raced: what was going on inside, what exactly had she stumbled into? She needed to warn ponies, needed to tell others what was going on. Suddenly a flash of light shone bright behind her, startling her and sending her tumbling to the ground with a thud. Through blurred vision she saw somepony standing over her and he was shouting something.*

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Apple Bloom's head was spinning, her vision slowly returning as she climbed to her hooves. As the little filly regained consciousness she was surprised to find herself standing outside. Her head hurt and there was a dry taste in her mouth, had she been running? Up till now she hadn't budged while having these memories, this time though she seemed to have traveled quite a bit while unconscious. Cautiously she felt her chest and head with her front hoof; that last memory felt so vivid she could have sworn she had taken the blonde pony's place. She looked around her new surroundings, familiarity taking hold of her as she realized she was where her recent recall had taken her. Some of the scenery had changed, but the general area looked all too familiar. In front of her sat a dirt path leading through a line of trees. The opening was shrouded in darkness. She looked back to the thicker parts of town, the party still raged behind her. Yet, this part of the town she now stood in lay oddly still. Apple Bloom knew her chase was nearing its end. The little filly puffed out her chest, steeled her nerves, and stepped into the dark woods once more.

The shadows of the trees engulfed Apple Bloom as she followed the path into the woods. The glow from the town's lanterns illuminated the exit she had taken, but the rest of the thicket was dark. Only sparse illumination from the moon above managed to pierce the canopy in places. Apple Bloom trotted forward carefully, trying not to lose the path in front of her. Soon the glow from the town had vanished in the distance and the filly's whole world became shadows. Suddenly, a flicker of golden light zipped between some trees in the distance. Apple Bloom stopped dead, scanning the trees and listening. In the far off distance she could just barely hear soft laughter.

...        ...        *Heheh... C'mon slow poke...*

The golden light shot past Apple Bloom, flying deeper into the woods. The little filly galloped after it, swerving around corners and jumping over roots in her way. She kept seeing glimpses of her culprit, but couldn't seem to catch up.

*Keep going ... .. You're almost there!*

It almost sounded like a taunt. This drove Apple Bloom to even greater speeds. She rounded another line of trees, skidding to a halt as her path ended. In front of her sat a large cabin nestled between the trees. All signs of the ghost seemed to have vanished as Apple Bloom crept up to the house. It looked like it was abandoned, but as she approached Apple Bloom detected a faint light coming from within. The windows were shuttered and Apple Bloom couldn't see through them. She tried the door...locked. How was she supposed to get inside? She wandered around the house and discovered a crumbled well. In its prime, this well might have resembled the same one within the town. Apple Bloom saw some flecks of red on a particularly jagged stone on one side of the crumbled structure. She reached out and rubbed it with her hoof, a sense of familiarity washing over her.

...        ...        *Ktchicck!*

Apple Bloom's ears twitched as a loud clicking noise came from around the corner. Abandoning the well, Apple bloom galloped back around to the front door. A faint glow faded off the door knob as the filly approached. She jiggled the knob with both hooves, discovering the door was unlocked now. An eerie creaking noise came from the hinges as the door was pushed open. Apple Bloom didn't let that deter her; she boldly marched inside the house.

Empty. The entire house was empty. No pony was home, not even ghost ponies. The old floorboards groaned under Apple Bloom's weight, the entire place was coated with layers upon layers of dust. The only remarkable thing to speak of was at the back of the room; a fireplace, fully lit and crackling. Apple Bloom sighed and coughed as she accidentally inhaled some dust. *After all this time...a dead-end, really?* She walked over to the fire place and sat in front of it, thinking to herself.

*"Nothing. All this for nothing. Ah' thought for sure ah' was gonna find the answer in here. But nothing...nothing but this fire..."*

Apple Bloom sat upright as her eyes fell upon the fire. The logs inside looked like they had been sitting there a long time, longer than they had any right to be. Underneath, wedged within the hearth, was something white. Apple Bloom leaned in closer, the heat of the flames making her brow sweat. There were a lot of these white things, and they looked like they made



some kind of shape. Apple Bloom stared at them, realization slowly creeping over her. The whole fireplace was filled with bones! Her small heart quickened, the beating amplified by the stillness of the house as she was lost to the darkness again.

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*Apple Bloom's eyes slid open. An orange glow flickered to her right as she looked around. She felt her gaze slip to her hooves. The soft grey of her coat was marred by the ugly brown rope that hog-tied her. She tried to speak, but her voice was muffled by a rag tied to her mouth. Her vision went wild, searching for some kind of help as strands of her blonde mane fell into her eyes. Through her bangs she could spot shadowed figures standing across the room. They were all looking at her.*

*"This can't be happening. First Gladstone, now this one...It's only a matter of time before the whole town ends up like these two. We need to find a way to stop these marks from spreading."*

*"Well it seems these marks can't simply be burned off. Our watch who spotted her said this mark appeared on her just moments ago."*

*"It's a curse after all, remember our scout's stories? Maybe it sensed our intentions to destroy it and jumped from Gladstone to her. If this curse can multiply it could jeopardize the whole town. It could even infect one of us if we don't stop it soon."*

*She saw them all shiver at this notion. One of them walked over to a table. Panic stricken she wiggled her hooves again, trying desperately to free her knots. Her mind raced with fear.*

*"Then it seems we don't have any more options. Gentlecolts, we'll have to stop it right here, right now."*

*"And how do you expect to do that Grey Hoof? We don't have any unicorns in our town to remove the magic."*

*"I expect that we shall just have to remove it directly from the source then..."*

*She watched as the stallion grabbed hold of something in his teeth.*

*"Grey Hoof, you don't honestly intend to—"*

*“—can you think of any other way? Because I can’t, and we’re running out of time!”*

*She watched as the other ponies regarded their options, all nodding in unison after a time.*

*“Make it quick.”*

*A flash of silver light caught her eyes as Grey Hoof took a step closer. She tried to plead with them, but could only manage muffled screams. Tears streamed down her face as the object drew close. Her heart raced, panic gripping her at what was coming. She closed her eyes, whimpering and praying with all her soul.*

*It was quick, but the pain that accompanied was unimaginable. Her vision was fading as she felt sticky liquid pouring out of her. She managed a gurgled scream, but it served no purpose, it was already too late. She could feel her lungs pull in one last breath, trying in vain to hang on.*

*“...Please, forgive these dark acts we’ve done...”*

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*“NOOOOOoooooooo!”*

Apple Bloom screamed and clambering to her hooves as the memory wrenched itself from her. Frantically her fore-hooves went right for her neck, expecting a giant hole. Her breathing was labored and deep and her little heart raced faster than it ever had before. She tried to look away from the bones, but her eyes refused to move. All she could see was the red of the fire, the burning lies and the poor pony that’d been murdered in this edifice. Her little game of detective had taken a hideous turn, and Apple Bloom wanted desperately to stop playing. She ran, bursting out into the woods and galloping toward town. She had to tell somepony; even if they ignored her she’d find somepony, anypony who would listen even a bit. Surely somepony would listen.

Apple Bloom slowed as she rounded the curve in the path that led back to town. The glow from the lanterns was extinguished, leaving only more darkness ahead. How did they manage to put out all those lights so quickly? It didn’t bode well. Apple Bloom hesitated. Before her was a pitch black unknown, but behind her was a mausoleum and a dead end. She had nowhere else to go but back into town.

The thick stench of blight overwhelmed Apple Bloom's senses as she passed through the trees into Sunny Town. The name now seemed a horrible choice, every single building and structure looked collapsed and decaying. The soft grass had been replaced with hard dirt and sticky mud, what was left of the party decorations looked ancient and riddled with rot. Apple Bloom stood perfectly still; everything around her was quiet.

She slowly trotted forward, weaving her way through the dilapidated town and avoiding the mud patches. Apple Bloom peered into one of the collapsed homes as she passed it; nothing but rubble. Then, a frightening voice growled out and shattered the silence.

*"There was no other way. She would have infected the whole town, we couldn't have that."*

Apple Bloom looked all around from where she was standing, but nopony was there. Where did that voice come from? She continued forward, fear beginning to rise inside her. She rounded the bend deeper into town when another noise reached her. It sounded like roots tearing. She turned in the direction it was coming from, realizing it was over by where Three Leaf originally sat. Apple Bloom approached the noise, the sound getting louder and mixing with the scrape of tilling earth. She stopped dead as a grime-covered hoof erupted from the ground, pulling with it a macabre shamble of bones, sinew and rot. Apple Bloom wanted to scream, but the sight kept her rooted in place, silent.

The figure took the shape of a pony, only it wasn't. It shambled forward with a lurching motion, stopping a few feet from the filly. The creature looked down toward Apple Bloom, staring at her with empty eye sockets. A red light began to rise in the monster's vacant skull as it opened its mouth.

*"The curse mark, it befell her this very night,"* the zombie spoke with an unnatural echo in its voice. Apple Bloom took a step closer, looking at its features. The thing still had a small amount of its mane left; it was a dark green color.

"Th-th-th...Three Leaf?" Apple Bloom managed to squeak out. What remained of the zombie pony's jaw wobbled, forming a hellish sneer. The empty glowing sockets drilled into Apple Bloom.

*"That's right..."*

"What happened here!?" Apple Bloom yelped, unsure if it was wise to chat with a zombie. Three Leaf stood silent for what seemed like an eternity before answering.

*"She had the mark! ... She had to go!"*

"You ponies killed an innocent mare, just because she earned her cutie mark! How could you?" Apple Bloom yelled at the zombie pony, trying to seem brave. In truth, she was scared out of her wits. Another voice broke the silence from behind her.

*"Please stay with us. We'll never let the same happen to you..."*

Apple Bloom twirled to face this new voice. Another zombie pony was standing directly behind her. This one was taller than the Three Leaf zombie and its skull was more square than rounded. Time did not age this one well, there was nearly no flesh left on it at all. Apple Bloom squealed, stepping back. How did this one sneak up so quietly? Her rump bumped into Three Leaf, making a sickening squishing noise as rotting flesh oozed onto her back. Apple Bloom shivered in fear and disgust. She began to feel woozy, like something was draining all the energy right out of her. Her whole world began to spin around her as more and more energy left her body. Through her blurred vision Apple Bloom watched the other zombie pony lean in close. It spoke in a gnarled voice, its eye holes flickering like flames.

*"Don't worry, you'll never become like her. We'll protect you...Forever!"*

The larger zombie pony lunged forward, trying to snatch Apple Bloom between its forelegs. The sudden movement snapped Apple Bloom from her stupor. She screamed and jumped away last-minute, barely managing to slip through its grasp before bursting into full gallop. She ran deeper into town, hoping to escape the pair. Both zombie ponies began to stumble after her, unable to match her speed. They opened their grisly mouths and let out a sickening wail.

Apple Bloom had managed to get to the town's center before hearing the gruesome moan. After it faded, another zombie pony began to uproot itself near the town well. Its skull turned toward Apple Bloom the second it was free of its earthy prison. Apple Bloom ran past it, ducking under a slow sweeping strike as she passed. She stopped short at a massive wall of rocks that had been piled between her and the pathway out. It stretched the entire length of the town square and was far too high to climb over. The zombie pony was slowly walking toward her, eyes alight with rage. She nervously paced back and forth; how was she going to get over this?!

A golden light circled one of the rocks in the wall, catching Apple Bloom's attention only for a moment before quickly vanishing. She ran over to the rock, trusting the phenomena and nudging it with a hoof. It was loose! Apple Bloom shoved her shoulder against the rock, pushing it with all the strength her little body could muster. The zombie pony was getting closer.

*"We'll protect you...Forever..."*

"Ah' don't want yer protection!" Apple Bloom protested; the zombie didn't care. There were only precious feet between her and it now, the rock was nearly out.

"AAEeeeeeyAAA!" Apple Bloom gave the stone one last shove, finally dislodging it. She knelt down and wiggled her way through the hole just as the zombie pony fell in a clattering of bones where she once stood. She breathed heavily; suddenly being small was having its advantages. She barely had time to catch her breath as two more boney hooves erupted right next to her, clutching at her as she galloped away.

She had made it, the end of the town. The large table that once held the food for the party had been overturned, its contents molded and decaying in the soil. The fields that had once been so full of life were now blighted and bare. Apple Bloom shook her head; this was no time to be reminiscing. She galloped forward, the gap into the Ever Free Forest growing wider with each step.

*"Please, don't leave... All we want is friendship."*

Apple Bloom skidded to a halt. This new voice sounded like it was in pain. She turned to see a pair of zombie ponies standing where Roneo and Starlet once were. Something inside her wrenched in sorrow for the two. Both their glowing eyes were set on the little filly. *Maybe if she talked to them, maybe she could make it all better?* She took a step forward, stopping as another thought struck her brain. *Or maybe this was all just a trick...* Roneo and Starlet both wobbled a little, like they were sensing her thoughts.

*"Please don't leave. The others won't like it."*

Now she was sure it was a trick. Apple Bloom turned tail and made directly for the exit to the Ever Free Forest. Before she could reach her goal, one last zombie pony began to dredge itself out of the earth between her and the path. Apple Bloom whinnied in protest. All this work just to be cut off again! She braced, preparing to charge through it if need be. Something was different about this one though; its body wasn't nearly as decayed as the others. In fact, she was still completely whole save for a few rot-marks and holes in her flesh. She even still had eyes. The zombie pony walked right up to Apple Bloom with little effort, choosing to focus its gaze on the two behind her instead.

*"These fools, even in death they just don't understand,"* Her voice was clear, lacking the eerie echo the other ones possessed. Apple Bloom looked the zombie pony over, her dirt-covered mane had a deep maroon sheen in the moon light, and her decaying coat was patched with grey splotches. Her eyes still boiled with the same red of the others, yet Apple Bloom

thought she saw a tear fall from one. The zombie pony looked right at the little filly, sighing deeply and closing her eyes.

*"I should have protected her, but I made my choice. This is our everlasting punishment for our sins...It's what we deserve."*

Apple Bloom reached a hoof out to Mitta, patting her on the side of her fore-leg.

*"Why did you stay?"*

"Ah' guess my curiosity just got the better of me. Ah never would have guessed this was what you were trying to protect me from. Ah'm so sorry."

*"Don't be. The ponies of this town deserve every drop of this curse, and I'm no exception to that. I had the chance to stop her, to protect her, but I failed as her friend. I abandoned her when she needed me most. Now I have my own sins to bear alongside these...**monsters**! Cursed to relive my lifelong regret...But you, you can escape our fate. You aren't bound here. You still have hope."*

Another tear fell and Mitta opened her eyes again, giving Apple Bloom a weak smile. Apple Bloom almost wanted to give her a hug, despite her rotting form.

Their peace was interrupted as the rest of the horde caught up. Their moans and wails were unbearable, forcing Apple Bloom to cover her ears. Mitta pulled the little filly back to her hooves, looking her in the eyes with renewed vigor. They were eyes that had been hurt, eyes that suffered and endured centuries of pain. Now those eyes held a new feeling, one of righteous fury.

Mitta stared at Apple Bloom and spoke very clearly, *"I'm done hiding and I'm done being the scared little pony that runs from her problems. You've taught me tonight that I need to be strong and I need to protect the ones I care about."* Mitta stepped to Apple Bloom's side, nudging her toward the town exit. *"Run little one, run as fast as you can. Keep running, and **do not stop!**"*

With that final command Mitta charged into the mob of zombie ponies, a stream of tears filling her eyes. With one mighty head butt she sent the forefront of the group scattering like bowling pins. The rest of the herd became disorganized and frantic at the sudden attack, confused that one of their own would so brazenly defy them. Apple Bloom ran for the tree line as the mob enveloped Mitta, stopping to glance back to her savior before passing through. Zombie ponies gnawed and bit at her, but Mitta would not yield. As more and more zombies dog-piled the poor pony, Mitta managed to pull her head out from the crowd one last time.

*"What are you waiting for!? **RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!**"*

Apple Bloom nodded and galloped off into the forest, suppressing her own sadness for the sacrifice Mitta gave her. She wished she could have brought Mitta with her, wished she didn't have to leave her to that fate.

The Ever Free forest was alive with movement, wails and moans of zombie ponies echoed through the trees. Every bush was her enemy, every turn yielding nothing but more skeletons. The forest grew darker with every minute, the moonlight extinguished by the thick canopy once more. Apple Bloom counted her blessings that zombie pony's eyes glowed or she would never have seen them coming in this darkness. In the distance Apple Bloom could see a patch of moonlight ahead of her; she was almost to the thicket! Abruptly, a slimy sensation wrapped itself around one of her hind legs. She screamed in horror, a zombie had managed to latch itself onto her! The familiar draining sensation began to pour over her again as the zombie opened its mouth.

*"We'll protect you...FOREV—"*

The zombie didn't get a chance to finish as Apple Bloom brought her free back-hoof into the zombie's skull. The adrenaline from her scare had nearly doubled her strength as her little hoof cracked the bones of the zombie's face. The creature released its grip and her energy came surging back.

Apple Bloom charged headlong into the thicket, heart still pounding from her encounter. She spun around, looking for her next path. There was none, nothing. Every part of the woods had closed in around her, leaving only the moonlight and the moaning of her pursuers. She slumped to the ground, heart sinking in her chest. After all she'd done, all the trials and tribulations, the only thing left now was to wait for demise. She started to cry.

"Ah' just wanna go home!" She screamed into the darkness, burying her face in her fore hooves to blot out her tears.

Apple Bloom sobbing slowed just long enough to hear it, or rather, not hear it. All of the moans and growls that were pursuing her had suddenly ceased, leaving nothing but quiet. She looked up, raising a brow in confusion. What happened to all the zombies? As she wondered this, a new sound broke the silence, a sound like that of clopping hooves. Apple Bloom leapt back as a golden glow erupted underneath her. In the dirt sat a pair of hoof-prints bathed in a golden light. As the clopping sound continued, the prints began to move as well, etching a path directly into the brush in front of her. Apple Bloom blinked, confounded by this turn of events. She started following the hoof-prints, pushing herself through the brush and trees as the trail bent and swayed between them. Then finally, it stopped.

Apple Bloom wasn't sure where she was, she had gone so deep in the woods the darkness made it almost impossible to see. Before Apple Bloom could take another step, a golden light pierced through the darkness. Apple Bloom covered her eyes at first, lowering her hoof to behold a familiar mare standing before her. She was grey with a blonde mane streaked with gold. Her eyes gleamed with a golden light. The ghostly pony hovered there in front of her, smiling.

*"Hi!"*

"Um...Hello?" Apple Bloom hesitated. The ghost-pony's happiness softened into a glum look.

*"I'm sorry I dragged you into all this. I was just curious."*

"Oh, don't be sad, ah' don't blame you. Ah' was just as curious," Apple Bloom tried to not seem apprehensive. The ghost-pony smiled again.

*"My name is Ruby, what's yours?"*

*"Apple Bloom."*

*"That's a nice name. So glad to have met you Apple Bloom."*

A low moaning sound was growing in the distance. Ruby turned in mid-air, looking off into the woods.

"Your Cutie Mark is a magnifying glass?" Apple Bloom asked as Ruby's flanks came into view. Ruby turned back to her with glee.

*"Yes! Turns out, I'm really good at finding things...and I finally understand what that means too."*

*"Ah'm so sorry for what happened. Those townspies did such a terrible thing to you."*

*"Don't be sorry Apple Bloom. If anything, pity them."* Ruby floated effortlessly through the air as she explained, leaving a fading trail of golden sparkles behind her. She twirled upside down directly above Apple Bloom, never breaking her smile. *"They knew what they were doing was wrong, and they paid the price for their actions."*

"But they murdered you! How can you forgive them so easily?" Apple Bloom found Ruby's cheerful demeanor almost contagious, but she still felt anger for what fate befell her. Ruby sighed and twirled around again, dropping to the forest floor next to Apple Bloom. She placed a hoof on Apple Bloom's shoulder; surprisingly it felt very warm and comforting to the little filly.

*"It does no good to dwell on the mistakes of others Apple Bloom. The ponies of Sunny Town were acting out of fear and felt no real remorse for what they did. The curse put on them by the Ever Free Forest **can** be broken, but only through atonement."*



*"So then why don't ya' just make 'em feel sorry for what they did?"*

*"Making somepony feel sorry for their mistakes isn't the same little one. Unless they can find reason to be sorry, then their restitution is meaningless."*

The moaning turned to a rustling of leaves and clopping of hooves as four zombie ponies came into view on the edge of the forest. They didn't seem to notice Ruby or Apple Bloom yet. Ruby knelt down close to Apple Bloom, bathing her in the light from her glowing golden eyes. Her smile was intoxicating, it made Apple Bloom unafraid.

*"Don't worry; I'm going to find you a way out of this. I promise."*

With those last words, Ruby's form began to fade away, leaving Apple Bloom alone in the darkness. The zombie ponies had all turned toward her and were shambling closer and closer. Apple Bloom stood her ground, closing her eyes and waiting. All four zombie ponies were now directly over her, their rotting stench nearly made Apple Bloom gag. The group all leaned down, preparing a coup de grâce.

Twilight Sparkle sputtered and moaned as she pushed her way through the underbrush. The forest had gone completely dark since night fell and she could only see as far as the light on her horn would allow her.

"Ugh, Apple Bloom...I give that little filly one very simple instruction: Stay put and don't wander off. Then what does she do? Exactly the opposite! I mean, how hard is it to sit still for ten minutes?" Twilight grumbled to herself as she pushed aside more brambles. She yelped as a particularly nasty sticker bush stuck to her leg. Twilight's horn glowed pale purple as her magic carefully plucked the bush's prickles from her coat.

"I swear, if I find that little pony she's going to wish she was still lost in the woods," Twilight cursed loudly to the forest. A growling noise in the distance caused the purple unicorn to shrink back, "Oohhh, I hope she's ok."

Twilight pressed on, her fear for Apple Bloom's safety growing more and more. She tried calling out to the little filly, "Apple Bloom! Where are you!? Ohhh, I should have never brought her. Applejack will never forgive me if anything happens to her. Wait, what's that?" A small, golden sphere bobbed back and forth between the trees in front of the unicorn. She rubbed her eyes to make sure she wasn't seeing things. Twilight took a step closer, and the orb bobbed back deeper away from her. The mare heard a faint voice coming from the direction of the light.

...      ...      ...      *Ah' just wanna go home!*

Twilight recognized the voice immediately. It was Apple Bloom and she sounded like she was hurt. The purple unicorn reared up and charged forward in panic. The bobbing golden light kept pace with Twilight as she threw herself through bushes and brambles. She ran through the pain, the sounds of Apple Bloom's sobs her only focus. The orb that guided her suddenly vanished, leaving Twilight stranded in the dark. She stamped a hoof in frustration, straining to hear Apple Bloom's cries. The forest was silent.

"No, I won't lose her!" Twilight called out to the darkness as she braced herself. Sparks began to fly from her horn as she conjured a large ball of white light. The magic grew bigger and brighter, lighting up the whole area. With a large jerk of her head Twilight sent the orb flying off into the distance in front of her.

It happened all so fast. Apple Bloom had been standing there, completely defiant against her zombified attackers. They had all lunged at her in unison, but none of them managed to even touch her. Something loud and bright had exploded overtop her and the surrounding forest, illuminating the whole area as if the sun itself was shining overhead. All around Apple Bloom lay the crumbled bones of defeated zombie ponies, their remains slowly melting back into the earth from whence they came. The little filly heard a familiar voice call out for her in the distance.

"Apple Bloom!? Apple Bloom, where are you?"

Apple Bloom hopped in delight, she knew that voice. Twilight Sparkle pushed her way through one of the bushes. She looked a total wreck. Her breathing was labored and her whole coat was covered in mud and briars. The unicorn spotted Apple Bloom immediately by her large bow, calling out to her again.

"Apple Bloom! Oh Apple Bloom, there you are! Thank Celestia I found you."

"Twilight!" Apple Bloom squeaked, embracing her savior with both fore-hooves. Twilight staggered under the sudden hug but quickly righted herself with a smile.

"What in the name of Equestria are you doing way out here in the woods? Didn't I tell you to stay put?"

"Ah' know Twilight, Ah'm sorry ah' wandered off..."

"Ok, ok, let's just get out of this creepy place. Who knows what kind of stuff is lurking in these woods," Twilight murmured, quickly leading Apple Bloom back the way she'd came. She breathed a sigh of relief as the pair made their way back. Apple Bloom remained silent the rest of the trip out. She thought about telling Twilight all about her adventure, but decided that it might be best to save for later.

It only took the pony pair minutes to reach the end of the Ever Free Forest. The Ponyville countryside was covered in moonlight now, the sun fully set. Apple Bloom and Twilight trotted merrily away from the forest, heading in the direction of town. Apple Bloom paused as Twilight pressed on. She felt like something was calling out to her. She turned back to look at the Ever Free Forest, catching just the faintest glimmer of gold amongst the tree trunks. Ruby's ghost was floating just under the canopy, wearing a smile on her face. She waved a hoof at Apple Bloom, and Apple Bloom happily waved back.

Just as the two finished their good bye, a second glow began to rise next to Ruby. This one had a faintly red aura about it and her eyes glowed with a soft maroon sheen. Mitta's ghost tapped her friend on the shoulder, smiling weakly as Ruby spun around to face her. Ruby's ghost leapt and twirled with excitement, latching onto Mitta in loving embrace. Apple Bloom felt a tear drop from her eye as she watched the pair reunite, a feeling of utter joy filling her heart.

Ruby and Mitta both faced Apple Bloom and waved again, gleefully drifting back into the Ever Free Forest. Before the two lights from the ghostly ponies faded, Apple Bloom could clearly hear both their voices call out to her.

*"See you later...Friend!"*