

Zecora turned her head to the side, so that the tears rolling off her muzzle would not fall upon the picture of Ponyville she had painstakingly drawn. Every feature was present in this rendering; Sugar Cube Corner in all its intricate detail, even with Pinkie Pie smiling out a window, waving as if in welcome.

Rarity's boutique was drawn with such care that even the prim and exacting fashionista, as she referred to herself as, would find no fault. Every curve of every beam precise, as was the color and shading of the roof, walls, windows. One could very nearly draw a blueprint from the picture and build it, if one was so inclined. In this picture, Rarity was drawn wearing one of her most elegant and colorful of dresses, and easily stole attention from her boutique that she stood in front of.

Sweet Apple Acres was off to the left of town, and was so represented in her drawing. The rows of apple trees placed with care, the farmhouse in the center of it all, accurately placed and represented. Applejack was drawn carefully, a mischievous expression on her muzzle as she bucked a tree in which Rainbow Dash was napping. Little AppleBloom sat nearby, watching, a giggle on her little muzzle and her bow bright and red as it held back the filly's unruly mane. Big Macintosh was drawn pulling a plow in a nearby field, but was also looking at the silliness about to unfold with an amused half-smile on his broad muzzle.

Off the other end of town was Fluttershy's cottage. Zecora had a deep and abiding respect for that mare, for she had given herself completely to her chosen tasks, much as Zecora had with hers. Fluttershy was absolutely dedicated to the care of the small life that looked to her for help and assistance. Because of that, Zecora had spent several days drawing Fluttershy laying in front of her little cottage, surrounded by all the little animals that she'd helped. Bunnies, turtles, snakes, birds, everything surrounded her, and her wise and kind smile seemed meant for each and every one of them.

The central park was also lovingly rendered, with the little trails that wound in and out of the carefully groomed gardens. The little gazebo in the center overlooked a small little reflecting pond that was tastefully dotted with lily-pads and small critters. The bench in the gazebo, Zecora had drawn with special care, for on her last spirit walk through town, she had been privileged enough to witness Lyra and Bon-Bon's first kiss and felt the backwash of joy that rippled through the immediate area. Zecora felt a bit bad about that; she hadn't intended to intrude on so private a moment. She had simply been passing through on a spirit walk and looked up at exactly the right time to have caught the magical moment.

Zecora had drawn this from memory, since she was not welcome in or welcomed by the residents of, Ponyville. Being a Shaman, she routinely spirit-walked around the Everfree forest as well as Ponyville, keeping an eye on things and looking for problems of a spiritual nature that she might be able to help with. Yet she was pariah, outcast, from Ponyville by will of its denizens; cursed to be alone due to her being from another land and following other ways. It had been this way from the very first time she tried to meet the ponies; they had shunned her, ran inside their huts, shut the doors, and basically left her standing alone in the middle of the street while they covered in fear.

It was breaking Zecora's heart. She had put so much effort into becoming a Shaman so that she could help her people. Part of that effort was having to leave her people and come to this place, to learn other ways so that she might be a better bridge for her people and the ponies in the future. Yet the ponies wanted absolutely nothing to do with her. She couldn't learn from them if they wouldn't speak to her and she couldn't help them if they wouldn't let her speak to them.

For the very first time in her life, she wondered if she'd made the right choices. She found herself starting to wonder if she shouldn't send a spirit's message to Ayada, asking if she must remain here, or if she could find another place to be. Or, Spirits forbid, asking if she had indeed made a mistake and if she shouldn't see about coming home early. That sadness had taken root in Zecora's heart and was growing with each passing day. She couldn't keep on, not like this. Not for too much longer, anyway.

Sighing, Zecora rolled up the picture and set it back on a shelf. She withdrew three sticks of incense, and carefully lit the ends, setting them before her sleeping mat. She sprawled on the mat, nose resting on the ground, as she inhaled deeply from the incense, and closed her eyes, using a meditation technique to relax her stressed body.

Zecora would meditate on this problem, and spend as much time as needed contemplating how she came to this place in the Everfree Forest. Then she would deliberate what it was she should do. For if her heart broke, she would be of no use to anyone, and might even become a danger. There were darker spirits that sought out wounded Shaman to poison with sadness and despair. This, Zecora could not allow.

Relaxing, she inhaled deeply again, and thought long and hard about how she had made the journey to the Everfree Forest.

It had been six months ago that Zecora had left her village, after becoming a Shaman. One reason for this was due to the fact that a village, by custom and tribal law, could only have one Shaman at a time. The second, and perhaps more important reason is that she was still very young and inexperienced. A new Shaman was sent out into the world to learn about it through direct experience, as it was believed that it would temper the Shaman and provide them with a greater depth and breadth of skills with which to guide her people when the time came.

Zecora had learned many things along the way to the Everfree Forest, the first of which was that she not only could, but **WOULD** get dreadfully seasick if there's even the slightest bit of.. what was the word the Captain had used? 'Chop'.. yes, that was it. She would get dreadfully seasick if there was the slightest bit of chop to the water. She had spent many long hours draped over the side of the sailing ship that brought her to the 'New World', much to the amusement of the Captain, crew, and very likely the water elementals.

She had sighed in relief when, after a week out at sea, the sails had gone slack and the ship would actually float without bobbing about like a leaf in a watering hole. The other passengers and the crew of the ship, being more worldly than she, were not. In fact, they'd seemed downright afraid. Zecora wasn't entirely certain why, but it had been enough that after five days becalmed, the Captain asked the passengers if there was any that had experience with weather magic.

Zecora didn't per se, but being aligned with the Spirits conferred at least the ability to ask for certain favors, and so at the Captain's behest, Zecora had scribed a circle around the main mast whilst chanting in her native tongue. She hadn't even finished the first verse of the Honorarium to the Air Spirits let alone even **STARTED** the lengthy Summonings before the circle began to glow warmly and the sails billowed out.

It had taken every ounce of her control and discipline to keep chanting and not run for the railing again, as the ship surged forward. No, she had to complete the Honorarium, and the lengthy Summoning, as well as the Requests, as well as express her thanks before she could give in to the nausea that threatened to disrupt her efforts to free the calmed ship. Once the ship was well on its way with a strong Air Spirit inhabiting the sails for the time being, she **DID** avail herself of the nearest railing, fairly convinced that the Water Spirits had it in for her *personally*.

Fortunately for her, one of the other passengers was what they called an 'Apothecary' with knowledge of the New World herbs equal to her knowledge of the old. Just as fortunate was that this Apothecary knew of an herbal infusion that could cure seasickness as well as had the supplies with her. A scant few hours after that, Zecora was feeling well again, and spent many a long hour comparing notes with the Apothecary who went by the name of Shin Zhen, from Neighpon.

Zecora had learned the New World names for all of her current herbs, and learned many others that she had not encountered before, where they might be found, and their medicinal properties. In just those few short hours, she'd more than doubled her knowledge of herbs and herbal remedies. She had expressed a wish to do something for him in return, but Shin Zhen had politely refused, indicating that the ship not being becalmed any longer was quite sufficient. Moreover, it had been many years since he'd had such an apt student and such knowledge was meant to be shared in any event to those that could learn it and would use it appropriately.

This was not the only expression of gratitude she'd received, either. A tailor happened to be on board and had made her some waterproof saddlebags to carry her belongings in, as well as a very comfortable weatherproof travel cloak that pulled up over her head and covered her nearly to her hooves. A carpenter had made a small herb carrying case for the most potent of her medicinal supply for easy access for emergencies... or bouts of sea-sickness.

Thanks to the vigor of the Air Spirit that had taken up residence in the ship's sails, the vessel had been able to recover all the lost time from the days becalmed and even came into port slightly ahead of schedule. The Captain expressed HIS gratitude by refunding the entire cost of her passage, which was a fair amount of bits in her carry purse.

The very concept of currency was foreign to Zecora. In her homeland, it was a barter economy. If someone needed a new spear, they would trade something the spearmaker needed or wanted. The idea of trading little symbols for goods was a strange one; what value did these chunks of metal have? They couldn't be used to make anything; the metal was too soft. It wasn't gold, nor was it precious in any way. Yet the New World seemed to make much to-do about these 'bits' and used them for nearly everything. Zecora made a mental note to ask Hidaya about it, when she could. Perhaps he could shed some light onto this concept for her.

Zecora also learned that some ponies were quite honest and friendly, even to strangers such as herself. She had entered a small town near the harbor she had arrived at, and in the course of walking through, had decided she was hungry. She'd stopped by a food stand that had something that looked and smelled a lot like groundnut stew from her homeland. As it turned out, it WAS, just using something called a 'peanut' and 'potato' instead of what she was familiar with. It was incredibly tasty, and just about right with spices. She'd paid for her dinner with some of these 'bits' and had evidently gotten it wrong.

She'd been about a block away when the proprietor's young daughter had chased her down, asking her to return to the stall for 'change'. Zecora hadn't known what that was, but as it turns out, she'd dramatically 'overpaid'. Seeing that she had no idea what the 'denominations' of 'bits' were, the proprietor took pity on her and spent an hour going over her money supply. Zecora now understood what the markings on the bits meant, and how many bits would pay for what. Zecora had also been cautioned that others would seek to take advantage of her, and to make sure she knew what she was buying before she actually paid for it. Zecora had bobbed her head in gratitude, drawn her cloak's hood over her head, and headed off out of town.

Many ponies in that town had been quite kind to her, and the air did seem a trifle dry. They might not allow her to do much for them, but she COULD beg a Blessing from the Water Spirits in the form of adequate rain for them. She lowered her head and dug at the ground with her hoof, whilst whispering the chant in her native tongue. She had just finished beseeching a light, soaking rain for the town when an elderly pony in a large hat came up to her. He also had a number of younger ponies with him, and the younger ones looked none too pleased.

Fortunately, the elder one had heard of her folk through his great-grandmare; evidently one of Zecora's kind had passed through two or three generations back, and he had recalled the blessing. It also helped that clouds had begun to gather around the dry town and surrounding fields, blanketing the area in a medium soaking rain; not enough to be a deluge, but it was quite evident that it would be more than enough to make up for the drought that had been ongoing. With a tip of his hat and a friendly smile, the Constable had nodded to Zecora, and headed back into town after apologizing for the misunderstanding. The Deputies too had thanked her; several of them had family farms nearby that were close to being lost due to the dry spell. This

would see them back to normal, and as such, they were most wholeheartedly grateful. Zecora smiled, and bid them well, continuing on her journey.

The next moment of note occurred some time later as she arrived in the vicinity of a castle built into the side of a mountain. She was a Shaman, and therefore quite well tuned to the spirits. That castle was nearly blindingly bright with spiritual energy, when Zecora gazed at it. She could only assume it was the home of the Spirit of Spirits; she who watched over all.

Zecora had paused, deciding to camp within sight of that city in the mountainside for a day to think. Her people had legends of a time when the Gods and Goddesses had lived with them, as a part of them. It was they who had taught them how to be Shaman in the first place. She had never uncovered in any of her studies *WHY* they had left. Left they had, however, leaving her people on their own. Part of her had wanted very much to go to that castle and see if the Gods and Goddesses were indeed there and ask why they left.

It almost hurt, in several respects. Zecora's people had dedicated themselves to the Spirits' service. It was their life, their reason for being. They held the ancestral lands because the Gods and Goddesses had asked them to. They fought a daily battle against the harsh environment and the creatures that sought to take the lands from them. If the Gods and Goddesses had simply relocated over here, were the sacrifices of her people even needed, any longer? Could they not then leave for a more agreeable climate?

Then there was the matter of these ponies not knowing a single thing about the Old Ways. Not a one that she had encountered so far seemed to be spiritually inclined. She knew enough to understand that appearances could be deceiving, but thusfar it certainly felt that way. Why then, did these ponies not have their own Shaman? They had no spiritualists at all, as far as she could tell. Had the Gods and Goddesses also abandoned the old ways, too? She was almost afraid that she and her kind were antiques, relics of a forgotten age. Discards.

After soul-searching, Zecora decided that even if all the above were true, even if the Gods and Goddesses had indeed abandoned her people... even if the Gods and Goddesses had abandoned the old ways... it didn't change anything. Her people had given their word that they would guard the ancestral lands, and that they would keep things together in her homeland. At some point, she **WOULD** ask the Spirit of Spirits if it was time for her people to lay their burden down, but that time was not yet.

Zecora had broken camp in the morning, and walked the last leg of her journey to the Everfree Forest, arriving at its entrance. The first order of business would be to find her home. She wasn't entirely certain how it would be revealed to her, but was absolutely certain it would be. She walked slowly down the path, taking the forest into her senses. The sights and sounds and smells, all wove a tapestry that she had not yet begun to learn. In time, she knew, she would come to know this forest as well as she did her village. She heard rustlings of creatures, but also felt them moving away from her; the PONIES might have forgotten or never learned the old ways, but the creatures always remembered. They knew what a Shaman was, and knew it would be wise to steer clear. She was very much a force to be reckoned with, even if they only knew it on an instinctual level.

After about an hour of slow strolling through the forest, Zecora caught sight of an oddly shaped tree. She grinned to herself; it had to be Hidayya's work, for the misshapen stump of a tree looked very similar to one of the Shaman's masks; in specific, the one that said 'Welcome Home'. She walked over to it carefully, and to either side of the stump appeared two magical torches that glowed with a warm yellow light that cast a soft glow upon a path that had not been there a moment before. As she walked along the path, it extended off and to the side, looking as if it had always been there, even though it hadn't.

The end of the pathway was marked by a clearing, in which piles of building materials began to slowly appear. Before her eyes, the piles began to levitate and separate, beginning to spin around in a whirlwind blur of wood and thatch. Gradually, she saw her home taking shape; a rough outer frame appeared first. Zecora felt a little questioning whisper at her ear; she smiled gently, and began to describe where she might like the different rooms and furnishings to be.

The hut rapidly began to take form; she saw the wind spirits weave the thatch together to form the different antechambers around the perimeter of the hut. The earth spirits dug out the main fire pit, as well as a smaller meditation pit that was close to her sleeping mats. The food preparation area was off to one side, and the earth elementals seemed to be having fun digging out storage areas to keep the foodstuffs cool.

Of course, the elements didn't necessarily get along; earth and water seemed to be picking friendly fights with fire and air by flipping clods of earth and rock at high

velocity as fire and air were trying to bake the soft earth to the consistency of stone to assure an even burn of the wood therein. Fire and air retaliated in turn by sending near scalding gusts at earth and water, which resulted in a dust-storm inside her hut that rapidly turned into a mud-storm. Still, this was not without use. She requested that the spirits kindly aim the mud flinging to the walls; it would make a fine insulation against the weather. Plus, it WAS rather cute in a way to see them having fun like that. Fortunately, they also cleaned up after themselves as they wove the inner thatch to seal the mud insulation into the walls.

She stepped inside to find a gentle fire burning in the main pit and furnishings up on the wall. The spirits had been storing the goods burned upon her funeral pyre until she'd arrived. The decorations were lovely; the tribal masks from her people graced the walls, little sticks of unlit incense here and there would provide a gentle reminder of home whenever she wished. The food preparation area was well stocked, and a quick glance in the underground cold-room showed that she would not lack for provisions for quite some time. The Spirits had been keeping all of this elsewhere, so that it would be fresh when she arrived. She smiled, chuckling; the spirits were also clearly intending to live with her, and she had no problems with that.

Zecora could hear a stream from out behind her hut; she investigated and saw that indeed, a cool springs was present. She hung her traveling cloak on the peg by the door, and left her meditation staff by the fire. What she wanted first and foremost was a bath to wash the trail dust from her; and then a good, long sleep. Heading out back, she saw that yes indeed, there was a cool spring deep enough for her to submerge in, should she wish to. Right now, she very MUCH wished to, and so sank herself into the refreshing waters. The dust and grime of the road washed away, and the coolness of the water was soothing on her tired body. She climbed back out after vigorously scrubbing herself clean, and shook herself dry before heading back inside.

Deciding she would sleep first before heading to Ponyville for the first time, she curled up by the warm fire, feeling the dampness from the bath evaporate away. The light within the hut dimmed by itself; the hut seemed to have an awareness of its Mistress and her needs and desires. She smiled, offering up a silent thanks to Hidayya and her people for being so very thoughtful for her. Closing her eyes, she felt herself slip beneath the gentle covers of sleep, letting the trials and stresses of the past few months fade. She was, at long last, home. Here she would remain until she either went to replace Hidayya as Shaman to her village, or the Spirits ordered her to move to a different location. Something told her, though, that it would be right here she'd stay for a long time; the Everfree forest just FELT like a place that had a great deal that needed doing.

The night was uneventful, and Zecora found herself well-rested come morning's first light. She climbed up and refreshed herself with another dunk in the river, and then nosed about inside the baskets and cabinets for breakfast. Finding something quite tasty, she sat at the meditation fire pit, thinking on the upcoming day. She ate breakfast, thinking on the sights and sounds she might soon see, for she was about to meet the inhabitants of Ponyville. It was something she was very much looking forward to; she wondered what tales they would tell, and what stories she could share with them. It promised to be an exciting time, to be certain!

Only it hadn't turned out that way. She had barely set hoof in Ponyville when she heard screaming and saw the ponies begin to mill about. Convinced that it was some sort of animal invasion, Zecora whirled around and dropped her head defensively to lend assistance to the town, only to find that there was nothing coming. Thinking it might have been a playful prank, Zecora grinned and turned around... only to have her grin slowly drop away to an expression of sadness and shock. The streets were empty. The doors closed tight. The shutters were drawn, and from somewhere, somehow, a *tumbleweed* had drifted across the street.

They were gone. Truly *gone*. They were *afraid* of her, and she hadn't done anything other than step into town. Surprised and saddened, Zecora had quietly turned away from town, shuffling back to her hut. She had spirit-walked that same day, heading back to Ponyville to see if she might find the source of her mistake. What had she done wrong? Had she violated some taboo?

She hadn't. The town had returned to normal by the time she'd returned in spirit form. The bustle of the town, the sights, smells. All were as she had imagined. Perhaps it was just a mistake. Zecora decided she would try again in a week. Maybe she had simply surprised them.

The next week was even worse than the first. In addition to the screaming and the fleeing, some pony had flung an apple at her, which had hit her right in the forehead. She simply had to face the reality; she was NOT welcome in Ponyville.

Zecora sighed, coming out of her meditative trance and immediately slipping into a spirit walk. Her heart felt heavier, but at least she now understood more clearly. She was not welcome, and she likely never would be welcome in Ponyville. She had been trying to get to know the ponies for over a month, and the very best she had achieved was to get pelted by an apple. No. It was done. It was over. She would move on, in the

morning. But first, she could not resist one last walk through Ponyville as a spirit. One more time of allowing herself the illusion of belonging.

She stepped out of her hut, and almost immediately tripped over the spirit of a little pegasus filly. She couldn't have been older than four, with a resplendent red mane, cream colored pelt and wings, and the most expressive emerald green eyes she'd ever seen.

"Miss? I'm sorry... could.. could you please help me? I'm lost.. I can't find my way back to Ponyville. Could you help me, please?" The little one looked up into Zecora's eyes, so full of fear and sadness.

Zecora was afraid she might have to take this little one to the Summer-Lands for a moment, before she realized she could see the ubiquitous white cord that bound all spirits to their bodes until they died. The child's cord was strong, but slowly weakening as if prolonged separation was eroding away at it. Fortunately, since she was in spirit form, she could talk as herself instead as Shaman. The foal might have trouble understanding her, otherwise.

"Of course, little one. Let's get you back to where you belong. What's your name?" Zecora asked, smiling gently.

The little filly smiled up at her, fanning her wings a bit. Even in the spirit realm, it kicked up gentle currents of air, as she did it out of the joy of it. "I'm Summer Storm! Who're you, Ma'am?"

"My name is Zecora, Summer. It's a pleasure to meet you, but I do wish it'd been under better circumstances. Are you sick? Is that how you wandered all the way out here?"

Summer nodded. "Yes, Miss Zecora. I got really sick after I ate a plant, and my mommy and daddy brought me to the hospital."

Zecora smiled gently. "Well, let's get you back home, Summer Storm. Here, I'll even carry you, if you'd like!" She hunkered down so that the little one could climb atop her back, should she wish.

Summer did wish, bounding up with a giggle and a happy exclamation that she was about to get a horseback ride like when she was little. This made Zecora smile, since she still WAS little, of course. The offer to carry her was genuine, but it also served another purpose. With the little one resting on her back, it made the entire process of trying to trace her life cord much easier.

“So, Summer. Tell me what happened. You just got sick after eating a plant, you said?” Zecora asked as she walked, following Summer’s path.

“Yeah. I was playing with some friends from Ponyville, and I got hungry. I saw this really pretty flower, and I ate it! It was really tasty, too. But I started feeling really icky in my tummy. My friends didn’t see me eat the flower, though! We don’t have flowers like that in Cloudsdale! That’s where I’m from, where ALL pegasus ponies are from!” She fanned her wings again, and Zecora permitted her to lift the both of them up. The little filly’s squee of delight was well worth the effort.

“My! With such strong wings, you must be the absolute best flyer ever!” Zecora winked.

“Naw, THAT is Rainbow Dash. She’s the fastest flyer in all of Equestria! I hope she’ll teach me to fly someday.” Summer giggled.

“Well, I think you’ll do just fine, Summer Storm. Now tell me about this flower that you ate.” Zecora walked at a steady pace, growing closer to Ponyville with each step.

Summer Storm tilted her head to the side, thinking. “Um.. it was really pretty! It smelled sweet, too. It had red and blue petals. Oh! And it had thorns, too.”

Arching an eyebrow, Zecora looked to the sides of the trail. After a bit, she found what she sought, and carried Summer over to it. “Was it this, dear? Is that what you ate?”

“Yeah, that’s it! I ate three whole flowers!” Summer nodded enthusiastically.

Fortunately, Summer couldn’t see the shocked expression on Zecora’s muzzle. Three whole flowers was enough to send six adult Zebra into the spirit world for a lunar cycle. For the little one to have consumed so much and survived bespoke no small amount of talent, or at least constitution. Fortunately, Zecora knew the antidote to

Dreamwalker Rose poisoning. “Alright, Summer. I know how to make you feel better now. It’s going to be a bit weird, but I’m going to take you back to your room in the hospital. It’s very, VERY important that you *stay* there, okay? If you wander off again, I won’t be able to find you so easily.”

Summer nodded, burying her tiny muzzle against Zecora’s neck. “I won’t. I promise. I just tried to follow Daddy and got lost.”

Soon, Zecora had traced the cord up into Ponyville General. She walked through the door with Summer still on her back, and saw her still form in the bed, surrounded by doctors and nurses. “Alright, Summer. You stay right here, okay? I’m going to go get the medicine that will make you better, now.”

The foal fluttered off of her back and sat beside herself on the bed, looking down. “Ewwwww. I’m DROOLING!”

Zecora chuckled, and ended her spirit walk, slowly fading back into her hut. She gathered up a few medicinal herbs, placing them into her carry pouch. Since she wasn’t going to want to take it with her when she departed, she also took the picture she’d drawn of Ponyville. Perhaps Summer would like it as a memento.

Mentally preparing herself for the rejection of the ponies, Zecora walked back to Ponyville, herbs and gift in tow. True to form, the instant she stepped into town, everypony disappeared and the tumbleweeds rolled unchecked through the street. This time, Zecora had a mission... a purpose other than socialization. She knew the route to Ponyville General, and climbed the stairs, nosing the door open and walking over to the front desk.

As it turned out, the doctor treating little Summer was at the desk, and, though he took a step back in surprise as he saw her and swallowed hard, stood his ground and asked, “M.. may I help you? I’m Doctor Whisper.”

Zecora put a Dreamwalker Rose onto the counter. “Summer Storm ate this flower, but she did not know it had some power. Dreamwalker Rose poisoning I know by rote, but I also have the antidote.” She put a small pouch of herbs next to the Dreamwalker Rose. “Infuse these herbs into a tea; have her drink it and she will waken, you will see.”

Dr. Whisper blinked, ears folding back and a light flush creeping up his neck and

muzzle as he looked at the flower. A little grin crept across his muzzle. "Oh, yes. I remember THIS flower." At a snerk from the attending nurse, the Doctor grinned and replied, "What? It was in medical school. Purely for.. research purposes, I assure you."

"My flank, it was." The nurse grinned, shaking her head. "Miss Zecora.. YOU know that flower as 'Dreamwalker Rose'. Officially, it's called 'Stargazer', but unofficially it's called the 'Freshman Fifteen'. Eat a leaf, go on a nice little trip for about an hour, and then proceed to eat any and all food in the immediate area. Nearly guaranteed to make one gain about fifteen pounds during the course of a semester. It's harmless. Stargazer couldn't have done this to her. She's one sick little girl, so please stop wasting our time."

Zecora's eyes flashed. "Summer Storm is small and petite. Three whole flowers did she eat. One leaf and after the trip you crave a snack. Three whole flowers and from the trip you do not come back. You say you know the Stargazer's touch. Yet I say you do not know so very much. The trip you take is quite real and what the eyes would see, the spirit would feel. Summer's life is at stake, so why won't you this seriously take?"

Dr. Whisper smiled indulgently. "Come with me, Nurse. Miss Zecora." The doctor picked up the flower and led them into Summer's room. She was unchanged; still unconscious. The doctor closed the door and drew the curtains shut. "Alright, Miss Zecora. I'll give you one chance to convince me that you're right. I'll try to keep an open mind. You seem honest, if strange, to me."

Zecora nodded. "Of the Stargazer, what do you know? Eat a leaf and off on a trip you go? Stargazer's a name that implies something with sight, so here's an idea to try if you might. Crush a leaf and rub under your eyes, then be prepared for quite the surprise. Doctor, you go first and write down what you see. Do not tell the nurse, and do not tell me. Nurse, you go next and write down notes to compare, then we shall see what truly is there."

The doctor shrugged. "Why not? Stargazer can't cause any effect that way." He made sure there was a notepad and pen nearby, then did as Zecora had asked. He picked up the notepad and paper with a smirk on his face.. until he looked at the bed. He blinked, then rapidly wrote down a few sentences.

Nurse Tenderheart did the same, crushing a leaf and rubbing it under her eyes.

She too blinked when she looked at the bed, jotting down some notes.

“Done this way, the effect doesn’t last. Wait a minute more and the effects will have passed. Once you can see both clear and true, then compare notes and we shall decide what to do.”

The notes were compared, and they were identical. Both Dr. Whisper and Nurse Tenderheart had seen the spirit of little Summer Storm waving at them, sitting on the bed. This would have absolutely been dismissed as mere hallucination, but without them talking about it.. how could they have the SAME hallucination? Dr. Whisper and Nurse Tenderheart shared a somewhat shaken glance before turning back to Zecora.

Zecora grinned a bit and shook her head. “Told you I did, but believe me you did not. That’s how we found ourselves in a bit of a spot. If more proof you need, I have none through talk. We must eat a leaf and go for a walk. Nurse, I must ask that you stay behind. If you were to watch over us, it would be most kind.”

Dr. Whisper stared at that flower as Zecora pulled off two leaves. The Zebra slid one of them over to him, and the other in front of herself.

“I eat my leaf and I hope you do too, for taking a Walk is the best thing to do. For when we go on our walk this day, the spirits will surely have their say. What you see and hear will all be true, but it won’t necessarily be me telling them to you. The choice is yours, and little Summer waits. I join her now, so you’ll decide BOTH our fates.”

With that, Zecora ate the leaf before her and soon her head rested gently on the side of little Summer’s bed.

Dr. Whisper looked at the leaf and to Nurse Tenderheart. “Would you watch out for us, Nurse? I think.. I ought to, after what we saw.”

Nurse Tenderheart nodded slowly. “If what we saw is true, then we’re wasting valuable time. I’ll get three doses of the antidote ready. I’ll give you thirty minutes.”

Dr. Whisper sighed, and picked up his leaf. He looked at it with a bit of a grin. “Never thought I’d be doing this, again.” He ate the leaf, chewing it well.. remembering

some of the sillier things he'd done in his medical career. He was hoping this would not be one of them.

Summer Storm flung herself from across the room, giggling happily and nearly tackled him with a tight hug. "Dr. Whisper! You came! I was hoping you would."

Dr. Whisper stared down into those brilliant emerald eyes with a smile. "Ah, so we're awake, then?" He looked over, and saw Summer still lying on the bed.

"No, silly. You're here, with Zecora and me!" She laughed. "And you're drooling worse than I am!" Summer giggled. "And I was drooling pretty bad. It's so gross!"

Zecora looked over and grinned. "As a spirit, normally I do not rhyme but something is certainly special, this time. When doing a Shaman's duty as I do right now, rhyme I must though sometimes I don't know how. Forgive any lapses and strange words I might choose, but there just isn't too much time we can lose."

Summer nodded, smiling up at Dr. Whisper. "What she said. But I'll help! There's a few ponies that wanted to see you again." She trotted through the door which remained closed, then poked her head back through. "Well, come on!"

"Spirits we are and can walk through a door. it isn't hard, nor particularly a chore. Let's follow Summer and go where we must for only that way could I possibly earn your trust." Zecora walked through the door, literally, and waited in the hall.

Dr. Whisper followed soon thereafter, and was looking around. "Everything looks so STRANGE.."

"Yeah, that's because they're as they really ARE. Everything is real clear here, like this." Summer said, smiling. She was slowly walking down the hallway. "If it's in the shadows, avoid it though. That's where the bad things are. Or the bad things go. I saw a pony get eaten by the shadows earlier today." She shivered. "It was real scary."

"Not all spirits are good, and that makes me sad. Shadows await those that are bad. The Summer-Lands are not the only place to go. The other? You **REALLY** do not want to know." Zecora shuddered. She'd had the misfortune of seeing that, too.

"Doctor Whisper? Doctor Whisper! Over here!!" a voice called out.

Doctor Whisper turned and came face to face with a patient that had died on his

operating table that day. And yet here she was, hale and hearty... for a spirit. "Dawn?! Dawn Sunfire? You.. you.."

Dawn grinned. "Yes, Doctor Whisper. I died. This morning, actually. I wanted to thank you for doing everything you could. It just wasn't meant to be. I was asked to wait a bit before I found out if I was Light or Shadow, just to see if I got the chance to talk to you one more time." She wrapped her hooves around Dr. Whisper's neck, giving him a warm hug. "Thanks, Doctor. For everything."

Dr. Whisper hugged back, chuckling. "What, no messages for those left behind? Words of wisdom to impart from beyond?"

"Not allowed, Doctor," Dawn winked. "Believe me, I would if I could. But when the entity that asked me to wait around a little while told me not to answer certain things? Yeah. You LISTEN. The ONE thing I was told I could tell you is that you do wonderful work and have earned the love and trust of the ponies that look to you. But you do need to keep an open mind. There's more out there, than just your science." She looked up, and grinned. "YESSS! No shadows for me. Warmth and sun..." She gradually faded from sight.

Feeling somewhat out of sorts, Dr. Whisper continued walking down the hall, seeing his hospital from an entirely new viewpoint. Suddenly there was a bright streak of light that shot through the hall and into one of the unused treatment rooms. He blinked and galloped forward, sticking his head through the wall.

Zecora moved a hoof out, preventing Summer from following. She grinned widely. "What goes on is friends having... fun. The bolt of light was their blessed surprise, I'm guessing a son."

Dr. Whisper was blushing wildly when he pulled his head back. "Those two interns! They're..." He looked down and saw Summer grinning back up at him. "... enjoying each other's company. A great deal.."

"Zecora said that they're gonna have a son!" Summer beamed. "Maybe I'll meet him, someday!"

A slow, mischievous grin spread across his muzzle. "I do think I'll have a bit of fun with them later." At Zecora's frown he shook his head. "No, no. Nothing bad, on my word. Just perhaps a congratulatory note, and a party celebrating their being a couple."

Zecora's frown lightened, and she chuckled, nodding. "A playful tease would be okay. Such a thing would brighten their day. Breaking of privacy though is never right for knowing too much would cause them a fright."

Sitting down in the hallway, Summer tilted her head this way and that. "I THINK she means that it's not good to go poking your nose around all the time like we are right now, because it's not something we'd normally see."

"I understand, and trust me.. I won't abuse the privilege," Dr. Whisper agreed.

Summer smiled. "Can I take him to the foaling place?"

Zecora grinned and nodded. "The foaling nursery is something to see. Endless flows of possibility! Hopes, dreams, and love are all in one place. It could make even the coldest heart race. This then is your reward for a job well done for the LIFE there is as bright as the sun."

Doctor Whisper knew the way, and he gasped as he came around the corner to the main Ponyville Maternity Nursery. It was everything they said it was. He could SEE the brightness, the vibrancy. The LOVE was absolutely all-encompassing. If the Hospital itself was crystal clear, this room made the hospital look downright muddy in comparison. He felt the possibility of each life in the room beyond the glass window. Each soul, slowly growing and changing. It was like the most brilliant display of color he could ever have imagined. It put the rainbow factory in Cloudsdale to shame in terms of raw, intense, vibrant color.

Zecora gently nosed at Summer's ear. "Doctor, your walk will soon end. This time with you was a pleasure to spend. The time comes to make your decision, true.. for soon you must decide what it is you will do. There's enough herbs for antidotes three, so please cure little Summer before you cure me."

Summer smiled and hugged Doctor Whisper again. "Now you've seen your hospital as it really is, and not just how you've seen it. I trust Zecora totally. You should too. Trust her. She's telling you the truth."

Dr. Whisper hugged her back, and turned to watch the beauty of the nursery. He gradually began to fade away, and was soon gone.

“Do you think he listened?” Summer asked, leaning against Zecora before hugging her again, too.

“I think so, little Summer, I honestly do. He’s been given a gift, offered to few. He’s seen his hospital full of beauty and grace. He’s seen the nursery, a magical place. Soon I think, you’ll begin to wake for the chance we gave him, he’s going to take.”

Summer faded and was gone shortly thereafter. Zecora turned and just watched the beauty and peace of the nursery, offering soft little prayers for each and every soul therein. It truly was her most favorite place in the hospital, and even, perhaps, all of Ponyville. She would miss it, and that’s a fact.

When she felt the tingle of her walk ending, she turned away and closed her eyes, unwilling to remember the beauty of that place as anything other fully magnificent. Summer’s room resolved around her and she lifted her head. Summer had already awakened, and was giggling softly as she hugged the Doctor, and the nurse.. and finally Zecora herself as she woke up.

Zecora ruffled the filly’s shock-red mane playfully and smiled to Doctor Whisper. “Well done, Doctor Whisper, you’ve done the right thing. When they see their daughter, her parents will sing. Thank you for not sending me away, for letting me help, and for letting me stay. I’ll go now, and trouble you no more. Bearing my company for Ponyville’s a chore.”

Doctor Whisper looked at Nurse Tenderheart who nodded, then looked back to Zecora. “Zecora, about that. I can’t control what the ponies do or say. But I can definitely tell you that you’ve saved little Summer’s life. I’d never have thought of Stargazer overdose. I’d also never have thought to use it to save her. You may only have convinced the three of us, but we WILL speak well of you to the others. It will take time, but I promise you.. Ponies aren’t a bad lot. We truly aren’t. A bit superstitious and ignorant and willful sometimes, but not bad. Please, stay? I’d like to learn from you, if I can... if you’d teach me and help me with spirits, herbs and herbal remedies.”

This is what Zecora had desperately needed. She *needed* to be needed. Tears in her eyes, she nodded and replied to the doctor while smiling, “Help with spirits and teach what I know? With such work to be done, how could I go. My hut is in the forest Everfree. Whenever you need, a friend inside there will be.”

Zecora left the hospital then, escorted by both Nurse Tenderheart and Dr. Whisper. They were smiling which drew interested and curious glances in her direction, but none other approached her. She might have saved Summer Storm, but Summer Storm had in turn saved HER. She had hope again, hope that things would turn out alright in time. Even the mistrusting ponies outside the Hospital and in the town didn't bother her, nor stop her from smiling. She had a Hospital to help, and though it would take time, the tide had begun to turn. Eventually, she would be able to look out for Ponyville in the body. Until then, she'd guard Ponyville's spirit.