

VAGABOND
PART 5

“So what you’re saying, Rainbow Dash, is that you couldn’t sleep?” Twilight asked, “That doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“I know!” Dash exclaimed, “It was like Arabesque was saying it over and over and over. Like she was inside my head! Arg! I can still hear it!” Dash said dramatically placing her hooves on either side of her head.

Twilight’s eye’s unfocused for a few moments, deep in thought, “Almost as if she were still here.” she said distantly, then snapped back to reality, “Spike, where is that book Spirits, Wraiths, and Ghosts?” she asked.

“I’ll get it.” Spike said despondently.

“Dash, what if Arabesque didn’t just give you the message then go to her final rest? What if she’s still around? What if she’s with you now?” Twilight asked interestedly.

“Don’t say that Twilight! It’s just, like, too creepy.” Dash said turning her head away and waving a hoof.

“It’s not THAT creepy Rainbow Dash. Maybe she just wants to make sure the Vagabond knows he’s been forgiven. I mean, it’s not like she’s malignant or anything.” Twilight said walking toward where Spike was searching the shelves of the library.

Rainbow Dash followed her in the air, “Malig- what?” she asked.

“Bad, evil, means to do harm.” Twilight said somewhat patiently.

“She kept me from sleeping!” Rainbow Dash said emphatically.

“We don’t even know for sure if it was even her.” Twilight said, “You could just be suffering from P.T.S.D. for all we know.”

“I DO NOT HAVE S.T.D.s!” Rainbow Dash said, highly offended.

“What? No, it means Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.” Twilight explained.

Rainbow Dash arched an eyebrow, “What?”

“Ugh!” Twilight grunted in frustration, “It’s like being in shock.”

“Oh.” Dash responded.

“Found it.” Spike said climbing down the ladder. He handed Twilight the book, then headed upstairs.

Twilight levitated the book onto her podium and opened it to its index, “Hmm. Ghosts in reference to haunting? Maybe...” she mused, “Aha! Ghosts in reference to Vagabonds. Page 187.” she said.

Flipping to the page, she began reading, “Here it is.” Twilight said clearing her throat, “The Ghosts that torment Vagabonds are the spirits of their victims. The ghosts subtly manipulates the perceptions of their hosts, causing no physical harm but psychological harm instead. Possible effects of the ghost’s manipulations include but are not limited to: visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, paranoia, dementia, neurosis, personality disorders, eating disorders, and sleeping disorders.”

“See?” Rainbow Dash said.

“There’s more.” Twilight said and continued reading, “Due to the rarity of Vagabonds, it is entirely possible there are other effects of which we are not aware. In the, even more rare, cases of forgiven Vagabonds the ghost tells another pony and tasks them with informing the Vagabond. It is believed, the ghost inhabits the pony until the message is delivered but, that said, there is not enough information to be certain. There are rumors and tales that non-ponies can also suffer the fate of a Vagabond. Of special interest are the zebras. Some of their masks are said to allow one to interact with ghosts, but it is not known if this is true.” Twilight looked up from the book, “Looks like we need Zecora’s help.”

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Applejack secured the cart to her harness, “Applebloom, Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo! Come on, we need to hurry.” she bellowed.

The Cutie-mark Crusaders came galloping out of the barn, a whirlwind of energy.

Applejack began walking before they even reached her, “Hurry up! This foods gettin’ colder by the minute. Applebloom, did yall get Big Macintosh’s blanket?” she called.

“Got it!” Applebloom beamed up at her older sister.

“Good. Now when we get to Fluttershy’s, steer clear o’ the injured pony on her couch. He’s awful messed up, what with loosin’ his wings and all.” Applejack bit her tongue as realized what she had said.

Eerie silence met her. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. All three fillies had stopped, mouths hanging open. Scootaloo looked back at her own wings then back to Applejack.

Scootaloo’s lip quivered, and her eyes teared up, “Th...that’s...that’s just...horrible!” she burst into tears, “Is...isn’t there...some way t...to...get them back?” she asked.

Sweetie Belle and Applebloom began crying as well. Applejack felt terrible, she hadn’t meant to say what she had. She picked up the three crying fillies and set them onto the cart, ‘Well maybe they’ll

wear themselves out cryin'. Wonder how Fluttershy's doin'?

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Fluttershy had just finished administering the pain medication to Vagabond, who had woken up only a few minutes beforehand,

“Thank you so much Fluttershy.” he said lowering his eyes, “I must apologize for my earlier outburst. You didn't need to have heard that.”

Fluttershy averted her eyes as she said,
“You begged Celestia to let you die. I've never heard anypony say that. It was just so sad. I know it's none of my business, but is it really that bad?”

“I truly hope you never have to find out.” Vagabond said, then sighed heavily, “But that doesn't answer your question does it? You've been so kind to me, if you really want to know what happened, I'll tell you.” he said.

Fluttershy sat down in front of him,
“Oh, I do want to know.” she said.

Rarity and Big Macintosh were in the kitchen but had stopped what they were doing, and now both of them listened intently at the kitchen doorway as Vagabond began,
“I was raised in an orphanage. I never knew my parents, but the orphanage wasn't terrible. I knew all the other colts and fillies, but I only had one real friend. Her name was Arabesque. She was a pegasus like me. She had a coat of light-red and her mane and tail were a shimmering silver-green color. She was beautiful.”

“For as long as I can remember she had studied and practiced ballet. She was a natural. She seemed to be able to fly without using her wings sometimes. She eventually convinced me to try it too. I was terrible at it. My only real talent is with chemicals, especially herbs, roots, and flowers. I became known, in our little village, as a bit of an alchemist. I had a habit of tending to all the cuts, scrapes, and other minor injuries of all the little colts and fillies around our village. Their parents loved it because my potions and salves actually worked and I never charged anything. I was always good with the little ones. Arabesque would help me sometimes, when we got older.”

“Others said we were a cute couple. Eventually I fell in love with her but I could never bring myself to tell her. As far as I know, Arabesque never knew how I felt, she only had eyes for the ballet. Soon after her seventeenth birthday, we heard about a talent scout coming to our village. Apparently, he had heard about Arabesque's talent and wanted to see for himself. Arabesque performed for him with me acting as her stage manager, rigging up lights and setting up props. She was perfect.”

“The talent scout took her picture and sent it off to Canterlot with an invitation for a troop to come see her perform and maybe sign a contract. Arabesque was ecstatic when she heard. She began to work on a complex routine that would require me to run myself ragged behind the curtain changing scenes and lights. She began talking incessantly about 'going away'. I didn't want her to leave without me, so I asked her if I could go too. The talent scout overheard me and said there were enough riggers in Canterlot and that Arabesque would be fine without me.”

Vagabond hung his head,
“I was so selfish though. Instead of being happy for her, I was angry. I asked her if she ever planned on marrying. She said she would meet a stallion in Canterlot who was also a dancer; and that they would marry and have several foals. I was so upset I had to walk away, I didn’t even see her until the next day. I had secretly decided to sabotage her performance. I would have the plywood backdrops collapse and distract her. I knew that with her skill there would be other auditions, and I promised myself I would only ruin one performance. I thought that if we had more time together she might come to love me.”

“I didn’t care about anything else, I wanted her, I needed her. I was so engrossed, so focused on my own desires I hadn’t stopped to consider her. I was selfish, greedy; I should have put her needs first, her dreams first.” Vagabond bit his bottom lip and breathed deeply through his nose to calm himself down, “The troop arrived and the whole village turned out to see her dance. I rigged the set to collapse straight down, I didn’t want to hurt her. I knew the exact moment I would collapse it, she would be in the very front of the stage, away from the backdrop...” Vagabond began hyperventilating and shaking.

He stopped and closed his eyes to concentrate on his breathing,
“I’m sorry Fluttershy *huff* I’m going to *pant* have to stop. It’s *huff* just too difficult right now.”

Fluttershy stood and reached out a hoof toward him for comfort.

Vagabond’s hoof snapped out, lightening quick, intercepting hers,
“I *pant* have no right to accept *huff* comfort until I’ve atoned. Please tell me you *cough* understand.”

“No I don’t.” Fluttershy said softly.

Vagabond let go of her hoof,
“I take it you don’t know about Vagabonds, then?” he asked.

“I’d never even heard the word until you came along.” Fluttershy said softly.

“When somepony kills another, intentionally or not, the dead pony’s spirit inhabits the one responsible and passes judgement on the killer until the spirit either forgives their killer or the killer dies. Arabesque has yet to forgive me, so I must continue my penance.” Vagabond explained.

“But you didn’t mean for her to be hurt, right?” Fluttershy asked.

Vagabond’s face hardened, as he tried to throw up his walls again. His will had returned in full force. He mentally repeated his old chant, *‘I am a stone. I feel nothing. I am nothing. Feel the void, the emptiness. Let it consume you. This is your life now, and your suffering will never end. This is justice for what you’ve done. Suffer until you love it.’* Vagabond repeated the old chant again and again to himself as he tried to snuff out the spark of life that had taken root.

“I would never intentionally hurt anypony,” he said, “But that doesn’t make Arabesque any more alive now does it?” his voice began growing cold, “She’s dead. Dead because of me, because of my actions, my jealousy, my selfishness. I killed her. Accident or not, it didn’t matter to anyone then and it doesn’t matter now.” Vagabond stopped and took several deep breaths, desperately trying to keep tears out of his eyes, “I’m sorry for yelling, Fluttershy. I didn’t mean to scare you, but you should be afraid. I’m the monster

that dames use to scare their foals into bed with. It is my place to suffer and I won't fight it."

"Oh, Vagabond," Fluttershy said softly, "I don't think you're a monster." she stopped and swallowed, "This all seems so cruel. Why would Arabesque do this to you?" she asked.

Vagabond couldn't figure it out. He couldn't extinguish the spark of life inside himself. The more he tried the brighter it became. He hated himself and had for years, but now something was different. There was the hint of something new, '*Maybe Arabesque will forg...*' he strictly cut off that line of thought, '*I've had that false hope before. It hurts too much to go through it again.*' Vagabond gave way to despair. It was a familiar, old friend, '*There is no redemption for Vagabonds. Just slow suffering for the rest of their lives and dying alone, forever alone. Just like I should be now. Being here won't last, I'll enjoy it while I can.*' he thought.

"It is not our place to judge things like this. The dead pass judgement on their transgressors. No pony can truly know how Arabesque feels about what I did to her, in the same way no pony can ever feel exactly how I feel about it either. I could talk about it from sunrise to sunset and still I would have only scratched the surface. No pony can know the secret thoughts of another and so any judgement call would be in error." Vagabond said.

"That makes sense, I suppose." Fluttershy said.

"I apologize for scaring you Fluttershy. I didn't mean to." Vagabond said.

"I know. I forgive you." she said.

Vagabond's face lit up, enraptured,
"You have no idea how much those three words mean to me, Fluttershy. Thank you." he said smiling.

Everypony jumped as a knock reverberated through Fluttershy's door.

Big Macintosh and Rarity went back to what they had been doing in the kitchen as Fluttershy walked over and opened the door,
"Oh, hello Pinkie Pie." Fluttershy greeted, then craned her neck to look over Pinkie's shoulder, "Who is that behind you?"

Pinkie looked over her shoulder as well,
"Hi Applejack!" she greeted.

Pinkie Pie bounded into Fluttershy's cottage, while Applejack hauled the cart up to Fluttershy's front door,
"Fluttershy, would you kindly send out Big Macintosh to help unload all this here food?" she asked, then added, "Uh, would ya happen to have anywhere to lay three little fillies what wore themselves out cryin'?"

"Oh dear, why were they crying?" Fluttershy asked.

Applejack looked away embarrassed,

“Uh, Ah might have let slip about Vagabond’s wings.” she said.

Rarity appeared at the doorway,
“Oh, the pool little darlings.” she said gently lifting the sleeping form of Sweetie Belle down from the cart.

Every uninjured pony helped bring in the food, while Vagabond watched, *‘I wish she hadn’t mentioned anything to the little ones. There is no need to traumatize them with things like that.’* he felt like it was his fault, *‘All this fuss for me? Why would anypony do this for me? I wish I could pay them back for it all.’*

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Twilight knocked on the door of Zecora’s hut.

Moments later the door opened, revealing the zebra girl,
“What seems to be the problem this time, only trouble brings you to this house of mine.” Zecora said somewhat pointedly.

Twilight wilted inwardly, Zecora had a point,
“We’ll come visit you more often Zecora, I promise. You are right though, we do have a problem.” she said.

Zecora smiled knowingly,
“Come on in and state your request, I will never mistreat a guest.” she said leading Twilight, Spoke and Rainbow Dash inside.

Zecora sat down next to her cooking pot,
“Tell me about this new issue, that you think I can help you through.” she said.

“Well I think that maybe Rainbow Dash has a ghost around her. I read in a book that said some Zebras may have special masks that let you speak with spirits. The ghost may be keeping Dash from sleeping and I want to be absolutely sure, one way or the other.” Twilight said pacing lightly.

“And you wish to use such a mask, to aid you in your task?” Zecora asked.

Twilight nodded,
“Exactly.”

Zecora stood up silently and pulled a wooden box out from underneath her bed. She opened the lid and removed a mask made of clear glass. It had strange carvings on the forehead, chin, and each cheek.

Zecora laid it down in front of Twilight,
“Using this will indeed allow to see a spirit, but see only, you will not be able to hear it.”

“Huh?” Twilight asked, “Why not?”

“The living cannot hear a spirit’s voice, but perhaps there is another choice.” Zecora said cautiously.

“What would that be?” Twilight asked.

“Put on the mask and enter a trance, I believe that is your best chance.” Zecora said.

“Trance?” Twilight asked, “What kind of trance?”

“I was taught not to use it, lest I be tempted to abuse it. For you I will break this rule, for what is knowledge if not a tool. The trance is similar to being dead, put on the mask and lay in my bed.” Zecora said.

Twilight levitated the mask onto her face, the top stopped just below her horn. She walked over and laid down in Zecora’s bed. It was comfortable. Both soft and firm at the same time. Meanwhile, Zecora walked over to her pantry and began rummaging through it.

Rainbow Dash and Spike walked over to Twilight,
“Are you sure about this Twilight? I mean, I know Zecora wouldn’t suggest it if it was dangerous and all but isn’t it, like, really scary?” Dash asked.

Twilight shook her head, her face distorted by the mask,
“Not really. Besides, now I get to know for sure what’s going on, and I can write about about it so others will know too. It’s actually really exciting.”

Rainbow Dash and Spike back-peddled to let Zecora near the bed. The zebra girl carried a jar filled with some sickly-green paste and had a small knife hung around her neck. Twilight opened her mouth to speak, but Zecora held up a hoof for silence and shook her head. Twilight stayed quiet as Zecora opened the jar. She scooped the goop up with the knife and began to fill the grooves in the mask with the stuff. Zecora took great care not to let any of it touch either Twilight or herself. Twilight’s nose twitched, the goop smelled like rotten fruit and was making her drowsy.

Zecora leaned over her and said,
“Calm yourself and be sure to close your eyes, because part of you now dies.”

Twilight could just barely hear Zecora, her ears were roaring. She closed her eyes and suddenly she was back in Zecora’s hut. Everything was identical except that instead of Zecora, Rainbow Dash, and Spike standing next to the bed, there was a light-red pegasus filly with silver-green mane and tail staring at her.

“Hello Twilight Sparkle.” the pegasus said.

Her voice was nearly as soft as Fluttershy’s but more deep, almost husky like Rainbow Dash. Twilight suddenly became very nervous. The pegasus’ eyes were pure white and seemed to bore into Twilight’s soul.

Twilight finally found her voice,
“Arabesque.” she whispered.