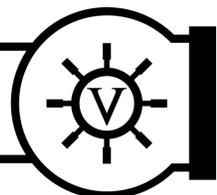


The Mill

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PONY FICTION VAULT



I wish I could remember what led me to the riverbank that day. Maybe I was thirsty, maybe I wanted to skip stones, maybe there was no reason at all. Personally, I like to think that it was the hooves of destiny that pushed me to the water's edge, but again I'm not sure.

Whatever the case might have been, I went to the riverbank. In the end, that's all that really mattered.

I was standing beside the rushing river, watching the water collide with rocks and create thundering rapids. There's such a beauty to the rapids; powerful enough to suck you under, yet still retaining that unfathomable elegance that water just seems to have. It's no surprise to me that ponies still get lured into that old river, only to be swept away by its current. It's so mighty and, at the same time, so compelling. I still feel the desire to go for a swim when I head down that path. It's a stupid urge, but an urge nonetheless.

It was while I was watching the water careen that I noticed the reflection. Something wooden jutting out of the tree line, its lower-half caressing the water and its upper-half tickling the tree limbs. I turned my head, convinced that I was just seeing things, and saw this large wheel. The water rushed against it, ramming into its body with a seemingly more intense force, and the wheel slowly spun – an incessant, irritable squeaking coming with each rotation.

I moved closer to the wheel and noticed that it was attached to this large stone building: a mill. It was clear that the mill had been unoccupied for many years. The stone it had been constructed from was weathered and moss-covered. There was only one slanted window on the front – glassless – and the doorway lacked a door or hinges. I wasn't an expert in architecture, but even my young filly mind could tell that this building was ancient. Of course, being a silly filly that I was, I also decided that the building had once belonged to a brave knight in shining armor. I had imagined that the interior of the building was filled with the skulls and pelts of manticores, goblins, or whatever else said knight could have slain. This theory was quickly disproved. The only forms of life, past or present, were cobwebs in the corners and mouse holes in walls.

Still, despite its obvious age, I felt compelled. The structure was still beautiful, and it was still in good enough shape that, with a few patched holes and an addition of doors and windows, it could be occupiable. I had fixed-up some things in my past – most notably, the old treehouse on my family's farm – and I had always considered myself to be pretty good at it, so I decided to give it a shot. There was no harm in trying.

That's how it started. Just a decision made on a whim with no real expectations or foreseen consequences.

If only it had stayed that way.

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The mill proved to be in need of a lot more fixing up than anticipated. The whole thing was as structurally sound as a piece of lint. Several times, I was in the middle of patching up a hole when half of the roof decided right then and there that it wanted to kill me. How it didn't succeed is a miracle. But I weathered the storm. While it was difficult and dangerous work, a voice in my head told me that it would all be worthwhile in the end

The hardest part was keeping it a secret. I knew that, if my sister or brother found out, I would have to stop. "It ain't safe!" they would say. "A filly shouldn't be doing such things." And I knew I wouldn't hear the end of it. So I made sure to stop by the creek that ran near the apple orchard every evening. I would scrub away the dirt, paint and blood, and I would groom and mat my fur in such a way that it hid any cuts or bruises. After I was sure that I was relatively spotless, I would head in for dinner. My family's suspicions were never piqued, and for that I was thankful.

Hiding my solo adventures from my friends was another difficult task. We had made a pact that we would attempt to earn, and eventually earn, our cutie marks together. If they caught wind that I was going out on my own, crusading without them, they'd have thrown a hell of a fit.

Unlike my siblings, my friends grew suspicious. They'd catch me walking out of the forest, late in the evening, battered and bruised. They would ask where I had been, and I would say that I was just going for a walk. They would ask why I was covered in scratches, and I'd answer that I'd fallen into a thornbush after tripping over a rock. While I wasn't the best liar in the world, it was convincing enough. They'd shrug and go on their way, and I'd breathe a sigh of relief and keep working.

Getting the materials I needed was both the hardest to accomplish and the most difficult for my soul. Being on a farm, I was surrounded by the materials I needed to fix up anything and everything. Crowbars, hammers, screwdrivers, wood, carts. You name it, I had it at my hooves, just waiting to be picked up. However, they weren't my tools. They were my family's tools. It wouldn't be stealing, but borrowing them without permission was still a big no-no. I would have asked, but I knew that my requests wouldn't be without questions. They'd ask what I needed them for, then they'd ask me where I went,

and then I wouldn't be allowed to go out anymore. It was a lose-lose situation. I was forced to choose between the sanctity of my soul, and the mill.

I chose the mill.

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The mill took months of grueling labor to refurbish, but I managed to do it. All alone, with no help from anypony. Something in the back of my head told me, even then, that no pony would even notice my hard work. The mill was too far off the beaten path; one had to actually go off-trail and through the woods to catch a glimpse of it. Yet I was still satisfied. I did this for myself. If somepony else noticed it and liked it, good for them. Maybe they'd use it as an inspiration for a painting or a song. Maybe they'd see it and decide to turn it into something useful, like a running mill that could produce things.

Or maybe it would stay enshrouded. I didn't care. The mill was my pride and joy, and nothing could take that away from me.

I wiped the sweat off my brow and limped my way back into town. I grumbled and winced with each step. A misjudged step on the path to the mill had led to a twisted ankle. While cuts and bruises could be hidden easily, hiding a limp would be near impossible. But I bit my lip and kept moving. The sweat and tears mixed – hopefully convincingly – and I was walking rather normally by the time I emerged from the forest. The sun was setting in the west, covering the sky in a brilliant sea of red and orange. I stopped to admire it. That was my mistake.

With a shout, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo shot out of the bushes. They had done it many times before – so much so that I didn't even jump in surprise anymore. Hooves raised, they pointed at me, questioning glares etched on their faces. A sea of generic questions spewed forth from their mouths.

"Where were you?"

"What were you doing?"

"Why are you limping?"

"What the hay is that on your flank?!"

The last one took me by surprise. My eyes grew wide – wider than Scootaloo's at the time – and I turned my head. I cried out when I saw it, my voice cracking more than Sweetie Belle's when she had made the observation.

Yellow hairs were no longer the sole occupant of my flank. A hammer and paint brush now resided there as well.

My cutie mark.

A tidal wave of emotions cascaded through my brain. Excitement, fear, sorrow, regret, joy.

I had finally done it.

I had finally earned my cutie mark.

Yet the most prominent emotions were the negative ones.

The ashamed ones.

The frightened ones.

I couldn't look Sweetie Belle or Scootaloo in the eye. To do so would bring me face-to-face with the ponies I had wronged. We had a pact, and I'd just broken it. Earning our cutie marks together was supposed to be our tether – something that kept us connected even as we grew older and farther apart. The intention of mutually acquiring our cutie marks was what brought us together, and it was what was going to keep us together.

And I had ruined it.

Without so much as acknowledging their ragged breaths or mutterings of "what?" I lowered my head and trudged towards Sweet Apple Acres. I knew that when I got there I would be found out; found out for a heathen, found out for a liar, and found out for an "Un-Apple!"

The shame weighed down on my heart, and I started to limp again.

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The Apple Family has a history.

If you're an Apple, a "true Apple," you'll have an apple cutie mark.

Even if you're meant to be an accomplished actor, an apple will appear somewhere on your flank.

That is the mark of a "true Apple."

And my flank was without it.

At first, I had thought – I had *hoped* – that it was all a matter of perception. I hoped that the lighting was just too dim for me to see the apple, or that the apple was located in a spot that I couldn't see no matter how far I craned my neck.

But that was just wishful thinking. As I bent down over the creek to wash the grime and tears off my face, I caught the reflection of my flank.

It was a hammer, a paint brush, and nothing else. Not even an appleseed.

I felt the sudden urge to end it right there, as crazy as that sounds. Not even fully grown, not even out of school, and I considered drowning myself in the creek. But, at the time I was lost and confused. I knew that nothing good was going to come from this mark. I knew that nothing good was going to come out of walking through the front door of my house. I knew that nothing good was going to come out of tomorrow or the next day or the day after that.

And I knew that I was "wrong," or at least what tradition said was "wrong."

I wasn't an Apple.

I doubted I was even a pony.

The hurricane of emotions and thoughts carried on from civil twilight to absolute darkness. They'd be looking for me soon, and I debated whether I should give them the benefit of finding me. The lights were still on in the farmhouse, and I could barely see the silhouette of my sister's hat as she paced in front of the window, her loud, twangy voice audible from nearly a kilometer away. I bit my lip and started to cry again.

What am I going to do?

I looked up at the moon. It was brighter than I could remember it ever being. To this day, I don't think I've seen it as bright as it was on that night. There was something

comforting in it. A glow that embraced me and told me that things were going to be okay. While it didn't console me completely, it was enough.

I washed my face off in the creek one last time, and marched towards my house.

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They were on me as soon as I opened the door. Scolds, questions, hugs; Big Macintosh had me wrapped in his forelegs so tightly that I couldn't even breathe. Things settled down after about a minute, and the questions became more decipherable.

"Where were you?"

"What were you doing?"

"Why are you bleeding?"

"What the hay is that on your flank?!"

I didn't lower my head this time. No, I raised my chin as high as I could, and made my flank as visible as possible. If they were going to hate me for what I was, I wasn't going to give them the pleasure of damaging me. They could disown me, they could sling their rocks and insults, but they would not have victory. I wouldn't allow it.

Applejack bent down, furrowing her brow and squinting her eyes, and looked. She looked at the mark, then at me, then at the mark, then at me.

Just fire the damn gun already! I thought. Stop with this hesitation, put me down!

She stared directly into my eyes, her own tidal wave of emotion evident in her gaze.

This was it. This was the moment that everything crashed.

She laughed a genuine laugh and pulled me into a hug. The air was knocked out of me – partially out of the intensity of Applejack's embrace, and partially out of complete shock.

That wasn't the laugh of a bully. That was the laugh of a friend.

The laugh of somepony who loved me.

"Ya got it, Apple Bloom!" she choked out, voice muffled against my shoulder. "Ya finally got it!"

I looked at her, perplexed. "Ya ain't mad?" I asked

She looked at me with her own perplexed expression. "Why the hay would I be mad?"

I sighed and pushed her away lightly. I shook my head and forlornly looked at the mark. "Look at it, Applejack. Notice somethin'? Notice what's *not* there?"

Applejack tilted her head and placed a hoof under her chin. She stared at it for a long time – *too* long for my patience.

"There ain't an apple, Applejack! Just this hammer and brush!" I fell to my knees, shaking. I had promised that I wouldn't give them the benefit of breaking me, but breaking promises seemed to be the only thing I could do at the moment.

"I ain't an Apple," I sobbed. "I-I... I ain't an Apple." I sniffled and hit my head against the floor with a loud *thunk*. My tears seeped into the cracks in the floorboards, and flowed through them.

Much like a river.

Then Applejack embraced me again, shushing me. Then I felt the strong forelegs of my brother wrap around me as well. Finally, I could feel Granny Smith's frail hoof on my back, trembling with age and emotion.

"You are an Apple," Applejack whispered in my ear. "And you're my sister, and I love you. Don't you dare think otherwise."

I began to cry again, but this time it was an actual release. No fear, no anger, just release. Things weren't going to be bad, or at least not *all* bad. I still had to go and talk to Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo. Apologize to them for breaking our pact as well as apologize for marching off without an explanation. Whether or not they would forgive me was a mystery, but on that night I didn't care.

I was hungry and tired.

Words could be said tomorrow.

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To this day, the mill stands unoccupied. I've considered moving in there from time to time, but quickly brushed it off. Although I feel like I did a fine job of sprucing the place

up, a mill ain't exactly the most comfortable of houses. Besides, nothing can change what it did for me. And, while I'm thankful that I stumbled upon it, I feel that the most respectful thing I can do for it is just leave it be.

It's fine just the way it is.