

1. Rebuilding

The sound of heavy construction permeated the air over Red Leaf. Outside, the sight of wrecking cranes with their heavy balls dotted the skyline. The roar of buildings collapsing punctuated the din. Lines of dump trucks traveled out of town heading for dump sites that had been hastily constructed, heavily laden with rubble.

Taryn stared in awe at the seething hive of activity that had become her town. *I hardly recognize this place anymore.* Taryn looked for visible landmarks she recognized, and noticed the tall tower of city hall. It's clock face, reminiscent of London's Big Ben, stained with soot from the fires. At least that was still recognizable. Taryn turned away from the fence and started pacing the confines of her backyard. She had been here only three days and the incredible activity had been nonstop. All this activity, because of her.

As she turned away from the back fence she found herself pacing the length of the yard from one corner to the other. It was exactly eleven full steps and one half step from corner to corner. Eleven and one *half* steps. Taryn gave herself a mental shake. What did it matter that the yard was eleven and a half steps wide? It had been much more when she was human of course, but surely that didn't mean anything? No, Taryn decided, it didn't. She was dickering with herself, trying to run away. The truth was, she had no idea what she should do. Before, she had followed her hope to become a researcher with an exciting company, maybe even one working on space projects. But now? There was no way she would ever be able to do her own experiments. Most likely, *she* would be the experiment; poked and prodded by curious scientists, stared at like some freakish *animal* and never see the light of day again. Nightshade had promised that would happen. He had *told* her that it would happen.

Taryn realized she was shaking, and forced herself to stop. She stared at the construction cranes towering over the area that had been downtown. They were there because of what she was. She could blame it all on Nightshade and his schemes, but that wouldn't change the fact that if she hadn't been here, had run away or hidden better, none of this ever would have happened. *Do they hate me?* She wondered. Did the people of the town hate her for what she had brought upon them?

“Taryn?” The soft voice next to her made her jump. Dirt flew from her hooves and her breath came in gasps as she fought her natural instinct to run. Her mother stepped back, eyes wide. Struggling to control her breathing, Taryn had to physically stop herself from running. Her mother looked at her in alarm. “Baby, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?” It was then that Taryn realized her face was wet with more than just sweat. She turned away, unwilling to show her pain to her.

The gentle touch on her flank was strangely soothing to her. “Sweetheart, please. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.” Her mother’s voice was both gentle and unyielding. She would have her answers, Taryn knew, even if it took all night to drag them out of her. Slowly at first, and then faster, Taryn told her about her guilt, why she was feeling the way that she was. The Brodricks, lying dead in the cemetery near their farm, the burned husk of the town, the funerals that had taken place while they were in Rio. All of it, her fault. When she had finished, she cringed. What would she do? Would she tell her...what? It wasn’t her fault? That she was merely a pawn? Taryn waited.

Her mother didn’t speak at first. Instead, she rubbed Taryn’s flank gently, gradually moving over her back. The rub felt good, and Taryn felt her eyes close as she gave herself over to the tender ministrations. As she worked, her mother began to speak: “Taryn, I think you know already that you aren’t responsible for all this. You certainly never asked for this to happen to you. You only wanted to support your friend for a costume party, and that cost you so much. You were kidnapped, abused, forced into slavery to perform for other people. Taryn, *none* of that was your fault. You never had control of your own life, ever. The ones that did this to you did those horrible things.”

“But,” she continued, the massage moving up to the point where her backs melded together. “You held on to yourself. You never stopped being who you are, of hoping one day to be free. I am so proud of you for that. So proud.” The fingers dug in slightly, and Taryn yelped. They immediately relaxed and began to work in circles, drawing the tension out of her body at that point. It felt so good, Taryn could barely think anymore. “Thanks, mom.” She murmured. The rub stopped and became a hug. “You’re welcome sweetheart.”

After a few more minutes, her mother left to get something to drink back in the house, leaving Taryn alone with her thoughts. She found them to be remarkably more pleasant after talking with her mother. It was strange, she mused. She had been talking to herself all day, saying the same words over and over, and she had never really believed them. Then her mother had come, and in a few short sentences, had

made her believe. She stared at the cranes, this time with a slight smile on her face. Turning around, she headed for the glass door. It was time to wash up for dinner.

Inside, Taryn found her mother already at work on the stove, wrestling a large pot of water onto the glass heating element. Taryn walked carefully over, hooves clapping loudly on the linoleum. Leaning over the top of her mother, she grabbed the pot and lifted it carefully on the stove. The pot didn't seem that heavy, but Taryn was aware that it was because her body was stronger than a normal human's. Not superman level, but certainly Mr. Galaxy level. Of course, a question came to mind as she looked at the pot sitting on the stove. "Mom, when did we get a glass stove?"

Her mother glanced at her. "Oh! Well, it was about three months ago. Anna had come over and had tried to cook a new type of spaghetti. Unfortunately, the sauce...um, exploded?" She chuckled. "Poor Anna was so embarrassed. We cleaned it off straight away, but somehow one of the wires of the old element had gotten exposed, and between the sauce and the wires, Anna convinced me that we needed to get a new stove. Poor Greg, he had to install my new one that Anna had gotten that very night. It was just after that worm of Councilman had come to town, too. He couldn't have been all that happy." Taryn felt a moment of guilt; the "worm of a Councilman" had really been on Nightshade's payroll. He had disappeared after Nightshade's capture and arrest in Rio. "Oh." Was all she said though.

After dishes had been put away and the pot set on the counter to dry, Taryn walked back out to the garage. To her surprise, her mother followed her. Honestly though, Taryn was glad of the company. She hadn't been alone in so long, that now solitude actually frightened her. At first it had seemed a welcome relief, but then Taryn had realized how much she had come to depend on someone actually being near her for comfort. It didn't matter if it was Sylvie or her mother, as long as they were close she felt safe. Taryn wondered if that was because of her capture, or a side-effect of her horse-nature asserting itself. To be honest, she didn't care. It was a part of her now, like her hand or hoof. Putting the problem out of her mind, she stepped to the side in the garage to give her mother space to walk in. She smiled at Taryn as she shut the door firmly behind her.

"I have a surprise, Taryn." She said with a smile. Taryn felt her human ears try to perk up. A surprise? Her interest was certainly piqued. Her mother walked to the far corner of the garage where a shelf sat. There was space behind it where they stored Christmas decorations. This time, her mother pulled out a

large box. From her grunting, it sounded very heavy. "Here mom, let me help you." Taryn said. Together, they pulled it out from behind the shelf.

Once free, Taryn was able to get a good look at it. It was a large pine crate that faded lettering on the sides and lid. Taryn looked closely, but the markings were so old that she couldn't make it out. The box stood over four feet high and about three wide. She was amazed that it had even fit back on the shelf. "What's in here?" She asked.

"Well, let's open it and see." Her mother replied. There was barely suppressed excitement in her mother's voice. Taryn found herself smiling happily, her mood rising in response to her mother's happiness. Eagerly, Taryn grasped the edges of the pine box and yanked. The box lifted off the floor. Taryn set it back down sheepishly. "I thought that it would work." She said sheepishly. Her mother laughed and handed her a crowbar. "Here, use this instead." Accepting it easily, Taryn jammed the edge under the lid and pried it open easily. Tossing the lid to the side, she eagerly looked in to see its contents.

"A saddle blanket?" Taryn asked in surprise. Of all the things she had expected, a saddle blanket hadn't been it. Something about it was funny though, like it wasn't laying on the bottom of the crate. She pulled it up and gasped. Underneath was a worn western saddle, silverwork gleaming with a sharp shine. The leather looked old, but was still in good condition, and appeared to have been recently oiled. On the side of the saddle, worked in silver, was an enormous star. "Mom, is this your..." Taryn couldn't finish. She looked up at her mother's face.

"Yes." Her mother said. She was staring at the saddle with...remembrance. "I had it when I rode Star. It was my saddle for many years. When I lost her, I left the farm. My father had it put up in storage. Kept pretty good care of it too until he died."

"How did you get it?" Taryn asked curiously. Her mother hadn't left her side since they had been reunited in Rio. When had she had time to fetch the saddle?

"Well, after my folks passed on, the farm was sold to our neighbor, who took care of the place. I called him while we were in Rio and asked if my saddle was still there. He told me that it was still sitting in the same place my father had placed it all those years ago. He's the one who got it fixed up and brought down here while we were coming home." Her fingers ran over the horn and down to the silver star,

tracing the design. "I wanted it because I wanted, well hoped, that my daughter would wear it while we went riding today." Her eyes met Taryn's with a mixture of emotions in them.

Taryn was overwhelmed. She stared at the saddle, thinking of how much it meant to her mother. She could barely speak. Instead, she lifted the saddle carefully out of the box and set it to the side. Her mother beamed at her. A moment later, she was bustling around Taryn, placing the riding blanket just so on her back, placing the saddle on top. Taryn grunted slightly when it was placed, it was surprisingly heavy for its size, it must have been all that metalwork on it. Her mother worked all the cinches and straps on it. As she tightened, Taryn remembered having a very different saddle placed on her, one that was more English in design, with more restraints. And Nightshade, chuckling as he rode her around to show off like some freak. His hand, running down her back; though never in a sexual way, but more like he was praising some beast for doing a good job. Taryn shuddered in fear and flicked her tail. Her mother stopped securing the last length of cinch and looked at her in concern.

"Taryn, are you all right?" A frown and genuine concern was in her eyes. She was nothing like Nightshade. She wasn't showing off her power by treating her like a beast of burden, rather she wanted to share time with her daughter. Taryn ran through some breathing exercises to get herself under control. When she had gotten some semblance of calm, she reassured her mother with a smile and nod. Her emotions were still raw, but she had mastery over them. Barely.

Walking out of the garage and down the drive, Taryn felt her body fall into the familiar pattern; relaxed stride, steady pace, keeping a portion of her mind on her rider. They walked down the street, waving at people they met. Most of them simply stood and stared, eyes bulging when they saw them. Just because they had seen her at the airport and heard her story didn't mean that they *believed*. Taryn couldn't help but chuckling at one poor lady, her hands full of groceries, staring at her and starting when Taryn waved at her. Her mother was quiet, though Taryn could feel her shifting around. Occasionally she heard her call out a greeting to folks they recognized. Taryn wondered what she was doing, but couldn't turn her body easily to find out. She caught a glance of her mother in the large windows of a house at the end of the block, and saw that she had a grip on the saddle horn and a rapturous expression her face. Grinning at her mother's expression, Taryn broke into a trot.

Taryn whipped around the corner and almost ran into Sara Kendall, who was going the other way. Taryn did a quick stop, her rear haunches sinking as her front hooves slid back, almost lifting off the pavement. Sara jumped back in fright, her strawberry-blond hair fluttering about her face in unusual disarray. Taryn

stared in shock. Sara was unkempt; her hair lusterless and flat, her eyes had dark bags under them, and her skin had a waxy, pale look to it. The picture was not helped any by the fact that Sara was glaring at her angrily. Taryn tried to smile and apologize, but Sara suddenly started and scurried away, casting fearful glances back at her. Taryn watched her go with wonder and revulsion. What had caused Sara to act that way? Surely she had known they were centaurs?

“That was strange.” Taryn commented to her mother. “Usually Sara can’t help but give me a scathing comment about my friendship with Sylvie. I wonder what was going on.”

“The poor dear has been working in the rebuilding efforts.” Her mom said. Taryn twisted around and saw that she was staring in the direction Sara had gone. Glancing back Taryn could just make out Sara turning a corner and fleeing for all she was worth. “I’ve seen her working long hours hauling away debris and building what she can. She went to all the funerals, and has been all over town, helping out wherever she can find people in need. I know her parents have had to haul her home and put her to bed to keep her from falling over.” Taryn peered at the corner where Sara had disappeared. She never would have expected that from the girl that had made the last two years of her life miserable, even if only because of association of her friends. *I guess some things really DO change over time.*

Still marveling over the change in Sara, Taryn walked to the edge of the construction area. There, she saw first-hand the devastation that had been wrought on Main Street. Much of the burned wreckage had been hauled away, although here and there a charred support beam or frame still stood. Now, great holes stood in the ground as the rubble from the foundations was taken away. Farther down the street, Taryn could see the first building starting to go in, a brick building she noticed. The street was a major hub of activity, as dump trucks moved in a steady stream in and around the sites, great backhoes, bulldozers and other earthmovers were hard at work tearing down the remaining buildings, and above it all, great cranes swung gracefully as they lifted pallets of tools and materials onto some of the taller buildings being erected.

“Wow.” Taryn said. There didn’t seem to be much else to say.

“I know.” Her mother patted her horse shoulder. “It’s impressive, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say.” Taryn agreed. She cocked her head as something occurred to her. “Where’d the mayor get the money thought?” She asked. “Before, the town was barely staying afloat and quickly going bankrupt?”

“Well,” her mother explained, “I asked Greg the same question yesterday. He told me that after the riots, the town was pretty badly burned. Martial Law had been declared and held firm until about a month ago. Federal Aid finally came through, the town was declared a disaster area, and the rebuilding finally began. By then, the council already had plans in place for the new town; they had just been waiting for the funds.”

“Oh.” Taryn said. She turned to watch the construction again. “What took so long for the funds to get here?” She asked, following a worker tying a chain to a backhoe. The other end was wrapped around a burned foundation beam.

“Not sure.” Her mother replied. Taryn could feel her shifting on her back “It’s the federal government dear. They’ve always taken their sweet time with their help.” Like many people in Red Leaf, she sounded bitter. It was a familiar tune to Taryn. Wherever she went, if people even talked about the Federal Government aid, it was with anger, bitterness that it took so long, or outright disgust. Taryn understood their feelings, and shared them. But she was more than a little troubled by the level of anger displayed. It seemed more than just what her mother had said, but Taryn couldn’t figure out what else so many people would be angry about. *Nightshade, what have you done to my town?* Taryn wondered, but couldn’t find an answer.