Lily Petal snuggled into her husband’s shoulder as they rode through the cobble streets of Canterlot. It was midwinter, and very late in the night. The streetlights cast a bright glow on the street, yet left the area around the beam in shadow. It was a lonely night, and there were no other ponies around. It had started to snow lightly, tiny flakes of snow drifting through the darkness, illuminated by the beams of yellow light. “I’m glad we took the taxi instead of trying to walk home,” said Lily, “It’s too cold to do anything but bundle up and let someone else do all the trotting.” She paused a moment before looking up into her lover’s face. Normally she was able to get at least a smile out of him, but tonight he had been acting unnatural, almost distant.

“Rusty? You okay?” She asked, peering into his eyes. It’s as if the words didn’t register for a second, before he shook his head as if clearing away the dazed expression he wore. “Hm…oh, yeah,” he responded, as if had just woken up “I..I haven’t really been feeling well for…for a while.” “Uh oh,” responded Lily, “I hope you haven’t picked up some sickness from our trip. Does your head hurt? Maybe you ate something weird. Is it anything like that?” “No, it’s nothing like that…I just feel…unnatural. Like something is in my brain, screwing things up in there.” Lily pondered this for a second. “Hm, well, tell me if it gets any worse. I’m going to take a quick nap before we get back home. Lily leaned back against Rusty, stretching out her legs into a comfortable position.

The wind was blowing, but the taxi people installed windshields into their carriages every winter to block cold air from entering the cabin. The result was a tiny bubble of heat, the passengers’ body heat getting trapped inside of the cabin. Lily’s eyes started to get heavy as the impact of the day started to lay itself on her. She yawned, snuggling harder into his shoulder. As she started to drift off, she couldn’t help but wonder about Rusty. She thought about where they had gone, and what have been making Rusty feel so uncomfortable. “Saddle Arabia is pretty foreign, maybe Rusty had picked up something from over there. But there were other places that could he could have gotten something. Maybe…maybe in…” but as the night overtook her, her head slumped against her spouse’s shoulder, and she drifted off to sleep, the road playing a soft lullaby under her head.

She woke to a gruff “Alright, here we are.” She stretched her forelegs, yawning as she did so. She groaned a bit and hopped out of the carriage, wincing as her legs hit the hard sidewalk. The sky was still an inky blackness that was only broken by the amber glare of the streetlamps and the snow briefly illuminated by them. She turned, waiting for her sweetie to hop out after her. He was still sitting in the taxi, but now wearing a silly grin on his face. She giggled “You’re looking better; maybe it was just some food disagreeing with you.” He didn’t respond, and stared straight ahead, still grinning like a crazy person. “C’mon, you weirdo.” She said with a smile, but with more of a confused tone than before, “let’s let the driver get back to his job. We’ve kept him long enough.” He still didn’t respond.

She reached back into the carriage and led him out of the taxi by his hoof. He responded to touch, and she led him out onto the sidewalk, before trotting up to the stallion pulling the cart. “Thank you!” She said, paying him fifteen bits. “Hope that he feels better” he responded, motioning his head towards Rusty and stashing the bits in his saddlebag before dashing off into the dark, wintery night.

Lily turned back to Rusty, who was still staring at her with that wide, peculiar grin. She got a series of chills up her spine. “Stop doing that. It’s creeping me out.” She scolded, half joking, but half serious. She didn’t know what was up with Rusty, he had been acting different ever since he said that he didn’t feel well back on the taxi ride. She waved hello to Windy Sands, who always took walks late at night. She waved back, and they had a pleasant encounter, talking about the trip that Rusty and Lily had just returned from.

However, she was the only pony that would ever see Rusty and Lily Petal alive.

As Windy told the Police later, she and Lily had talked. Rusty, as Windy put it, had “Just stood there, looking at me with that creepy smile.” As Windy Sands remembers, they said goodnight, and both she and the other couple went back to their respective houses, and Windy went straight to sleep. The two were found five days later, after somepony recalled not seeing either of them at work, and went to the police to investigate. Both died of extreme thirst, and had apparently not left their bedroom from the time that they went inside after exiting the carriage. They were both found with the same unrecognizable plants growing out of their stomachs, a plant which, despite being examined by the most prestigious botanists, could not be identified.

However, the most disturbing attribute of both bodies were the happy, almost blissful smiles that each of the two ponies wore.

400 years later.

Aspen Swift slept sprawled out in his bed; his light gray mane lay unkempt and messy on the pillow, and his dull blue coat reflected the rising sun that peered through his window. He breathed in and out peacefully, subconsciously enjoying the lethargic mornings that normally come with Sundays. Normally, he got a pretty early start on days, waking up at about 5:00, but he sleeps in a couple of hours this one day in the week.

It’s nice to have bit of extra time to catch up on rest, and even if he wakes up early, it gives him some time to think. This morning, however, Aspen was out cold. The week had been harder than the last, as it was every week. Demand for goods has steadily risen for as long as Aspen can remember. Next season will be harder, and the next more so, and so forth, as population steadily rises in the town of Ponyville.

The alarm clock starts to ring on the table next to Aspen’s bed.

*Briiiiing*. Once.

*Briiiiing*. Twice.

*Briiiiing*. And there’s the third time.

Aspen slowly rolls onto his belly and sluggishly opens his eyes. He glossily stares outside his window before rubbing his eyes and giving his hooves a good stretch. His forelegs hit the wood floor of his bedroom, and he makes his way down the stairs and into the spacious kitchen, starting a bit of coffee in the coffee maker. Aspen puts some wood into the old iron stove and starts a fire, pouring a bit of water into a pot and laying it on the stove. He pours himself some coffee and takes it into the large dining room.

If there was a spectator in the room at that moment, it would have looked a bit lonely, just the one stallion sitting at a table that was obviously built to seat at least eight ponies. Aspen, however, was every bit as happy as if there were eight other ponies there to share the space with him. He certainly did not lead an antisocial lifestyle, but did not feel as if he had to be around somepony else at all times in his life, and in fact took pride in the fact that he managed his orchard by himself. Relying on others for help was something that Aspen did not enjoy, and he felt, at that moment, that he was as free to live as he pleased.

Aspen Swift sipped his coffee, using both hooves, and stared out the window of his extensive dining space to observe the night’s effect on the acres and acres of rows that organized the orchard. He grimaced as he recognized The Wall at the far end of his orchard. The Wall, as most everypony called it, was a huge metal wall that extended around Ponyville, the city that Aspen lived in. To his knowledge, nopony knew who built The Wall or why it was build. The only information that had been passed down was that nopony should ever try to go past it. It was, and always had been, just *there.* Aspen could also recognize the husky limbs of the oldest tree on the farm; an old oak tree, much older than anypony that Aspen knew or had ever known in his life.

The story had been passed down for generations: The first pony who had started the orchard had started sawing trees, both to open up space to plant his fruit-bearing trees and to use as timber for the new cottage that he had planned on building. The pony saw the tree, and recognizing how old yet sturdy it was (even then), decided not to cut it down. And there it sat, never being cut down, despite the countless amounts of owners that inherited the orchard. Many fond memories were made there by the fillies and colts who lived at or visited the orchard, whether it was swinging from the tire swing or climbing up the trunk and jumping into the surprisingly deep stream below.

Aspen’s cutie mark, a stream running past a line of trees, was the view from that same oak tree. Aspen realized that he wanted to be a part of the orchard ever since he first climbed that tree and surveyed the surrounding fields and forested hills that made up the farmstead. The cutie mark appearing on Aspen’s flank finalized his destiny, and the orchard was passed down to him after his grandfather died.

It was said that tree, along with the first owners, were around long before The Wall was even built. Of course, that was probably just a myth created by one of Aspen’s cousins. As far as Aspen was concerned, there was no Ponyville before the wall. They were just created…together. Even Aspen’s grandfather said that he never knew anyone old enough to remember a time before The Wall or before Ponyville.

Aspen finished his coffee, and thought about making some toast. He decided against it, instead thinking about grabbing some cherries and a pear in the grove. His old cat, Tipsy, nuzzled his hind leg as Aspen picked up the coffee cup in his mouth and placed it in the sink. He nudged open the door with his muzzle and grabbed a stack of baskets in his mouth. Trotting out into the orchard, Aspen noticed that the ground was a bit wet under his hooves. “This rain will be good for growing,” he thought. It was spring, and the pegasi were making it rain quite frequently, right before they take some breaks during the summer season and let things dry out a bit. Aspen could smell the fresh aroma of the cherries from up and down the orchard.

Aspen took pride in his sensitive sense of smell. He’s before asked his friends what the orchard smells like to them, and most of them say something like “It smells...earthy. And maybe a bit…oh, I don’t know…woodsy, maybe. Aspen, however, can pick out individual scents and aromas that he feels from around the lines of trees that cover the hills around the old farmstead. Today, he smells the cherries from north field, mixing with the pears from the riverbank. They combine to create a cold, crisp scent that, unlike some fragrances that invade your nose, lightly sink into your senses without disturbing them or even alerting them to your presence. The gentle fog serves as a seasoning to the aroma in the air, turning the whole mixture into something that makes you want to close your eyes and just…breathe.

Aspen took his time to study the gentle breeze with his nose as he turned towards the riverbank. Unlike some ponies, Aspen normally didn’t go by a schedule, deciding where to work by intuition and by just general feeling. He decided that today was a day that he wanted to spend down by the stream that ran through the estate, where, many generations ago, a few lines of pear trees were planted, which are now growing the delicious pears and that are still the best selling items when Aspen takes his fruits to market.

He trotted down the weathered dirt path through the grove of plums and through to a clearing. A stream, wide and deep enough for a pony to swim around in, ran though the center of the clearing. It burbled happily, like a little foal with a new toy to play with, as it made its merry way down over the brim of a lining of rocks and down a small waterfall. The small pear trees closest to the stream were so short and skinny they almost look like shrubs. The ones farther back, however, stood firm and brave. All the lines of trees were in full bloom. The sweet scent of the blossoms were almost overpowering, and Aspen took a quick second to lean his head back and absorb the smells, the sounds, the feel of soft, dewy grass under his hooves. “This is where I want to be,” he thought to himself, “this is where my world centers around.” He took another quick breath of the delicious morning air before focusing back at the task at hand

Aspen quickly set to work. He set off towards the strong trees farther back, and balanced on his hind legs so that he could reach up to grab one of the lower branches and pulled himself up and onto it. Same with the next branch. And the next. Finally, he was at the top of the tree and could move some branches out of the way while still maintaining his balance. Of course, it wasn’t even close to ripening time for the pears, the fruits were just now starting to form into their respective shapes. But, it doesn’t hurt for a pony to check up on his crop every once in a while, and make sure any critters weren’t trying to take more than their fair share. The pears seemed to be coming along just fine, the trees had no need to put fences around the bottom of the trees to keep animals off of them. Aspen grabbed onto the trunk and slid down back to the spongy grass below.

Aspen saw that the weeds were getting too big for the smaller pear trees to handle, and decided to just do some weeding this morning. That was good; he needed something monotonous to do while he thought.

Long ago, back when Aspen was just a colt in school, he was taught the basics of life, reading, math, science, and so forth. However, Aspens teachers were required to go into much depth on Ponyville’s past. Aspen was forced to sit through lectures about past heroes, and when Ponyville was just one of many towns in a land called “Equestria.” The lands were protected by four princesses, one of which led a group of her and five other mares who battled any opposition of the peaceful lands.” Back then, to Aspen, the idea had seemed almost unfathomable. Of course there wasn’t someplace called Equestria, and of course Ponyville wasn’t part of it. Ponyville had always just been there. Of course, now the world makes more sense to him. To a young Aspen, there might of well have been nothingness past The Wall for all he cared about the outside world. It didn’t matter to him. However, in an older age, it makes sense that there might be more than Ponyville in the wide, emptiness of the known world.

Aspen remembers one lesson from his childhood specifically, and how it changed his view on Ponyville and the world for the rest of his life.

*Mrs. Angelwood came into class with the same authoritative, yet gentle grace that she most always wore in front of the fillies and foals. The class quieted down as she wordlessly took her seat at the front of the class. They turned all attention on her; a respect that not many teachers receive from their pupils, but one that Mrs. Angelwood had gotten from every class that she had ever taught in all her years of teaching. To put it in one sentence, Mrs. Angelwood ruled the classroom with a sturdy, yet fair grip, and her students loved her for it. After unpacking her saddlebag into her desk, she stood to face the chalkboard. Her horn was surrounded by an electric blue light, and then a similar light enveloped the chalk piece next to the chalkboard.*

***“The Basic Principles of Mathematics”*** *was written in a neat, looping cursive on the board, and a small chorus of groans erupted from some of the class, quickly shushed by other students. Mrs. Angelwood, however, heard the groans, and turned to the class. It was as if she had seen the class for the first time that day. Even the smartest and most hardworking fillies and colts had blank expressions plastered on their faces, and most of the class had there muzzles slumped against their hooves. Even Aspen, who was normally interested by learning, kept catching himself staring out the window at a nest of baby birds in the tree outside the window. Mrs. Angelwood, being the experienced teacher that she was, understood that today was not a day to teach something as monotonous as mathematics to this group of young students. She sighed, and used levitation magic to grab the chalkboard eraser and erased the words written at the head of the board. A few heads picked themselves up at the sight of this, and some of the class shuffled to straighten up in their desks. “So, class, does anypony know the history of Ponyville and The Wall?” Mrs. Angelwood asked, trying to put on a bright smile as to get everypony’s attention. The little ponies looked at each other, confused. No, they didn’t. In all their years of schooling, these ponies had never asked about where the land they grew up in came from, or what its history was. They had never asked about The Wall, and why it was there. Aspen, who thought that he knew everything (as most colts do at that age), had never asked his parents when and why Ponyville was settled, and it was apparent that none of the other students knew either. They stared at Mrs. Angelwood attentively, their faces changed to show a new expression that excited their teacher: curiosity. A curious student is easier to teach and will retain more knowledge than a bored one. Mrs. Angelwood paused a minute to smile, before continuing on.*

*“As we’ve previously discussed,” said Mrs. Angelwood, “Ponyville was once part of Equestria, which was ruled by four princesses, blah blah, you know the story.” This brought some smiles to the faces of the now-eager learners. “But what happened to Equestria and the Princesses? Where did Equestria and its peace-loving folk disappear off to? I’m going to be honest with you: nopony knows. In the record books at the town hall, the timeline shows that Equestria was a perfectly happy, normal empire, in one year, and,* ***boom****. Gone the next year. Coincidentally, The Wall was built that same year, the year that Equestria disappeared and Ponyville was left on its own. However, mystery surrounds the building of The Wall. There are photographs and drawings from all over Equestria, which help us to understand that their way of living was not so different from ours. They had the same technologies, language, and same races, the Pegasi, Unicorns, and Earth Ponies, that we do today.”*

*“Of all the perfectly stored photographs that show us what life was like back in that time, from all over the lands, there was one action that was not documented or photographed: the building of The Wall. Even with the Unicorns magic, the Pegasi’s flight, and the Earth Pony’s strength, it should have taken months, even years to finish a metal wall of this size. But, as far as the timeline says, the building of the wall didn’t happen. There was no building of it, it seems that it just…appeared. After that, we hear no tell or tale of life outside of these walls. Even the ponies that lived in Equestria at some point seem to have no recollection of it, the only way we know is because it was so well documented. The only tie we have to the old world are the buildings that we have maintained and still live in today, and the three rules that we run our community by and that were painted in pink irremovable paint on the wall of our town hall: Share what you have, learn to get along, and don’t try to transverse The Wall.”*

*Mrs. Angelwood stopped talking, which all of the fillies and colts took to mean that the lesson was over. A series of questions were verbally thrown at her after that, and Mrs. Angelwood tried to direct students to ask questions in an orderly fashion. “Settle down, settle down,” she calmed, “I understand that this may be a bit confusing, so I’ll take questions one at a time.” Everypony, excepting Mrs. Angelwood, raised their hooves simultaneously. She called on a small Unicorn in the back of the classroom. “Yes, Rosy?” she asked. “So, why has nopony tried to get past the wall yet?” Rosy Bloom called in a quiet, high pitched voice. “Well,” came the reply, “I’d love to tell you that nopony has ever tried, but there have been a few who have. Mostly Pegasi that have just flown over the top. They...well…they haven’t been heard from since.” finished Mrs. Angelwood. A Pegasus filly raised her hoof, “So, Pegasus ponies control the weather, right? They fly high enough to grab passing rainclouds for when we need rain, and clear them for when we need sun, correct?” Mrs. Angelwood brightened as she realized that the little filly was referencing a lesson they did on Ponyville’s weather about a month ago. “That’s right, dear!” She replied. “So, if the Pegasus ponies fly that high, wouldn’t they be able to see over the wall? What do they see?” she finished, furrowing her brow. “An excellent question!” Mrs. Angelwood turned to the class. “The weather patrol has indeed been able to see over The Wall, and have given us a broad description of what they saw. They, by law, aren’t allowed to say anything specific, but they have reported a mountain to the west, and forest everywhere else. The land seems to be untouched, with no apparent structures or cities to be seen. However, be it by coincidence or not, there are more ponies on the weather patrol that try to cross the wall than any other group of ponies anywhere else.” She purposefully left that response open, trying to get the little students to discuss amongst themselves why they think the weather patrol would want to leave and what might be on the other side. Aspen would specifically remember one little colt bragging about how he’s going to join the weather patrol and* ***really*** *see what’s out there. “Is this good? Should I really be teaching them to be curious of the outside world?” She thought to herself.*

*She called on a few other students, but at that point, Aspen had lost interest in the other pony’s questions. He hadn’t thought of it before, but one thing was bugging him. It was a solemn question, but one that somepony needed to ask. His hoof shot in the air. Mrs. Angelwood turned to him. “Yes, Aspen?” she inquired. The room quieted as all eyes turned on Aspen. “So,” started Aspen, “if The Wall can’t be crossed by anypony, and Ponyville’s population continues to multiply, wouldn’t we eventually run out of room in Ponyville to live? Shouldn’t, eventually, we simply run out of space inside The Walls?” His voice grew more determined as he began to put jumbled thoughts together. “Won’t we, someday, all have to leave the wall, whether we like it or not?” He was staring straight at Mrs. Angelwood, and he noticed that her gaze darkened. “I wondered if anypony would ask that,” she thougth, “I should have guessed that at least one student might put the idea together.” She replied directly back to Aspen after she took a moment to collect her thoughts and choose what to say.*

*“In theory, yes.” she replied, and expected the young colt’s eyes to widen in shock. Instead, he almost slightly nodded, as if he had already known the answer, and was just confirming it by asking her. “So,” he continued, “we will probably need a group of ponies to someday go outside of the walls and look for somewhere safe to live?” “Now hold on,” she replied, “I didn’t say anything about…” but one look from the young student in front of her told her that she wasn’t fooling him. “Yes,” she said, after a pause, “Someday, maybe not in this generation or even the next, there will have to be a place that we can move to so that we can support our growing community.” She said solemnly. Aspen, again, nodded, and then said nothing.*

*Mrs. Angelwood trotted back to her desk and sat down, a little bit shaken by the question, but trying to keep a smile on her face. Pulling out a paper sack from under her desk, she addressed the class as a whole, “Well, all right, ponies,” she sang, “time for lunch!” The bell rang and the class filed out the door, Aspen along with it. A couple of Aspen’s friends, Chip Circuit and Eloquence, hurried to catch up with him and they began to talk as they walked out to the playground to eat. Aspen almost forgot about the whole lesson, and it seemed like everypony else did, too. All the fillies and colts ate lunch and played until it was time for them all to go home, and did so as carefree and worriless as if they had never been hit with the astounding amount of information that they just were. Well, almost all of the students forgot…*

*Aspen, however, did not forget. As he said goodbye to his friends and started to trot back home for the weekend, Aspen started to think. “So, like it or not,” he thought, “Somepony’s got to go out there and explore. Somepony, or maybe even a group of ponies, have got to go out there, and do make an assessment of the outside world, to make sure it’s okay for us to live there again. And, even though taking care of the orchard is important, I think that this is even more important.” He looked at his cutie mark wistfully. Despite cutie marks not being very detailed, Aspen could feel the tranquility and freedom of his grandfathers, and soon to be his, orchard, just by looking at the mark. He wished nothing more than to be able to stay on the orchard forever, to grow up and have children there, and, someday, grow old there. But, as the law said, a citizen of Ponyville must “learn to get along.” If being brave for the sake of the town wasn’t leaning to get along, Aspen wasn’t sure what was.*

*At this point, Aspen had reached the old farmhouse, and went in through the front door. Aspen’s grandfather had just come out of the fields, and greeted Aspen with a smile and a hug. The rest of that night went by typically, but Aspen was a different colt than he had been when he had left for school. Aspen knew, without a doubt, that he needed to do whatever it takes to save Ponyville.*

Aspen pulled up the last few sprigs of weeds that had grown around his pear tree. He surveyed his row of now weed-free tree bases. Wiping the sweat off of his brow, Aspen got to his hooves and looked up at the sky. The sun was directly overhead, and despite it being early spring, the sun was radiating waves of heat towards the newly awakened earth. All snow had been cleared off on the first day of spring, as was according to the tradition of past residents of the town. The winter had been cold, but not as cold as past winters have been. Still, most everypony was ready for it to be over, and urged the Pegasi to keep the skies clear of clouds as much as possible.

Aspen heard somepony coming through the orchard, and was surprised to find his friend Chip Circuit trotting down the dirt path that led to the stream. “Hey, Chip!” called out Aspen, beaming, “I thought that was Tipsy coming down the road!” Chip smiled, “Oh, come on. I know I’m quiet, but not that quiet!” he responded playfully, grinning in response. The noonday sun filtered through the trees and made patterns on his turquoise coat and dark brown mane. Chip kept his hair short, letting his unicorn horn poke through a part in the middle. The two ponies gave each other hoof bumps as they turned and started a slow gait down the dirt road back to the farmhouse. The sweet smell of plum blossoms followed them as they chatted about everything from work to the price of fresh tomatoes.

Chip had a hard time speaking to most ponies, and tended to hole himself up in his technology lab for days on end, not leaving until he lost inspiration for or finished whatever he was working on. Aspen wouldn’t have told him this, but he was glad Chip came out to see him. He got worried when Chip spent too much time on his own. “So, I was meaning to tell you,” said Aspen, “I really appreciate you lending me that soil measuring device prototype, it’s really been helpful. My cherries were looking unhealthy, and I couldn’t figure out why. Turns out they weren’t getting enough minerals from the soil, so I had to add some fertilizer.” Chip feigned a look of astonishment, “but I thought Earth Ponies could, you know, *sense* that kind of stuff. Are you saying that an Earth Pony can’t even farm without a unicorn helping them out?” Aspen nudged into him, “Ha ha, very funny,” he responded, “but I bet I can still climb to the top of a tree faster than you can even get your hind legs off of the ground.” Chip Circuit laughed, “fair enough, fair enough, “he replied with a grin.” The two made it back to Aspen’s house and up the front stairs to the living room.

Aspen fell back into a comfy couch, taking up both seats as he leaned back, and Chip sat on a recliner. “Aren’t you supposed to offer your guest something to eat?” Chip complained. “Hey, your legs ain’t broken,” responded Aspen Swift, mimicking the thick country accent his grandfather always used, “and anyway, I’ve been working in the sun all day. What’ve you done today, spent an hour playing with an ounce and a half of metal?”