

Chapter 8: Falling Star

*Then I heard your heart beating, you  
were in the darkness too  
So I stayed in the darkness with you*

---

Mint-Als were a kind of stimulant drug, Chrys explained to me after she cast a spell on Starry that stopped her convulsions—a paralyzing spell, she had said. It was the only thing she could think to do, if nothing else than to just keep Starry from hurting herself any further.

"I need to go get help," Chrys said. "You stay here with Starry while I go find Kijiba."

I knelt down next to Starry, looking over her. She was on her side, completely limp, though her eyes stayed open and stared straight ahead, fixed as though they were watching some faraway horror. Spittle frothed at the corner of her lips.

"What do I do?" I asked, glancing up at Chrys.

"Just . . . keep her company. Make sure she doesn't stop breathing," Chrys answered hesitantly before she turned and galloped off into the woods.

I looked down at Starry again, and for a while all I could do was sit there and watch her chest rise and fall with each breath. I wanted to reach out to her, hold her, but I was afraid. I feared that if I touched her, it would only hurt more if—if she . . . didn't make it.

I fought back tears. I couldn't start crying. I had to be strong. I had to do something, but there was nothing to be done.

One of Starry's saddlebags had come open while she had been seizing. Its contents had spilled out all around her. So, for lack of anything else I could do to help her, I started gathering up her things and putting them back into her bag. Among them, I found her aspirin bottle.

The bottle had been a lie the entire time. I gritted my teeth as I stared at the faded, benign label on the bottle and thought about the poison that had been inside it all along. It made my wings bristle and my mane stand on end to think about how stupid I had been.

And in that moment, I felt a sudden, primal urge within me: There was one thing I could do. I didn't have to think about it, or worry if it was the right thing to do—doing it was the only thing I could do. And even if it were wrong to do it, I wouldn't care. I threw the bottle into the darkness, where I heard it crash through the branches and land somewhere out there where I couldn't see

it anymore, where it would stay lost.

As soon as it was gone, I felt weak again, like I had after Chrys had fed off me. My heart was racing, pounding inside my chest, but it was a distant sensation, as though it weren't my heart or my chest. I sat down and watched over Starry in numb silence. The near-total darkness that had pervaded the forest was somehow seeming to dissipate. But the dim light that filtered in to replace it was cold and brought no comfort as I stayed there with Starry, watching her ragged, irregular breathing.

"Please don't leave me," I whimpered quietly.

\*\*\*

"Day?" I heard Chrys calling out to me through the trees.

"Over here!" I yelled back.

Chrys came crashing through the woods, gasping for breath. Kijiba followed shortly after. He carried a large cloth bag over his shoulder.

I moved out of the way to give Kijiba room to work as he knelt down beside Starry and began examining her.

"Is she okay?" Chrys asked as she sat down next to me, still panting. She had a few leaves and twigs stuck in her mane, and her forelegs had a number of fresh cuts on them.

"I don't know. She's still breathing at least," I answered. "Are you alright?"

Chrys looked down at herself. She seemed confused at first, as if she hadn't known she was injured. "I tripped while I was running. It's alright, I'm fine."

Remembering that the medkit I carried had been restocked by Grift, I opened it up to find a supply of fresh bandages and even a few healing potions. I held out a roll of bandages to Chrys to use on her cuts, but she grabbed one of the healing potions in her magic instead and carried it over to Kijiba.

"Will this help?" Chrys asked.

Kijiba had been in the middle of sorting through the contents of his medicine bag, but he paused to take the vial from Chrys. He pulled out the stopper and gave it a sniff. "It will not, I fear," he answered grimly with a shake of his head. He replaced the stopper, gave the vial back to Chrys, and returned to his bag. "Poison runs deep in her veins. Her body must purge."

He produced a small vial containing a viscous, dark fluid from his bag. He opened Starry's mouth and carefully poured a single drop onto her tongue. It took only a moment for her to start heaving. She threw up, but there wasn't much; it seemed that scotch and Mint-Als had been the only things in her stomach. A half-dozen small white tablets, half-dissolved, lay on the ground in front of her once she finished.

"Is she going to be alright?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"A rough road ahead," Kijiba answered as he pulled a bundle of leaves from his bag. "She'll get worse before better." He plucked one of the leaves from its stem and put it under Starry's tongue. "But your friend is strong."

After a few moments, Starry's eyes relaxed, losing that faraway stare and slowly closing. Her breathing steadied, and I let out a relieved sigh.

Kijiba stood up and approached me. He gave me the bundle of leaves and told me, *"Put one leaf under her tongue every few hours for the next day. Then whenever she starts shaking."*

I nodded and tucked the leaves into my saddlebag.

Kijiba helped us carry Starry back to his hut where he then helped us fashion a stretcher so Chrys and I could carry her all the way back to the diner. Chrys asked if he would be safe and offered to let him come with us.

Kijiba said his place was there, though. He thanked us for killing the changeling queen and driving out the others. He feared that they might come back, and knew that his village would need his help defending against their return; with their influence gone, the villagers would listen to him now.

After saying our final goodbyes and thank yous with Kijiba, Chrys and I set out with Starry on the stretcher between us.

We walked back to the diner in silence. I was still reeling from the dream she had put me through, and my envy of Kijiba mixed with that to give me an uncomfortable longing for home—for the home I used to know, when I was just a little colt, and when everything was simple . . . when I could cry when I was sad.

I envied Kijiba. He had a place where he belonged. His picture was complete, with all the pieces set in their places, while mine was on the verge of falling apart all over again.

\*\*\*

We arrived back at Mum's Diner well after sunset. The night was dark, without even a trace of

moonlight penetrating the clouds above. But the diner's generator was still working, so we had light and warmth inside.

We carried Starry upstairs and, after searching through her pockets to find the keys to all the locks she had installed on the door, got her inside and set her down on the bed.

Chrys and I looked at each other. I was exhausted, physically and emotionally, and Chrys didn't look much better. Of course, Starry was the worst-off of all of us and we couldn't rest just yet.

I held Starry up while Chrys used her magic to unfasten Starry's battle saddle and set it aside with her bags. We then had to get Starry out of her uniform, which was permeated with sweat and grime, before we could finally lay her back down and let her rest properly. In the course of searching her pockets and getting her gear and clothes off, we found half a dozen flasks on her. All but two of them were empty.

Chrys went around the room, looking through the desk drawers, under the chair cushions, and under the bed. She collected another two flasks and four bottles of scotch, as well as two other "aspirin" bottles.

"Day?"

Chrys put her hoof on my shoulder, making me flinch. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—" She sighed. "Why don't you take off your uniform too? I'll wash it for you along with Starry's."

Looking down at myself, I realized just how dirty my uniform had gotten. There were even still bloodstains in it—not my blood. It had only been a few days, but the wasteland had already covered the once bright blue and yellow of my stable uniform with dull, dark, reddish-brown stains. Suddenly, all the blood and death I had seen in that short time played back in my head.

"Day?" Chrys asked again.

"I, um, sure," I answered, shaking my head to clear those gruesome images away. I pulled down the zipper and started taking my uniform off, but it caught on my injured wing and pulled at the still-sore joint. I ground my teeth and started wrestling with it, but that only seemed to get me even more caught up in it.

"Hold still. Let me help," Chrys said softly. "I won't touch you, I promise," she added hastily as I glared at her. It took me a moment, but I sighed and gave her my consent. Chrys circled around behind me, and I felt the warmth of her magic against my back as she took hold of my uniform. "Is it alright if I take the bandages off your wing?" she asked. I nodded slowly, and I felt her warmth around my wing, but only briefly before the bandages came loose and floated away.

Slowly and carefully, Chrys worked my uniform off. Then she gasped. "Day, you're covered in

bruises. What happened to you?"

"It's nothing," I answered quickly while stepping away from Chrys and turning so she couldn't see my back. "I—I fall down a lot is all."

Chrys stared at me, still holding my stable uniform in her magic. "Day, those bruises are shaped like hooves. Did somepony beat you? Who would—" Her eyes widened and she gasped; she had the look of somepony who had just uncovered a deeply-buried secret. "Day . . . oh, Day . . . I'm so sorry. If I had known, I never would have—"

I cringed and backed away from her. "No."

"Day, it's alright. You're safe here."

"No." I backed up further, right up against the wall.

"It's alright. I understand now. You were—"

"Don't say it!" I snapped at her.

"It's alright. It's not your fault," she said timidly while keeping her distance.

"No!" I screamed at her. "You don't get to tell me what is or isn't my fault! You don't get to plant dreams in my head and then go and tell me it's alright! Don't tell me it's alright! It's what everyone always says, but they only ever say it when it's *not* alright. I don't want to hear your sweet nothings. It's not alright, and you can't make it that way just by saying it is!"

"Day, I'm only trying to help—"

"Get out!"

"Day—"

"I said get out!" I kicked the wall behind me and felt the wood crack under my hoof.

Chrys hesitated only briefly before she gave a slow nod and made her way out the door, collecting Starry's uniform and her flasks, bottles, and pills along the way. As soon as she was across the threshold, I ran over, slammed the door, and turned all the locks. And then I collapsed against the door. My face and ears burned, and I could hear the pounding of my own heartbeat.

I was on the verge of tears when a rapid beeping found its way through the noise in my ears: my Pipbuck alarm. I had set it to go off every three hours to remind me to give Starry another one of

those leaves. I stood up, let myself forget about everything else, and after I had put a new leaf under her tongue, I moved the armchair closer to the bed. I climbed into the chair and got as comfortable as I could in it, with my chin resting on the arm so I could watch over Starry.

I may have dozed off briefly once or twice, but it was hard to tell. Time was standing still inside that room. It was only Starry and I and her mosaic constellation tacked up all across the walls. I remember feeling so excited about helping her search for Rainbow Dash—she was going to give me a place where I could belong, a puzzle to fit into. But the search had only lead to more heartache instead.

I wanted to give up. I couldn't bear to go through that kind of torture again. I wasn't cut out for what the wasteland would put me through. I didn't know where else I could go or what I could do, but whatever it was, I'd have to do it alone, I decided. As long as I was alone, nopony else could hurt me.

\*\*\*

It was not very long after my Pipbuck alarm had gone off again and I'd given Starry another leaf when there was a knock at the door. I pretended not to hear it.

The knock came again. "Day?" It was Chrys. I felt my heart start racing, though I kept my breathing shallow and tried to just ignore her.

"Day, I'm—" She hesitated. "I'm leaving some food and water, some clean blankets, and your and Starry's uniforms out here. I'll be downstairs if you need anything." There was silence for a moment before I heard her hoofsteps moving away from the door and back down the stairs.

I didn't go to check what she left for us right away; I wasn't hungry or cold, Starry was still asleep, and I didn't really want to get up anyway. After a while, though, I did climb out of the chair and made my way over to the door. I opened it slowly, taking my time with each of the locks.

There were no locks on doors inside the stable. At least, not on any of the living quarters. Security had locks on the detention cells and in the armory, of course, and the stable door itself was really nothing but a giant lock on the whole stable, but that was it. I had never locked myself in before—I'd never been able to before, and there had been a certain feeling of comfort in locking the world out.

I turned the final deadbolt and opened the door. The hall was empty save for the food (a few MRE) water, blankets, and our uniforms. I brought them into the room quietly and then closed and relocked the door, though I only bothered with one of the deadbolts; it had felt good to lock them all when I had chased Chrys out, but now it just seemed excessive.

I left Starry's uniform on top of her bags, put the food and water on the desk beside the shattered remains of the radio, threw one blanket over the armchair, and pulled the other one over Starry. Chrys had gotten the stains out of my uniform, but the colors were still severely faded.

Wastelanders recognized stable uniforms; as long as I wore it, I'd always stand out as somepony who didn't belong out here. I considered not putting it back on, but I was uncomfortable without something to cover my bruises. And so what if I stood out as an outsider? I didn't belong; I may as well look like it.

My wing was still sore, and I hadn't bothered to re-bandage it—not that I would have been able to by myself anyway. But flexing my wing to fit it through my uniform wasn't so bad. As long as I didn't put too much strain on it, I'd be fine.

I climbed back into the armchair and settled down to watch over Starry. But I suddenly felt restless. My legs ached as though I'd just run a marathon, and no matter how I stretched out or curled up, I couldn't get comfortable. All I wanted was to quietly care for Starry, but the only thing on my mind was Chrys.

Part of me started imagining her coming back into the room. I imagined her pleading for forgiveness, saying anything and everything to try and convince me that she was sorry. And from there, the daydream split in two: In one version, I yelled at her—I told her that she had no right to do what she did, and that nothing she could ever say or do would make up for it. She'd given me an impossible dream, a dream that showed me everything—the only thing I ever wanted. But it was only that: a dream. And that dream hurt. She teased me with a vision of joy and happiness like I had never felt before, only to devour that joy herself and leave me with only the emptiness of knowing that I had glimpsed something I would never have.

And yet . . .

In my imagination's other version of events, I accepted her apology. I knew she didn't intend to hurt me. I couldn't blame her for it. And even though that didn't make it hurt less, I wanted to pretend as though it did. I wanted to hold her, cry with her. And as I let my imagination run with that vision, I thought of asking her if she could give me another dream, but one that wouldn't hurt. The warmth and comfort that I had felt, if only ever so briefly when she had fed off me, had been wonderful.

I closed my eyes and rolled over, finally getting comfortable. With my head leaning back, I let my imagination wander. I thought about what kind of dream I might have that would give me that—the good without the bad, the joy without the pain—what kind of dream I would ask her to make so vivid for me. Would that make up for what she did? Was I just deluding myself, just looking for something to make myself feel better? Was it even anything she would agree to? I didn't know. And as I let my daydreams play out in my head, I didn't care either.

\*\*\*

The rest of the night went quietly. Chrys never came back, though I found myself wishing that she would. I didn't know if it was because I wanted an excuse to yell at her or if it was for something else; I tried not to think about it.

I didn't sleep at all. I kept thinking about how, only a few days earlier, everything in my life had been completely normal—the status quo, as it has always been. And then I had woken up one morning and it all had simply fallen apart; my entire life had shattered to pieces, and I had been left all alone with no place to fit in. And here it was, about to happen all over again. I didn't want to wake up to find that something had happened to Starry while I had been asleep.

So I stayed awake for the entire night, watching over her.

According to my PipBuck, it was early in the morning—just before six—when I heard Starry groan and I looked up to see her rolling over in bed. She covered her eyes with one foreleg while she hung the other one off the side of the bed and blindly fished around with it, looking for something.

"Starry?"

She winced. "Not so loud." Her voice was strained, and she panted as though out of breath. "Where're my bags? My head's killing me. Can you get my aspirin bottle for me?"

I hesitated. In my naivete, I had simply assumed that Starry would wake up and everything would be fine, that she'd be all better. But it couldn't be that easy.

"Day?" She asked again, "Aspirin? Please?"

"I—I'm sorry." My voice trembled. "You can't have any more."

Starry sat up at that, though she seemed to immediately regret the movement as she clutched her head and groaned. "What . . . what do you mean? I—I need it. My head's killing me."

"Starry, what's the last thing you remember?"

She slumped over and let out a pained moan as she peeked out from under her fetlock. She spotted her bags in the corner and slowly started crawling her way out of bed. Starry tumbled onto the floor and continued crawling toward her bags.

"Starry?"



"The forest," she murmured. "We got separated somehow." She paused for a moment. "How did we get back here?" She reached her bags and started digging around in them. "Day," she asked after a moment, "where is it? Where's my aspirin?"

"Chrys took it," I answered.

"What!" Starry clasped her hooves over her ears at the sound of her own voice.

"Starry, you . . . you overdosed. You nearly died."

She forced a laugh through gritted teeth. "Day, that's silly. You can't overdose on aspirin."

"Starry, I know it wasn't aspirin. Chrys told me."

"What does that bitch know?" She started crawling toward me. "Day. Do me a favor and go get it back for me? I need it." She reached a hoof out to me. She was shaking terribly. "I *need* it."

I bit my lip. "You need to rest, Starry. Kijiba gave me some leaves to help with the shaking. Just let me help you back into bed and I'll give you one and—"

"I don't—" She cringed and lowered her voice. "I don't need any damn leaves. If you want to help me, then get me my pills."

"No, Starry. You're sick. Please, just get some rest—"

"Fine! Don't help me!" She pushed herself up onto her hooves and started for the door.

"Starry, no!" I rushed to catch her as she stumbled toward the door.

"Let me go!" She screamed and started trying to push me away.

I held her tighter, and she bit my foreleg. We stumbled, crashed back against the side of the bed, and slumped to the floor together where I held her down. Starry kicked and bucked and screamed at me, but I wouldn't let go. Eventually, her kicks settled down to just shaking and her screams turned to sobs. She just kept repeating: "I need it. . . . I need it. . . . I need it . . ."

After she settled down, I helped Starry back into bed. She was mostly deadweight, but at least she wasn't fighting against me. Her whole body felt cold, but she was sticky with sweat. I got out another leaf for her and told her to hold it under her tongue. I wasn't sure if she understood me, or if she just didn't have the mind to do anything else with it, but she held it there while I pulled the covers over her. A few minutes passed and Starry's shaking subsided. Her eyes closed, and she fell asleep.

\*\*\*

For the rest of the day, I continued to keep watch over her. She'd wake up every couple of hours or so. I tried giving her some food, but she couldn't keep down anything other than water, which I gave her plenty of. I had to hold her head up for her while she drank.

Starry was rarely lucid while she was awake. When she did have the presence of mind to talk to me, she'd try to convince me to get her pills for her; she was too weak to fight back when I told her no. Most of the time, though, she'd just mumble incoherently until her tremors would come back, so I'd give her another leaf, and she'd fall back into sleep. Thankfully, her tremors weren't as bad and were coming less frequently as the day carried on.

I lost track of time like that. I'd check the numbers on my PipBuck clock every so often, but they became meaningless; the action of looking at them was reduced to an idle habit. I didn't even care what time it was. There was no ticking away of seconds, minutes, hours; there was only the tense quiet between Starry's fits which marked the passage of time.

The numbers on my PipBuck told me it was late night, but it could have been a week, a month, or even a year later for all I could tell. I certainly felt like I hadn't slept in a week. And whatever sleep Starry was getting, it wasn't restful. She twisted and turned, and shivered in a cold sweat most of the time.

I had kept the lights off ever since she had woken up that morning. It seemed to help her sleep and to stay calm during those brief periods of consciousness.

Somehow, even without any windows in Starry's room, it had grown darker. And it was in that night's darkest hour that Starry began mumbling in her sleep. It wasn't anything I could make out, but as I watched and listened, she started thrashing about. The blankets tangled up around her legs, and Starry sat upright, her eyes wide open and mouth agape, frozen as though about to scream.

She sat there for a moment and looked around.

"Starry?" I got out of my chair and leaned over the foot of her bed.

Her eyes found mine in the darkness and she scrambled across the bed toward me. "Day," she whispered as she reached a hoof toward me. She hesitated when I flinched away, but I saw the look in her eyes: she was terrified. So I leaned in toward her and let her put her hoof on my cheek. "Day, I was so lost without you." She shivered and started crying softly. "In the forest. I saw—" She wrenched her eyes shut and shook her head vigorously, as if trying to rid herself of an image she couldn't bear the sight of.

Her eyes opened and fixed on mine again. "They tried to make me think you were dead. You're

here, aren't you? Please tell me this isn't another dream. Are you hurt?"

"I'm . . . I'm here," I answered. "You saved me." I felt my chest tighten. "I almost lost you, though, Starry. You . . . you poisoned yourself."

She turned away from me and let out a trembling sigh. "I—I had to. The M—" She cringed at trying to say it. "Those . . . pills were the only thing that let me see through the horrible things they showed me. You just vanished and I was running around, trying to find you. And I stumbled over your body . . . you had been crushed. And—and then y—you got up . . . and you started telling me it was my fault, but that you were better off dead, and I shouldn't worry about you."

I'd been so stupid, blinded by my own selfish problems. Of course Starry had been tortured the way they had tortured me. Our dreams had been tailored so they could feed off our worst fears and memories. In my dream, Starry beat me. In hers, she had gotten me killed.

Slowly, I climbed up onto the bed and sat next to her. "Starry . . . how did this happen?" I asked. "How did you end up . . . like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"The pills, the drinking . . . why are you so afraid of . . . losing me?"

Starry glanced over at me briefly, then turned away. She was silent for a minute before she answered. "I did something terrible." She looked back at me, and I saw in her eyes, a silent, despairing plea. I moved closer to her, close enough that I could hear her shallow, trembling breaths.

She sniffled. "It was years ago, on my first command as captain. I took a team dirtside to tear down a building for scrap metal. It was already in bad shape—worse than that building where I met you. I was worried about it collapsing on us while we were inside, so I told my team to be quick: get in, set the charges, and get out."

Starry's breathing was ragged. She started shivering, but she just shook her head when I offered to get her another leaf. "I did a head count—made sure we all got out. I counted twice, just to make sure. Everypony was accounted for, so I set off the charges, and the building came down. Then we started excavating. And—"

Her face contorted, and her eyes closed tightly as she let out a loud, sobbing wail. "And then we found bodies." Starry wrapped herself in her wings, and rocked slowly as she cried. "They were so mangled by the collapse that we could barely tell they were ponies at first. They were all huddled together; some of them were so badly crushed that we couldn't tell where one body ended and the next began. We dug them out and buried them. Thirteen in all: six adults and seven—" She choked and gritted her teeth. "Seven children. Two of them couldn't have been

more than a year old."

She rolled over and covered her face with her forelegs. "They were families. They were living in that building and hiding from us. I didn't do a sweep of the building. I didn't give them any warning. It was my fault they were dead. I killed them. Three whole families. With just the push of a button. If I'd only paid more attention . . . been more vigilant . . ."

"Is that why you started taking the Mint-Als?" I asked.

Starry shook her head vigorously under her forelegs. "No. That came later." Her back shuddered as she cried into her pillow. She didn't continue talking right away, and I didn't want to press her about it. So I just sat there on the corner of her bed, watching over her.

Eventually, she seemed to run out of tears, and her cries were reduced to muted sobs and short gasps for breath. She calmed down and sat up slowly. "When we got back to the clouds, I told my commanding officer about what happened. I told him it was my command, my responsibility; that I was the one who should be disciplined, not my team." She choked briefly, and took a deep breath. "He laughed at me. 'Just some rats that didn't have the sense to scurry away,' he said. I tried telling my other superiors, but they all said the same thing: I hadn't done anything wrong."

She turned to look at me, her eyes wide in horror. "Thirteen innocent civilians were dead, and I hadn't done anything wrong. The best I ever got out of anypony was from my old drill instructor, and all he told me was that if I was looking to be punished, I wouldn't find it—I was too useful."

Starry sighed and looked down at the floor. "That's when I started drinking. As soon as I was off duty, I'd drink to forget, and then I'd drink until I passed out. But then to deal with the hangovers, I started drinking while I was on duty too. My performance started slipping, and that's when I started taking Mint-Als to stay alert."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back as she took in a deep breath. "They made me feel invincible. I knew where everything was—where everypony was, what they were doing, what they were saying. All of it. All the time. With those pills, I'd never screw up again."

She paused for a moment. I wanted her to go on, but I felt as though she needed me to ask something before she could continue. "So how did you end up here?"

Starry opened her eyes and lowered her gaze from the ceiling to the door with all her myriad locks installed on it. "I wasn't exactly discreet about what I was doing. I guess the higher-ups took notice, and rather than risk the public disgrace of a drug-addicted officer, they sent me on this snipe hunt. I don't suppose they ever expected me to find anything. Probably just wanted me to get myself killed down here so they could call me a hero without me around to screw it up." She let out a small, mirthless laugh. "It seems obvious now, but back then . . . I believed it: I was the hero, operating all by herself in a hostile environment, searching for Rainbow Dash's

final resting place. And when I found her, it was going to be this magical thing where suddenly everything would be right with the world. All I had to do was find this one special mare and it would make all the bad things in my life just go away."

She sighed again and turned to face me. "But it doesn't work that way." She shook her head. "Nothing can erase the pain we've been through; nothing can make it right. All we can do is try to learn from it, try to help others learn from it too. And do our best to not repeat our mistakes."

Starry leaned over and hugged me.

I didn't know what else to say or even what to do. I wasn't completely comfortable in her embrace, but I could tell that she needed it, and I even found a certain comfort in her warmth myself. So I didn't pull away, and we just sat there. I let her hold me, rest her head on my shoulder, and we stayed like that until I felt her go limp against me; she'd fallen asleep.

Carefully, I laid her down on the bed and pulled the covers over her. For the first time since I'd known her, she actually looked peaceful while she was sleeping.

\*\*\*

Not long after Starry went back to sleep, I left her room to go downstairs.

It was well past midnight at that point, but the lights were still on, and I heard movement. As I came out the door at the bottom of the stairs, I was struck by the smell of beer mixed with sweat. There were a couple of ponies I hadn't seen before passed out in booths along the wall, and Chrys, looking tired, but still smiling, was going around, collecting bottles and glasses in her aura while simultaneously wiping down the tabletops.

Chrys looked up to see me. Her eyes lit up briefly, but then her smile faded and she lowered her gaze back to the table she was cleaning. "Everything alr—I mean . . . how's Starry?" she asked.

"She woke up this morning. She was in bad shape for a while, but I think the worst is over," I answered as I took a seat at the counter. "What happened here?"

"Prospectors came back from their salvage run," Chrys said as she moved behind the counter and sorted her collected trash. "Was a big party to celebrate. Next time a trader comes through, we'll be able to stock up on enough food and water for a month, or at least as much as he's carrying." She dropped her rag into a bucket of dirty water and turned around to face me.

I looked down at my forehooves resting on the counter. "Is that a lot?"

"Yeah. This was a good haul. Sometimes this place is empty for weeks at a time when they don't bring back enough trading stock in a single run."

"That's good," I said.

"Yeah."

We were both silent for a while before Chrys asked, "How about you? Are you . . . how are you doing?"

I sighed and shook my head slowly. "I don't know. I just feel . . . tired.

"I can give you a place to sleep," Chrys offered.

"I don't want to sleep. I just . . . I need something to do."

There was a pause. "Are you trying to suggest something?"

I glanced up at her. "Huh?"

For the first time, Chrys was the one blushing instead of me. "N—nothing." She cleared her throat. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Again, I sighed and looked back down at my hooves. "I don't know."

Things were silent again until I heard the pop and fizz of a Sparkle-Cola bottle opening and Chrys set one down on the counter and slid it across to me. I looked up at her; she was smiling, but only a little. "On the house," she said softly.

I took the bottle and had a couple sips from it.

"Day, I'm . . . I know you don't want to hear me say I'm sorry, but I don't know what else to say. If there were some way I could make up for everything, I'd do it, but I don't think there is such a thing. I don't want to hurt you, but please, I need to explain what I did—I think I know why it hurt you so much."

I grimaced and started to turn away.

"Wait. Please. I promise I won't say anything about . . . about *that*. Just, please, hear me out."

Hesitantly, I turned back, though I kept my eyes on the counter and idly rolled the cola bottle back and forth between my hooves.

"I made a mistake about you and Starry," Chrys said. "About setting you two up together, I mean. I'm right that you two belong together, but I was wrong about how. I thought you two

should be lovers, but after what happened in the forest, I see now: the love between you two is the kind between a mother and son."

I blinked and looked up at her. I was sure I had heard her correctly, but it didn't make sense.

"Whatever you saw in the feeding dream, I'm so sorry. It's not supposed to hurt like that. It's just that, I—" Her ears folded back and again she blushed. "That was my first time doing it. I don't know how to control the dream, and I had the wrong idea about how to inspire it, I—" She stopped and took a deep breath. Her eyes looked into mine, and I felt her hoof rest on top of mine. "I only wanted to make you feel loved."

And then something happened. Chrys leaned forward over the counter, and she kissed me. And I didn't pull away. At least, not right away. Her lips were warm and soft, and I felt her hoof lightly rubbing mine. It all just felt so nice. But then fear crept into my mind and I leaned back. I stared at her. Her eyes sank, and she drew her hoof back. "You're afraid of me," she said. "I . . . I don't blame you. I'm a monster."

"Wait," I said as I reached out to put my hoof on hers. "You're not a monster. It's not you I'm afraid of. It's me. I'm scared that—" I glanced back over my shoulder at the ponies sleeping at their tables. "Is there somewhere more private we can talk?"

Chrys motioned for me to come behind the counter with her, and she lead me through the door at the back. The room beyond was a stockroom, with various supplies organized onto shelves, but was also apparently where Chrys slept. She had a bed in the far corner, and a small vanity table next to it with a cracked mirror and several small boxes carefully arranged around it.

I sat down on the bed beside Chrys, and looked across into the mirror, at our reflections; the single, long crack that ran jaggedly down its length divided us from each other.

"What you said, I—" I sighed. "Starry said that the Mint-Als made her feel invincible. But they didn't actually make her invincible. And that feeling nearly killed her. You said you wanted me to feel loved, but is that all? Only a feeling? When you fed off me, I felt loved, but I knew it wasn't real. That's what hurt so much. I just . . . I don't want to see some illusion. When you kissed me just now, I felt like . . ."—I bit my lip—"like it was you, really you."

I gazed at her through her reflection in the mirror. "And I liked that. But I pulled away because—because I don't know . . . I was afraid that I might try to use you just to make myself feel better."

Chrys gently leaned her shoulder against mine. "What if I said I'm okay with that?"

"I'm not," I answered. "I don't want to get back at you. I don't want to whisper sweet nothings in your ear. I want—" There weren't any words to follow that. "I don't know what I want."

"Do you want to kiss me again?"

I looked at her directly, into her bright eyes, and I felt a smile cross my face. "I think so . . ."

"You *think* so?" Chrys giggled.

My ears burned as I blushed and stammered, "I—I mean, I guess—I—"

"Shh." She smiled at me as she put her hoof on my lips. "I'm only teasing, honey." She took her hoof away slowly. "If you wanna kiss me, then just kiss me. If it makes it easier for you: I'd like it if you did."

Somehow, my blush faded almost instantly. Chrys had a way about her—a shine in her eyes, a soft, inviting tone in her voice, even the slow and careful way that she moved. All that helped me feel at ease in a situation I'd never been in before. It took me a moment, but I worked up the courage to lean over, and I pressed my lips against hers. She pressed back, and we stayed like that for a while. Our lips parted, but only barely. I felt her breath against my lips as I gazed into her eyes.

Then she put her hoof on my chest and slowly slid it up to the collar of my uniform. "Is it alright if I take your uniform off?" she asked softly.

"W—why?" My first thought was to pull away from her, but something in the way her eyes held mine made me feel safe, or at least safe enough to wait for her answer.

"I want to look at your bruises," she said. "You keep them hidden from everypony else. I want to be somepony you can show them to."

I fidgeted. Her request made my heart beat a little faster, but I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When I opened my eyes, she was still sitting there with her hoof on the zipper of my uniform and her eyes looking up into mine, waiting for my consent.

I gave a slow nod, and she slid closer to me while she unzipped my uniform. She reached under it with both forehooves and carefully slipped it off over my shoulders and wings and let it fall. I sat there, shivering, though not from cold, while Chrys moved around to sit behind me on the bed. I felt her hoof brush ever so lightly against my shoulder, and then along the back of my neck. Slowly, my shivering subsided.

"Do they hurt?" Chrys asked.

"No . . . not really. They're all at least a week old," I told her. Then I felt her hoof run along my spine, and I gasped.



"Was that okay?" Her voice carried a slight chuckle with her question, as though she already knew my answer.

"Y—yeah . . . that felt . . . nice."

Chrys began kneading her hooves up and down along my back. I started to feel weak, and she got me to lay down on my belly; then she continued her massage. She was slow, gentle, giving me a kiss on my neck, holding her hoof against mine, or even just backing off for a moment to let me breathe when I needed it.

We fell asleep together in each other's embrace. Her warmth and kindness were a comfort that I hadn't realized I had been missing.

\*\*\*

It was late the next morning when Starry came downstairs. Her mane was braided, and she was wearing her uniform again, though her cap had apparently been lost somewhere in the forest. She found me making repairs to her radio with Chrys helping me. We were nearly finished, thanks to a fresh supply of scrap components that the town's prospectors had traded to Chrys.

"You were still asleep when I went to check on you earlier," I explained to Starry as she sat down at the table with us. "I didn't want to wake you, and I just thought I'd have another go at putting this thing back together again."

Starry smiled at me, but it was an uneasy smile. She made a noise that was halfway between a groan and a chuckle. "I just can't get rid of this thing, can I?" She saw the puzzled look on my face and sighed. "I broke it on purpose. The first time just a little bit in case I ever needed it, but then you fixed it, so after you left, I smashed it."

I heard a note of regret in her voice, as though she wished she hadn't done it. "Why?" I asked.

Starry didn't answer right away. She looked down at the radio on the table and ran her hoof along the edge of the case. "Remember what I told you about my mission being just a snipe hunt? Well . . . I always kinda knew, I guess. I'm supposed to check in with the Enclave every so often, but doing that always made it feel as if I really were going nowhere. I couldn't just neglect my duty, though, but if the radio were broken, then at least I would have an excuse to not check in." She laughed and put a hoof to her forehead. "Oh, I've been lying to myself for so long."

I looked down at the radio. It wasn't just her link back to the Enclave; it was a tool for communication, and she had been afraid to use it, afraid of what she might hear . . . of what she might say.

For a little while, Starry just stared at the radio. "You know," she said finally, "I don't even really care about my mission anymore. I don't even think I want to go back up there, honestly. But I don't know if I can just abandon them, even if they weren't expecting me to ever come back anyway."

"We could smash it again?" I offered.

Chrys cringed. "At least let me get the salvaged parts back from it first. That's good trading stock!"

We all shared a brief laugh. Then Starry let out a heavy sigh. "Well, you put so much work into it. Let's see if it works first anyway, and then maybe I'll think about what to do."

I smiled. We put the last few components in place and closed it up. With a little bit of trepidation, I hovered my hoof over the power switch. "You know, since I've been out here, it seems as though every time I turn on a radio, I hear some strange message that almost sounds like it's specifically for me." I let out a tense laugh and flipped the switch.

A familiar voice came on through the radio. It was small, frightened, and lonely:

*Day? It's Sweets. We need you. Something's happened. You're the only one who can save us. Please, Day, come back. The overstable agreed to pardon you. Hurry. We won't last long without you.*

The air was silent for a moment before the message repeated—a recorded distress call on a loop.

*Day? It's Sweets. We need you . . .*

I couldn't take my eyes off the speaker, but I didn't need to look up to feel Starry and Chrys staring at me. I trembled.

"My little brother . . ."